

**ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING WITH WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING:**

**A CASE STUDY IN THAILAND**

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### **Abstract**

This study is an analysis of an international hospitality program, which has taken steps to collaborate with the corporate hospitality sector and integrate it into its curriculum, instruction, and internship. These changes have been implemented in order to enhance the quality of its graduating students. Workshops and experienced guest speakers from various trade associations, convention organizers and visitor bureaus have also been incorporated into the curriculum, which has been developed in order to bring the corporate hospitality sector closer to the daily world of undergraduates.

**Key Words:** Work Integrated Learning, Industry and University Collaboration, hospitality program

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### **Introduction**

This study is an analysis of an international hospitality program, which has taken steps to collaborate with the corporate hospitality sector and integrate it into its curriculum, instruction, and internship. The program was established in 1997. Since then, the program has steadily developed its staff, student body and facilities. These efforts have seen our student enrollment consistently grow each year. From only eight intake students in 1997, the number has now risen to more than 200. Also, the hospitality program's reputation has blossomed, domestically as well as internationally, as it continues to attract students from across Thailand and the globe; namely; China, India, Myanmar, Belgium, Germany, France, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the United States. Naturally, due to the diversity of our student body, the curriculum, style of instruction, and facilities have also been developed and

improved to meet and satisfy their ever changes needs. For example, initially, courses were mainly taught in lecture rooms and mostly consisted of theory, but now practical classes (labs), internships, and monthly guest speakers have been integrated into the learning arena to help compliment the traditional style of learning. The cornerstones of the improved curriculum are the various practical learning arenas, the guest speakers, and the Work Integrated Learning (WIL).

### *Practical Learning*

In order to put theory into practice, a training restaurant and kitchen facility was built by the university. This facility offers the students the opportunity to practice the management of a restaurant and kitchen, and to familiarize themselves with the daily challenges they would face in a real-world restaurant and kitchen. In the training restaurant and kitchen facility, students are required to successfully complete a 300-hour internship before they can apply for the 600-hour external internship. Such experiential learning looks to integrate theory with real-life work experience. Exposed to a real working environment, it provides every student with an individualized educational, real-life work experience through practical training in a structured, employment situation.

### *Guest Speakers*

Industry speakers, from Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, Exhibitions (MICE), are regularly invited to give presentations and open up the industry to the eyes and minds of the students. With first-hand exposure to seasoned voices, it is hoped students will develop a better understanding of theories taught in the classroom and thus be able to apply them to the real workplace. In addition, students now have the opportunity to compliment this integration of theory and practice, as they are now responsible for organizing banquets and arranging booths for the numerous and yearly exhibitions held at the university. In order to enhance the

hospitality program, relationships have been developed with MICE service providers. All of these developments have been initiated with the hope of providing a quality MICE workforce for the future.

### *Work Integrated Learning Courses*

The program has recently revised its curriculum by integrating into it both work and study and as a result of direct collaboration between the university and industry, graduates will now be able to meet the demands of the industry on entry. Initially, three courses, including convention management, exhibition management, and Meeting Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibition (MICE) Management, were used as pilot WIL courses. These courses teach both the theoretical and the practical aspects of what it takes to organize and execute a successful exhibition. Particularly, students who take these courses are required to attend lectures and laboratories (kitchen, services) and to complete assignments that offer them experience in organizing a banquet, an exhibition, conducting research, and working (at least ten day as part-time staff) with industry mentors. These assignments aim to provide students with experiential learning in real life settings, in which the instructors work closely with the industry to evaluate student performance. Students are expected to apply the theories learned in class and the additional knowledge acquired from them, to successfully complete projects, as well as to acquire skills and knowledge from the work and study environments in order to develop their career path.

This paper aims to highlight the significance of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in enhancing the learning of students in our international hospitality program. The authors hope that this case study will reinforce the importance of integrating the industry and the academic world by collaborating on issues such as curriculum, instruction, and internship.

## **Literature Review**

According to Downey and Deveau (1987), Pauze, Johnson, Miller (1989), what is learned on the job, compared to what is learned in the classroom, is very different. This highlights the need for hospitality education programs to provide students with as much industry exposure as possible. One area that has not been mentioned but that we would like to explore is the first-hand exposure to industry voices, and how that impacts on and compliments the learning curve of our students. Indeed, Pavesic and Brymer (1989) encouraged hospitality educators to prepare students for the “realities” of the industry and to emphasize work experience/internships. This is because work integrated learning can assist students to relate abstract terms and concepts to the actual business of running a hotel or a restaurant by providing them critical learning processes and true understanding through day-to-day experience in the workplace (Hill and Reed 1983).

As mentioned earlier, the principles of management taught as theory in the classroom and the actual application of those theories through performance in real-life settings are obviously quite different, learning needs to be demonstrated behaviorally in a performance context (King, McKercher, Waryszak 2003) WIL provides students with such experiential learning (theoretical skills and abilities applied to the real world (Lam and Ching 2007). Because of the importance of hands-on experience, most of the hospitality management undergraduate programs include some form of experience-based management training in their curriculum (Young, Corsun, Muller, and Inman 1998). As such, hospitality students are required to acquire a certain amount of work experience before graduation in order to supplement their classroom instruction with substantial industry experience, with the optimal goal of enhancing university-industry relations by providing hospitality firms with qualified students for employment (Downey 1979).

Since practical learning is an essential part of a hotel-management curriculum, most hospitality management programs have an attached or associated hospitality facility where students can practice, so as to understand both guest and manager perspectives (Le Bruto and Murray 1994). This on-campus training is essential in preparing students with first-hand experience before they enter the real world in their off-campus internship. In addition, the success of work integrated learning is the result of inviting industry to get involved in curriculum design and internship, as well as to serve as university board members (Hayes and O'Keefe 1983).

### **Methodology**

This study used a mixed method design of quantitative and qualitative approaches with a triangulation of data collection (survey, interviews and observation). As for the quantitative approach, a self-administered survey questionnaire was given to current students and graduates who were attending a rehearsal for their graduation ceremony to measure their perception towards the value of the WIL courses. The questionnaire contained two sections: the perception of the students toward the value of the WIL courses and a demographic profile. The respondents were asked to indicate the level of agreement with each of the items concerning the WIL courses in enhancing their competitiveness on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). After that, an Independent Sample Mean t-test was used to assess any significant mean difference between students who have taken WIL courses (referred to as “WIL students” in this study), and those who have not (referred to as “non-WIL students”).

In the second stage of the qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with students, current employers, and board members from various trade associations, who could elaborate on the industry's standard expectations of a graduate's skill-set. Moreover, a-one-

year-participant observation was used to observe critical learning process of a group of WIL students who have taken the three WIL courses in one year. The results of the survey, interview and observation are presented in the subsequent section.

## **Results**

### *Survey*

More than half (62%) were “WIL students”, whereas the rest (38%) were “non-WIL students”. Regarding the demographic profile, about 68% of the respondents were female, and the majority of the students were Thai (74%), followed by Chinese (16%), Myanmar (4%), Indian (3%), Belgian (1%), French (1%), American (1%), and Bangladeshi (1%). About 40% were graduates, followed by second year students (22%), third year students (21%), first year students (15%), and fourth year students (2%).

### *Perceptions towards WIL Value*

As shown in Table 1, WIL students have higher means on all of the value of the WIL courses than non-WIL students. Specifically, the WIL students have the highest rating on the items concerning the usefulness of the WIL courses on career enhancement, applying theories into practices, a better understanding of the industry, and their confidence to work in the industry.

Table 1  
Perceptions of WIL and Non-WIL Students

| Perceptions towards WIL value   | Group Category   | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|------------------|-----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| The WIL courses give you a better understanding of the MICE industry            | WIL students     | 111 | 4.08 | 0.61           | 0.06            |
|   | non-WIL students | 68  | 3.65 | 0.94           | 0.11            |
| The theory learned in the WIL courses is helpful in organizing an exhibition    | WIL students     | 111 | 4.07 | 0.53           | 0.05            |
|   | non-WIL students | 68  | 3.59 | 0.78           | 0.09            |
| The WIL courses prepares you for the realities                                  | WIL students     | 111 | 3.96 | 0.57           | 0.05            |
|   | non-WIL students | 68  | 3.57 | 0.90           | 0.11            |
| The assignments allow you to apply theory into practices                        | WIL students     | 111 | 4.09 | 0.56           | 0.05            |
|   | non-WIL students | 68  | 3.43 | 0.89           | 0.11            |
| The practical training develops your problem solving                            | WIL students     | 111 | 3.93 | 0.76           | 0.07            |
|   | non-WIL students | 66  | 3.32 | 0.90           | 0.11            |
| The service labs are helpful for your off - campus internship                   | WIL students     | 111 | 3.80 | 0.99           | 0.09            |
|   | non-WIL students | 68  | 3.31 | 1.08           | 0.13            |
| The WIL courses allow you to apply theories learned in class to the real world. | WIL students     | 111 | 4.02 | 0.71           | 0.07            |
|   | non-WIL students | 67  | 3.27 | 0.99           | 0.12            |
| A lecture on invited guest speakers keeps you up - to - date with industry      | WIL students     | 111 | 3.77 | 0.87           | 0.08            |
|   | non-WIL students | 67  | 3.25 | 0.84           | 0.10            |
| The WIL class teaches you on how to conduct a research                          | WIL students     | 111 | 4.08 | 0.81           | 0.08            |
|   | non-WIL students | 67  | 3.48 | 0.91           | 0.11            |
| After taking the WIL courses, you are more confident to work                    | WIL students     | 111 | 4.07 | 0.70           | 0.07            |

|   |                  |     |      |      |      |
|---|------------------|-----|------|------|------|
| in the MICE industry  | non-WIL students | 65  | 3.48 | 0.89 | 0.11 |
| The knowledge learned in the WIL courses is useful for your career  | WIL students     | 111 | 4.19 | 0.76 | 0.07 |
|   | non-WIL students | 67  | 3.58 | 0.99 | 0.12 |
| Working at the training restaurant provides you with an understanding of guest's and manager's perspectives <sup>ns</sup> | WIL students     | 71  | 3.76 | 0.98 | 0.12 |
|   | non-WIL students | 46  | 3.65 | 1.02 | 0.15 |
| Internship allows you to gain work experience before graduation <sup>ns</sup>   | WIL students     | 71  | 4.07 | 1.05 | 0.12 |
|   | non-WIL students | 47  | 3.53 | 1.14 | 0.17 |

Note: <sup>ns</sup> means non-significant difference.

The results of the Independent Sample Means t-test shows that there are significant means differences between WIL students and non-WIL students on all of the statements ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) except the last two statements. The responses indicate that WIL students have a better perception on 13 out of 15 issues than non-WIL students. This is not surprising due to the fact that WIL students are required to organize a semester banquet, an exhibition and work as part-time staff with an industry mentor as part of their class requirements. Hence, WIL students have to apply theories and techniques learned in class to the real world. Because of this, WIL students in this survey perceived that they could use what they had learned in class in organizing a real event. The results also indicate that WIL students are more satisfied with courses that provide them with theory, practice, and work-integrated learning on campus, off campus, and in their research. This is clearly evident when considering the contrast between the responses of WIL and non-WIL students. As the non-WIL students were quite neutral regarding these items in the survey, we can reasonably assume that it is because they have had no experience of WIL courses. However, their responses lean toward positive perception toward the WIL.

## *Interviews*

The interviews also suggest that students who have completed WIL courses are more confident in working within the industry, since they have had previous experience both on and off campus with professional chefs, as well as international customers. Likewise, the industry, it seems, would rather recruit students who have graduated from hospitality programs such as ours, as they are well aware of the quality and potential of the students, given they contributed to their development in the form of guest speakers and so on. Due to the fact that the industry has provided regular feedback on student performance, and due to the favorable nature of their response, the industry appears keen in continuing to recruit students, who come from such programs, to work on either their part time or full time roster. Thus, the WIL reduces uncertainty in the hiring process in the later stages (Lam and Ching 2007).

The results also show that students are satisfied with the opportunities that the program and university provide them, and so this serves as the perfect way to promote the program to prospective students. From the students' perspectives, they are satisfied because they have a greater opportunity of being selected for employment, since they know what the industry expects from them. Likewise, the industry (employers, supporting trade associations, and convention and visitor bureaus) has also been satisfied, because they have found a workforce specifically trained to serve their needs. Moreover, the industry has shown itself very keen to continue working with the university to update our students on further developments and changes within the industry. The administration, in addition, is particularly pleased with all aspects of WIL and the results, and thus will continue to seek further links with industry, especially as the administration is extremely excited and has been encouraged by the response of the industry to its students, many of whom have now developed their careers successfully since they entered the work place. Here the salient points were

earmarked by Hill and Reed (1983) and by Pavesic and Brymer (1989), both of whose studies emphasized the necessity of WIL in closing the gap between the classroom and the ‘realities’ of the workplace.

In addition, it was found that industry mentors are important in providing faculty members with information regarding industry trends and practical knowledge of use in both teaching and in conducting basic and applied research. Specifically, industry collaboration generates new research questions and provides different perspectives valuable to the academic community to investigate and understand. This style of on-campus orientation is supported and discussed by Le Bruto and Murray (1994), who both believe that it’s essential to explore all avenues when trying to prepare hospitality students for the workplace, and a managerial guest speaker is one of those which certainly brings a new dimension to student’s learning curve.

### *Observation*

The result of our one-year observation reveals that WIL has proven to be a successful tool in enhancing student quality, as can be demonstrated by two out of the three international awards that our WIL students received from the *IT&CMA and CTW Asia-Pacific* trade show held from 6-7 October, 2009 in Bangkok. This international trade show is a showcase of MICE destinations and Corporate Travel products and services. Part of the show includes two competitions of the IMEX-MPI Future Leaders Forum, in which our students participate.

The first is called “The Perfect Event”. This is a group presentation for which the students must organize and present a creative event itinerary for 10 people to demonstrate Thailand’s strong points as a MICE destination. The second competition is called “The University Challenge”. This competition is for individuals who have prepared their presentations in advance. Participants are required to design a creative alternative to

traditional exhibitions, and then give a 10-minute presentation. Admission to participation in the IT&CMA Future Leaders Forum is based on the results of an entrance or qualification test taken by students about the meeting and incentive travel industry. Nine students from our program passed the entrance examination. These students had all successfully completed the three WIL courses (Convention Management, MICE and Exhibition Management) that the university offered in the revised curriculum. Our students represent 25% of the total number of 60 students from the various universities throughout Thailand.

More importantly, three of our students have been honored as the three best entries in the University Challenge competition, taking 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> places. Among our students who were the best entries, one of them was awarded first place, the prize being a trip to Frankfurt, Germany to compete in the Future Leaders Forum at the IMEX trade show in May 2010. Another of our students was also part of the group that was awarded 1<sup>st</sup> place in the “Perfect Event” challenge, which included students from universities throughout Thailand. These awards are evidence of the WIL success in enhancing student quality.

### **Conclusion**

This case study is an example showing that WIL is one of the best methods of enhancing student learning in the hospitality field. Although, the teaching environment varies country by country, this concept is a classic method that works well in Thailand.

Moreover, the authors strongly believe that WIL is fundamental to the development and preparation of our students for the workplace. The industry depends on institutions like ours to provide future employees properly honed in all the skills necessary for the hospitality industry (King et al, 2003). Likewise, we depend on the industry to take an active part in the instruction and preparation of our students. Therefore, we recommend continued, and closer, cooperation between the hospitality industry and the university, in terms of sponsorship,

exchange programs, and workshops, in order to give our students a better insight into what the industry will require of them as employees. Young et al. (1998) highlighted the significance and benefit of such actions in their studies, which suggested that formulating a curriculum which included experience based management, was the way forward to a better prepared hospitality graduate. Moreover, students themselves have responded positively and noted the value of such enterprises when forging an early career in the hospitality industry (Lam and Ching 2007).

Finally, this study suggests that successful Work Integrated Learning must be accomplished as a complete system. Curriculum design, teaching, industry mentors, internships, project evaluation, and marketing WIL to current students and employers must be approached in a cooperative and integrated manner. This case study provides empirical support for this: that university and industry collaboration is very important in shaping graduates to meet the needs of industry.

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