

## Conference Paper

# Internship after Covid-19 Pandemic: An In-Depth Interview among Journalism Program Interns of a Malaysian Public Higher Learning Institution

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**Abstract.**

This paper intends to explore the challenges encountered by journalism undergraduates while undergoing their internship after the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted students' learning; thus, causing concern about their performance when undergoing industrial training. Poor performance by students during industrial training can create a negative perception among industry players toward a university. The study aimed to achieve in-depth interview sessions with a small group of final-year journalism program students at a public university in Malaysia who underwent a 14-week internship at various Malaysian companies after a series of nationwide lockdowns spanning almost 2 years. The findings of this research hopefully will provide rich insights into internship experiences, especially regarding the challenges faced by the students, which in turn will benefit the stakeholders, including the students, employers and educational institutions.

**Keywords:** journalism, internship, industrial training, students' experience, post-Covid-19

## 1. Introduction

Internships are increasingly viewed as an essential experience for university students. In today's world, graduates need to be competent. This means having relevant job skills for them to be competitive in industry. Having a good degree with excellent exam results alone does not guarantee a job as graduates should have current knowledge along with practical experience, soft skills as well as a positive attitude before they face the challenges of the real career world. It has been demonstrated by advocates of the program that an internship results in students who have adaptable skills and can use their book knowledge to solve real-world issues. These students are also able to grow

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their networks and professional relationships, which help them socialize and allow entry into their chosen careers [1].

Internships have been defined as ‘any official or formal program to provide practical experience for beginners in an occupation or profession’ [2]. In the Malaysian context, internship refers to the placement of students in an organization to conduct supervised practical training in a chosen industry, whether abroad or in country, within a set period of time before they are awarded a certificate, diploma or bachelor’s degree. These internships predominantly provide an opportunity for undergraduate or graduate students and those who are changing careers to receive hands-on exposure to their chosen field of study or a new career, either in a paid or unpaid environment. Thus, it is important to understand what aspects of these experiences make them most worthwhile [3].

## 1.1. Internships in Malaysia

Internship is a requirement that every student in Malaysia has to fulfill to graduate at the first degree level. Usually, they have to go through it when they are in their final year of study. In Malaysia, it is normal practice that undergraduates undergo an internship for three to six months depending on the requirement of the higher learning institution.

Malaysia was subjected to a series of “total lockdowns” starting from 18th March, 2020 to April 2022, which forced students of all institutions to undergo the process of teaching and learning online. These lockdowns resulted in students facing problems to understand what they were learning and there were concerns that this situation may affect their industrial training experience.

The implementation of online learning and teaching has been problematic because students face several problems such as lack of monitoring by their supervisors and ineffective time management [4]. Students also experience negative physical and psychological effects as well as other technical problems such as internet connection problems, device issues, lack of interaction with lecturers, lack of monitoring and implementation of learning activities during the pandemic [5].

Most previous studies conducted have only focused on the experience of students undergoing industrial training during the Covid pandemic and there was little research done on the experiences and challenges faced by students post-Covid-19 especially in Malaysia. To date, there has not been any specific study on the effect of the pandemic to journalism practical students in Malaysia.

Most research on student internship in Malaysia have also been quantitative in nature [6]. Interns' feedback is crucial in ensuring that the entire program meets their expectations and their needs. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to qualitative findings in identifying the experiences and challenges faced by students majoring in journalism when undergoing their industrial training. The findings of this study are expected to help universities and industries produce graduates who are always competitive and able to face various challenges in this post-Covid era.

## 2. Literature Review

Generally, numerous studies have been done on industrial training by students. At every university, a long standing practice has been to provide the students with survey questions each time an industrial training period ends. These questions need to be answered regarding their level of satisfaction/experiences and challenges that they faced during their industrial training.

In the context of research during the Covid-19 pandemic, there are several published articles that discuss students' experiences, challenges and satisfaction with their industrial training. For example, a cross-sectional study between public health undergraduate students and their supervisors in Singapore has been conducted by a team of researchers [7]. They found that Covid-19 disrupted internships significantly, with a reduction in the number of placements offered and necessary changes made to the internship scope. However, supervisors and e-interns reported high levels of satisfaction and documented learning gains such as the development of technical skills and soft skills unique to remote work.

Other than that, a quantitative research was conducted on the impact of Covid-19 on internship activities at health organizations in Saudi Arabia [8]. The findings of the study show that Covid-19 had a deleterious effect on the industrial training of health graduates. There were health organizations that canceled industrial training, to the disappointment of the affected students.

A team of researchers from Malaysia also explored the challenges encountered by accounting undergraduates whilst undergoing their internship during the Covid-19 pandemic by using the quantitative approach [5]. Their study found that working from home affected the normal working environment, leading to interns feeling that they were lacking in communication skills. This in turn resulted in fewer opportunities to gain a better understanding of accounting or auditing skills and knowledge. They also

learnt to be more independent in making decisions without any supervision from their supervisors while dealing with clients from their homes.

In addition, a study has been conducted on impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the graduate employability (GE) of a public university's final year students [9]. The study found that students were ready to perform their internship even during the lockdown period. For employment prospects in the future, results show that students generally believed prospects for future employment after COVID-19 are low.

Another research looked into challenges faced by Tourism Management interns from a public university during the implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia [10]. The findings suggest that the students have been physically or psychologically affected by the movement control order. Among the difficulties encountered by the students include early termination, working from home and working outside of their job scope.

In conclusion, it can be seen that many previous studies into this topic have only focused on the challenges faced during the Covid-19 era. Since Malaysia has now entered the endemic phase, it would be instructive and interesting to learn how students who were previously mostly confined to their homes performed. The study would also attempt to discover and get to know the challenges/experiences they faced when they underwent their industrial training. Therefore, this study is expected to provide useful findings to universities that have journalism courses, as well as related industries, to understand and to improve their future students' performance during their internship.

### 3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach by interviewing seven students majoring in journalism at a public university in Malaysia. These seven students were selected using purposive sampling method where they were selected out of 16 journalism students altogether. All the students selected as respondents were those who had undergone industrial training in media organizations and actually carried out their industrial training in the field of journalism. All of these students underwent their internships in various states in Malaysia during the 16 weeks from March to early July, 2022. All the respondents were gathered in a group and given information about the objective of the study. Then, all respondents were interviewed using the in-depth interview method. The interview protocol questions were adopted and modified based on the questionnaire developed by previous studies [3,5,6].

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Job scope

Generally, all respondents were given assignments related to journalism i.e. writing news reports, video editing, taking photos, radio production and news editing. All of them were given suitable assignments that fit the profession of a journalist. For example, Hajar who worked at a mainstream English language newspaper stated:

*My internship consisted of editorial work, research and business news writing, and I had the opportunity to meet and work closely with senior and other media journalists. This gave me an insider's view of the story and questions to ask while improving my reporting techniques and interviewing ability, and writing skills.*

In addition, Nazihah who was posted to a language-related government body said that she was assigned to work as a journalist as well as an editor.

*The main scope of work given to me was related to journalism studies such as being a reporter and an editor. Since I had two supervisors, I was responsible for two magazines, Dewan Masyarakat and Pelita Bahasa. Besides that, I was also carrying out additional duties for editors of other magazines as part of my internship.*

Moreover, Ain who worked at a public broadcasting department shared how she learned to use computer software to edit videos in addition to reporting news.

*As I was an intern I also contributed to editing the news. I gained editing knowledge using Final Cut Pro, honestly that was my first time using it and I was so nervous yet I succeeded in overcoming the challenge. I was glad to have moral support and guidance from the senior visual editor. She taught me the steps one by one, and I recorded it as my backup and reference if I did forget. After completing the video editing, the senior VE asked me to call the KL office and tell them "Penang pump in the materials" and wait for their approval. After they gave approval the story is done. That was my routine everyday if I got an assignment.*

Mus who worked at a public broadcasting department, also chimed in with his experience of being assigned to work as a radio program producer and a photographer.

*I was placed in the Program Division during my industrial training. The job scope leaned toward radio and broadcasting. I was given a job scope that covered radio production which entailed assignments such as 3P reports, Weekly Guest Schedule, Job Coverage Memo as well being a program production committee member for the radio producer and other duties in the production and broadcasting units.*

*I was also assigned duties as the photographer for the multimedia unit. For each program or event that involved the Program Division, I was required to join and take photos and footage or short videos as documentation for the program. This way I had the opportunity to learn and master photography techniques.*

This finding shows that although they were learning exclusively through online methods, these industrial placement students were trusted by their organizations to carry out the actual work of real journalists. This shows that this internship program helps people learn job skills like working in a team and a fast-paced environment, managing their time, editing, and publishing, communicating, and social networking.

## 4.2. Work experience

Typically the respondents expressed that they learned a lot regarding news writing and how to communicate with other people, which were sorely lacking in emphasis during online classes. One of the respondents, Nazihah stated that she learned many new things when she did her industrial training.

*When collecting data to post news, I had to research and analyze the facts first. So, I would refer to official media releases or official announcements regarding any issues that had cropped up. For example, I visited the official website of Malaysia's Ministry of Finance to view their press release about an event before generating it as news.*

*In addition, a new thing that I learned that was different from what was learned at university was when writing "lead" in the news. The house style used allowed us to write more than one sentence in the lead, while at university the lead was often written in only one sentence.*

Apart from that, Awatif who worked at a mainstream Malay media organization also shared her experience of the huge difference between what was learned in class and the real employment environment.

*The most noticeable difference was our unfamiliarity with writing about real situations because we only did it as an exercise at university. For example, going out for an assignment, meeting different strata of people and from there learning to communicate and ask questions and most importantly learning about the 'angle' that is suitable for making news was very difficult because at university we still couldn't envision what it was that people wanted, what needed to be conveyed, what was interesting to use as an angle. All that was clearly shown when we were in the journalism industry itself.*

In addition, Farhana who had undergone industrial training at a public broadcasting department in Malaysia also shared her experience by stating that she had been

exposed to novel news writing techniques, while at university level previously, she was only exposed to the newspaper writing format.

*...I had also been assigned to be a script writer either for TV or radio. This was so difficult for me because during my time at the university, I only learned it once. So I just wrote up the script using the organization's format. My editor just wanted the idea and the main point of the script. I wrote up the script before the editor did the editing especially if I was working with a stringer, and the result was worth it and a success. Sometimes, I was writing up the script either for visuals that I had edited or another stringer's visual. This script was for news that happened around Negeri Sembilan.*

Another student also stated that she learned a lot about physical communication during her industrial training considering that before, students only communicated through the virtual world. Hajar stated:

*During my internship, I learned how to communicate and build relationships with the people I worked with. I learned how to introduce myself, talk about my interests, knowledge, and skills as well as how to ask questions and gain a better understanding of businesses not only in the co-working space but also others in the market. This process overall helped me develop my professional network and emphasized the importance of creating these connections.*

Another student, Ain, shared her experiences which she did not learn previously during online learning. Among those mentioned were writing methods, editing skills and how to communicate with others.

*First, I got communication skills with various members of society such as VVIPs, society, old folks, managers, personal assistants and secretaries. Being a liaison, I admit it required a clear interaction and direction. Handling and managing people is not easy. I had to be professional and be patient all the time.*

*Second, my editing skills. As we all know we faced difficulties during the pandemic of Covid-19 for about 2 years and online distance learning limited me as a mass communication student as I needed to do more practical tasks. That's why I'm lacking in editing honestly but during my internship I learned something new and I am blessed.*

*Third, writing news. The format that I had learned in university was totally different from what I got here. I mean it had a different format. In university we learned to write for printed news but in the industry I had to write based on the broadcast news format. However, the basics and principles of journalism in printed and broadcast news are the same.*

The findings of this study confirm the findings of previous studies which stated that what is learned solely in a classroom is not enough to prepare students to face different situations and experiences when working in the actual industry [3]. The findings of this study also confirm the findings of previous studies which stated that face-to-face interaction is vital for sustaining interpersonal relationships in the workplace [11]. Therefore, what students learn especially regarding communication and physical interaction can have a beneficial impact on their personality development and how they communicate.

### 4.3. Challenges faced during internship

Some of the students interviewed stated that they were challenged by having to do multiple tasks concurrently. Lack of training that required multi-tasking skills during online learning before was also a factor in this problem. For example, Nazihah stated:

*...Another challenge I faced was when I had to race against time to complete two news stories in one day. For me, the experience was very challenging because at that time, I was in a crowded place. So it was quite difficult to focus on news writing with the noisy crowd and no special place to write such as an office. At the same time, the Internet also played a role when I needed to find a suitable workstation to send the finished news to the editor for review and upload to the portal.*

Another student, Ain also expressed the same sentiment:

*For me, it was about multi-tasking. Sometimes, I was assigned tasks continuously and we were a bit overwhelmed by all the tasks. And in this department we needed to do everything, for example we were journalists and at the same time we needed to be a visual editor and sound editor for radio.*

Mus also conveyed a similar opinion of the situation:

*.... the extended lack of face-to-face physical contact caused students to have lower potential capability in various aspects.*

*I found it difficult to do work that required limited speed or multi-tasking work. It was also difficult for me to identify an assignment because it was not from the Journalism field but from the field of broadcasting or radio production. Maybe it was very different from what was learned at university.*

In addition, the students also stated that they felt awkward and "surprised" with having to adapt to a new work environment and a different way of writing news from what they learned before. For example, Zahirah who worked at an alternative media organization stated:



*I find it difficult to socialize with people and feel awkward at interview sessions. And it is true that this factor affects my work performance.*

*...I also went through an experience where I was given an assignment to cover a sensitive topic that involved religious issues, the writing and arrangement of my story was changed by the editor which made me feel uncomfortable. Because the reader will form an impression of the writer and not of the editor. Since the name displayed is my name.*

Hajar added her view on same position:

*One of the biggest obstacles was of course, upon entering the workplace, I was awestruck and dumbfounded. Despite having a little bit of knowledge, I could not believe that I was missing out so much on the real thing and how things operated behind the curtain. However, my supervisors kept feeding me with knowledge to survive in this industry and thus, although I was stuck briefly, I was able to survive this hurdle.*

Another student, Awatif also experienced difficulty in adapting to the writing style as required by the organization where she worked. She stated:

*As a journalism student, we become too attached to the book writing style taught at university and when we are in the industry, it's a surprise like nothing we learned at university.*

*It was difficult for me to find the right angle for a story, and I was always being admonished by the editor over this. This was also a problem; it was even difficult to think of a suitable headline.*

Another respondent stated that she also felt awkward at the new workplace and took quite a long time to adjust and adapt with the culture at the new workplace. Farhana stated:

*When I first stepped into my workplace, I experienced some discomfort and I was unable to function well in a new setting. The surrounding was very unfamiliar, and it took me about one week to adapt to the new culture. Thankfully, I could manage and finish all the tasks on time when I was assigned to do them until the end of my internship. If I have some problems, I will share them with my team and find the solution until it is done.*

In conclusion, the findings of this study confirmed the findings of previous studies which stated that these students faced the same problems with those who were undergoing industrial training during Covid-19, in that they find it hard to adjust to the new workplace because they have become accustomed to online learning during the pandemic era [7]. Virtual internships are a realistic internship choice that provides

students with an opportunity to develop and enrich their relevant transferable skills. These transferrable talents include but are not limited to adapting to learning digitally, being flexible and able to adjust well to new conditions, working independently.

#### 4.4. Recommendations for future improvement

There are a few suggestions to improve the process of industrial learning undergone by future students. The suggestions put forward are for improvements to be carried out by the university and the industry. One of the interns, Zahirah, proposed for assignments given out to students to be more challenging and must be completed within a short span of time. She stated:

*I propose for students in the future to be given more assignments that put into practice writing from short articles to long articles. Then, the lecturer needs to set a time for students to complete the assignment as soon as possible. The best thing would be for the task to be completed in 1 hour, at most 2 hours.*

Meanwhile, Nazihah proposed for the university to offer short courses to the students before they undergo the industrial training. She stated:

*In my view, the Communication program should offer short semesters to students of communication for industrial training. Maybe the time that can be utilized for that short semester us during semester break. So, students who undergo industrial training in the short semester can benefit from more in-depth learning about the industry and more soft-skill exposure can be put into practice. Therefore, students will become more skilled and more confident to undergo industrial learning in the final semester.*

Additionally, Awatif proposed for lecturers in the future to give “hands-on” assignments and organize programs with journalists in order to further enhance students’ experiences. Awatif stated:

*I suggest the lecturers in future challenge the students to go out in the field and carry out their own news reporting maybe in court, meet experts to gain their views or do anything that resembles a journalist’s job in real life. I also wish to suggest that the lecturers conduct a ‘day with journalist’ programs so students can observe how journalists work.*

Another student, Farhana, suggested that the university upgrade the existing equipment and software to improve student quality especially when it comes to video editing.

*I would like to suggest to the university management to provide and prepare more equipment related to Broadcasting and Journalism students to learn more about them, such as Apple’s iMac for editing using Final Cut Pro or Adobe Premiere. Students must*

*explore further the editing part because, in the industry, all the editing uses Final Cut Pro and Adobe Premiere software. Other than that, the students need to practice doing “stand upper” more frequently when dealing with the camera to increase their confidence.*

On the industry's part, a few respondents suggested that the media organizations get together with the students more frequently to understand the problems faced by them while undergoing their industrial training. Awatif also suggested that a guidebook be prepared for student use. Awatif stated:

*If possible, have a book or any material as a reference for practical students so we are not summarily scolded for even the slightest mistake.*

Farhana stated:

*For the company, I suggest that the industrial supervisor and staff be more understanding of the practical students. Industrial supervisors and staff should not give practical students tasks that they do not know how to do without guiding them, and asking them to figure them out by themselves.*

*Although I could manage all the tasks given by the editor, sometimes I could not handle them on time. But I told myself, I can do it because, in the future, this is real work and I must do it on time. The aim of the internship is to train practical students and expose them to the real working world. So, they really need guidance and help from the supervisor and seniors so that they can do the work correctly and smoothly.*

The same suggestion was also given by another intern, Hajar.

*Before the internship begins, the industry should take time to sit down with the interns and learn more about them. Find out why they are here, what their career goals are, and what they hope to achieve during their internship. This will help them to understand their motives and give them a better idea of what to achieve during the internship.*

In conclusion, it can be stated that the recommendations and suggestions given by the respondents are not very different from previous studies. In general, they expect the universities to continually enhance its teaching methods and facilities so that they are on par with industry standards. In addition, they anticipate that the industry will constantly listen to their problems and provide assistance during their industrial training.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, all respondents were assigned duties according to what they had learned throughout their four years of study. The experience they gained demonstrably gave them a different perspective of the real media industry.

The interns learned new knowledge that was not previously taught to them at university level, not to mention they also had to undergo online learning for 2 years. Thus, this may have affected their understanding of the real media industry as they lacked hands-on experience. In terms of the challenges that they faced, it is clear that the online learning that they went through before had somewhat affected their experience in their respective organizations. However, all the interns gave a full 100% commitment as all of them successfully completed their respective internship programs.

Hopefully, the findings of the study and recommendations given by the respondents will be able to assist universities, news organizations and future students on what to expect and what needs to be improved in the future, especially in this post-Covid era.

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