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How do hotel and tourism students select internship employers? A segmentation approach

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ABSTRACT

The major objective of this study is to segment the hotel and tourism students into groups based on their perceived importance of the criteria for selecting internship employers, which is grounded in the expectancy theory and job choice framework. Drawing from a self-administered survey of 273 hotel and tourism management college students in Hong Kong, the study used cluster analysis to generate four clusters of students, namely learning enthusiasts, social support seekers, brand seekers, and school followers. Chi-square tests showed that school followers generally do not have internship experience. Implications for educators and internship employers are discussed in the paper.

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1. Introduction

The growth of the global hospitality and tourism industry has resulted in a huge volume of job opportunities (Richardson, 2008). However, the industry has encountered difficulties in attracting and retaining workers (Lam & Ching, 2007), leading to a mismatch between labor supply and demand. The labor shortage is not exclusive to a specific region of the world. A study conducted in Australia shows that over half of the participated hospitality and tourism students intended to find jobs in other industries (Richardson, 2008). An earlier study from Ireland demonstrates a high dropout rate from hospitality and tourism jobs (O’Leary & Deegan, 2005). In Hong Kong, a recent study shows that hospitality students were reluctant to join the industry after graduation (Chang & Tse, 2011). These findings are not surprising, as tourism and hospitality jobs are generally demeaned in society, with people having negative attitudes toward the nature of the work (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Teng, 2008). Thus, even though new graduates may be willing to join the industry, they generally do not exhibit any inclination to stay in it for long (Jiang & Tribe, 2010), which in turn threatens its sustainability.

In this regard, incorporation of an internship program into curricula has been suggested as an effective solution to the problem (Breakey, Robinson, & Beesley, 2009; Fidgeon, 2010; Kwong & Law, 2008; Yiu & Law, 2012). Internship is generally recognized as a bridge between classroom learning and industrial practice (Collins, 2002; D’abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009;

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Jiang & Tribe, 2010). A positive internship experience encourages hospitality and tourism students to join the industry after graduation and promotes job satisfaction and willingness to stay in the industry (Chathoth, Mak, Sim, Jauhari, & Manaktola, 2011; Chuang & Jenkins, 2010; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). Towards this end, there has been a recent upsurge in research aiming to provide recommendations for improving the effectiveness of internship programs in hospitality and tourism education (Zopiatis, 2007). Calls for related research are also growing. Cho (2006) called for research on establishing a framework to guide effective implementation of internship programs. Similarly, Singh and Dutta (2010) urged research in various countries to better identify the gap between internship expectations and experiences.

Most previous research has revolved around students' expectations and perceptions of internship programs (Siu, Cheung, & Law, 2012), particularly in closing the gap between expectations and perceptions in order to derive students' satisfaction with their internship experience (Barron, 2008; Lam & Ching, 2007; Singh & Dutta, 2010). Such work undeniably provides educators with useful insights when planning their internship programs. However, closing the gap provides the incomplete picture of students' internship satisfaction because importance of selection criteria also plays a crucial role in the formation of satisfaction (Patterson, 1993). Research on selection criteria is worthwhile as focusing educators' attention on the factors that students consider most important when selecting an internship employer will help to make their planning more effective.

Another major stream in the internship research provides a priori bounds for research on students' selection. Existing literature shows that perceptions of internship programs differ across students in terms of gender, previous experience, academic major, and so on (Hejmadi, Bullock, Gould, & Lock, 2011; Ju, Emenheiser, Clayton, & Reynolds, 1998; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002). Following this rationale, research on students' selection criteria would be well conducted by segmenting the students based on their perceived importance of the selection criteria and then examining any possible difference among the groups. However, no relevant study thus far has been located in the existing literature.

Although internship research in the field of hospitality and tourism was rich, most of them were conducted in the Western context. Given the difference of cultural values between Westerners and Chinese (Hofstede, 1994), there has been a call for more studies in the Chinese context (Lam & Ching, 2007). Hong Kong has been selected as the location to pursue this study as university students in Hong Kong are primarily Chinese. In addition, hospitality and tourism industries are significant contributors to its economy and relevant educational programs are well-established in the jurisdiction.

Based on the above observations, this study conducted a survey among university students who were looking for an internship as part of a curriculum in a major tourism and hospitality management program in Hong Kong. The objectives of this study are fourfold:

- To identify students' selection criteria when choosing internship employers;
- To examine and compare these criteria in terms of their corresponding importance from the students' perspective;
- To segment the students into groups based on their perceived importance of the criteria; and
- To examine the profile differences between the groups.

2. Literature

Internship has attracted widespread attention from scholars in different disciplines (Hejmadi et al., 2011; Lam & Ching, 2007; Nancy, Marcia, & Robert, 2007; Zhao & Liden, 2011). While different terms have been used in previous studies, such as experiential learning (Dickerson, 2009; Kiser & Partlow, 1999; Lee, 2008), cooperative education (Garavan & Murphy, 2001; Leslie & Richardson, 2000), work-integrated learning (Spowart, 2006), placement (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004; Singh & Dutta, 2010; Una & Ursula, 1995), and practicum (Lin, 2006), all these refer to "structured and career relevant work experiences obtained by students prior to graduation from an academic program" (Taylor, 1988, p. 393). The goal is to enrich student learning by blending classroom learning with practical experience (Jiang & Tribe, 2010), so that students can have a realistic preview of their potential career (Siu et al., 2012), and can develop some workplace-oriented common sense before graduation (Aggett & Busby, 2011). Thus, many academic institutions make internship a compulsory subject for undergraduates, while some even extend it to the postgraduate curriculum (Fidgeon, 2010). Such kind of practice is not unexpected as internship programs provide considerable benefits for various stakeholders including students, employers, and academic institutions (Fong, Lee, Luk, Leung, & Law, 2013; Pang, Wong, & Wong, 2013; Singh & Dutta, 2010).

2.1. Benefits and threats of internship

From students' perspective, a major benefit from internship is to secure a job upon graduation (Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Zopiatis, 2007). Empirical studies also show that graduates with internship experience receive a job offer more quickly than those without (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999; Kwok, Adams, & Price, 2011). Indeed, employers place more emphasis on the communication skills and critical thinking ability of job candidates, all of which can be fostered during internship, than on academic performance alone (Busby, 2003; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Lee, 2008). On the other hand, internship experiences enhance students' confidence (Hejmadi et al., 2011; Ko, 2008). Students with such experience behave more actively in

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