Hospitality Inclusive Internship System (HIIS): An Innovative Internship Matching Platform for Person with Disabilities (PWD) Students

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality industry thrives on diversity and service excellence, yet students with diverse abilities continue to face barriers in accessing fair internship opportunities. These challenges include limited accessibility, inadequate supervisory support, and industry misconceptions, resulting in unequal participation and under-representation in hospitality careers. Despite the importance of inclusivity, most internship systems remain fragmented and lack tailoring to accommodate students with disabilities. To address this gap, the Hospitality Inclusive Internship System (HIIS) was developed as a centralised digital platform designed to connect universities, industry partners, and students through a structured and inclusive matchmaking mechanism. Key features include a student profiling module to record academic background and accessibility needs, industry modules to access workplace readiness, automated matching with supervisor verification, digital logbooks for reflective learning, and accessibility tools such as screen readers and voice-to-text support. Data was gathered and analysed for ten (10) students with disabilities (PWD), including visual, hearing, cognitive and mobility, undergoing the hospitality program to evaluate the HIIS usability, accessibility, and confidence levels. The findings show that the system is improving access to equitable internships, enhancing students' confidence, and supporting universities in coordinating placements more effectively. HIIS also enhances industry awareness of inclusivity practices and has the potential to scale industries, ensuring long-term impact and sustainability.

Keywords: Hospitality, Inclusive, Internship, Person with Disabilities (PWD)

INTRODUCTION

Human connection, excellent service, and diversity are the three pillars upon which the crucial criteria in hospitality industry. In this ever-changing landscape, internships play a crucial role in connecting students' academic knowledge with real-world practice by providing them with industry experience, hands-on learning, and the opportunity to apply what they've learnt in class. Far beyond introductory work experiences, these placements are increasingly recognised as transformative platforms that shape career development and long-term professional trajectories (Hanson, Robinson, & Codina, 2021; Renschler, Riley, & Stuart, 2023; Shaw, Barnes, Hunter, & Sueoka, 2022). Furthermore, the internship enhances professional competencies and fosters self-esteem, confidence, independence, and social skills (Zainal & Mahmud, 2021). However, students with diverse abilities continue to encounter significant barriers in securing an internship, including accessibility challenges, limited support systems, and prevailing industry misconceptions about their capabilities. Furthermore, internship programmes benefit students by providing real workplace experience that builds self-esteem, confidence, and independence and improves social interaction and work behaviour.

Globally, there is a growing emphasis on inclusive education and workforce integration, aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), to achieve global development by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Nevertheless, in many hospitality education systems, placement processes remain fragmented and are not tailored to meet the needs of students requiring special accommodations. This study introduces the Hospitality Inclusive Internship System (HIIS) as a practical, innovative solution to bridge the gap. HIIS acts

as a centralised system that connects students, industry partners, and universities through a structured and inclusive matching mechanism.

Problem Statement

Internships are an essential component of hospitality education, offering students practical exposure, skill development, and pathways to employment. However, existing internship systems often lack inclusivity and accessibility for students, which is one of the crucial elements for the inclusion of people with disabilities (PWD), especially in the hospitality industry (Yusoff, Majid, Ramli, Anuar & Ahmad Shariff, 2023); with diverse abilities, such as those requiring physical, hearing, vision, learning, speech, or mental support. These students face multiple barriers, including inaccessible workplace facilities, limited communication tools, inadequate supervisory guidance, and insufficient awareness among industry partners. Such challenges result in unequal access to opportunities, reduced confidence, and underrepresentation of differently-abled students in hospitality careers.

Although the hospitality industry promotes diversity and service excellence, there remains a lack of a structured, systematic, and inclusive platform to guarantee equitable internship placements for all students. Awang et al. (2020), noted that efforts to accommodate the needs of PWDs across various environments- such as educational institutions, public transportation, national parks, shopping malls, hotels, the tourism industry, mosques, and public buildings- have contributed to greater awareness of PWD inclusion. To address the existing gap in hospitality internships, an innovative approach is necessary, one that integrates student profiling, workplace readiness, and digital monitoring to foster more inclusive and equitable opportunities.

Objectives

1. To develop an inclusive internship system that streamlines coordination between universities, industry partners and students
2. To promote equal opportunities for PWDs in hospitality internships through accessible and inclusive practices
3. To empower students and strengthen collaboration by using digital tools that enhance reflection, communication, and industry-academia partnership

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION & METHODOLOGY

The HIIS development began with gathered data from ten (10) students with disability profiles. HIIS was developed on the Google Sites platform since it is both accessible and cost-effective. This process included 1) identifying the needs of PWD hospitality students, 2) mapping inclusivity practices of employers, 3) designing features such as accessibility ratings, internship matching, and mentor support, and 4) conducting a user survey. Feedback was collected via survey and analysed descriptively to evaluate usability, accessibility, and confidence levels.

HIIS is a digital platform designed to support fair and inclusive internship placement for hospitality students with diverse abilities. The system connects students, universities, and industry partners in one centralised platform. This platform fosters inclusive and effective experiential learning within the hospitality industry. Central to this framework is the Profiling Module, which comprises two key components: the Student Profiling Module, responsible for capturing students' academic backgrounds, career interests, and accessibility requirements; and the Industry Partner Module, which enables hospitality organisations to post internship opportunities with detailed accessibility specifications. To ensure equitable placement, the PWD Alignment – Matching and Verification feature automatically aligns students with suitable roles based on their profiles, subject to final approval by designated supervisors. The system also incorporates a digital reporting function, allowing students to document weekly progress and personal reflections, thereby promoting continuous learning and self-assessment. Complementing this is a robust mentoring and monitoring system, through which supervisors and mentors can provide structured feedback, monitor performance, and uphold inclusive practices. To make it easier for everyone to use, the platform includes tools like screen reader support, voice-

to-text features, visual icons, and options for different languages in all internship materials and evaluation rubrics, so that all participants can access it no matter their abilities.

POTENTIAL FINDINGS AND COMMERCIALISATION

The HIIS is projected to deliver impactful outcomes across educational and industry domains by promoting equitable access, enhancing career readiness, and fostering inclusive practices. For students, particularly those with diverse abilities, HIIS facilitates fair internship placements, builds confidence, and strengthens professional preparedness, aligning with findings that experiential learning enhances students' ability to apply theoretical knowledge and transition effectively into the workforce (Sihombing, 2021). Universities benefit from streamlined coordination, improved graduate outcomes, and elevated status as leaders in inclusive hospitality education, consistent with research emphasising the strategic role of internships in shaping institutional reputation and student satisfaction (Soffi & Mohamad, 2021). Industry partners gain structured hiring guidelines, increased awareness of inclusivity, and enhanced employer branding, reinforcing the importance of competency-based frameworks in hospitality workforce development (Quintela et al., 2024). These outcomes collectively demonstrate that inclusive systems not only support diverse learners but also enrich workforce diversity and service excellence within the hospitality sector.

From a commercialisation standpoint, HIIS has strong potential as a scalable digital solution. Through a licensing model, institutions offering hospitality, tourism, or culinary programmes can use HIIS to efficiently manage internships. Industry partnerships allow hotels, restaurants, and tourism companies to showcase inclusive values and attract talent via the platform. Additionally, HIIS offers customisation services to accommodate varying institutional and national accessibility standards, with potential expansion into related sectors such as tourism, events, and food services, positioning it as a versatile, multi-industry solution for inclusive internship management.

Figure 1 Interface of HIIS
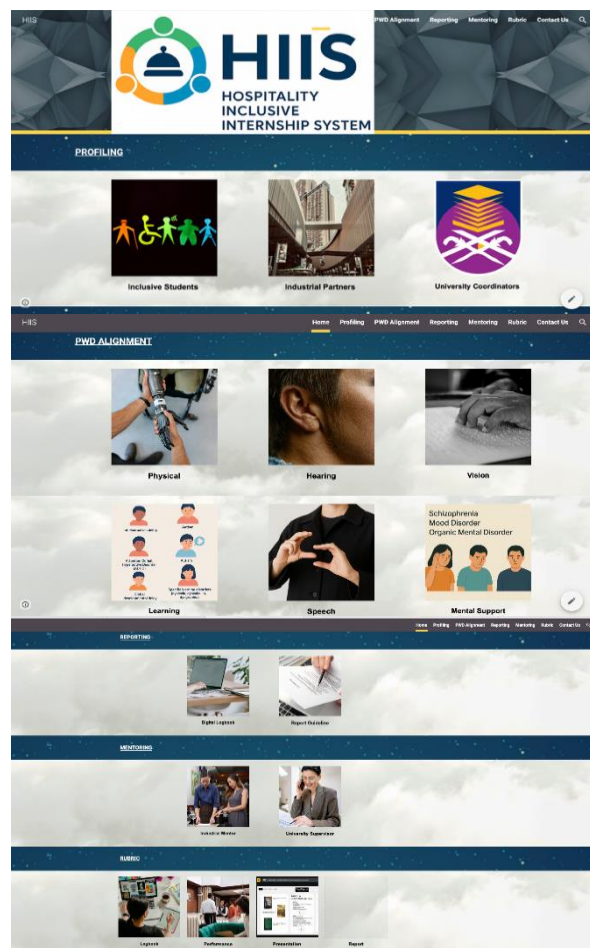
The user feedback from the ten (10) students with disabilities (PWD) was obtained via a Google Forms survey. Among the respondents, 30% were female and 70% were male, with among 60% from the Bachelor's level and 40% from the Diploma level representing all UiTM campuses offering the hospitality program.

Figure 2 PWDs students' program
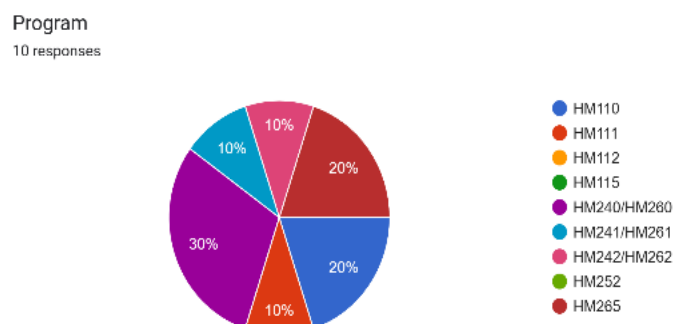
The results show that most users find that out of four (4) key evaluation criteria, trustworthiness and effectiveness are the highest at 94% meaning students trust the information provided by HIIS and find it effective. Functionality scored 88%, indicating that features and efficiency are generally strong. Ease of navigation (90%) suggests the system is user-friendly and easy to navigate. Overall, HIIS performs very well across criteria with only minor refinements needed to further optimize user experience.

Figure 3 User Feedback
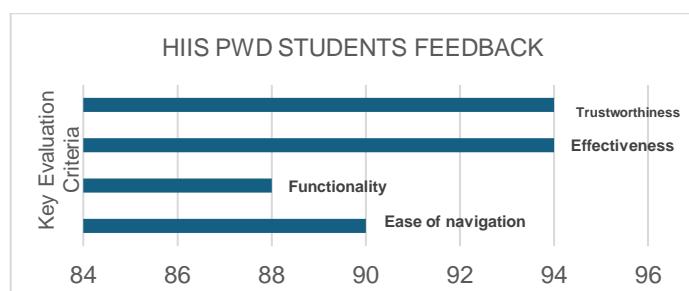
Novelty and Recommendations

The HIIS introduces a suite of innovative features that distinguish it from conventional internship management platforms, positioning it as a transformative solution within the hospitality and service sectors. At its core, it is an inclusivity-centred design purposefully developed to accommodate students with diverse abilities and ensure equitable access to internship opportunities. HIIS uses a matching system that combines student profiles, checks on industry partners, and supervisor confirmations to ensure fair and accurate internship placements. To support universal usability, the system incorporates built-in accessibility tools, including screen reader compatibility, voice-to-text functionality, visual iconography, and multilingual support. Its digital monitoring and feedback capabilities offer a structured logbook for students to engage in continuous reflection, while enabling mentors and supervisors to track progress and provide targeted guidance. Furthermore, HIIS demonstrates cross-sector scalability, with potential applications extending beyond hospitality into tourism, culinary arts, and other service-orientated industries. Together, these features make HIIS more than just an innovative administrative tool but also turn it into a key resource for promoting inclusivity, accessibility, and diversity in hands-on learning settings.

As for recommendations, for the adoption of HIIS for universities, the system can be used to streamline internship coordination by providing inclusivity training for coordinators and embedding it as part of student career development support. Industry partners are encouraged to conduct accessibility audits and provide inclusivity training to ensure that workplaces are internship-ready for students with diverse abilities. At the policy level, supportive measures such as policies, incentives, and recognition programmes are needed to

promote inclusive internship practices and encourage industry participation. Students themselves are recommended to make full use of the profiling and digital logbook features within HIIS to reflect on their learning experiences and communicate their needs more effectively. Looking ahead, future development of HIIS should focus on expanding beyond the hospitality sector to other service-based industries, ensuring broader impact, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability.

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