

# “We Did It Right on Time”: International Students’ Internship in China During COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Enormous distractions brought by deadly COVID-19 pandemic in higher education left no excuse for internship activities. Hence, tradition/offline internship has been postponed or rescinded and a massive online/virtual shift of internships has been observed in lieu. The present case study employed qualitative research approach to solicit information from two ( $n = 2$ ) internship organizers for international students of a selected university in China. The university continued to implement offline internship as intended right on time in spite of strict curb measures to contain COVID-19. The study revealed; pre-internship briefing, effective communication with receiver institutions, as well as obedience to new normal pandemic prevention measures were the main reasons facilitated on time and offline internship. Simultaneously, difference in educational experiences, language barriers and some movement restrictions within the school were uncovered challenges for interns as international students. Provision of pre-internship briefing, psychological support and counsel, and follow up of rules and procedures were emphasized as recommendations for improving internship experience and in case of upcoming pandemic crises.

**Keywords:** China, COVID-19, international students, internship, pandemic

## 1. Introduction

Internship which is considered a win-win strategy is becoming one of the mushrooming aspects in higher educational institutions (Galbraith & Mondal, 2020; Margaryan, Saniter, Schumann, & Siedler, 2020; Karunaratne & Perera, 2019; Narayanan & Paul, 2010). Widely, it is known for its crucial role for academic course completion (Jogan, 2019) and competitiveness in the employment arena (Zehr & Korte, 2020). Although internship varies in time, duration and form; Narayanan and Paul (2010) noted common aspect shared by many internship programs. According to the authors, “internship involves a term-length placement of an enrolled student in an organization-sometimes with pay, sometimes without pay-with a faculty supervisor, a company supervisor, and some academic credit earned toward the degree” (p. 61). Internships are valuable activities for prospective employees since they allow interns to prepare for future careers while their one foot is yet in school (Kaşlı & İlban, 2013). Thus, internship has been explained as “a three-way partnership among a college or university, the internship site, and the student” (Crowell, 2018, p. 19).

Internships are described as a way to incorporate job-related experience into graduate study through involvement in programmed and supervised duties (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010). Concisely, Wheeler and Waite (2021) defined an internship as a supervised, short-term learning experience in a professional workplace setting that helps students to get relevant, practical experience in their field of study or career ambitions. However, as COVID-19 started to spread worldwide, higher educational institutions promptly closed their campus (Wheeler & Waite, 2021) and unfavorably affects the continued implementation of internships either overtly or covertly (Feldman, 2021; Park & Jones, 2021). Hence, internship has been altered to best optional ways that carefully considers prevention measures (Mediawati et al., 2020) and it has caught attention of several studies. Investigation the impact of virtual internship experiences (Feldman, 2021) and adaptation to changes in tourism, events, and hospitality education (Park & Jones, 2021), critical assessment of internship approaches and finding better alternatives (Wheeler & Waite, 2021), exploring benefits and skills of internship from perspectives of accounting students and supervisors (Mediawati et al., 2020), impact of COVID-19 on public health (PH) internships through interns’ and supervisors’ perspectives before and during the pandemic (Teng et al., 2021) are

among others. Yet as a number of new variants have been identified globally, Park and Jones (2021) emphasized that it's not certain how long its impacts will last or whether internships continue to a fundamental shift. However, to the authors' knowledge, little is known about internships during COVID-19 in China and how universities dealt with designing and implementing internships as China was the first victim country of the pandemic remains unexplored.

The university under study continued on-site internship on the spot; hence by taking it as a case, the present study is mainly aimed to investigate the following research questions;

- 1) What arrangements put into practice to implement offline scheduled internships and how the faculty worked to keep interns safe and comfortable by considering international students as interns?
- 2) What lessons would be taken for better preparation for future or upcoming pandemic inconveniences?

### *1.1 COVID-19 Pandemic and Internship*

COVID-19 that initially labeled as an outbreak, epidemic and later a pandemic was detected in China and rapidly spread to rest of the world with its fast way of transmission (Roy et al., 2020; Varalakshmi & Arunachalam, 2020) and led to striking illness and mortality. Governments announced preventions measures as a response where keeping social distance and prohibition of public gathering remains the best alternative to lessen new infection rate (Bao, 2020; Paules, Marston, & Fauci, 2020; Toquero, 2020). Thus, brought enormous disruption in private and public sectors (Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Viner et al., 2020) as well as in higher educational institutions (Aucejo, French, Araya, & Zafar, 2020; Zaman et al., 2021). Aimed to assure the safety of their students, universities engaged in sustained initiatives (Mekonen & Nneoma, 2021). Extensive application of online learning was observed across the world (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Ferrel & Ryan, 2020; Sintema, 2020), although it led to increased students' stress (Roy et al., 2020), frustration and low engagement (Mekonen & Nneoma, 2021).

Not surprisingly, the pandemic badly affects traditional or in-person internship programs (Park & Jones, 2021; Zaman et al., 2021). Hitherto, virtual or distance internships were not regarded to provide high-quality internship experience due to students' lack of engagement and professional interaction (Park & Jones, 2021). It's revealed that some internship has been rescinded due to financial constraints and difficulty to change to online mode (Aucejo et al., 2020; Hora et al., 2021). However, numerous higher educational institutions switched to online internships swiftly (Park & Jones, 2021).

### *1.2 Structure of Internship*

The structure of internship plays a crucial role for attainment of program goals. Structure is vital for attainment of intended mutual benefits of internships, interns' and host organizations satisfaction (Jenkins, 2001; Park & Jones, 2021). Educational institutions should be aware of how to structure internship programs effectively; to consider interns' expectations and ensure that the internship purposes are in chord with host organization requirements (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014). Despite the fact that the objectives of the program determine the duration, characteristics and nature of internship (Hora, Wolfgram, & Thompson, 2017), the typical length of internship extend from 3 to 6 months (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014). In this regard, Galbraith and Mondal (2020) stated that several higher educational institutions offer credits for progress assessment of interns from their work in host organizations equivalent to number of school hours. Similarly, Hora, Wolfgram and Thompson (2017) noted although giving careful consideration to overall design; length, nature, mentorship, payment and supervision is crucial "yet frequently overlooked component of internship programming" (p. 4).

### *1.3 Benefits of Internship*

Several authors have been documented the advantages of internship (Baert et al., 2021; Crowell, 2018; Wei, 2020; Wheeler & Waite, 2021) by which Narayanan and Paul (2010) classified as university, organization and student as sender, receiver and career respectively. Jogan (2019) listed; profession socialization, practical experiment arena, undiscovered perspective, and arouse continued learning and reflection as some advantages of internship. Anjum (2020) asserted that in addition fostering students' skills, it enhances professional exposure and growth. Internships favorably affect career self-concept, job awareness, self-sufficiency and social skills (Cook et al., 2015) and aid interns' professional socialization (Hora et al., 2021). The other facet of internship is fostering future career performance by bringing expected intern behavior change (Jogan, 2019).

Positive relationship between internships and career opportunities was discovered (Salticoff, 2017 cited in Galbraith & Mondal, 2020). Companies use internship as a device for recruitment and retention of potential interns at low cost (Gault et al., 2000). Different values of internship for students include opportunity for employment, source of revenue or good stipend, as well as fulfillment of degree requirement (Karunaratne &

Perera, 2019). Experiential experience enables students to apply what they have learnt in class practically (Kaşlı & İlban, 2013; Galbraith & Mondal, 2020), gain experience, and improve problem-solving abilities (Chang & Chu, 2009). In a study by Holdway et al. (2005) in the nursing field found that internships nurture adaptation, self-esteem, and organizational competencies. Moreover, internship nurtures rapport with the host industry and familiarity with working culture (Karunaratne & Perera, 2019). Hauck et al. (2000) asserted that internship notably contributes to interns' professional and employment plans, although no connection is found between academic achievement and involvement in internship programs. However, Holyoak (2013) indicated that not all internship experiences promote the desired outcomes. Studies revealed the aspects of internship that demands improvement. In this regard, a study by Kaşlı and İlban (2013) disclose that interns' professional growth may not be granted due to limited employee rights, compensation, and exploitation of interns as "cheap labor". Likewise, internship poorly affects teamwork, management capacities, creativity and enhancement of research and project skill aspiration for continuing learning (Karunaratne & Perera, 2019). Thus, it adversely influences interns' motivation and lowers their retention intention in the companies (Kaşlı & İlban, 2013).

## **2. Theoretical Framework—Situating Learning and Internship**

Internship that is adversely affected in pandemic era is a bridge which enables students to apply what they have learned theoretically to practical context is better elucidated by Situated learning theory (SLT). SLT is a theory proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), that assume learning develops when learners get chance to involve in a "community of practice". According to authors, the communities provide learners high practical learning opportunities. Gawande and Al-Senaidi (2015) stated situated learning as learning model where learning occurs in real environment and activities. The model criticizes the classroom bounded learning and perception of learning as merely taking notes, attending lectures or completing assignments or academic tasks (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this regard Bay (2021) stated internships can best understand under a shade of situated learning activity, where learning is not confined in classroom but, situated in an environment of action and participation. SLT is genuine practical context that facilitated learners with more learning opportunities and engagement with in social contexts (Besar, Pengiran, & Binti, 2018; Lave, 1991). Internships are practical learning grounds that facilitate learners to apply conceptions and theories on actual settings (Bay, 2021). STL emphasizes crucial role of internship for academic and professional development of students that was the foundational objective of university under study. Hence, it enables the researcher to explore deeply how internship best organized and what experiences can be gained for future incidents.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Study Design**

The study used a case-study design that employs a qualitative approach. This aimed to explore how the case university continued to implement intended on-site internship right on time despite fear and anxiety of COVID-19 in China. Although there were other universities organize internship however, most were shifted to online or postponed due to Covid-19 crisis (see limitation section). Besides, choosing the university under study gave a detailed experience for better design of offline internship in case of impending pandemic crises. The qualitative method allows researchers to go deeper into a topic of interest and gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018) through genuine participant's perspective and experience (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Qualitative research help researchers to "access the thoughts and feelings of research participants, which can enable the development of an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences" (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 230).

### **3.2 Participant and Interview Protocol**

Purposive sampling was used to select two ( $n = 2$ ) respective personnel in charge of organizing internships from the case university. The interviewed participants are responsible for the overall arrangement of internships including but not limited to pre-briefing to receiver institutions, orientation, and evaluation of interns. Accordingly, the participants share detailed information and experience during the interview process. A self-designed interview guide that encompasses a list of semi-structured and open-ended questions grounded on standards in the extant literature and reviewed by a qualitative researcher in the field was employed. A semi-structured interview guide is a prevalent method for pliable and adjustable data collection (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). This approach's versatility allows more elaboration and follow up questions (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Furthermore, probe questions for profound understanding were used, as it is highly recommended (Adarkwah & Zeyuan, 2020).

### 3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Director of the program was initially contacted and briefed about the present study to suggest the right person in charge of the internship and to get legitimate access. Prior to the interview, consent was sought as fulfillment of ethical consideration of academic research and to brief details of the study. This allows participants to be aware of what is expected from them during interview and possibly increase their honesty (Gill et al., 2008). Subsequently, face to face and online via widely used social media application in China (WeChat) interview of a verbal account was done. The in-depth interview took 35–40 minutes range. The interview duration excludes the time the researcher contacted the participants for briefing research purposes and further clarifications. The interview was conducted in English and was recorded in audio after interviewees' assent. To make sure that the study provides genuine and valid results (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), the transcribed audiotaped interview was sent back to for checking and correcting misinterpretation prior to data analysis.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Verbatim transcription of the audio-recorded data was done initially. After the researcher listened to the recording to check and correct some errors, first-round coding to categorize broad emergent themes followed. This enables the researcher to start gaining insight and understanding from the participant's perspective (Sutton & Austin, 2015) and familiarity with the data (Lester, Cho, & Lochmiller, 2020). Subsequently, similar sub-themes were identified and grouped together in a meaningful and coherent way using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is "an umbrella term, designating sometimes quite different approaches aimed at identifying patterns across qualitative datasets" (Braun, Clarkem, & Hayfield, 2019, p. 844). Assistance from other qualitative researcher was sought for coding the same transcript data, and basic differences and similarities were discussed from both sets of coded data. Hence, it can be surmised that the study ensures the reliability of the coding as suggested by researchers (Sutton & Austin, 2015). For coding of the themes, NVivo software was used.

## 4. Finding

### 4.1 The Context—Main Objectives, Structure and Intern Roles

According to the collected data, internship program under study is embedded in two principal objectives. First, it is a compulsory requirement for master students' degree. Second, aid students to apply what they have learnt in class. The internship is offered in the third semester for two years master's program as the department offers one-year professional master's program as well. The internship which encompasses 4 credits extends for the whole semester of 3–4 working days. Regarding the role assigned to interns, three different roles were listed. For example, some interns were assigned to bilingual schools to undertake some language (English) subject after class observation and guidance of the tutor. Whereas some interns get involved in administrative work and some other school activities, such as sport meetings and faculty meetings. This enables them to get to know how to manage group, department or maybe school activities as a whole. The last role interns get involved was student management affairs.

The overall internship evaluation includes different aspects derived from the activities involved. Wide coverage of the evaluation is given to internship report work with at least 4000 words submitted at the end of the semester. Besides, continuous formal and informal meetings; reflection at the middle of internship and evaluation form filled by the tutor and stamped by the school is carefully considered. Aggregately, based on mid-term report, reflection, tutor feedback, and evaluation form the department give credit.

Table 1. Categories and emerged themes from the interview

| Categories                 | Themes                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Communicating goals        | Briefing internship goals<br>Common consensus<br>Interns choice                                                                                                                                                                |
| Procedures during COVID-19 | Application and official approval<br>Health and travel (tour) code<br>Travel restrictions to interns<br>Registration at school gate<br>Measuring temperature, wearing mask and using sanitizers<br>Preparation of special help |
| Main challenges            | Walk and movement restrictions inside schools<br>Less interaction with colleagues during detection of local confirmed case<br>Language barrier<br>Educational practice differences                                             |
| Recommendations            | Special attention to psychological or mental condition of interns<br>Keeping close contact/in touch with interns                                                                                                               |

#### 4.2 Communicating Goals

According to the findings to ensure internship and receiver school goals are aligned, prior to assigning interns to any school the faculty/center follows some procedures. Organizers and teachers from the center visit school and brief internship goals, explaining students' capabilities and qualifications. It's only after the receiver school agreement the center send interns.

After discussion and then based upon on our common consensus we send our students there (receiver schools). And besides, we take our students and let the students have discussion with the teachers or administrators of that school. And also they ask and give opinions to make some choices, which roles or position would they like to take most [P1].

The discussions we had with receiver school play a vital role for smooth running of the activity [P2].

#### 4.3 Procedures During COVID-19

The internship activities under the present study took place in early 2020 right after the incidence of COVID-19. Hence, schools requested some prevention procedures before official acceptance (see Table 1). Travel restriction for interns, registration at the gate, measure temperature and show health and travel code were among the demanded safety guard measures.

Interns submit application for to the international students' center and also some Shanghai international authorities and only after their application is approved they work officially as interns in the schools. This is one way of safety guaranty. And second for students' safety and also safety of the school they were also check the green health code and travel (tour) code. And generally speaking schools have the strictest prevention and controlling measures because they are responsible for students who can easily contact by the virus [P1].

In fact intern students were not allowed to travel for safety sake. Hence, it minimizes the probability of infection. This is to say schools (receiver) feel comfortable and secure with interns [P2].

Actually, our center prepared special help for intern students ...emm we make everything done before we send our interns, hence we did it—right on time [P1].

#### 4.4 Challenges

According to the participants, it can be concluded there were no major challenges as all the interns were not allowed to travel even inside China and are not new arrivals from abroad. However, at any local cases reported, alert level elevates and interns' movements and interaction within the school was highly restricted. Moreover, interns expressed some cultural differences and language barriers born challenges.

There were minor challenges... I mean when the COVID-19 situation was better they take it as normal but when any new local cases reported and they (the school) ask all the intern students to stay in one office and were not suggested to walk around... [P2].

Commonly the entire administration meetings were in Chinese language which our students (interns) find it difficult to get involved as all interns are from English taught program [P1].

... many interns told us they learnt a lot; students here behaved well and how the teachers dealt with the students who misbehave and the teaching methods, training methods and the culture are so different [P1].

#### 4.5 Recommendation

For supporting interns and fruitful implementation of internship, the participants shared some take-away tips. According to them, as all intern students were international students, paying special attention to psychological or mental conditions is vital. This helps to know the experiences and challenges of interns therefore, problems can be tackled and helps them to better adapt the local community. Failure to do so according to participants' opinion perhaps may lead students' anxiety and panic.

Regarding COVID-19 for us who are dealing with international students ahh... I think we should not only provide academic help or some daily routine regulations. We need to tell our students not to be frightened or anxious, just stick to the regulation and it will be safe. And even if anyone gets contacted we still have competent and efficient health care services [P1].

And second maybe our intern students as international students feel prejudiced by local students here. They may say oww... some students don't like us (foreigners). For example, one intern told us that we were kicked by a boy (pupil) during internship time and we told the intern it is not only happening to you. But it's just misbehavior of some students. Hence, to keep their psychological well-being and to eliminate some doubt or even humiliations sometimes- we should nurture strong attachment [P1].

### 5. Discussion

The present study found that the principal reason for the normal application of the intended off-line internship was strict compliance of official rules and regulations, effective communication and pre-briefing internship goals to receiver schools. Wei (2020) revealed that internship in China faced several problems as the low keenness of companies (i.e., receiver institutions) and the apathy of students to internship. As a remedy, a study by Teng et al. (2021) suggested the crucial role of rudimentary pre-internship orientation for creating a conducive environment and active interns' participation. However, the same study underlined that these practices are still lacking.

The participants believe commitment and provision of special help for interns and making everything done before sending interns facilitate for smooth internship activity. According to interns' reports and reflections, the feedback from both interns and the respective schools was quite positive. Internship plays a predominant role in professional maturity, socialization, interpersonal relationships, and self-confidence (Cook et al., 2015). However, some language barriers, cultural and educational practice differences were revealed. Wei (2020) clearly stated that due to dissimilarities of the learning experiences, "Sino-international" students found it difficult to cope with the Chinese context. Concurrently, a study by Tan (2018) witnessed a gap among individual skills of interns due to some background or philosophical educational foundation among countries. Thus, it led to controversies or concerns associated with particular teaching approaches and school system (Tran, 2013). Although it is difficult to narrow these differences within a limited internship intercession (Teng et al., 2021), opening opportunities to interns to attend different academic meetings can be, intra or inter-department and school events strengthen work attachment and boost social connectivity (Pretti et al., 2020). Worthy yet mostly neglected is the provision of psychological support services for interns as international students is what the present study underlined. Recent studies reported COVID-19 results in weak social interaction and relationship that deteriorates mental states (Rudnik et al., 2020), homesickness (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021) of international students and generally jeopardize their academic performance (Mbous, Mohamed, & Rudisill, 2022).

### 6. Implication

The world is still suffering from the adverse effect of COVID-19, detects of new variants through time and anticipated long-lasting implication and challenges (Rudnik et al., 2020). As panacea, virtual internship remains the best alternative during COVID-19. However, Park and Jones (2021) stated it is not always suitable for all students of diverse majors. Hence, irrespective of the tension and anxiety of the pandemic, how to host internships that adhere to prevention measures needs careful consideration. In this regard, the study came out with some significant implications;

#### 6.1 Pre-Internship Briefing

Pre-internship briefing was found to be the vital aspect that equips receiver schools with fundamental goals of internship and capabilities of interns. Thus, likely increases receiver schools acceptance and agreement to host internships and particularly international interns. A recent study by Zehr and Korte (2020) found discrepancies among internship goals between sender institutions and receiver companies. As the present study revealed educational practice differences, involving interns in both academic and social school events is essential. This

increases the familiarity of school ethos and culture to interns as international students. To minimize potential confusion about interns' roles and expectations as well as the working culture of the receiver institution should be formally and explicitly briefed (Teng et al., 2021). Darling (1998) stated that several studies emphasized the significant role of "pre-professional" internships or field arrangement.

### 6.2 Providing Psychological Support

China still adheres lockdown measures for international students since the emergence of COVID-19 as outbreak in late 2019. Apparently, the isolation (Brooks et al., 2020; Rudnik et al., 2020), homesickness (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021) adversely impact students' psychology which consequences depression, traumatic, lonesomeness and hopelessness (Khalaf, 2020; Bidzan-Bluma et al., 2020) all across the globe (Ammar et al., 2020). And it is still anticipated to continue to influence international students (Hope, 2020) which will last-long (Rudnik et al., 2020). Therefore, universities should offer counseling and psychiatric services (Toquero, 2020). In addition, provision of especial support that matters for interns' psychological and mental health to grasp the expected outcomes.

The provision of counseling or psychological support may be given in online mode, different social media widely used in China (Wechat, Ding Talk). Provision of free online psychological support in one Polish university during COVID-19 pandemic was initiated and showed promising results (Rudnik et al., 2020).

### 6.3 Monitoring the Obedience of Rules and Regulations

Fulfillment of official COVID-19 procedures and interns travel restrictions should be implemented. Although it's difficult to cope with the new normal COVID-19 procedures and protocol, as noted by Rudnik et al. (2020), obedience to restriction measures is vital. Dissemination of significant information that convinces why the new restriction and rules are needed may increase the probability of acceptance and implementation. Wei (2020) indicated that China with different principles and way of handling things has different educational context for international students yet demands improvement. Continuous monitoring of internship activities and consistently identifying alternatives to enhance the experience for current and upcoming pandemics is needed (Winn et al., 2021).

## 7. Conclusion

The study attempted to investigate how intended internship in the case university continued to take place right after COVID-19 incident without any delay or cancelation. To get first-hand information, organizers of internships for international students were interviewed. Despite the small-scale participants and limitation of the study to transferability, the study contributed to fill the dearth of existing literature in China and international students as interns. The study also provides insight and experience for educational institutions that struggle or fail to take an on-site internship in the wake of COVID-19. The dawn of new strains through time foretells the continuation of distraction in internship activities. Hence, the implication of the present study embedded to suggest practicability of offline internship when virtual or online internships become impossible due to nature of the field. In this regard, the study can be a road map for other higher educational institutions to strive for this fate. Besides, the study revealed some challenges of language barriers and educational practices differences. Recommendations that need careful consideration for psychological and mental well-being of interns were mentioned. For further studies, the authors suggest that investigation by involving different stakeholders (for example, interns and supervisors) might uncover deep understanding through different angles.

### Limitation

Although many universities have internship activities, some of the contacted universities shifted to online and others postponed. However, other universities that might continue to offer on-site internships could not be reached. And also, the study targeted only one international center for teacher education in the case university.

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