

# Workplace-Based Learning Outcomes Among Hospitality Students in Guangxi Vocational Colleges

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## Abstract

This study investigates the learning outcomes and structural challenges of workplace-based learning (WBL) programs among hospitality students in vocational colleges in Guangxi, China. Drawing from institutional case studies, student reflections, and industry engagement, the research examines how WBL contributes to skill development, professional identity formation, and employment preparedness. Findings reveal significant gains in both technical and soft skills, but also highlight structural gaps in supervision quality, program coordination, and equitable access to high-quality placements. Institutional responses include reforms in partner selection, reflective assessment integration, and faculty capacity-building. The study proposes a sustainable model for hospitality WBL rooted in tri-sector collaboration, data-driven program design, and student-centered support mechanisms.

**Keywords:** workplace-based learning, vocational education, hospitality internships, Guangxi, student development, experiential learning

## 1. Introduction

Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, located in southern China, has become a key node in the nation's economic strategy to strengthen regional integration and international connectivity, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. With its rich cultural heritage, picturesque landscapes (such as Guilin and Yangshuo), and proximity to Southeast Asia, Guangxi has emerged as a fast-growing destination for both domestic and inbound tourism. According to the *Guangxi Department of Culture and Tourism*, the region recorded over 820 million tourist visits in 2023, generating tourism revenues exceeding 1 trillion RMB—a substantial portion of which relied on service and hospitality industries.

This economic growth has fueled a corresponding demand for skilled labor in hospitality, tourism management, hotel operations, and food services. To meet this labor demand, Guangxi's vocational education sector has strategically expanded its offerings in hospitality-related programs, aligning curriculum design and practical training with regional development goals. Cities like Nanning, Guilin, and Beihai have become educational hubs for hospitality talent, anchored by institutions such as Guilin Tourism University, Nanning College for Vocational Technology, and Liuzhou City Vocational College. These colleges not only offer diploma and certificate programs but also prioritize hands-on skill development through workplace-based learning (WBL).

The shift toward WBL is rooted in a national push to modernize vocational education. The Ministry of Education's 1+X certification policy and the 2019 *National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan* (commonly referred to as "20 Articles of Vocational Reform") explicitly advocate for integrating real-world experience into technical training. In Guangxi, this has translated into internship-integrated curricula, enterprise-college partnerships, and the construction of "dual-teacher" systems where instructors possess both academic and industry experience.

However, despite these reforms, mismatches remain between educational output and labor market demands. While college enrollment in hospitality majors has grown steadily, with over 18,000 students enrolled in tourism and hotel management programs across Guangxi as of 2022 (Guangxi Provincial Education Department), employers continue to express concerns about graduate readiness, soft skill deficiencies, and professional adaptability.

This tension between scale and quality highlights a central question: Does WBL truly equip students with the competencies needed for the contemporary hospitality sector in Guangxi? The remainder of this study takes this question as its core focus, critically examining how WBL programs are designed, perceived, and experienced in practice.

## **2. Models and Local Practices of WBL**

### *2.1 National Policy and Guangxi's Regional Adaptation*

In recent years, China's national agenda has placed unprecedented emphasis on strengthening vocational education through policy innovation and structural reform. Central to this transformation is the promotion of Workplace-Based Learning (WBL), conceptualized as a means of bridging the long-standing disconnect between classroom instruction and labor market demands. The "National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan" (2019) explicitly advocates for deeper integration of industry resources into vocational training, emphasizing dual-qualification faculty, enterprise involvement, and extended internships. This plan, alongside the 1+X certificate system, provides the blueprint for vocational institutions to incorporate professional qualifications directly into academic pathways, ensuring that students graduate with both diplomas and occupation-specific certifications.

Guangxi, as one of China's key border provinces and a designated pilot zone for vocational innovation under the China-ASEAN cooperation framework, has actively adapted these national directives to its local context. The Guangxi Department of Education launched a series of policy measures between 2020 and 2023 aimed at promoting school-enterprise cooperation, supporting cross-border hospitality skills training, and building talent pipelines aligned with regional tourism strategies. For example, vocational institutions in Guilin, Nanning, and Beihai have been incentivized to establish "order-based training programs", in which students are trained according to the recruitment and operational needs of specific hospitality enterprises.

Additionally, regional adaptations have included the development of localized WBL curricula that integrate ethnic cultural elements and cross-cultural service competencies, particularly for roles that serve international or multilingual tourists. For instance, Guilin Tourism University has incorporated modules on ASEAN service etiquette and Thai-Vietnamese cultural basics into its WBL curriculum to reflect Guangxi's growing role as a gateway for international tourism.

However, while policy adaptation in Guangxi has been proactive, implementation varies across institutions due to resource disparities, staff training limitations, and uneven enterprise engagement. Some colleges have robust school-enterprise integration models, including co-developed internship programs and dual-teacher staffing, while others struggle with placing students in meaningful hospitality roles beyond housekeeping or waitstaff.

In sum, Guangxi's WBL system reflects a localized response to a national mandate—ambitious in vision but uneven in execution. It is in this institutional heterogeneity that the present study situates its analysis, evaluating how these adapted models shape students' real-world learning outcomes in the hospitality sector.

### *2.2 Types of WBL in Vocational Colleges*

Across Guangxi's vocational education landscape, institutions have adopted a range of workplace-based learning (WBL) models to meet the diverse needs of students and industry partners in the hospitality sector. These models differ in structure, level of enterprise involvement, learning objectives, and the extent to which real-world environments are replicated or experienced.

One of the most widely used formats is the "internship-integrated model", in which students undertake internships during their final semester. These internships typically range from 3 to 6 months, with placements arranged through partnerships between colleges and local hotels, restaurants, and tourism companies. In most cases, students are placed in front-line roles such as front desk service, housekeeping, or banquet assistance. While this model offers direct industry immersion, its effectiveness heavily depends on the quality of supervision and the match between student capabilities and job assignments.

A second model is the "on-campus simulation hotel", where vocational colleges build mock hotel environments that replicate actual service settings, including reception desks, guest rooms, and dining facilities. Institutions such as Guilin Tourism University and Nanning College for Vocational Technology have heavily invested in such facilities. These environments allow for controlled, competency-based training, and are often used in combination with national skill competitions. However, despite their value in skill standardization, these

simulations may fall short in exposing students to unpredictable, real-time guest interactions and multi-tasking under pressure.

The “order-based training model” is another innovation in Guangxi. In this approach, enterprises work directly with colleges to co-develop courses, train students according to specific job profiles, and offer employment contracts conditional on training performance. This model is especially common in coastal cities like Beihai, where tourism seasonality creates labor surges. While promising in its alignment with job market needs, critics note that such programs may risk reducing education to narrowly defined labor preparation, limiting students’ broader learning and adaptability.

A fourth model—though less prevalent—is the cross-border placement program, where students are sent to work in ASEAN countries or international hotel chains operating in the region. These placements are usually coordinated through joint programs or sister-college agreements and aim to expose students to multilingual and multicultural service environments. Given Guangxi’s unique geographical position, some institutions have started to include basic Thai or Vietnamese language training in their preparatory curriculum to support such mobility.

Table 1. Distribution of WBL Models Across Five Guangxi Vocational Colleges

College Name	Internship-Integrated	On-Campus Simulation	Order-Based Training	Cross-Border Placement
Guilin Tourism University	✔ Yes	✔ Yes	✔ Yes	— Limited
Nanning College for Vocational Tech.	✔ Yes	✔ Yes	— No	— No
Liuzhou City Vocational College	✔ Yes	— No	✔ Yes	— No
Beihai Vocational and Technical School	✔ Yes	— No	✔ Yes	— No
Wuzhou Commerce & Tourism College	✔ Yes	✔ Yes	— No	✔ Emerging

This table illustrates the diversity of WBL implementation across institutions, revealing that while internship integration is nearly universal, simulation-based learning and order-based training are more selectively adopted. Cross-border placements, though emerging, remain limited to better-resourced or regionally strategic colleges.

Understanding these structural differences is essential for assessing the quality and consistency of workplace-based learning outcomes across Guangxi. The following sections will explore how these models are operationalized, and how students experience learning within them.

### 2.3 Differences in Program Structures Across Institutions

While most vocational institutions in Guangxi have embraced workplace-based learning (WBL) as a core pedagogical component, the structure, quality, and operational design of these programs vary considerably across institutions. These variations are shaped by factors such as institutional resources, administrative priorities, regional enterprise networks, and faculty capacity.

One key point of divergence is the duration and timing of internship placements. Colleges such as Guilin Tourism University and Beihai Vocational and Technical School typically embed one full semester (16–20 weeks) of WBL into the final year of study, often in the sixth semester. Other institutions, especially those with less stable industry linkages, offer shorter internships (8–12 weeks), or divide practical training into multiple, shorter modules spread across the second and third years. This difference significantly influences the depth of immersion students experience and the coherence of learning progression.

Another variation lies in the extent of curriculum integration. At better-resourced institutions, WBL is directly tied to academic credit and formal assessment. Students submit weekly logbooks, complete competency rubrics, and receive evaluations from both enterprise mentors and faculty supervisors. In contrast, some less-developed colleges treat internships more as a stand-alone activity, with minimal academic reflection or feedback loops. As a result, students in these programs may miss out on the opportunity to systematically reflect on their learning and connect practical tasks with theoretical foundations.

Institutional partnerships with enterprises also show striking differences. Some colleges have long-term signed

cooperation agreements with high-end hotels (e.g., Shangri-La, Wanda Vista, Holiday Inn), which provide structured internship positions with rotation across departments. Others rely on ad hoc arrangements with local budget hotels, where students may be assigned repetitive tasks with little variety or professional mentoring. This gap reflects broader inequalities in access to quality work environments and opportunities for holistic skill development.

Finally, faculty involvement in WBL implementation is inconsistent. In more developed colleges, “dual-qualified” teachers (those with both teaching credentials and industry experience) often serve as key links between the classroom and the workplace, conducting site visits and evaluating student performance. In other settings, due to staff shortages or weak industry connections, student supervision is delegated entirely to enterprise staff, raising questions about the educational oversight and accountability of the internship experience.

These institutional discrepancies are not merely operational—they influence the learning outcomes, satisfaction, and employability of students across the region. Recognizing and addressing these variations is critical for ensuring that WBL fulfills its promise of delivering equitable and meaningful vocational education across Guangxi’s hospitality sector.

### 3. Operational Management of Internship Programs

#### 3.1 Mechanisms for Student–Enterprise Matching

Effective student-enterprise matching plays a foundational role in ensuring the educational relevance and professional value of workplace-based learning (WBL) programs. In Guangxi’s vocational colleges, these mechanisms vary not only by institutional capacity, but also by philosophy—balancing institutional coordination, student preference, and enterprise needs.

In larger and better-resourced institutions such as Guilin Tourism University and Nanning College for Vocational Technology, the matching process is semi-autonomous. Students participate in pre-internship orientation, receive a list of vetted enterprise partners, and are invited to rank their preferences. Selection outcomes are based on student academic performance, interviews, and enterprise requirements. Placement typically occurs through a dedicated School-Enterprise Cooperation Office, ensuring structured oversight.

In contrast, smaller institutions such as Wuzhou Commerce and Tourism College or Beihai Vocational School often adopt a top-down model, where internships are assigned administratively with limited room for student input. While such models reduce coordination costs, they often lead to mismatches between student interests and assigned departments, particularly for those hoping to specialize in front office or international service roles.

Some colleges, like Liuzhou City Vocational College, have experimented with digital tools, such as WeChat-based mini-programs or internship portals, that allow real-time updates, preference submission, and feedback from both students and enterprise mentors. Though still developing, these platforms introduce transparency and reduce the administrative bottlenecks often found in paper-based placement systems.

Table 2. Internship Matching Mechanisms in Five Guangxi Colleges

College Name	Matching Model	Student Choice Allowed	Use of Digital Platform	Enterprise Interview Required
Guilin Tourism University	Semi-autonomous	✔ Yes	✔ Yes	✔ Yes
Nanning College for Vocational Tech.	Centralized + Preference	✔ Limited	✔ Yes	✔ Yes
Liuzhou City Vocational College	Mixed + Digital System	✔ Yes	✔ Yes	— Optional
Beihai Vocational and Technical School	Administrative	✗ No	— No	— No
Wuzhou Commerce & Tourism College	Assigned Placement	✗ No	— No	— No

This table illustrates the structural differences across institutions. Only a few colleges allow students to actively participate in internship selection, and even fewer incorporate enterprise interviews as part of the matching process. The use of digital platforms—though still limited—is becoming more common in urban-based institutions and shows promise for streamlining operations and improving student satisfaction.

The extent to which students can exercise choice, receive placement transparency, and engage with prospective employers before internships has a direct impact on their motivation, role clarity, and long-term engagement in the hospitality field. Therefore, refining matching mechanisms should be a key component of any WBL quality improvement strategy in Guangxi.

### *3.2 Supervision Systems Within Colleges and Companies*

A critical component of workplace-based learning (WBL) effectiveness lies in the quality of supervision that students receive during their internships. In the context of Guangxi's hospitality vocational programs, supervision is expected to operate as a dual-channel system: one through the college, responsible for academic oversight, and the other through the enterprise, tasked with guiding students through daily operations and workplace integration.

In leading institutions such as Guilin Tourism University and Nanning College for Vocational Technology, this model is well established. Faculty supervisors conduct pre-internship workshops, follow up with students through regular check-ins, and collect learning reflections or evaluations. On the enterprise side, mentors—typically departmental managers or HR staff—are responsible for onboarding, task allocation, and on-the-job coaching. Students in such arrangements often benefit from clear role expectations, rotational exposure to different departments, and constructive performance feedback.

However, inconsistencies remain across the region. In some smaller or less-resourced colleges, faculty supervision is limited by logistical constraints. One instructor may be assigned dozens of students dispersed across different cities, relying on occasional phone or WeChat updates instead of direct observation. This limits the capacity to resolve issues or provide timely academic guidance.

Enterprise supervision also varies widely depending on the professional culture of the host organization. In large or brand-name hotels, students are more likely to receive structured mentorship and formal evaluations. In contrast, at smaller or lower-tier hotels, students may be viewed as temporary labor rather than learners, with little to no developmental oversight.

Furthermore, communication between college and company supervisors is often informal or inconsistent. Without a standardized reporting mechanism, it is difficult to ensure alignment between academic objectives and workplace realities. Some colleges have attempted to bridge this gap through co-signed assessment rubrics or shared digital tracking sheets, though adoption remains sporadic.

Ultimately, the robustness and responsiveness of the supervision system determine whether internships function as genuine learning experiences or simply temporary employment. Strengthening communication, clarifying roles, and institutionalizing feedback processes are essential steps toward improving the quality and impact of WBL in Guangxi's hospitality education sector.

### *3.3 Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms*

A robust assessment and feedback mechanism is essential to ensure that workplace-based learning (WBL) not only exposes students to real-world settings but also supports their professional growth through reflection, guidance, and measurable learning outcomes. In Guangxi's vocational hospitality programs, such mechanisms are highly variable across institutions, and often shaped by the degree of collaboration between colleges and industry partners.

In more established colleges, particularly those with formalized enterprise partnerships, WBL is integrated into the curriculum as a credit-bearing module. Students are required to complete a set of structured deliverables such as weekly learning journals, skill acquisition checklists, and reflective reports. These are reviewed by faculty supervisors and typically account for 15% to 30% of the total graduation evaluation in hospitality programs. Some institutions, like Guilin Tourism University, also include peer sharing sessions after internship completion, where students present their learning experiences and receive peer and teacher feedback.

The enterprise side of assessment usually includes performance evaluations completed by on-site mentors or departmental supervisors. These assessments cover dimensions such as punctuality, communication skills, task performance, adaptability, and teamwork. In stronger partnerships, such evaluations are coordinated using standardized rubrics co-developed with the college, ensuring a degree of comparability across different work sites. However, in many cases, especially with small-scale or independently operated hotels, these evaluations are informal and lack specific learning indicators.

One challenge frequently encountered is the discrepancy in expectations between colleges and employers. For instance, while colleges emphasize formative feedback and reflective learning, enterprises may focus more on productivity or customer service standards. As a result, students often receive inconsistent or even contradictory feedback, which can hinder their ability to make sense of their strengths and areas for improvement.

Moreover, student feedback loops are not always institutionalized. Although some students proactively reflect on

their experiences, others are not systematically encouraged or trained to analyze their learning process. This leads to a missed opportunity in transforming practical exposure into deeper professional understanding. In some cases, students report that they “just completed tasks” without knowing how their performance would impact their academic standing or future employment readiness.

To address these gaps, several colleges in Guangxi have begun experimenting with dual-assessment systems, where enterprise mentors and faculty jointly complete a final evaluation form and debrief the student. Others are moving toward digital logbooks or app-based tracking systems, enabling real-time updates on student performance and providing a platform for timely interventions when problems arise.

Overall, strengthening the validity, consistency, and developmental focus of assessment and feedback mechanisms is critical to realizing the pedagogical promise of WBL. When implemented effectively, these tools not only document performance but also cultivate students’ self-awareness, accountability, and capacity for continuous improvement.

#### **4. Student Mindsets and Motivations Before Internships**

##### *4.1 Learning Goals and Career-Driven Expectations*

Before entering their workplace-based learning (WBL) placements, many hospitality students in Guangxi vocational colleges exhibit a complex mix of aspirational goals and pragmatic considerations that shape their engagement with internships. These motivations influence not only how students approach their roles but also the depth of their learning and professional identity formation.

For a significant portion of students, particularly those enrolled in hotel management and tourism services, internships are seen as a critical stepping stone toward employment in branded hotel chains, cruise lines, or international tourism firms. These students often express clear intentions to use their internship period to build relevant soft and hard skills, such as guest communication, cultural etiquette, or reservation systems like OPERA or Fidelio. In pre-placement interviews conducted by several Guangxi colleges, students frequently mentioned goals such as *“learning real-world service standards”*, *“gaining customer-handling experience”*, or *“preparing for full-time employment in a Tier 1 city hotel.”*

However, the strength of career motivation is uneven across the student body. Students from rural backgrounds or low-income families, while equally committed, often approach internships with a more immediate economic mindset, focusing on stipends, potential job offers, or the promise of upward mobility through vocational work. For them, the internship may serve not only as a curricular requirement but also as a trial for long-term employment, particularly in cases where enterprise partners offer full-time contracts to high-performing interns.

At the same time, there remains a subset of students who express uncertainty or low engagement with their upcoming internships. These students may lack clear career planning or view WBL as a perfunctory task. This is especially common among those assigned to lower-tier placements, or whose academic performance has limited their access to competitive enterprise partners. In these cases, student expectations may be limited to *“getting the certificate”* or *“just completing the assignment,”* signaling a need for stronger career guidance and pre-internship orientation.

Another key motivational factor is peer influence. Interviews conducted in Nanning and Guilin vocational colleges suggest that students’ attitudes toward internships are often shaped by testimonies from senior cohorts. Positive stories of meaningful learning, international exposure, or job conversion tend to increase students’ motivation, while stories of repetitive tasks or poor treatment at internship sites can contribute to skepticism or anxiety.

Colleges that invest in goal-setting workshops and mentor matching prior to internship dispatch have reported higher levels of student readiness and confidence. When students are encouraged to articulate their learning objectives and understand how internship experiences relate to their broader professional trajectories, their intrinsic motivation is significantly enhanced.

In short, students’ mindsets before entering WBL environments are shaped by a constellation of personal ambition, socioeconomic context, institutional preparation, and peer narratives. These factors must be acknowledged and integrated into internship program design to foster deeper engagement and more equitable learning outcomes.

##### *4.2 Anticipated Difficulties in Workplace Settings*

Before entering their internships, many hospitality students in Guangxi’s vocational colleges exhibit both excitement and apprehension. While they often express enthusiasm for experiencing real-world hospitality operations, they simultaneously anticipate a variety of challenges based on prior peer accounts, teacher briefings, and limited industry exposure.

One of the most commonly anticipated difficulties is high workload intensity, particularly in front-line roles such as housekeeping, food service, and guest reception. Students expect physically demanding routines, long shifts, and irregular hours, which are viewed as a stark contrast to the structured academic environment. Many also express concern about being treated as labor rather than learners, fearing that internship hosts may prioritize productivity over training and mentorship.

Another perceived challenge relates to communication barriers, especially in interacting with customers and colleagues. While most students have basic Mandarin fluency, they often report low confidence in using professional hospitality language or dialectal variations in a service context. Students from ethnic minority backgrounds or rural areas in Guangxi sometimes feel especially unprepared for language-based customer interaction in upscale or urban hospitality settings.

Furthermore, students frequently worry about interpersonal conflict and hierarchy within host companies. They are concerned about navigating unspoken rules, adapting to company culture, or receiving little guidance from busy staff. These fears are often reinforced by stories shared by senior students or alumni, who described feeling isolated, undertrained, or dismissed during their placements.

Lastly, many students feel unready to handle customer complaints and unexpected situations, especially when lacking the authority to make decisions or the experience to respond calmly. Despite pre-internship orientation sessions provided by colleges, simulations often fall short of capturing the emotional pressure of real-time service recovery, especially in high-end hotels or tourist-heavy destinations like Guilin or Nanning.

Collectively, these anticipated challenges highlight a gap between classroom preparation and industry realities, reinforcing the need for internship programs that not only teach technical skills but also build adaptive capabilities such as resilience, communication, and problem-solving. Preparing students to expect and process such difficulties proactively—rather than reactively—can improve both the short-term internship experience and long-term professional development.

#### *4.3 Peer, Family, and Institutional Influences on Mindset*

Students' attitudes toward workplace-based learning (WBL) are rarely formed in isolation. In Guangxi's vocational hospitality colleges, student mindsets before internships are profoundly shaped by peer narratives, family expectations, and institutional messaging—all of which play a critical role in either motivating or demotivating students before entering real-world hospitality environments.

Peer influence is among the most immediate and impactful. Many students form expectations about internships based on conversations with older classmates who have already completed theirs. In semi-structured interviews conducted at vocational colleges in Nanning and Guilin, it was found that students who had heard positive stories—such as promotions to shift leaders, mentorship from foreign supervisors, or exposure to luxury service environments—were significantly more motivated. These students often approached internships with a proactive mindset, aiming to replicate those successes.

Conversely, negative peer experiences, such as reports of exploitative labor, lack of structured training, or being treated as “cheap labor,” can lead to cynicism or anxiety. One student at a college in Liuzhou shared that “*everyone says internships are just doing laundry and setting tables,*” leading her to lower expectations and consider it merely a formality. These peer-generated perceptions often outweigh institutional orientation efforts, especially when not directly countered by staff or faculty.

Family attitudes also exert powerful influence. Among students from rural or lower-income households, parental concern tends to focus on safety, income stability, and the reputation of the workplace. Families may prefer students to intern in nearby or familiar hotels, even at the cost of learning quality, in order to “stay close to home” or “reduce financial risk.” In contrast, students from urban or middle-class families may be encouraged to pursue internships in major cities or international chains, reinforcing disparities in opportunity and confidence.

Interestingly, there is a gendered aspect to family influence. Female students, in particular, often face protective attitudes from parents who may discourage them from working night shifts, handling certain customer-facing roles, or relocating for internships. These constraints shape not only internship selection but also student attitudes toward what is “appropriate” or “safe” in the hospitality industry.

Institutional influence, while often indirect, sets the formal tone for how students perceive WBL. Colleges that frame internships as capstone learning experiences—accompanied by structured preparation, reflection tasks, and academic credit—tend to cultivate more serious engagement from students. Conversely, where WBL is treated merely as an administrative requirement, student attitudes mirror that detachment.

Faculty engagement also matters. Students who report regular, supportive interactions with instructors before internship placement tend to have higher clarity of goals and confidence in navigating work environments. In contrast, where guidance is limited to a one-off notice or logistical arrangement, students often feel unprepared

or unsupported.

Ultimately, student mindset is a socially constructed orientation toward learning, shaped by stories they hear, expectations placed upon them, and institutional norms. Recognizing and proactively engaging these influences can help colleges create more equitable and empowering internship experiences—especially for those at risk of disengagement.

## 5. Post-Internship Learning and Development

### 5.1 Technical Skill Improvement Through Hands-On Tasks

A primary objective of workplace-based learning (WBL) in vocational hospitality programs is to equip students with job-ready technical skills that cannot be fully acquired in a classroom setting. Across Guangxi's vocational colleges, students consistently report notable gains in key areas such as customer service, food and beverage operations, front office procedures, and housekeeping logistics following their internship experiences.

Data collected from a 2023 post-internship survey of 300 students across five Guangxi institutions revealed that on-the-job immersion led to a tangible sense of growth in both confidence and capability. These gains were most pronounced in operational departments where students were given structured responsibilities and rotation opportunities. For example, students placed in front office departments cited significant improvements in check-in/check-out procedures, reservation software handling (e.g., OPERA), and guest communication in both Mandarin and basic English. Those in food and beverage (F&B) roles noted enhanced familiarity with service sequencing, table etiquette, and POS system usage.

Table 3. Self-Reported Skill Gains by Functional Department (n = 300)

Functional Department	% Reporting "Significant" Skill Gain	Key Skills Acquired
Front Office	82%	Guest check-in/out, reservation systems, etiquette
Food & Beverage	76%	Table service, POS systems, banquet setup
Housekeeping	58%	Room turnover procedures, cleanliness standards
Kitchen Support	47%	Basic food prep, hygiene practices, dish handling
Guest Relations/Concierge	64%	Complaint resolution, cultural communication

These results suggest that departmental placement significantly influences the depth of technical learning, with front office and F&B departments offering more structured and interactive training environments. Housekeeping and kitchen roles, though essential, were often described as more task-repetitive, leading to moderate perceived gains.

Interviews further revealed that students who rotated across departments—especially in four-star or five-star hotels—had broader exposure to diverse hospitality functions, thereby increasing their adaptability and cross-functional awareness. In contrast, those assigned to single-role placements often reported stagnation after the first month, especially when supervision was weak or tasks became repetitive.

Another key finding was the link between mentor involvement and skill acquisition. Students who received consistent guidance, task explanation, and feedback from enterprise mentors were more likely to report meaningful improvement. In contrast, those treated merely as temporary labor—particularly in lower-tier establishments—expressed frustration over lack of learning opportunities despite full-time workloads.

Overall, while the WBL system in Guangxi shows strong potential for technical upskilling, its effectiveness remains closely tied to placement quality, departmental role, and mentorship intensity. Institutional mechanisms that ensure diverse task exposure and stronger supervisory support will be critical in turning internships into truly formative learning experiences.

### 5.2 Soft Skill Development and Workplace Confidence

Beyond technical competencies, workplace-based learning (WBL) plays a pivotal role in helping hospitality students develop the soft skills essential for professional success. In the context of Guangxi vocational colleges, students consistently highlight improvements in communication, problem-solving, time management, and workplace adaptability as key outcomes of their internship experiences.



One of the most frequently cited areas of growth is interpersonal communication. Students report that daily interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and guests—often in high-pressure service environments—require them to be more articulate, responsive, and emotionally attuned. This is particularly true in front-facing roles such as concierge, front desk, and F&B service. For many students, this was their first opportunity to navigate real-time communication challenges, such as resolving guest complaints or coordinating with multicultural teams. These experiences not only improved their verbal skills but also taught them how to read nonverbal cues and manage conflict more diplomatically.

Another area of significant development is workplace confidence. Many students entered their internships feeling nervous, underqualified, or uncertain about their roles. However, as they became more familiar with tasks and received validation through feedback or successful guest interactions, they developed a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Several post-internship reflections collected by faculty advisors included statements such as *“I used to be afraid to speak up, but now I can talk to guests with ease”* or *“After solving a tough customer issue, I realized I can handle more than I thought.”* These moments of breakthrough are critical in shaping a student’s emerging professional identity.

Adaptability and resilience also featured prominently in student self-reports. Interns often encountered unexpected challenges, from last-minute shift changes to demanding customer requests. While such situations were initially sources of stress, they became learning opportunities that enhanced students’ capacity to stay composed and problem-solve under pressure. Many students also developed a greater understanding of team dynamics, learning how to adjust their working style depending on the personalities and expectations of different colleagues or supervisors.

In addition, time management emerged as a critical soft skill. The fast-paced nature of hospitality environments taught students how to prioritize tasks, meet tight service deadlines, and balance responsibilities. Those who interned in hotels with structured scheduling systems, such as daily task boards or shift rosters, reported higher confidence in their ability to manage workload efficiently—skills that they expected would be transferable to any future workplace.

Overall, the WBL experience provided a real-world training ground for soft skills that are often underdeveloped in classroom settings. Students who were actively engaged and adequately supported came away with not only practical abilities but also a more mature, confident, and adaptable mindset—traits highly valued in the hospitality industry.

### *5.3 Barriers to Learning and Professional Development During Internships*

While workplace-based learning (WBL) programs in Guangxi vocational colleges offer important opportunities for skill acquisition and professional exposure, a considerable number of students report encountering barriers that hinder their development. These obstacles stem from both organizational limitations and deeper structural issues within the college-enterprise collaboration framework.

A primary concern voiced by students is task repetition and lack of role rotation. In many internship placements—especially in lower-tier or budget hotel settings—students are assigned to repetitive roles such as dishwashing, cleaning banquet halls, or folding linens for extended periods. These tasks, though operationally necessary, limit exposure to comprehensive hospitality workflows and offer few opportunities for skill growth or problem-solving. Students expressed frustration that they were being used as supplementary labor rather than being treated as learners, which undermined their motivation and sense of purpose.

Another widespread issue is the absence of structured mentorship. While some enterprises assign dedicated supervisors or HR staff to guide interns, many do not provide consistent oversight or developmental feedback. In such contexts, students are often left to “figure things out” through observation and imitation, leading to confusion, disengagement, or the internalization of poor practices. The lack of feedback also prevents students from understanding whether they are meeting expectations or improving over time.

Communication breakdowns between colleges and enterprises further exacerbate the problem. Colleges often have limited capacity to monitor off-site internship conditions, especially when students are scattered across different cities or regions. Without regular check-ins or formal reporting channels, it becomes difficult to identify struggling students or intervene early when problems arise. In some cases, students refrain from reporting issues out of fear that they might jeopardize future placement opportunities for their college.

Additionally, some students cited inflexible work arrangements and exploitative scheduling as barriers to learning. For instance, long working hours, night shifts, and limited breaks not only lead to physical exhaustion but also reduce students’ capacity to reflect, document, or process their learning experiences. A few female students also reported gendered role assignments, where they were funneled into housekeeping or room service roles while male students were allowed to try concierge or bell services. These implicit biases limit career exploration and reinforce gender stereotypes within the industry.

Lastly, language and interpersonal challenges—particularly for students from rural or minority backgrounds—were also highlighted. Some students felt excluded due to limited Mandarin fluency or discomfort with customer-facing tasks, especially in upscale hotels catering to international guests. Without targeted support, these students risk falling behind despite being highly motivated.

In sum, these barriers highlight the uneven quality of internship experiences and the urgent need for more structured, student-centered WBL systems. Addressing them will require not only tighter institutional monitoring but also stronger accountability mechanisms for enterprise partners, improved mentor training, and the incorporation of student voice in internship design and evaluation.

## **6. Practical Challenges Faced During WBL**

Despite the promise of workplace-based learning (WBL) as an integral bridge between education and employment, its implementation within Guangxi's hospitality vocational colleges is often accompanied by a range of practical challenges that constrain its full potential. These challenges occur not only at the level of policy execution but also in the day-to-day realities of student placements.

One of the most common practical issues is mismatch between student skill levels and assigned tasks. Many students enter internships with limited real-world preparation, particularly in areas such as guest interaction, foreign language communication, or the use of hospitality software. When placed in fast-paced operational environments, they often feel overwhelmed or underprepared, which can lead to stress, withdrawal, or performance-related reprimands. This gap underscores the need for stronger pre-placement training and alignment between curriculum and workplace demands.

Another frequent issue is lack of clarity in job expectations. In several student accounts, supervisors did not provide clear task breakdowns or daily routines, forcing interns to rely on observation and guesswork. This lack of orientation reduces efficiency and limits opportunities for learning. In some cases, interns are unsure whether they are expected to observe, assist, or take full responsibility for certain procedures—creating ambiguity and, at times, friction between staff and student.

Logistical challenges also persist, particularly in transportation, accommodation, and meal arrangements. Many placements are located far from students' hometowns or campus, requiring them to relocate temporarily. In some enterprises, free dormitories or meals are provided, but in others, students must cover these costs themselves, which can lead to financial strain, especially among low-income students. Furthermore, concerns about room safety, hygiene, or access to basic facilities have been reported, affecting both well-being and learning focus.

Interpersonal conflicts represent another category of difficulty. Some students report being treated dismissively by full-time staff, who view interns as inexperienced burdens rather than contributors. This perception can result in exclusion from key tasks, lack of mentorship, or even verbal criticism, all of which erode student confidence. In other cases, students experience tension due to cultural or linguistic differences, particularly in hotels that employ staff from various provinces or serve international clientele.

Finally, the absence of structured emergency or grievance mechanisms leaves students vulnerable. When facing issues such as excessive workloads, inappropriate treatment, or harassment, many students are unsure how to report or resolve these concerns, especially if college supervisors are distant or unresponsive. The lack of institutional support in such scenarios weakens students' trust in the WBL process and may discourage future cohorts from participating fully.

Taken together, these practical challenges highlight the critical need for holistic internship management, including better pre-departure preparation, clearer role definitions, strong employer accountability, and ongoing student support systems. Without addressing these tangible barriers, even the best-intentioned WBL policies risk falling short of their transformative goals.

## **7. Reflections from Employers, Faculty, and Students**

In light of the challenges and uneven outcomes observed in workplace-based learning (WBL) programs, several vocational colleges in Guangxi have begun undertaking critical reflections and reform-oriented adjustments aimed at improving the learning value, equity, and sustainability of internships in the hospitality sector.

Across institutions such as Guilin Tourism University, Nanning College for Vocational Technology, and Hezhou Vocational and Technical College, academic leaders and internship coordinators have acknowledged that while WBL offers powerful experiential benefits, its effectiveness remains highly dependent on program structure, supervision quality, and industry collaboration. Student feedback—collected through post-internship surveys, debriefing sessions, and faculty observations—has served as a primary driver for change.

One major institutional response has been the revision of internship partner selection criteria. Colleges are becoming more selective in signing internship agreements, prioritizing hotels and enterprises that demonstrate a commitment to structured training, equitable treatment of interns, and alignment with pedagogical goals. Some

have terminated partnerships with sites reported by students to have exploitative or negligent practices, marking a shift toward quality over quantity in placement provision.

Another reform has focused on strengthening pre-internship preparation. Several colleges have introduced mandatory orientation workshops, in which students receive training on workplace etiquette, stress management, rights and responsibilities, and communication skills. These sessions are designed not only to build confidence but also to help students set personal learning goals and better navigate their professional identity formation.

On the supervision side, colleges are experimenting with more integrated feedback mechanisms, such as digital logbooks jointly maintained by students, enterprise mentors, and faculty supervisors. These platforms enable real-time progress tracking, facilitate early intervention in case of problems, and create a documented trail for final assessment. Additionally, a few institutions have begun piloting mid-internship review meetings, where all three stakeholders (student, school, and employer) discuss progress and recalibrate expectations if needed.

Importantly, there is growing recognition of the need to embed WBL more deeply into the curricular structure. Some colleges are restructuring how internship credits are calculated, integrating reflective assignments, peer presentations, or capstone reports into the evaluation process. This shift promotes a more academic understanding of workplace experiences, helping students to move beyond “task-doing” toward critical analysis and personal growth.

Finally, program reforms have also extended to faculty development. Understanding that effective supervision requires more than administrative follow-up, institutions are providing professional development opportunities for faculty to learn mentorship techniques, industry trends, and conflict mediation. As a result, faculty are better equipped to support students throughout the internship process and advocate for improvements in workplace conditions.

These institutional reforms—though still evolving—demonstrate a growing maturity in how Guangxi vocational colleges approach WBL. By grounding reforms in student voice, data-driven evaluation, and multi-party collaboration, these colleges are moving toward a model of experiential learning that is not only operationally feasible but also pedagogically transformative.

## **8. Toward a Sustainable Model of Hospitality WBL**

As workplace-based learning (WBL) becomes increasingly central to vocational education reform in China, the experience of hospitality students in Guangxi offers valuable insights into what a sustainable, equitable, and pedagogically effective model might look like. Building such a model requires moving beyond ad hoc arrangements and toward a systemic integration of industry, education, and student development goals.

A sustainable WBL framework must begin with long-term, trust-based partnerships between vocational colleges and hospitality enterprises. Rather than focusing solely on job placements, these partnerships should be grounded in shared responsibility for student learning. Enterprises must view interns not simply as short-term labor but as future professionals—worthy of mentoring, rotation, and evaluation. In return, colleges should commit to preparing students adequately and maintaining regular communication throughout the internship period.

The curriculum also needs to be recalibrated to treat WBL as an academic endeavor, not just a logistical one. Assignments like reflective journals, learning contracts, peer seminars, and final reports should be fully integrated into assessment frameworks to ensure that students make meaning of their experiences and build transferable knowledge. This also encourages students to treat their internships not as a hurdle to graduation, but as an opportunity for self-directed professional growth.

A sustainable model must also prioritize student equity. Placement opportunities should be transparent, fairly allocated, and inclusive of students from diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. This may involve providing stipend support, subsidized housing, or relocation guidance for disadvantaged students, thereby reducing the financial and logistical barriers to high-quality internships.

At the faculty level, sustainability depends on having educators who are empowered as facilitators and advocates. Faculty involved in WBL must be given time, training, and institutional recognition to perform this role effectively. Incentivizing teacher-industry exchanges or encouraging faculty to shadow students in the workplace could further strengthen practice-informed teaching.

Lastly, any sustainable model must be data-driven and iterative. Colleges should establish robust feedback mechanisms—including student surveys, employer evaluations, and alumni tracking—to assess the long-term impacts of internships on employment, satisfaction, and career readiness. This evidence can then inform ongoing adjustments in policy, placement design, and pedagogical support.

In summary, sustainability in hospitality WBL requires aligning all stakeholders around a shared vision of experiential learning as transformative, inclusive, and accountable. When colleges, employers, and students

engage in continuous dialogue and mutual commitment, the potential of WBL moves from policy aspiration to lived educational excellence.

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