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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES ON STUDENTS' PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF CHICKERING'S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The importance of supporting holistic student development has been increasingly recognized in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Hence, this study aims to explore the impact of internship programs on the personal and professional development of Hospitality and Risk Management and Insurance students in Universiti Utara Malaysia. The researchers investigated experience of ten participating students through a small group interview. Utilizing the lens of Arthur Chickering's Identity Development, the findings related to the seven vectors were analyzed accordingly. Several themes of the internship experiences were identified such as experiences evoke adaption to change, opportunities for personal and professional developments and opportunities for future visioning of a career path. Additionally, a connection exists between the researchers' findings and Chickering's seven vectors as the students demonstrated their development along the vectors upon completing the internship. This study provides the benefits of insights into internship students' experiences as they successfully transitioned from dependent learners to autonomous learners. Over time, the desirable outcome for internship students will be achieved, resulting in the inevitable transformation of students into self-directed individuals on their respective life paths.

Keywords: Arthur Chickering, Identity Development, Internship, Personal and Professional Developments, Seven Vectors.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, higher education is highly challenging. Higher education institutions are expected to prepare their graduates with competencies, interpersonal skills, fundamental knowledge, and values to meet the industry's current requirements. Internship serves as one way to stay current with the industry trends. Internship is one type of work-based learning that takes place outside the classroom where the students can apply and practice skills in a professional setting while gaining career and life experiences (Hora et al., 2017).

At public universities, notably Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), most undergraduate programs require the students to complete internship as part of their curriculum requirements. Internships in the Hospitality and Risk Management and Insurance programs, which typically last between four and six months, must be completed by students during the eighth and final semesters of their respective programs. Based on the in-class observations, there are significant differences in personal and professional developments of students who had participated in internships and those who had not. This notable difference is thought to be the case due to the influx of inexperienced freshmen admitted from various higher institutions (e.g., Sijil Tinggi Peperiksaan Malaysia (STPM), Matriculation, etc.) and seen to be in a transitional phase into a higher education institutional.

Transitions occur when individuals are unavoidably confronted with a new situation that necessitates any adjustments to meet new environmental demands (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008). Transitions are common in education as students acquire new knowledge (such as new subject materials), progress through educational stages (such as infants to junior) and adjust to new institutional contexts (such as starting secondary school) (Hussey & Smith 2010). Starting an internship is a notable transition due to the changes students go through at the time. For the majority of students, beginning an internship is their first exposure to assuming self-responsibility and meeting a variety of new people and opportunities. Therefore, enrolling in an internship program involves not only academic transitions in terms of new educational context, but also personal, social, and lifestyle transitions. It is necessary to analyze the significance of student development theory in order to assess the manner in which students navigate the transition from educational to professional settings.

According to Gault et al., (2010), academic internship is a bridge linking theory and practice by taking part in supervised and scheduled works. These internship programs not only contribute to improving the students' personal skills but also polishing their professional experiences. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the students' personal and professional development through the lens of Chickering's Identity Development Theory. This study proposes two specific objectives: first, to examine the common experiences of students who have successfully completed internships, and second, to investigate the effectiveness of internships and their influence on students' personal and professional growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Development Theories

Theory serves as a guide and framework for understanding how students develop and how educators can help them develop. The theory of student development encompasses a range of theoretical frameworks that aim to analyze and elucidate the process of student growth throughout the years they spend in higher education. Development refers to the positive change that occurs within a student, measured from simple to complex processes, in which the student expands their capabilities and demonstrates competency and knowledge. Student development theories are primarily linked to psychological theories that are commonly associated with the population of individuals in the traditional university age range (Evans et al., 1998).

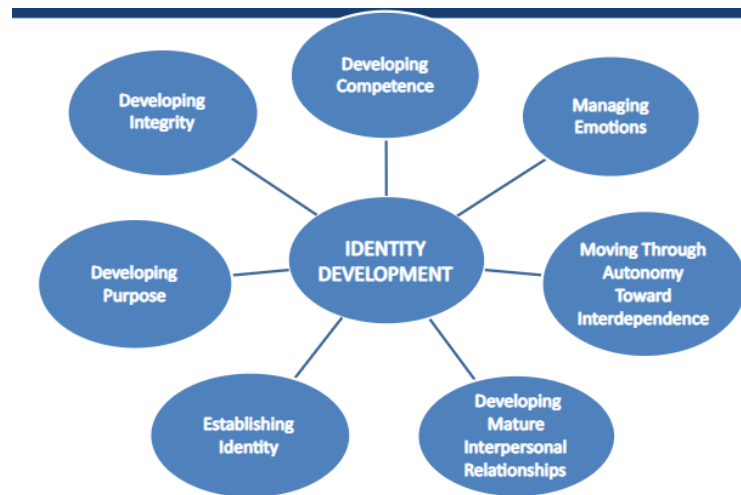
Generally, four types of student development theories exist, namely Psychosocial Theories, Cognitive-structural Theories, Person-environment Interactive Theories and Humanistic Existential Theories. The psychosocial theories describe how students' perspectives of their own identity and of society evolve through the conflicts and crises they experience on the self-reflective and interpersonal dimensions of students' lives (Long, 2012). It emphasizes on the growth and development of individuals over their lifespan. In most theorists, the individual development is regarded as a line-up of developmental tasks, stages, or challenges. Typically, these tasks, but not always, are age and chronologically related. Among others, the two well-known theories are Chickering's Theory of Identity Development (1969, 1993) and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995).

Chickering's Theory of Identity Development

Chickering's Theory of Identity Development, which encapsulates seven vectors of student development in total, involves development as a succession of stages, such as thinking, feeling, behaving, valuing, and relations with others as well as to oneself. Specifically, vectors reflect the direction and magnitude of a student's development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Potentially, the seven vectors that were meant to characterize a student's development in a university environment can affect him/her in the emotional, social, physical and intellectual aspects/conditions especially in the formation of a student's identity. Based on Figure 1, the seven vectors are orderly arranged from developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, and developing purpose to developing integrity. Within these vectors, particular developmental successes are highlighted that explain a student's ability to successfully transition into an engaged member of their professions and communities at the end of their respective educational journeys.

Figure 1

Chickering's Seven Vectors of Identity Development (Source: Chickering & Reisser (1993))



Unlike other theories which suggest that development occurs in a specific and step-by-step process, Chickering's theory is non-linear in nature. Movement in one vector can be followed by movement in a previous vector or in a vector representing future development. As a result, an act of moving to the next vector from one vector can constitute as increased abilities, confidence, awareness, strength, complexity and integration in respective manners (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010). Chickering acknowledges the inherent variability in individuals' development, recognizing that each student possesses a unique set of strengths. Although the primary emphasis is on the advancement of university students, it is important to acknowledge that certain students may require more time to navigate or progress through the various aspects of their academic journey. Hence, Chickering asserts that changes experienced by one student are less likely to be felt by all other students. Hence, it can be observed that each student exhibits a distinct and individual rate of development across each vector, and furthermore, all seven vectors demonstrate the potential for intercorrelation (Evans et al., 1998).

Indeed, Chickering's Theory of Student Development has been widely applied in educational research, resulting in numerous findings and insights in higher education and student affairs. This theory has been used by researchers to investigate various aspects of student development as well as to comprehend the experiences and challenges that college students face. For example, Moseley et al., (2020) explored the lived experiences of student pharmacists as they transitioned through the first three years of a Doctor of Pharmacy curriculum. Another research looked at how foreign students in a study abroad program transitioned toward independence (McCleary & Sol, 2020). Additionally, most past research discovered the development of the first year university students adjusting to the new educational environment and became accustomed to their new surroundings (Fennell, 2020; Lindi et al., 2018, Marcenaro, 2018; Coombs, 2013).

Internship for Undergraduate Students

Industrial placement or internship is increasingly being seen as essential components of higher education curriculum. More students and industries are increasingly acknowledging the advantages of

gaining practical experience through internships as part of a course programs. According to Pak et al. (2021), internship is a type of experiential learning in which students apply theories taught in school, in real-world circumstances, and it allows students to integrate and solidify their thinking and behaviour. This extracurricular experiential learning activity has been regarded as an approach for undergraduate students to get real-life experiences, for training purposes, and as a tool for identifying long-term interests and goals (Hanson, 1983; Nga Thi Vo et al., 2021; Pak et al., 2021). By undergoing internship, undergraduate students can become self-sufficient, motivated, and determined. Students' satisfaction with their undergraduate courses increases as they clarify their professional interests clearly, develop their personalities, and become more competent throughout the internship term (Pak et al., 2021). This statement is also supported by Li et al. (2021) who claimed that undergraduate students utilize internships to put what they have learned in class into practice and to develop new skills, and that internships can offer opportunities for them to further education at higher levels. Thus, internship can be viewed as a useful teaching instrument that delivers valuable experience for undergraduate students.

On the other hand, Silva et al. (2016) mentioned that internship can be a beneficial practice for bridging theoretical knowledge and experience and improving graduate employability. After completing internship, students' skill and confidence to work with people, knowledge of how the sector operates, ability to adapt to changes, leadership, and financial management competency all improve significantly (Lam & Ching, 2007; Li et al., 2021). Furthermore, internship helps students build self-confidence and gain insight into whether their career choice fits their interests and personality (Dobratz et al., 2014). According to Hong et al. (2013), internships help students become more confident in their capacity to find employment following graduation from college. Internships provided students with transferable skills, enhanced their understanding of their chosen field, and provided a tangible link between theory and practice (Li et al., 2021). Given the significance of internships in the higher education system and its ability to influence students' learning experiences, there is a change in the personality and values of students following an internship, as well as how these experiences affect future career aspirations and perspectives.

Internship as an Element of High-Impact Educational Practices

Within the literature, high-impact educational practices (HIEPs) represent key instruments used by the educators to strategically provide substantial benefits to college students with diverse backgrounds (Kuh, 2008; Schneider, 2008). By employing HIEPs in a proper way, such practices can connect various elements of the college environment in order to create a more coherent educational experience that may facilitate the learning process among the students. Hence, according to Kuh (2008), Schneider (2008), and Kuh, O'Donnell and Reed (2013), there are 10 widely tested and used HIEPs worldwide; first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning/community-based learning, internships and, capstone courses and projects.

Internships, which are increasingly utilized as a form of experiential learning, provide students with direct work experience under the supervision and socialization to a profession provided by a company supervisor, while also encouraging them to integrate classroom learning with knowledge acquired in a chosen field of work (Kuh, 2008; Schneider, 2008). Moreover, internships provide students with opportunities to apply and evaluate the knowledge they have gained during their undergraduate studies. Instead of being detached from the curriculum, course supervisors should provide thoughtful guidance to make internships an integral part of the college learning experience (Wawrzynski & Baldwin, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Ten full-time undergraduate students participated in the interview. Eight participants were female, and two participants were male. Participants ranged in age between 22 and 26 years old. Regarding ethnicity, four participants identified themselves as Malay, three as Indian, and three as Chinese. Participants came from two distinct academic programs, namely Hospitality and Risk Management & Insurance. All participants revealed that their average CGPA was at least a B. Seven participants had participated in internships within the previous two years. These participants were Hospitality diploma and certificate holders who had completed a five-to-twelve-month internship as part of their diploma program. Meanwhile, three participants had just completed the-four-month internship as part of their degree program, all of whom were in the Risk Management and Insurance fields.

Data Collection

This study was undertaken as part of the requirement for passing the enrolled Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Learning and Teaching program, particularly in the SGHE5063 course of Supporting Holistic Student Development during the A213 Semester Session 2021/2022 at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Participants comprised of the undergraduate students who were enrolled at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Students were recruited based on the following criteria: internship completion, possession of a diploma/certificate/degree or its equivalent, and a four-month or longer internship. All students interested in participating in a focus group interview to discuss their internship experiences were invited by researchers to join a WhatsApp group in order to participate. Such invitations to participate in an interview through WhatsApp are displayed as per Figure A.1 in the Appendix section. Small group interviews were held using the WebEx platform to allow students to share their experiences among themselves. Such group interviews, which covered one and up to three or four participants and one researcher who acted as a facilitator, lasted for about 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded in video presentations, respectively. During the sessions, facilitators checked their informed consents, explained confidentiality and subsequently requested the participants to complete the Google Forms.

Interview

The students were divided into three small groups based on their respective fields. Small-group interviews were favored over individual in-depth interviews because they allow moderators to record the diverse perspectives expressed by participants and to conduct comparative analyses accordingly. Interview questions were structured and developed with reference to the existing literature. The moderator in each session guided the conversation by posing open-ended and loosely organized questions. The protocol included four sets of questions in total. In each session, the moderator stimulated discussions among the participants by asking, probing, and follow-up questions. These "probes" also helped to broaden and clarify the participants' responses. On the saturation point of interviews, the moderators decided to end respective sessions when they noticed that similar themes with regards to the benefits of internship experiences were repetitively shared by the participants. All sessions were recorded using the UUM WebEx Meeting platform.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Through observations, participants were seen as individuals with diverse backgrounds, distinct life experiences, and varying sizes of families, of which, their values as well as beliefs were brought together and reflected throughout the internship periods. All participants shared strong motivations to be successful in their academic and career pursuits so that they would be able to make significant differences in their personal and career journeys. Also, all participants were aware of the requirements to undergo internships as they had received reminders on the importance albeit facing difficulties in the internship processes. In this section, the main findings were largely derived from small group interviews. First, internship learning experiences were summarized that were significant to students, followed by the impacts of internship experiences were examined on the students' personal and professional development through the lens of Chickering's Identity Development Theory.

Table 1

Respondents Demographic

	Frequency	Percentage
	<i>n (7)</i>	<i>% (100)</i>
Gender		
Male	1	14.3
Female	6	85.7
Age		
23 years old	3	42.9
24 years old	3	42.9
26 years old	1	14.3
Duration of internship		
1-3 months	1	14.2
4-6 months	5	75.6
7-12 months	1	14.2
Race		
Malay	4	57.1
Indian	2	28.6
other	1	14.3

Hurdles in Internship Application Process

All participants were of the views that the associated processes such as identifying, applying to, and accepting (or not) internship are complicated to some extent. Participants described that the availability of support from others is important in manoeuvring all stages. They stated that there exist difficulties to succeed in the internship application processes, which included deterrent factors related to the availability of internship for certain majors, geographical restrictions that can impact internship's availability, and the competitive conditions of some internships. Syaza, who majored in Food Service (Halal Practice), stated that she applied to JAIS but was unable to obtain a placement confirmation.

I am short of time, so I just go for senior recommendation for placement at Impian Golf & Country Club. I was a little misdirected, but as long as I got the placement, I'll be fine (Syaza).

Meanwhile, Anati from Vocational College stated that students were not allowed to choose a placement that is close to their hometown or to intern at a family-owned business. She applied for three different places and all of which were turned down, leaving her one final choice to accept an internship offer at her friends' family bakery shop. Similarly, Renuga, who majored in Business Risk Management and Insurance was contented and relieved to do her intern at one of the Top Glove's manufacturing factories in Klang, Selangor despite her strong desire to be working together with one of the renowned insurance companies in Malaysia.

Participants described their excessive reliance on others, such as faculty, peers, and seniors, for words of encouragement, helpful guidance, and information about available opportunities. The majority of respondents agreed that when choosing an internship, they consult with their peers and seniors.

As I made more friends, more senior friends, they supplied me with different types of internships that they heard about. They tell me where I can get information, where I can go to get it, and so on (Kim Swee Lee).

Mishallini, on the other hand, explained that her internship placement was predetermined by the faculty. She and her friends were asked to draw lots to determine their placements and were required to attend an interview to secure their placement. This left her with no room to pursue at her own place of interest for internship.

Experiences Evoke Adaption to Change

Participants expressed how internship can impact on their personal and professional developments over time. This included the stories of being independent for the first time (e.g. to over-stretch themselves by surviving in a new place) and learning to adjust to completely new situations.

This is the first time I was apart from my family. It's quite challenging and I feel lonely for the first week of the internship. I took about one week to adapt to the new environment and different types of colleagues (Jude).

The main reason why I really struggle with my adoption phase is because previously I'm a passive student in class and normally just mingle with my close friends. The internship experiences shaped me to be more friendly and able to improve my interpersonal skills as my internship placement at travel agent agencies required meetings with diverse clients (Jude).

Likewise, Mei Kait faced tough moments to kick-start her practicum in the of Ernst & Young's audit department as she had to undergo a home quarantine for several days due to her close contact with a COVID-19 patient. Later, it took her a week or so to comfortably blend with the working environment there. Mishalini, on the other hand, has a completely different story.

I am able to work and communicate well with the staff and other trainees. At the university, I actively participated in many student club activities, which I believe

helped me to carry myself well with new people and the environment. Although I have no issues with the people or the environment, I am having difficulty adjusting to the hotel industry culture, which is completely different from what I expected and is a very difficult industry. Fortunately, my supervisors and senior staff always motivated me and gave me guidance on how to adapt to the new workplace environment and culture during my internship (Mishallini).

Experiences Provide Opportunities for Personal and Professional Development

During the internship, participants reported gaining comprehension, applying knowledge, and gaining confidence against challenges in order to gain new knowledge. Participants described a variety of non-university curriculum-related skills acquired.

I was given opportunities to learn Chinese Set in Banquet, which is not on the syllabus (Mishallini).

While at Vocational College, I never learned basic cooking principles since my major is Bakery (Mardiyah).

My internship is even supplementing my education because I learned so many things that I wouldn't have learned in a textbook or in class. But now, they have become real (Jude).

Mardiyah, a Pastry and Bakery major, said she learned a lot about hot cooking. She pointed out the most difficult situations she ran into while on internship, which she regarded as a memorable and especially rewarding learning experience.

I was once assigned to handle the egg counter during the breakfast buffet. It was a peak session, and it was truly chaotic. The orders kept coming in and I remembered being yelled at in front of others by an Arabic guest due to the delay in preparing his omelette. The guest complained to my upper supervisor, who consolidated rather than scolded me, which meant a lot to me (Mardiyah).

Moreover, internship promotes opportunities for a professional development, which were highly acknowledged among the participants. Syasya reflected her internship as a competitive work condition. She referenced meeting professionals working in various types of organizational environments and learning how to work in differently sized organizations.

Everyone is showcasing their respective strengths and advantages, and eventually I had to compete as well (Syasya).

I know how to converse with them. I become aware of certain things notably in terms of what to say and otherwise (Syasya).

For most participants, the access to supportive supervisors and peers during and after internship was a critical component of professional development. Most participants agreed that their supervisors provided them with words of encouragement, immediate feedback and hands-on learning opportunities. Among others, Kim Swee Lee stated that her supervisor demonstrated how to do things on a step-by-

step basis, telling her where she went wrong or how she could improve herself. She valued the one-on-one attention she received.

Students reflected on how they had changed personally since they started the internship program. They reported development in their sense of self, responsibility, autonomy and increase in interpersonal skills were perceived to be linked to transition experiences. Mishallini shared several instances in which she was given tasks and responsibilities to handle on her own. The supervisor assigned her to act as a manager (manager in action) for an executive lounge operation due to shortage of staff, while she was only a trainee.

When I was in the housekeeping department, I was assigned to do 30 make-up rooms per floor to be completed in a day, all by myself (Mishallini)

All participants agreed that there was a noticeable improvement in interpersonal skills, particularly communication skills. Mardiyah emphasized the significance of communication skills in helping her become comfortable and adaptable in the workplace. Additionally, given the conducive and vibrant working environments at Top Glove, Ernst & Young and Dell companies (e.g. supervisor-subordinate relationships and provided trainings), Renuga, Mei Kiat and Wei Jian opined that the practicum for new students should be continued at such companies over the coming semesters. These were mainly due to the availability of vast job exposures that can unlock the individuals' potential through the involvements in various individual and team initiatives within respective companies.

Experiences Provide Opportunities for Future Visioning of a Career Path

Participants described internship as providing a greater grasp of what it is like to work at a specific company and providing a clearer perspective of the industry.

Internship is wonderful for students who are seeking career options. During my six months internship, I was assigned to several areas such as Garde Manger Kitchen, Pastry, Hot Kitchen, Coffeeshouse, and Chinese Restaurant. This knowledge helps me with future job searches by giving me a better sense of the types of jobs I desire and, perhaps more crucially, the types of positions I do not want (Kim Swee Lee).

Internship has given me a broad perspective and a clear professional path in the hotel industry. Previously, I had no clear vision of my future career in the hotel industry. Due to a lack of information and interest, I feel as if I am just taking my Diploma in Hotel Management as part of my educational path, with no idea what I should do after graduation. However, since I began my internship, all the senior staff have advised and encouraged me to continue my career in the industry after graduation because the opportunities for career advancement are excellent (Mishallini).

Unlike the other interns, Wei Jian was hyped up to share the good news that he was successfully being promoted as a financial analyst at Dell right after his practicum ended on 7 July 2022. Given the good ratings that he received from Dell's top management during the individual project presentation at the end of his 4-month practicum period, he managed to secure a slot in High Performance Staff group who deserves the opportunities to become a chartered accountant (CA) within three years after joining in the company. Also, with a clear direction of future career growth and seemingly fit to be working there, he was determined to stay on with the company for a couple of years.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICES

This study was accordingly administered to ten full-time undergraduate students with academic backgrounds in Hospitality and Risk Management & Insurance courses who completed their practicum periods (i.e., ranging from four months to twelve months) as part of their diploma and degree programs. In the study, the focus group data as gathered from the series of conducted interviews were subsequently examined via the lens of the Chickering's Identity Development Theory with regards to the impacts of internship experiences on the students' personal and professional development.

Based on the findings, a connection exists between the seven vectors of development from the Chickering's theory throughout the internship periods with the disclosure of certain vectors to be more prominent than the other vectors. Of the seven vectors, vector one: developing competence was widely apparent among the participants as observed from the series of conducted interviews. Students reported lack of confidence and abilities to perform task at the beginning of internship, but gained competency on how to navigate the task as they progressed through the internship term. Vector two: managing emotions, was equally presented in the students' responses. At the beginning of their internship, students were discovered to be emotionally challenged. However, as they progressed, they learned to understand, recognize, and appropriately act on the feelings they were experiencing. Vector three: moving through autonomy towards interdependence was visible in students' responses. Internship students developed a sense of self-direction in their learning, improved problem-solving skills, and gained independence from superior guidance.

The importance of vectors five and six: establishing identity and developing purpose, was reflected in internship students' responses. Most students were puzzled when it came to deciding where to intern. Some were undecided, while others sought advice from other people. As a result, many struggled at the start of their internship, adjusting to the new environment and learning new things. However, as the internship progressed, students' sense of identity and sense of direction grew. Furthermore, they established more specific professional objectives and broadened their career interests in their respective fields. Generally, these vectors are fluid and allow the students to progress in their own order, traveling back and forth through the vectors to achieve the milestones that are necessary for the college students in surviving the transitions in the academic, occupational and social aspects with responsible and ethical manners.

More importantly, internship or practicum constitutes as one of the ten HIEP elements. It is aimed to provide the college students with direct experience in a work setting besides exposing them with the benefits of supervision and coaching from the subject-matter experts in respective fields. Overall, when the students successfully undergo the internship periods in a proper manner, such periods are likely to provide them with the opportunities to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge within new environments that are essential for deep, meaningful learning experiences among themselves.

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