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CULINARY CROSSROADS: EXPLORING THE VALUE OF GRADUATE WORK EXPERIENCE IN TOKYO'S GASTRONOMIC SCENE

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CULINARY CROSSROADS: EXPLORING THE VALUE OF GRADUATE WORK EXPERIENCE IN TOKYO'S GASTRONOMIC SCENE

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INTRODUCTION

Internships offer transformative experiences, fostering personal growth, cultural awareness, and professional development (Seyitoğlu, 2019). This article explores the journey of two recent New Zealand culinary graduates who undertook a year-long placement in a Kiwi-owned Japanese fusion restaurant in Tokyo. Initiated through a personal connection with an expatriate, the opportunity aimed to bridge cultural and culinary worlds, offering graduates a chance to refine their skills and discover their professional identities. Their experience, marked by adaptation, challenge, and growth, exemplifies the theme of “becoming”—not just chefs, but global citizens navigating the complexities of cross-cultural environments.

Recognising the distinct potential of this initiative, the restaurateur—together with an academic staff member from Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology (Toi Ohomai) in the Bay of Plenty—decided to pitch the idea to a cohort of ‘near’ graduating culinary students, prior to their transition into professional roles within New Zealand's hospitality sector. Two motivated students embraced the distinctive opportunity extended by faculty staff: a year-long, immersive professional placement at a high-end restaurant situated in Yushima, Tokyo. This opportunity served as a platform for skill development and meaningful cultural exchange, effectively connecting the culinary traditions of the students' homeland with those of their host environment. It provided a transformative space for both personal and professional growth within their chosen career. Findings revealed the importance of academic institutions working closely with hospitality establishments to find solutions to the many challenges the hospitality industry currently faces globally (Mqwebedu et al., 2022). This was an unexpected finding and could serve as a valuable consideration for enhancing future graduate experiences.

The two participants in this study reported that their experience in Japan led to significant self-discovery and insights into professional practices that they believe will help shape their futures. Reflecting on their arrival, “Jonah” remarked, “When we arrived at Narita airport, it really hit us. This country is super busy, a bit crazy and I just hope it doesn't eat us alive.” This research deepens our understanding of how recent graduates navigate and adapt to such a foreign environment within the field of culinary education, unveiling the challenges faced and highlighting the significance of preparation, adaptability, and innovative thinking as essential components in achieving culinary excellence and fostering the process of professional becoming.

SETTING THE SCENE

The idea of promoting an internship-like experience came to fruition through the collaboration between the two main parties and, of course, the enthusiasm of both graduates. In alignment with his original ties, the restaurant

owner, originally from Tauranga, extended the opportunity to culinary graduates from the Bay of Plenty. By January 2023, two brothers who had successfully completed two years in the Culinary Arts Programme, commenced their placement at the four-year-old restaurant, renowned for its expertise in sake and an appreciation of New Zealand wine. Identifying as New Zealand Māori and aged 20 and 22 respectively, the participants—referred to here as “Jonah” and “Steve”—hail from a socioeconomically disadvantaged area within the wider Bay of Plenty region (Kawerau District Council, 2024).

Wright and Mulvey's (2021) research admits there is no commonly agreed definition of the term internship as there are so many variables involved but, typically, all internships involve 'hands on' work experience with variations in duration, pay, and formality. This planned opportunity fitted the description of an internship, even though there was limited formal documentation to 'seal' the idea. Gomez (2023) found that international experiences, whether a formal internship or similarly targeted programme, resulted in a positive self-perception of employability skills for participants. This positive perception was shown to increase according to the duration of the internship, generally leading to more accumulation of knowledge and skills. Internships can significantly impact students' perceptions of career development within the hospitality industry and enhance their future marketability (Mashuri, 2020). These experiences demonstrate to potential employers that graduates have gained practical, real-world exposure and are committed to pursuing careers, or at least being employed, in the industry for the foreseeable future. Literature indicates a correlation between internship experience and career success. Renowned New Zealand chef and *MasterChef* judge Simon Gault believes that experiences gained during a student's internship result in quicker employment after graduation, a higher salary, and higher job satisfaction (Farrell-Green, 2007).

Moreover, the internship experience smooths the transition from student life to work life and allows students to learn aspects of the industry that are not always possible to teach or even simulate in the classroom. Armed with knowledge, new entrants are more prepared to face the many challenges in the industry. Internship is therefore used as a platform to build and develop awareness of the skills needed in the industry. According to Mashuri (2020), this experience not only helps students adapt but also equips them to thrive in the industry while pursuing their career ambitions. Offering the time to train, upskill, and develop a culinary graduate is something that does not happen very often and to see such a positive, humble attitude toward offering this opportunity to someone less resourced, with the big picture aim of bringing those skills back to their homeland, is inspiring.

Individual connections were established between each of the two students and the owner of the wine and craft sake bar based in downtown Tokyo. Through informal discussions conducted via messaging platforms, the owner sought to assess the students' authenticity, motivation and readiness for the opportunity. Pre-departure interviews were subsequently conducted to explore the graduates' expectations, aspirations, and intended outcomes for their time abroad. In parallel, the restaurant owner was interviewed to clarify his expectations and objectives for hosting the students. These preliminary engagements contributed valuable insights that may inform the future formalisation of an internship arrangement between the parties involved.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As part of an approved research project conducted through Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, data was collected, gathered and analysed using a qualitative research methodology. This approach was chosen to allow for a rich, nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the two graduates who had participated in this informal internship abroad. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study aimed to capture an authentic account of the graduates' feelings, attitudes, and perceptions regarding their international placement, including such areas as personal growth, cultural adaptation, and professional development. Prior to the commencement of the research, the proposal underwent rigorous scrutiny by an experienced ethics committee. The committee raised critical questions concerning the validity, relevance, and ethical considerations of the research topic, particularly in relation to informed consent, confidentiality, and the potential impact on participants. After a

thorough review and necessary revisions, the committee granted formal approval, ensuring that the research adhered to institutional and ethical standards and was focused on producing meaningful and trustworthy insights.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to collect material using an interview guide to steer them. The questioning in these semi-structured interviews did not always follow a set order as it depended on the interview process and the responses of each participant. The benefit of using semi-structured interviews to collect this data was that it promoted opportunities to enquire about things that could not be observed, such as a person's thoughts and feelings, or how they interpret the world around them (Amundsen et al., 2017). Interviews occurred at the participants' convenience (there was a time difference to consider), recorded (with their permission) using a phone application called Otter, and later transcribed as a digital document. Each interview was listened to repeatedly while making notes and initial observations. The data provided by each interview was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) approach to thematic analysis. This system was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge rather than being dictated by pre-conceived ideas. These initial codes were then grouped into distinguishable themes.

The examination of interviews before, during, and after tenure revealed two central themes: the perceived benefits of international experience, and the challenges encountered during the participants' time in a foreign country. The opportunity to advance vital skills in a chosen career in an organised placement abroad is recognised as a core approach for preparing graduates to be global inhabitants and developing their cultural intelligence (Holtbrügge & Engelhard, 2017). This finding underscores the importance of adequately preparing graduates for transformative and occasionally daunting experiences and highlights the necessity for tertiary institutions to equip students with essential soft skills that are integral to various positions in their selected field.

RESULTS

The results of three rounds of interviews conducted over the course of a year, as mentioned above, revealed two overarching themes. The benefits of international placement included skill enhancement, personal growth, improved language proficiency, and increased cultural awareness while challenges were also encountered, such as navigating linguistic and cultural differences, and adjusting attitudes and perspectives. These experiences collectively initiated a profound journey, strengthening the graduates' connection to their cultural heritage while shaping their evolving professional identities.

Both participants expressed that their involvement in the Tokyo placement facilitated the development of essential skills, including collaboration, adaptability, and creative problem-solving. This growth stemmed from daily opportunities working in a tightly coordinated kitchen team, where they engaged in precise preparation routines and learned to maintain efficiency in every kitchen related task. They experienced a dynamic shift in thinking due to the vast differences in the Japanese kitchen and culture, when compared to the expectation they had of a New Zealand kitchen space. Both young men identified the development of "cultural insight" as a key takeaway.

Having developed a meaningful understanding of people from other parts of the globe meant that a robust foundation was established for Jonah's and Steve's future. Both interns had a clear understanding of their own personal culinary training and kitchen work ethics, but Steve explained how they both questioned their assumptions about the Japanese kitchen hierarchy and what constituted "outstanding" dishes. They simply examined why the system existed rather than thinking how different it was to the typical New Zealand restaurant kitchen. This perspective forms what can be identified as cultural identity. The interns recognised that the head chef did not just hold authority due to their position in the kitchen but, rather, out of a deep respect for their culture and experience working with the myriad of rich Japanese resources within the restaurant. Habashy and Cruz (2021) identify cultural humility as a lifelong journey of reflection, rather than one focussing on outcomes and the completion of tasks. What Jonah and Steve experienced, however, is the embracement of cultural humility where the focus shifts to processes and people.

Steve described the placement as “intense,” noting that it prompted meaningful reflection on his own familial culture and personal values. This introspection led to a heightened appreciation for cultural diversity and a deeper respect for perspectives different from the participants’ own. The contrast between traditional Māori cooking techniques—such as boil-up and hāngi—and the refined, intricate methods employed by the Japanese head chef further enriched their understanding of culinary practice. The head chef guiding them was unexpectedly receptive to the fascinating cooking techniques from New Zealand, enriching the experience for both graduates and hosts in a reciprocal way. Both participants reflected on how the opportunities they had on the Japan placement influenced their personal and professional development beyond what they thought would have occurred on a typical domestic placement. As Steve remarked:

I think we only touched the surface when it comes to skills and knowledge gained not only in the kitchen, but in our daily lives. I experienced so many moments that I found confronting, really pushing my limit a few times in many areas. I gained a lot of personal growth from these challenging times, and I don't feel I would've got this if I had stayed in New Zealand.

The shift in perspective, prompted by the challenges both interns encountered, opened new avenues for growth and contributed significantly to the evolution of their self-concept and professional identity.

Steve exclaims, “The sheer pace of service in a high-pressure Tokyo kitchen was an adjustment. Precision knife skills and lightning-fast plating were essential.” Beyond technical skills, the new graduates discovered a whole new approach to food presentation. The meticulous attention to detail, the respect for seasonality, and the emphasis on creating an artistic experience on the plate were revelations to them both, not only as new chefs but also as cultural outsiders. These gems of new experiences kept the recent graduates engaged, consistently adapting to their new environment and contributing to the expansion of their sense of identity. Steve remarked on his return how there had been so much effort expended in trying to make the food look as natural as possible, a hallmark of Japanese cuisine: “Plating was such an art, but there was emphasis on making it look like no effort had been made, even though there was.” Steve continues, “It was a constant learning experience, figuring out how the flavours would work together, everything is so precise.” Highlights for Jonah, meanwhile, were experiencing raw chicken, preparing milk-fed lamb, and working with numerous ingredients that were previously unheard of back in New Zealand. There was also a strong emphasis on using plant-based ingredients, which the head chef asserted ‘elevates’ the dishes. This cross-cultural exposure may have cultivated valuable insights, such as determining the significance of hospitality (*manaakitanga*), revealing meaningful parallels between Japanese culinary principles and traditional Māori culture.

CHALLENGES

The year wasn't without its challenges. The fast-paced Tokyo kitchen demanded a level of efficiency and communication that Jonah and Steve had not quite anticipated. “The language structure is similar,” they exclaimed, noticing that the vowels were very much the same in both Māori and Japanese languages. “There were language barriers to overcome, of course,” said Steve, “but also cultural differences in how a kitchen operates. After having spent two years studying culinary skills in our programme, it still took a while to adjust to the strict etiquette that is evident in a Japanese kitchen environment.” Even the seemingly straightforward task of sharpening their knives revealed significant differences in their training methods. Askren and James (2021) argue that students often believe the programme curriculum will prepare them for work in their chosen industry, but that several important skills required in business are missing: self-confidence, a strong work ethic, and adequate social skills, to name a few. In the interns’ case, the language barrier and the emotional challenge of not wanting to offend anyone, proved to be major, additional hurdles. Deciphering unfamiliar ingredients and navigating the hierarchy of a Japanese kitchen demanded quick learning and cultural sensitivity, aspects of the work not so obvious in their training facilities in New Zealand. The sheer pace of service in a high-pressure Tokyo kitchen needed adjusting to.

The initial cultural barriers were steep, according to Steve, and the language presented a constant challenge even though one brother had learned Japanese for four years at school. Steve and Jonah both confirmed on return from their Japan placement that the environment they had been immersed in had had a profound impact on their self-worth. They were forced to negotiate many challenges throughout their time in Tokyo and, in turn, progressed to pushing the boundaries at times. According to Cullen (2010), the stimulation of boundary crossing can assist in developing a student's identity as a learner. Having to conform to a different culture along with a new language develops into a transition period before the student or newcomer finally reaches a stage where the experience has given them the opportunity to develop a certain level of intelligence that aids in promoting self-confidence.

For the graduates, cultural immersion extended beyond the kitchen. The pair had to adjust to Japanese social norms, such as bowing as a greeting and respecting personal space, which differed from those they were accustomed to in their own cultures. Navigating the bustling metropolis of Tokyo with its different customs and etiquette demanded another layer of adaptation. Paying their rent in cash every week, comparatively lower wages, and working in environments with up to 90 percent humidity were significant adjustments for these young men. Being exposed to a culturally distinct and more professionally and personally challenging environment, in contrast to a placement in New Zealand, played a significant role in enhancing their capacity to handle stressful situations. Koyama (2020) highlights the enrichment interns experience regardless of language barriers as being profound, including personal growth in areas such as maturity, tolerance, patience, and self-confidence. Professionally, the graduates developed their adaptability and resilience, learning to perform under pressure in a fast-paced environment. Personally, they uncovered new facets of their identity, finding a balance between cultural pride and embracing the need to change and become innovative.

DISCUSSION

Interviews with the participants, the head chef, and the restaurant owner, revealed key components contributing to the students' growth and cultural adaptation during their overseas work placements. Post interviews revealed that both students experienced perceived language gains, in particular in listening comprehension. "Ideally, we both should've learned more key phrases in Japanese before we went," admitted Steve. The restaurant owner stated that the main issues faced by himself and the head chef were related to the graduates being 'work ready.' There was an assumption that because these brothers were recent graduates, they would possess the necessary skills required to start working effectively in any commercial kitchen. However, both possessed minimal experience working in any kitchen in New Zealand, let alone in a foreign country, which proved to be a challenge in adapting quickly to a new professional culinary environment.

Following instruction from the head chef was an integral skill according to the restaurant owner: "The boys just needed to listen and repeat then repeat again and again—no need to use your fresh ideas just yet," he stated. "Perhaps we needed to be tougher on the consequences of not following instructions when asked?" There is a delicate balance between providing constructive guidance and correcting employees, however. In support of this, a 2022 study of 27 students in the hospitality industry in South Africa showed a clear correlation between demotivators and whether the students were likely to stay in the industry (Mqwebedu et al., 2022). Post-internship interviews, however, revealed that both graduates perceived positive outcomes, even when they faced first time challenges. They claimed that they maintained their Māori roots but were open to adopting elements of Japanese kitchen culture and food preparation which conveys how identities can be dynamic and multi-layered.

Supporting the findings of this research, Vo et al. (2021) define an internship or the like as a three-way partnership between the educational institute involved, the students, and the organisation receiving them. There are benefits for each party. In this case, the restaurant owner and his chef discovered how to train graduates more effectively while the institute earned recognition for facilitating a successful educational exchange. The students in this study have benefited from their internships as they have gained transferable skills and developed a strong link

between theory and practical knowledge. The significant range of cross-cultural experiences has reshaped their professional philosophy, teaching them to work with new ingredients and technique, contributing to their ongoing advancement as chefs.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to explore the perspectives of hospitality graduates experiencing a first-time sojourn overseas in a work environment. Results revealed that by the end of their twelve months abroad, both brothers were not just graduate chefs, they were seasoned travellers with broadened horizons. They returned to New Zealand with a newfound appreciation for their own culinary heritage, forever changed by the precision, the flavours, and the detail that went into every service. Their year in Japan was not just about mastering new skills; it was about cultural exchange, personal growth, and pushing the boundaries. Both stated that although they showed respect for the local culture and tried to learn and understand as much as they could absorb, they both underestimated their 'readiness.' "It took me at least three months to become familiar with the expectation of my job in the kitchen. There was a lot of frustration on both sides," they both agreed.

The experience has undoubtedly become a cornerstone of their culinary careers. They now approach food with a global perspective, their dish ideas reflecting the fusion of Kiwi ingenuity, Māori traditions, and Japanese precision, a testament to their transformative year in the heart of Tokyo. From the owner's perspective, as he begins a year with another graduate from the same class in Tauranga, he has learned some important takeaways: "In future, I will put more emphasis on getting the students to repeat some of the kitchen skills instructed by the head chef." Understanding the complexities faced by new graduates working abroad provides an appreciation for the resilience required to cope with these challenges. This, in turn, can pave the way for future graduates considering a similar excursion and for educators who are part of these participants' journeys. The findings of this research also highlight the importance of supporting students throughout their experience, with particular emphasis on pre-departure preparation to help prevent culture shock.

For graduates venturing into the professional kitchen, the learning curve is steep. But for those who take the leap across the globe, the challenges multiply. Since this study was exploratory, future research could employ qualitative methods to explore in greater depth how hospitality graduates form their perceptions and expectations, and how these influence their career decisions. The ongoing relationship between the restaurant owner and researcher will be a source of extended contacts through the team of employees working at the establishment as well as the myriads of international contacts the owner has within his circle. The opportunity exists to build positive relationships between the faculty staff and international industry operators as well as to increase awareness of the different cultures of the parties involved. Collectively, these benefits have helped the development of a valuable professional network for participating students, enhancing their prospects of securing full-time employment in their respective fields. The transformation these two young men in particular have experienced has enabled them to view themselves not only as chefs, but also as cultural representatives, shaping their vision to blend universal influences with the rich heritage of Māori cuisine. The experience has also allowed them to test and refine their skills, build confidence, and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the culinary industry. These research findings more broadly will help to leverage improvements for future students should the practice become formalised and alleviate the challenges of executing a formal internship.

Declaration of interest statement

I declare that the information above, is true and correct to the best of my knowledge. As the author and team tutor of the graduates, I have a memorandum of understanding with the restaurant Rangitoto Tokyo that the placement of students is not for commercial gains. The research was undertaken with the approval of the Human Ethics Committee of the institution at which I teach, Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology. To protect participant privacy, pseudonyms have replaced the graduates' actual names, with their consent.

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