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Prospective student's motivations, perceptions and choice factors of a bachelor's degree in tourism

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the motivations and perceptions that lead prospective students to favor a bachelor's degree in tourism. Given the relative newness of these studies, the aim was also to determine whether these motivations differ from the ones related to choosing other, more consolidated, degrees in the field of social sciences. The results obtained through a survey reveal that tourism students give prominence to job prospects and to their own tastes and abilities and that there are no great differences between students motivations. Using a Logit model, the significance of motivational factors, academic performance, gender, and parents' education were examined as choice determinants.

1. Introduction

Bearing in mind the growing importance that tourism is acquiring all over the world and its driving force towards development in many countries, it is only natural that education in tourism has aroused the interest of the main tourism stakeholders and of researchers. In this context, the perception of tourism and hospitality studies (hereafter TH), their curricular subjects and their career prospects, have been a growing object of study, mainly as far as students' perceptions are concerned; although in some cases, those of other agents such as managers of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and tourism enterprises have been addressed (Chang & Tse, 2015; Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2009; Ring & Dickinger, 2009).

There is a rather generalized view that TH studies are less valued by students and society as a whole than other degree studies both in related knowledge areas (social sciences) and in others that are far removed from their field (experimental sciences, health sciences, etc...) (Airey, Tribe, Benckendorff, & Xiao, 2015). Along these lines, it can be held that tourism as a field of study has been continuously questioned, both in the past and nowadays (Airey and Tribe, 2005; Airey et al., 2015). This undervaluing, which may affect the reputation of these studies, can be found in a wide range of countries and also extends to the career prospects available in the tourism industry (Akis & Öztin, 2007; Richardson, 2010). In the field of tourism higher education, it is frequently argued that its recent implementation is one of the main reasons, although not the only one, for its lower popularity compared to traditional studies such as, for instance, law and medicine. At the end of the day, their development has taken place relatively recently – since the mid 1980's – in most countries (Airey and Tribe, 2005). One consequence of this is that higher education institutions often manifest their concern regarding the difficulties in attracting and retaining the best students in these degree studies, a fact which, in turn, impacts the professional qualifications of jobs in the tourism industry (Airey et al., 2015). This last point is relevant, inasmuch as it is beginning to be widely acknowledged that education, training, skills, and motivations of employees play a key role in the acquisition

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of a competitive advantage in tourism companies (Akis & Öztin, 2007; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Özer, Latif, Sariisik, & Ergün, 2012; Richardson, 2010). In this sense, as Richardson says (2009), the tourism industry throughout the world has come up against the problem of attracting and retaining the most highly qualified employees, often being forced to take on poorly qualified staff to cover their needs, a fact which is corroborated by the study conducted by Aksu and Köksal (2005) on the perceptions of Turkish students towards the tourism industry. Chang and Tse (2015) obtain in their research that a limited number of TH students end up in the tourism sector and that TH jobs offer significantly lower salaries than jobs in others sectors.

Considering that in many countries, and particularly in Spain, bachelor's degrees in tourism have recently reached their consolidation stage after three decades of implementation, this paper aims to study students' perceptions towards these degrees and, in particular, towards the reputation of these degrees and the prestige associated with the career opportunities they provide. Accompanying these perceptions, the motivations that lead students to choose these degrees were also studied, along with the significance they have as choice determinants.

As Kember, Ho, and Hong (2010) point out, students' motivations influence their future dedication and involvement in their studies, which makes it particularly interesting to find out about these at some time prior to their admission to university. Thus, the target population of this study is school-leaving students residing in the island of Mallorca (Spain) who are about to choose their future higher education degrees. Therefore, this is a study of intentions that have not yet been influenced by the experience and real knowledge of university studies, and which are based on prospective students' intrinsic and extrinsic perceptions and motivations. Further, the fact that the target population is confined to the Island of Mallorca, where there is only a single university where most locals study, minimizes the possible influence of university choice on the choice of degree.

For the purpose of comparing the results obtained, the analysis was extended to other bachelor's degrees in the field of social sciences, with a different historical development and at a different stage of consolidation, such as law – with its century long tradition – and business and economics – with a history that has been clearly consolidated for decades. This comparison is particularly interesting in the case of degrees in tourism that belong to a discipline that is continuously under scrutiny (Airey et al., 2015).

The specific aims of this study are:

- (1) To explore the importance of the perceptions and motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, which lead to choosing a bachelor's degree in tourism, and the existence of differences compared to other degrees in social sciences.
- (2) Based on the motivational items, to identify the main underlying factors that affect the choice of degree.
- (3) To examine the influence that motivational factors, academic level, gender, and parents' education have on the decision to choose tourism as opposed to other social science degrees.

In short, this paper tackles the study of the motivations and perceptions towards TH degree programs from two original perspectives that are not found in other research studies. First, the focus is a group of prospective students who have not yet reached university, thus avoiding a possible bias in their assessment of perceptions and motivations that could be more easily found if they were already at university. Second, there is an opportunity to compare between diverse degree programs with different levels of consolidation, which enriches the understanding of choice determinants and enables the existence of differences in motivations and perceptions between a bachelor's degree in tourism and the other degrees considered to be confirmed. In this sense, the proposal of a choice model for a bachelor's degree in tourism is also original.

2. Literature review

2.1. Motivations and perceptions

Various are the papers that deal with the study of motivations when it comes to choosing a university degree in the field of social sciences (Ali & Tinggi, 2013; Lopez-Bonilla et al., 2012; Kim, Markham, & Cangelosi, 2002; Navarro Guzmán and Casero Martínez, 2012; Worthington & Higgs, 2003). In these papers the main motivations are expressed as prestige, job opportunities and working conditions, admission scores, parents and others' external advice, financial gain, interest, and lifestyle. Frequently, this type of research studies are based on the distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic motives studied by Ryan and Deci (2000), as is the case of Kim et al. (2002), López-Bonilla et al. (2012), and Tavares and Ferreira (2012). Intrinsic motives refer to enjoyment, vocation, and students' personal satisfaction; whereas extrinsic ones are those that show recognition which is external to the activity in itself (prestige, social approval, family expectations, remuneration,...).

More specifically, in the field of higher education TH studies, there are, however, very few studies that attempt to explain the motives behind students' preferences. In fact, in Spain there is no study that includes bachelor's degrees in TH in their research. There is, on the other hand, a greater development of research on the choice of school or university, the perception of future professional careers, and the tourism industry in itself (Akis & Öztin, 2007; Aksu and Köksal, 2005; Chuang & Dellman-Jenkins, 2010; Chang & Tse, 2015; Richardson, 2009, 2010). A pioneering research study in the field of motivations behind the choice of a TH degree program was that of O'Mahony, McWilliams, and Whitelaw (2001), who studied the case of Australian students interested in hospitality degree programs and found that career purpose was the most frequent reason among others related to social, cognitive and personal aspects. More recently, Kim, Guo, Wang, and Agrusa (2007) studied the motivations and preferences of students in China, Taiwan and Korea in choosing a bachelor's degree in TH. In their study, a set of motivational items is proposed; these are assessed by undergraduate and graduate students through a survey and refer mainly to personal interest in the degree, to the job opportunities generated, and to certain academic questions. The results reveal significant differences between students' motivations

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