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## Revisiting hospitality internship practices: A holistic investigation



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### ABSTRACT

Hospitality internships are integral part of almost all reputable hospitality programs worldwide. Despite their universal recognition as an essential component of hospitality education, their value is often superseded by the challenges facing hospitality stakeholders in providing such an experience for the next generation of hospitality professions. The purpose of this paper is to investigate—with the utilization of structural equation modeling and after a thorough investigation of the existing literature—the causal relationships of the key issues that define modern hospitality internships and the practice's perceived impact on students' intention to pursue a hospitality career upon graduation. Crucial elements before, during, and after the experience were accounted for, as well as students' overall internship perceptions. Findings prove to be of considerable interest to hospitality stakeholders by confirming some theoretical notions pertaining to the efficacy of the practice, as well as by enhancing understanding and opening new research horizons for those wishing to advance our collective knowledge of the experience.

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### 1. Introduction

In an era of uncertainty, constant changes and attempts to internationalize hospitality degrees (Brookes & Becket, 2011), crucial elements that define the practice of the internship, still remain unknown. The absence of a universally-acknowledged definition, purpose and scope, has driven hospitality educators to develop a pedagogically sound experience while juggling the challenges associated with discovering commonalities amongst the internship's primary stakeholders; the student, the educational institution and the industry.

While reviewing the internship-related literature, one can sense the progressive nature of the discourse that reflects the conditions of the era under investigation. Scholars in the 80s and 90s mostly explored procedural issues since the imperative at the time was to find the best possible way to assimilate internships into the hospitality curriculum. Based on this premise, numerous scholars investigated internships from an array of 'administrative' perspectives. At the start of the new century, the focus shifted towards a more explanatory mindset, as attempts were made to investigate the internships' key components, relationships, associations and success factors.

A quick foray into the most popular academic databases (e.g., Emerald, ProQuest, Sage, and Science Direct) reveals the scarcity of internship-related empirical articles which convincingly investigate this crucial but most often forgotten element

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of hospitality education. Reinforcing this fact, numerous scholars (e.g., Airey & Tribe, 2005; Walmsley, Thomas, & Jameson, 2012; Zopiatis, 2007; Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012) highlight the need for further scientific investigation into the efficacy of hospitality internship practices. In an attempt to enhance the stakeholders' collective knowledge and provide new insights that might more accurately address contemporary internship issues, this study sets out to investigate the causal relationships that define modern internship practices. The findings may prove fruitful for researchers grappling with the concept's tri-partite relationships, that is the pre-, actual-, and post-internship experience.

## 2. Review of literature

The following section provides the conceptual background upon which the study was grounded, starting out with a definition, followed by a holistic review of the existing internship-related literature through the years.

### 2.1. Towards a definition

Irrespective of which definition one espouses, certain key words are evident throughout much of the existing internship-related literature, such as, students, supervised work practice, experiential learning, academic credit, etc. Zopiatis (2007) defines the internship experience as:

... a structured and career-relevant supervised professional work/learning experience, paid or unpaid, within an approved hospitality agency/organization/corporation, under the direct supervision of at least one practicing hospitality professional and one faculty member, for which a hospitality student can earn academic credit. (p. 11)

In general terms, an internship is viewed as a short-term period of practical work experience wherein students receive training as well as gaining invaluable job experiences in a specific field or potential career of their interest. For their contributions, students may or may not earn money depending upon the specific circumstances. This experience enables students to apply classroom theories within the actual world of work, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice. Internship practices are sometimes referred to as practical work experience, work placement, field work practicum, professional placement, cooperative education, or experiential learning activity.

Today almost all reputable hospitality programs include at least one internship experience in their curriculum. Table 1 exhibits the internship requirements of twenty educational institutions offering hospitality or tourism management degrees worldwide. The twenty programs were randomly selected in order to provide an indicative picture of the current practices. It is important to note that almost all institutions consider internships as a mandatory requirement for their students' graduation, thus reaffirming their conviction in the practice's overall pedagogic value. Moreover, the trend is set to increase the duration of the experience which in some cases may last a year, via the utilization of different internship schemes.

### 2.2. The early days (1980s and 90s)

Beginning with the early 80s, scholars sought to uncover the fundamentals of the experience. Welch (1984) suggesting that the students' hospitality internship experience can be more valuable when specific performance goals are established, proposed a four-step model (self-assessment, development of competency statements, establishment of performance objectives and evaluation) as an apparatus for ensuring the attainment of specific hospitality skills. Schmelzer, Costello, and Blalock (1987) investigated internship practices within the context of hospitality curricula, while Loftus' (1988) investigated the concept from the perspective of the hospitality industry. A number of other studies (Cargill & Fried, 1990; Pauze, Johnson, & Miller, 1989) provided specific instructional and administrative recommendations pertaining to the internship practice, whilst Ciofalo (1989), and Parilla and Wesser (1998), investigated the value of internships as a learning tool. Along the same lines, Alm's (1996) study provided valuable insights as to the necessity for effective internship evaluation methods.

During this time period, only a handful of studies actively tapped on the students' experience while undergoing the internship. Barron and Maxwell's (1993) research findings suggest that, prior to their internship, hospitality students had positive perceptions in terms of the industry's career opportunities, monetary rewards, training prospects, and job satisfaction, but, unfortunately, those perceptions became negative upon the students' return from their actual internship experience. The authors restated that the differences between students' expectations and their internship experience perceptions could be attributed both to the educational institution's inadequate practices, as well as to the industry's problematic induction programs. They concluded that a negative internship experience substantially influences students' perceptions regarding their future hospitality career.

Students' internship expectations and perceptions have also been investigated by other scholars from an array of perspectives. Waryszak (1999) presented a number of research studies that assessed students' expectations, whereas Charles (1992) states that hospitality students were "...generally satisfied with their career choice, although their satisfaction appeared to be decreasing with time, and they had been more influenced in their view by their internship experience" (p. 13). Going a step further, Nelson (1994) examined students' internship perceptions in terms of the overall effects of job dimensions and supportive relations on the interns' level of satisfaction. Findings suggest that students were more satisfied with internships that "...provide relevant work, some autonomy, and timely feedback" (Nelson, 1994, p. 133).

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