

Enhancing hospitality and tourism graduate employability through the 2u2i program

2u2i program

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the concept of 2u2i – two years attachment with university and two years attachment with industry – a new learning mode introduced by the Ministry of Education as a strategy to enhance the employability of university undergraduate degree students in Malaysia.

Design/methodology/approach – The new mode of undergraduate degree program requires the university and industry to collaborate on the design of the curriculum and development of student training programs. Based on a series of qualitative discussions, the paper draws on the perspectives of university administrators and selected practitioners from the hospitality and tourism industry who are interested in developing 2u2i curriculum and working together to enhance the overall employability of university graduates. The paper explains the issues and challenges in implementing the 2u2i program at a local public university as a case study in Malaysia.

Findings – The 2u2i program provides a significant opportunity for industry to collaborate with the university in enhancing competencies and relevant skills among degree graduates so that they are able to excel in the workplace. Some of the issues and challenges involve bureaucratic procedures, time constraints in developing the program with industry, delay in approval procedures of the program and extra costs highlighted in managing the program with industry. Despite several challenges relating to the implementation of the program, it is important for industry to collaborate with universities in designing relevant curriculum to augment the employability skills of university graduates in Malaysia.

Originality/value – This paper explores different strategies for engaging with industry practitioners so that they are able to work closely with the university in crafting academic curricula in the hospitality and tourism field. This is important because it enhances university graduate employability via a relevant curriculum based on input from the industry.

Keywords Industry, Hospitality and tourism education, Graduate employability, Curriculum development

Paper type Case study



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Introduction

In Malaysia, the issue of university graduate employability is one of the greatest priorities for education policymakers. According to a Central Bank report in 2015 on youth unemployment, the percentage of those unemployed is higher among those with a tertiary education compared to those who have not undergone this level of education. The 2015 report observed that of the 405,000 young people who had completed tertiary education, 15.3 per cent were unemployed (StarOnline, 2017). Furthermore, only 53 per cent of 273,373 university graduates in 2015 were employed in the period six months after graduation. Several reasons are given for the relatively high level of unemployment among local graduates. The main reason is a reported mismatch between the training provided at universities and the skill set required by employers. Employers also said that, in general, the university curriculum does not reflect the current skill requirements and especially the communication skills that they require of graduates. However, according to the report, the private sector does not have an adequate structure for industrial training and it is not especially interested in working with universities to ensure that relevant training is given together with work exposure for graduates to help them prepare for the realities of working life. Recently, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has introduced what is referred to as the “2u2i program” in support of a more flexible approach to education, aligned with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education). This advocates a more holistic, entrepreneurial approach so that graduates have a more balanced set of skills that can be readily applied in the workplace. The 2u2i educational concept combines on and off campus learning throughout the study period. The name “2u2i” reflects a process of learning that occurs on the campus and in the workplace in various combinations. The options include three years in university, one year in industry (3u1i); two years in university, two years in industry (2u2i); and two years in university, one year in industry (2u1i).

Given this development, the article highlights some of the implementation issues and challenges for local universities relating to the 2u2i program and aspects of the graduate employability problem in Malaysia. It also provides insights into how such a program could be successfully managed by drawing on a case study involving a local public university.

Background of the study

The issues of graduate employability are not new and the topic has been discussed and debated by academics and practitioners. A particular criticism is that universities fail to equip graduates with the relevant skills needed to participate in the workforce. Due to changing education and labor market policy and trends, universities are facing tremendous pressure to produce employable graduates. In fact, graduate employability is one of the main priorities for higher education policymakers due to the uncertainty of labor markets and the changing educational landscape especially in the most advanced western economies (Bridgstock, 2009; Tomlinson, 2012). According to Tomlinson (2012), universities are under public scrutiny for failing to equip graduates with skills that match what industry needs. In the UK and Australia, a graduate employability rate performance indicator is based on the employment status of graduates a few months after they have completed their degree program. Employability can be defined as “a set of achievements-skills, understanding and personal attributes-that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their occupation, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy” (Yorke, 2006, p. 8). From the employers’ perspective, graduate employability is a function of the skills, attitudes and personality of graduates that determine whether they are sufficiently “attractive” to be employed.

Due to technology-driven changes that are occurring in the workplace, there are serious concerns about the future of young graduates in terms of their prospects for securing graduate

employment. Studies indicate that an internship program or industrial placement can increase student employability prospects (Kapareliotis *et al.*, 2019; Sanahuja Vélez and Ribes Giner, 2015; Zopiatis, 2007). In hospitality and tourism programs, internship placement is commonly practiced and is part of a requirement that must be met before students can graduate. It is typically a short-term, practical work experience, in which students receive training and gain experience in a specific field or career of their interest (Zopiatis, 2007). There are several benefits for students upon completion of the internship program, notably that have work experience and this is likely to enhance their confidence and skills which in turn, could help them secure employment upon graduation (Kapareliotis *et al.*, 2019). However, as stated by Zopiatis (2007), an internship program has to be monitored closely, as students may not be getting the experiences that the university may have anticipated.

There are a number of core skills required if graduates are to be employable. Several studies indicate that a core set of employability skills is required by employers. They include communications skills, adaptability skills, developmental skills, group effectiveness skills and influencing skills (Napiah *et al.*, 2012). Competency in these skills is needed if graduates are to perform routine tasks in the workplace. In view of this, universities need to examine graduate attributes that increase graduate employability that is related to the different skills that graduates possessed (Bridgstock, 2009). Other than generic skills such as being able to communicate effectively, graduates should also be exposed to other important concepts such as self-management and career building so that they can secure their own long-term employability. There are different strategies used by universities to enhance graduate employability. For example, universities that effectively implement an industry–university partnership are generally able to enhance graduate employability prospects (Jauhari and Thomas, 2013). Industry–university partnerships are practiced by many established universities in the USA, the UK and India and the outcome is that graduates are not only employed locally but also internationally.

What is the 2u2i program?

As reported in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) by the Ministry of Education (formerly known as the Ministry of Higher Education, 2018), the ministry aspires to increase the current 75 per cent graduate employability rate to more than 80 per cent by 2025. To accomplish this goal, it is important that local universities are able to provide teaching and learning that prepares graduates with the skills and attributes needed by industry. One of the important initiatives in the Blueprint is to develop industry-led curriculum so as to improve graduate employability and reduce the skills mismatch. It is in this context that universities need to intensify their partnerships and collaboration with various industry players to co-create the relevant curriculum. To enhance graduates marketability, the Malaysian Ministry of Education introduced the 2u2i (two university + two industry) program, a new learning approach that facilitates opportunities for industry to work with universities in designing curriculum and providing more extensive work experience to students. The 2u2i program learning experience takes place both on and off campus and is guided by close supervision from academics and practitioners.

The 2u2i program requires undergraduate students to study on campus for two years before participating in internship training for another two years. The program was introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2016 to improve local graduate employability, emphasizing a work-based learning approach. Here, students are required to undergo a specific work placement for an extended period – a minimum of one year or maximum of two years – normally between the third or final year of an undergraduate degree program. The main purpose of the 2u2i program is to improve the overall work readiness of graduates

and enhance their employability. Due to criticisms from industry that local university graduates are not work ready and lack certain skills, it is necessary for universities to re-think their curriculum so that it is aligned with the needs of industry and society.

The concept of 2u2i is not new, and it has been implemented by other countries before. However, a new feature in Malaysia is that industry practitioners have an opportunity to co-create the curriculum with the university so that the program is more relevant to industry's needs. It is also thought that the workplace training exposure that the 2u2i program offers to students will help them to gain confidence and real-world business skills. Students who undergo such a program are exposed to an active and constructive learning experience that enhances their graduate profile, builds self-confidence, creativity, professionalism and improves their communication skills. Based on experiential learning, students are exposed to paid, real-world experience off campus and receive training from participating employers (learn and earn). According to the 2u2i guidelines prepared by the Ministry, the new study mode is a combination of several elements: work-integrated education, work-based learning and work-integrated learning. The main attribute of 2u2i is that students receive meaningful "hands-on" experience based on the collaborative university–industry curriculum design.

Currently, there are five public universities in Malaysia offering the 2u2i mode of learning for certain undergraduate degree programs, namely, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. According to the Ministry of Education, the major challenge in implementing the program is in persuading industry to participate with universities to facilitate student placement over an extended period. Another issue is whether practitioners have the time to discuss the specifics of student placement with academics given the pressure of managing their businesses. There are also questions from the public as to whether students are equipped with enough academic knowledge, as they will spend less time on campus-based learning. According to the Ministry, the strength of the 2u2i program emerges from the collaboration between industry experts and academics in designing a curriculum that is delivered at the university and in the workplace. In this endeavor, employers are also involved in grading students alongside academics and this helps to create a more industry-driven form of assessment.

The case of the University Malaysia Kelantan

UMK is a Malaysian public university based in Kelantan on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The university was established in 2007 by the government with a mission to deliver high-quality education, specializing in entrepreneurial education. There are currently seven faculties offering multiple undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs including entrepreneurship and business, hospitality and tourism and wellness with more than 6,000 full-time students. The University's long-term vision is to become one of the leading entrepreneurial universities in the Asian region. The University also has more than 400 postgraduate students in subjects ranging from entrepreneurship and business, multimedia and creative technology to agriculture sciences, architecture and landscaping. The university is developing strong links with industry by providing a platform for industry practitioners to share experience and knowledge with students through its CEO Talk Series and Industry Captain talk sessions. To enhance student participation in entrepreneurial activity, the university has also identified several CEOs from established companies in Malaysia to advise the university's senior management on ways of strengthening its academic programs so as to foster among its graduates, an entrepreneurial mind-set.

The faculty of hospitality, tourism and wellness was established on June 1, 2016 with the aim of equipping students with the competencies needed to become managers and/or

entrepreneurs in hospitality, tourism and health management. The faculty's work is aligned with UMK's vision and mission which is to champion balanced and holistic human capital development with an emphasis on entrepreneurship. There are more than 1,500 students enrolled in the faculty and students are required to undergo a minimum three-month internship program with industry. During this period, hospitality and tourism students are expected to learn as much as possible from the organizations in which they are placed and to apply what they have learned to their campus-based studies. According to practitioners, a three-month period of internship is not enough time to prepare well-rounded graduates. For example, students who undergo training at a hotel will not learn much about hotel operations due to time restrictions. In view of this critique, the faculty decided to implement the 2u2i program with support from UMK's senior management as prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

Research approach

This paper draws on discussions with selected participants among hospitality and tourism industry operators and related associations about the suitability of the 2u2i program for UMK. A series of discussions took place with travel operators/owners, industry associations, senior leaders and CEOs of established event organizing companies. Participants were asked about the suitability of the 2u2i program and whether the outcome of such a program was in their view, advantageous to both students and industry in developing graduate employability. Participants were also given the opportunity to make comments on the current employability of university graduates and on relevant subjects to be included in the curriculum in line with industry needs and requirements. In general, participants expressed their support for the new mode of a 2u2i degree level program, and they were also interested in collaborating with the university. The following hospitality and tourism organizations were approached and consulted (Table I), along with some major associations in the Kelantan region about the possibilities of long-term partnerships and placing students on industrial attachment.

University administration including the faculty dean, asked industry practitioners about their willingness to co-create a 2u2i degree program. After understanding the rationale of the 2u2i program, participants offered their full support and willingness to collaborate with the university. All of them were interested in participating and welcomed the interesting idea of co-creating the curricula which they thought had never been proposed before. These discussion meetings took place at the university head office in 2018. Participants also accepted an invitation from the university to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to implement the program. A special MoU signing was organized at UMK and the above listed organizations attended the session and confirmed their willingness to collaborate with the university. The MoU signing event was organized in April 2018 and witnessed by the Minister of Higher Learning. In part, this symbolizes the intent of government and a sense of urgency from both perspectives: the university and industry in addressing the issue of graduate employability.

No.	Organization	Training area
1.	QSR Brands	Food and beverage/restaurants
2.	Asian Overland Travel and Services	Hotel management/Tours and travel
3.	Putra World Trade Center	Event management
4.	Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association	Tours and travel
5.	Malaysian Association of Wellness and Spa	Spa and wellness management
6.	Felda Investment Corporation	Hospitality and tourism

Table I.
List of organizations interested in collaboration for 2u2i program with UMK

Implementation phase of 2u2i program

For a start, the university is prioritizing the 2u2i program with the QSR Brands (M) Holding Bhd., which is the regional largest quick-service restaurant operator with popular brands such as KFC, Pizza Hut and Ayamans restaurants. They were interested in participating in 2u2i program, work-based learning, offered by the Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness in the area of restaurant management. Through the program, students will be placed at restaurants owned by the company, gain one-year solid experience in restaurant business and get ready to enter the industry upon graduation. According to the CEO of the company, students who undergo training with the QSR Brands may receive the similar training provided to the permanent staff of the company. There were several discussions with QSR Brands managers in getting the program running since 2018. However, it was found that getting the program approved by the university senior administration and Malaysia Qualifications Agencies (a national regulating authority) and Higher Learning Department Jabatan Pengajian Tinggi/ Higher Learning Department (JPT) is a monumental task. There are several bureaucracies and red-tape issues in terms of getting the paperwork done and approved by the university Senate. However, being used to efficient work and job done in the private sector, the CEO of the QSR Brands is supporting the university to get the paperwork completed and approved by the relevant authorities. At the university level, the faculty is working hard to get the paperwork approved by both the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and JPT. As of March 2019, the paperwork was approved at the university level and after several meetings and debates with university management in terms of the curriculum structure. It is hoped that the paperwork will be approved by both the MQA and JPT before it can finally be offered sometime in 2020.

Findings

Support from practitioners

One of the respondents mentioned that students would gain more experience by participating in an extensive training period. Further, that most organizations are willing to recruit students who are undergoing such a program, and they are convinced that students can be equipped with the necessary skills to be successful in the tourism and hospitality industry. The CEO of an event company based in Kuala Lumpur said that he looked forward to accepting students, and he specifically asked his HR manager to join the meeting. The managing director of a well-established travel agency in Malaysia is also keen to participate and collaborate with the university in designing the curriculum. In general, senior leaders also suggested that the university should engage with industry on a regular basis so as to incorporate the latest industry trends in their teaching material. One manager also agreed to participate during the “industry captain” talk series introduced by the university and offered to share his knowledge and experience with students.

Issues and challenges facing the 2u2i program

Several issues were raised by practitioners during discussion meetings. Many of them advised the faculty not to send so many students to be trained during the program cycle. The maximum number of students that they can take is around 5-10 students per intake/per year. Practitioners also wanted the university to recognize their efforts in getting involved with such a program. A few of them asked for a certificate endorsed by the university to acknowledge that they had taken part in training hospitality and tourism students. The implication here is that the faculty may need to limit the number of student enrolments for 2u2i program; otherwise, it may be difficult to find industrial placements for them all. The university must also sign MoUs with industry partners to secure internship places for

students in advance. Regular meeting with industry partners are also necessary to monitor student progress and to obtain feedback for further improvement.

One of the major challenges in implementing the 2u2i degree program is to recruit more industry partners who are interested in co-creating and designing curriculum with the university. Even though the feedback received from employers was very encouraging, the faculty clearly needs to identify more industry partners to join the program. It is also necessary for faculty to provide advice and assistance to industry partners on the design of the curriculum so that it reflects current industry needs. Commonly, the number of new students for hospitality and tourism degrees offered by the faculty is around 500 students. If all new students decide to enroll on the 2u2i program, the faculty would have to find 500 suitable placements every year. Such a big number of student enrolment may require more industry partners to be onboard.

Another important component of the 2u2i program is that students are taught and assessed by a qualified industry coach. It is a challenge for both university and industry partners to agree on a common structure that enables both the industry coach and academic staff member to collaborate on both the course content and assessment procedures. There are a number of courses in an undergraduate degree program and this exercise may be required for many subjects. It is also unclear how many hours need to be allocated for certain courses to be mentored and assessed by an industry coach in the workplace. Further, the requirements for an industry coach are also unclear: what and who should evaluate students, and what kind of reports should be submitted to the faculty?

The faculty has not reached agreement with industry partners regarding allowances for students during their internship attachment. There should not be any circumstances in which employers take advantage of students to perform jobs without appropriate supervision. One lesson from the hospitality industry in Cyprus in the context of student internships, is that employers failed to provide students with meaningful work due to inappropriate on-the-job-supervision (Zopiatis, 2007). Clearly, the faculty must establish roles and duties for oversight by employers. Another issue that the university/faculty must address is that there may be some costs incurred in managing such a degree program mode where academic staff must travel to a workplace from time to time to monitor student workplace progress.

Conclusion

The 2u2i program concept is designed to provide students with learning experiences that take place on and off campus in a systematic way. With this new mode for a degree program, students will have the opportunity to widen their network in collaboration with industry practitioners and gain good work experience at the early stage of their degree program. With such an arrangement, it is hoped that students can perform well both academically and practically and thus be better prepared to enter industry with relevant skills and competencies. While the minimum one-year work placement can provide in-depth work experience, on campus learning equips the students with theoretical knowledge. Specifically, off campus learning can help to develop generic skills, communications skills, adaptability skills, developmental skills, group effectiveness skills, influencing skills, self-management and career building skills among others.

In summary, three main challenges were identified during the discussions cited in this article. First, that the program may take a longer time to implement due to several bureaucratic requirements set by the university. This is potentially a source of frustration among academics and the private sector that are developing the curriculum together. Second, there is still confusion and misunderstanding between the university and the industry as to how to execute such a program. Third, wider participation, greater support

and acceptance from the private sector are needed for such a program. It is anticipated that conflict and misunderstanding between academic administration and employers may occur during the process of designing the study curriculum. There are many issues to resolve, such as what type of assessments to assign to the students during the attachment, how to give feedback, the time constraints facing managers in supervising students and the financial obligations of both universities and employers, during the one- or two-year training. These issues need to be addressed before the actual student attachment takes place and further discussion with the industry is needed. That said it is hoped that the 2u2i program can enhance overall university graduate employability in Malaysia and secure long-term employment in the country.

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