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Tourism and hospitality internships: A prologue to career intentions?

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ABSTRACT

Despite their assumed benefits, negative internship experiences have been reported amongst tourism and hospitality students, which in turn minimise the likelihood of pursuing a career in the industry. This study explores the influence of internship experiences on the career intentions of tourism and hospitality management students. Drawing upon qualitative data, the article highlights the multi-faceted and complex nature of graduates' career decision-making and reveals that an interplay of factors influences the relationship between internship experiences and students' career intentions. Important insights are offered that contribute to the understanding of aspects relevant to internships' efficient design and informed management.

1. Introduction

In an era of socio-economic and political uncertainty and turbulence, whereby the global economic landscape is constantly changing, the importance of graduate employability has been elevated. Universities have been called to address the pressing issue of career preparation by embedding skill-development elements in curricula (Wilton, 2012). In this respect, internships have proven a popular work-integrated learning experience that facilitates the transition of students from higher education to employment and contributes to their career development (Silva et al., 2016). For instance, internships may improve students' perceptions of job fit (Allen, 2011) and enhance graduates' job satisfaction (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010). Defined as "a short-term period of practical work experience wherein students receive training as well as gaining invaluable job experience in a specific field or potential career of their interest" (Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013:34), internships are viewed as a valuable component of the learning cycle due to their numerous benefits. From a pedagogical perspective, internships enable students to gain practical experience (Chang & Chu, 2009), develop skills that would be difficult to acquire in the classroom (Daniels & Brooker, 2014) and utilise networking opportunities that may improve graduates' employment prospects (Alpert, Heaney, & Kuhn, 2009). Additionally, internships have been found to improve the academic performance of students and lead to increased motivation towards study (Crawford & Wang, 2016; Jones, Green, & Higson, 2017). In turn, interns may bring innovative ideas to the participating organisation and allow companies to reduce recruitment and retention costs by exploring the potential in the market (Garcia-Aracil & Velden, 2008; Govender & Taylor, 2015). Internships also impart advantages to educators as links between academic institutions and the industry are strengthened and educators update course content in line with industry needs (Zopiatis, 2007).

The value of internships is particularly noticeable within tourism and hospitality, where the dynamic and multidisciplinary nature of the industry requires that human capital possesses a variety of skills. A highly competitive environment, constant change and the disparate nature of the industry pose as challenges to the recruitment and retention of a skilled labour force and reinforce the need for a diversely trained workforce, with skills that can span across sectors (Kim, 2014; Robinson, Ruhanen, & Breakey, 2015).

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Consequently, internships represent a valuable component in tourism and hospitality education, which targets practical knowledge acquisition (Robinson et al., 2015). Nonetheless, a quick foray into extant literature reveals that negative internship experiences have been reported amongst tourism and hospitality students, which in turn may influence their future career intentions (Siu, Cheung, & Law, 2012). For instance, Wu and Wu (2006) found that hospitality interns expressed a lack of confidence in terms of a future career in the industry. Richardson's (2008) study revealed that nearly 50% of tourism students contemplated leaving the industry after completing their internship whereas Lu and Adler (2009) found that 32% hospitality graduates expressed willingness to exit the industry. Further studies concluded that negative internship experiences minimise the likelihood of graduates working in the tourism industry (Chen & Shen, 2012; Ko, 2008; Koc, Yumusak, Ulukoy, Kilic, & Toptas, 2014; Lee & Chao, 2013; Robinson et al., 2015; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013). Unsurprisingly, concerns have been raised over the efficacy of tourism and hospitality internship programmes and their potential impacts on career development. As Wan, Wong, and Kong (2014) argued, the design and implementation of effective internships is a key determinant to the long-term career commitment and engagement of students. Evidently, investigating the career intentions of tourism and hospitality students following the internship maybe not only inform educators of the potential influences of internship programmes on career choices but also contribute insights into the improvement of internship programme design.

This paper seeks to explore the factors shaping the career intentions of tourism and hospitality students through an examination of their expectations of the internship, their evaluation of the internship experience and, consequently, their career-related decisions. The perceived success of internships is largely based on students' expectations and perceptions of the internship being met (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Waryszak, 1999); hence, examining interns' expectations and perceptions of the internship can shed light on the efficacy of internships in enhancing the career development of students. A qualitative approach is adopted in order to "obtain a richer understanding of the feelings students hold towards the tourism and hospitality industry, as well as ... gaining an understanding of the effect an internship work experience placement may have on career choices and opinion about the industry" (Robinson et al., 2015:4). Indeed, calls for expanding the current research focus to qualitative explorations of the way students determine their career paths have been made (Chen & Shen, 2012). Contrary to previous studies which adopted a hospitality-specific focus in their investigation, this study considers the perceptions of both hospitality and tourism interns. Overall, the paper's potential contribution is believed to be two-fold. First, insights may be generated that will contribute to universities' efforts to improve the planning and implementation of internship programmes, thereby enhancing the employability of their graduates. Second, given that the recruitment and retention of skilled employees is a tenacious concern in the tourism and hospitality industries (Lee & Chao, 2013), findings may advance existing knowledge on the determinants and outcomes of successful internships.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. First, a review of the literature on internship experiences within tourism and hospitality is provided. Then, the methodology guiding this study is explained before findings are presented and discussed. Last, the potential implications to academics and practitioners are drawn together in the conclusion section.

2. Literature review

There is an extensive body of research documenting the value of internships within tourism and hospitality settings. Specifically, researchers posited that internships may improve students' self-confidence (Ko, 2008), enhance labour market value (Kim & Park, 2013), improve adaptability and familiarity with the profession (Robinson et al., 2008), allow knowledge exchange (Ruhanen, Breakey, & Robinson, 2012) and strengthen the management of graduate expectations (Chen & Shen, 2012). Despite the numerous benefits they may offer, extant literature reports an array of challenges facing internships. Specifically, administrative issues have been identified as inhibiting the success of internships including the lack of funding for on-site visits by educators, inadequate training of students at universities, poor payment, little industry support, the lack of mentorship during the internship and an absence of incentives (Yiu & Law, 2012). Likewise, discrepancies between student and industry expectations with regard to the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved, interns' abilities, rewards and student professional growth have been highlighted as key factors contributing to negative internship experiences (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). Core to the success of internships is the perceived fit between student expectations with interns' perceptions of the internship experience (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Waryszak, 1999). Within this context, student satisfaction with internships has emerged as a key determinant in evaluations of the effectiveness of internships.

Overall, student satisfaction emanates from the trade-off between their expectations and perceptions of internship experiences. Expectations refer to what students perceive before the internship experience and perceptions represent how people feel after the experience, with the gap between them indicating one's satisfaction level (Lam & Ching, 2007). Investigations of student satisfaction may detect problems with the internship programme and/or lead to improvements in internship design and implementation. There is an important pool of tourism and hospitality studies dedicated to examinations of student satisfaction with internships. Past studies are informative of the aspects and dimensions of internships which are influential on student satisfaction. For instance, longer internship programmes (Lee, Lu, Jiao, & Yeh, 2006), prior industry experience (Lee, Chen, Hung, & Chen, 2011), autonomy, supervisory support, team spirit and task involvement appear to yield positive student perceptions (Lam & Ching, 2007); thereby, enhancing student satisfaction with the internship. The socialisation potential in an internship was also found to exert a positive influence on student perceptions and consequently satisfaction (Kim & Park, 2013) whereas the influence of the cultural environment on student satisfaction with internships cannot be undermined (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). Indeed, Singh and Dutta (2010) found that the context in which the internship takes place is influential on student satisfaction. Additionally, the supervisor's knowledge, mentality and treatment of the intern (Lam & Ching, 2007) as well as work conditions such as salary level and the existence of social support (Chen, Ku, Shyr, Chen, & Chou, 2009) were identified as influential on interns' satisfaction. Last, personal factors such as

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