



## Academic Papers

# Today's intern, tomorrow's practitioner?—The influence of internship programmes on students' career development in the Hospitality Industry

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Internship programme  
Hospitality industry  
Career development

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to explore how internship programme planning, industry involvement, and student commitment influence student willingness to pursue a career in the hospitality industry after graduation. This study applied Structure Equation Modelling (SEM) and employed a questionnaire to collect data from students at twenty universities to test seven hypotheses proposed in this study. It was found that internship programme planning, industry involvement, and student commitment positively influence overall satisfaction with internship experiences. In addition, internship programme planning and industry involvement have the most profound influence on students' willingness to stay in the hospitality industry after graduation.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism 2020 Vision, a study compiled by the World Tourism Organization in 2009 (UNWTO), forecasts that worldwide international arrivals are expected to reach nearly 1.6 billion by the year 2020. Of these, 1.2 billion will be intra-regional and 378 million will be long-haul travellers. East Asia/Pacific, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa are forecast to have record tourism growth rates of over 5% per year, compared to the world average of 4.1% (WTO, 2010). According to the latest Taiwan tourism data, Taiwan's international tourist arrivals reached 5,567,277 in 2010, a 26.67% increase from the previous year (Tourism Bureau of Republic of China, 2011). This fast-growing market has led to an increased demand for hotels and restaurants. A survey conducted in 2010 by an online head-hunter, 104 Corporation, shows that the industries with the highest rates of growth in employment are the tobacco, food and beverage industry (147%), culinary industry (83%), and hotel industry (79.9%) (Wang, 2011).

The demand for new recruits in the hospitality industry has led to the rapid development of hospitality education in Taiwan. The number of hospitality departments in Taiwanese colleges and universities has more than doubled in the past decade. Data compiled from Taiwan's four-year and two-year college entrance exams shows that the number of students applying to hospitality programmes has increased from 10,092 in 2002 to 25,114 in 2010. In response to such demand, universities in Taiwan continue to establish hospitality programmes. According to the Republic of China Ministry of Education (2010a), more than 164 universities have established over 200 hospitality-related departments, most of which offer four-year degrees. These programmes are usually composed of three parts: general, professional, and commercial courses.

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To earn their degrees, most students must complete an internship programme in the private sector, working at least 400 h in one year (Horng, 2004; Horng & Lee, 2005). Internship placements are either arranged by schools or by the students themselves. The majority of internships consist of entry-level positions. In the case of the hospitality industry, interns are mostly placed in the front of the house, doing jobs such as housekeeping, food and beverage serving, or working in kitchens. Different academic systems have internship programmes of different durations. Vocational colleges tend to sandwich the internship between two periods of academic study for a duration of six months to one year (Lee & Chao, 2008). Upon completing the internship, students receive ten to sixteen credits. In 2008, the Ministry of Education launched an off-campus student internship initiative for technical colleges. This initiative had three main purposes: to expand co-operation between schools and the private sector; to help students put their knowledge into practice; and to give students first-hand experience in the job market (Ministry of Education, 2008). In 2009, the Ministry brought into effect the Implementation Rules for Subsidising College-level Off-campus Internship Programmes in order to encourage colleges to create such opportunities (Ministry of Education, 2010b). Under the leadership of the Ministry, hospitality internship programmes sponsored by the private sector have grown both in scale and sophistication.

Successful work experiences can positively influence students' intentions of pursuing a career in the hospitality industry (Domonte & Vaden, 1987; Fazio, 1986). On the other hand, inappropriate design of internship programmes, unequal treatment of interns by employers, and wage discrepancies may cause students to leave the industry after their internship (Richardson, 2008; Roney & Tin, 2007). Solnet, Kralj, Kay, and Deveau (2009) emphasised that neither educators nor industry operators can act alone in developing the necessary resources and programmes that can facilitate students in the transition from school to the real world. Richardson's study, found that more than 50% of respondents are already contemplating careers outside the industry after an internship or holding a part time in the industry. In addition, many students seem to lack confidence about their future in the industry after their internships (Wu & Wu, 2006). Fox (2001) stated that a bad internship experience could quickly turn a young person away from the industry. The crucial point is that internships must offer excellent returns to all parties involved (Knouse, Tanner, Harris, & Elizabeth, 1999). Students who do not have successful internship experiences are less likely to consider the hospitality industry for possible future careers (Ko, 2007). Today's students also feel that high salaries cannot compensate for a lack of job satisfaction, so they need to be not only adequately paid, but also given a sense of self-fulfilment (Edwards, 2010). Interns want to feel that they play a meaningful role in the whole internship process. Eakins (2000) proposed that "the placement should be structured so that it provides tasks which students see as challenging, for which they can take responsibility and which they see as contributing to the organization".

The aim of this paper is to explore students' level of satisfaction with their internship experience, as well as how such an experience influences students' willingness to pursue career in the hospitality industry. Furthermore, the paper looks at which stakeholder – schools, the private sector, or students – has the most influence over students' overall satisfaction. Finally, this study will address how to create a meaningful internship experience from the different stakeholders' perspectives.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Internship Programme Planning

A number of studies have been written on the benefits of internship programmes to students (Fox, 2001; Ko, 2007; Neuman, 1999; Petrillose & Montgomery, 1998). Terms like "window to the real world" or "supervised work experience" or "bridge to the real world" were used to describe the experiential learning curriculum. Most hospitality programmes incorporate internships, and student satisfaction is the most important criterion for evaluating the success of such programmes. Ju, Emenheiser, Clayton, and Reynolds (1998) explored students' perceptions of their internship experiences by looking at eight dimensions: (1) professional skills improvement; (2) leadership development; (3) general knowledge improvement; (4) future career marketability; (5) self-actualisation; (6) relationship with supervisor; (7) structure of the programme; and (8) structure of the academic course. Also, there were two dependent variables for overall satisfaction: (1) students' strengthened resolve through internships to continue working in the hospitality industry; and (2) their overall satisfaction with the important factors contributing to the success of their internship. In addition to students' viewpoints, Busby (2005) indicated that although there are numerous stakeholders in the internship experience, the three key parties involved are students, employers, and higher education institutions. Chang and Hsu (2010) also emphasised that the private sector should be involved in curriculum design in order to strengthen the internship practicum system. Based on previous studies, internship programmes should be evaluated from the perspective of each stakeholder. Beggs, Ross, and Goodwin (2008) studied how practitioners and students view internship programmes differently by looking into four dimensions: the influence of the internship experience, the role of internship providers, the capability of interns, and the criteria for selecting interns. This study has based its framework on the research of Beggs et al. (2008) and identified four dimensions through focus group interviews: internship programme planning and administration, industry involvement and consultation, students' commitment, and overall satisfaction. Based on the above literature, this paper focuses on students' satisfaction with the three main stakeholders involved in an internship programme and how that indicator is related to overall satisfaction. Furthermore, this study investigates how overall satisfaction with an internship programme affects a student's willingness to stay in the hospitality industry.

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