

An Investigation of Student Satisfaction From Hospitality Internship Programs in Greece

Evangelia Marinakou

Royal University for Women, Riffa, Bahrain

Charalampos Giousmpasoglou

Bahrain Polytechnic, Isa Town, Bahrain

The purpose of this paper was to investigate internships in the hospitality sector and identify factors that contribute to student satisfaction from this working and learning experience. One hundred and sixteen students who had completed their internships from both public and private higher education institutions in Greece participated in this study with a survey questionnaire that required participants to rate their internship experience and identify challenges and benefits. The findings suggest that overall students demonstrated a favorable perception towards their internship experience. This research also suggests that working in a professional environment, the learning experience, social interaction with supervisors/staff, and the working conditions are factors that contribute to motivation and student satisfaction from internships. Finally, students' expectations towards the internship experience were focused in learning and working in a professional environment. Long working hours, low or poor pay, and lack of coordination are issues that were raised as challenges and may contribute to low satisfaction. This paper proposes that institutions should provide students with clear information on internships and the challenges of working in the hospitality sector. They should offer programmes that include experiential learning and the practical aspect of the profession. In addition, it is proposed that the internships should be carefully planned and organized, as well as monitored by trained instructors to ensure the appropriateness of the learning experience to the students.

Keywords: hospitality, internships, expectation and perception, Greece

Introduction

Hospitality internship programs have a long tradition in Greece. As early as in the mid-1950s, the first students from ASTER (School of Tourism Professions: Educational Establishment of Higher Education in Rhodes) attended their practical training programs in luxury hotels in Rhodes, and soon these programs spread in popular tourism destinations all over Greece. Most of these internships took place in the state-owned Xenia luxury hotels; after graduation, those students progressed to senior managerial positions in the luxury hospitality sector. This was in effect until the early 1980s where dramatic changes occurred both in the tourism industry and hospitality curricula in the country. The era of mass tourism raised the demand for more qualified staff in hospitality; as a result, the government upgraded with European Community funds the existing vocational

Evangelia Marinakou, head of Business, Faculty of Business and Financial Sciences, Royal University for Women. Email: emarinakou@ruw.edu.bh.

Charalampos Giousmpasoglou, Business School, Bahrain Polytechnic.

training centers to today's technological educational institutes (TEI), equivalent to British polytechnics at that time; the first students from TEI's hospitality and tourism internship programs appeared in the mid-1980s. In the 1990s, the first graduates from private higher education hospitality program participated in internship programs. More recently, since the early 2000s, an influx of students from Eastern European countries and an increasing number of student grievances for exploitation on behalf of the hoteliers had resulted in the introduction of a new legislation on internships in 2010.

Today, six decades after the first internship students appeared as trainees in luxury hotels in Greece, it is more important than ever to ensure that our graduates will not only decide to follow a career in this profession, but also will be able to compete in a turbulent and constantly changing global environment. Internships have the potential to provide multiple benefits for the participant students, such as the development of practical skills that cannot be taught in class environment, i.e., dealing with difficult customers and using specialized equipment (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). On the other hand, a practical training program is a first-class opportunity for students to acquire and exercise managerial competencies by observation and practice (Tse, 2010). Practical training has been found by Marinakou, Peistikou, and Palisidis (2012) to increase student satisfaction and enhance the learning experience.

This study aims at investigating how hospitality students in Greece perceive their experience during their practical training. More specifically, it focuses on the following objectives: (1) to understand the internship experience from the student's perspective; (2) to explore the factors that create student satisfaction and dissatisfaction; and (3) to explore students' expectations from their internships.

Literature Review

Hospitality internship research appears in literature in the late 1980s when the first students from hospitality and tourism university undergraduate programs in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) respectively participated in internship programs; these are described with a variety of names such as placements, supervised work experience (SWE), work integration education, and practicum. From the very beginning, this experiential form of learning was viewed as a golden opportunity for students to integrate and consolidate thinking and action (Davies, 1990). Nevertheless, during the 1990s, a considerable number of discrepancies are highlighted in most of the Anglo-American studies, at a time when the industry suffered from a rather poor image due to the unfavorable working conditions and low pay compared with other sectors (Jenkins, 2001; Leslie & Richardson, 2000; Patterson & George, 2001). Despite the considerable amount of discrepancies reported from the internship stakeholders (students, academic institutions, and employers), there is a unanimous view of internships as a critical factor in the successful completion of hospitality curricula and the smooth transition of students to the real world of work (Lam & Ching, 2007; Richardson, 2009). Collins (2002, p. 93) argued that internships are not supplemental components of hospitality curricula, "but an essential collegiate experience component". Zopiatis (2007) suggested that the success or failure of the various internship programs determines the volume and quality of the hospitality graduates and the future leaders of this sector.

In the new millennia, a number of studies outside the Anglo-American context explored the challenges created from the introduction and implementation of internship programs in different cultural settings, i.e., Australia (Richardson, 2009), Cyprus (Zopiatis, 2007), Greece (Christou, 1999), Hong Kong (Lam & Ching, 2007), Malaysia (Austin, 2002), Taiwan (Chen & Shen, 2012), South Korea (Kim & Park, 2013), the Netherlands (Akomaning, Voogt, & Pieters, 2011), and Turkey (Collins, 2002). Despite the cultural dichotomy that divides

the individualistic western world from the largely collective eastern cultures (van't Klooster, van Wijk, Go, & van Rekom, 2008), a number of themes appear to be common in hospitality internship research. This practically means that hospitality students face common challenges during their practical training in the industry regardless of their background. Thus, hospitality students are mostly concerned with the capitalization of their internships as the main gateway to their first jobs (Collins, 2002), the working conditions (Richardson, 2009), relationship with colleagues and supervisors (Kim & Park, 2013), taking responsibility (Waryszak, 1999), and preparing themselves for the real world of work (Zopiatis, 2007). Although it is normal due to cultural and contextual conditions to expect different views, it is very important to acknowledge that most of the problems created before, during and after the implementation of an internship program, appear to have common roots.

Most of the existing researches indicate that students view internships as a unique opportunity to land on their first jobs, since this valuable qualification will help them enter the job market faster and easier (Charles, 1992; Collins, 2002). Choosing a career in hospitality though appears to be problematic, especially after the completion of an internship program. Some argue that students do not have realistic expectations regarding the work itself in hospitality (Downey & DeVeau, 1988); this fact quite often creates a gap between expectations and the actual perception of the internship experience (Lam & Ching, 2007; Tse, 2010; Waryszak, 1999). As a result, a considerable amount of graduates decide to seek employment in other sectors (Barron, 2008; Jenkins, 2001; Zopiatis, 2007). Students' experiences from their internship participation may be positive or negative depending on a number of moderating factors and their expectations. On the one hand, interns value high the social climate, referring to the interactions with colleagues and supervisors (Kim & Park, 2013; Waryszak, 1999). Additionally, they appreciate working in a professional environment that encourages experiential learning and practicing new skills (Lam & Ching, 2007). The successful completion of an internship program improves the students' self-confidence, encourages them to develop and participate in professional networks, and enhances their understanding of the industry itself (Zopiatis, 2007).

On the other hand, the most common factors that create dissatisfaction and decreased motivation of interns are found to be poor or no pay, poor employee-supervisor relations, poor communication, lack of coordination and disorganized work environment, limited or no delegation, long working hours, and overall a hectic working environment (Collins, 2002; Lam & Ching, 2007). Students assign a great share of responsibility for the problems created during their internship programs to the receiving company; more specifically, there are grievances that small firms and/or family businesses are using students as cheap labor in order to cope with seasonal demands (Miner & Crane, 1995; Taylor, 2004). There are also complaints that full-time staff and managers are not properly trained and prepared in order to enhance and contribute to the overall student experience during the internship (Roney & Öztin, 2007). Hospitality interns also propose that their schools/departments are not very well prepared to design, monitor, and manage these programs (Zopiatis, 2007). It is also argued that educational institutes fail to prepare students adequately in order to cope with the challenges and demands of work in this sector (Lam & Ching, 2007). It seems that the role of the internship coordinator is critical for the success or failure of an internship; the inadequate emphasis and planning in this position for a number of factors such as heavy workloads or lack of industry knowledge may cause a negative impact to an entire internship program (McMahon & Quinn, 1995; Beggs, Ross, & Goodwin, 2008).

Based on the existing research and building on Lam and Ching's (2007) findings, it is argued that measuring and understanding students' perceptions against their expectations on their internship programs is of paramount

importance. A good or bad experience can determine the student's decision to continue his/her career in the hospitality and tourism industry after graduation (Waryszak, 1999). The talent hemorrhage is no longer an option for the hospitality sector, since its continuous growth is not analogous to the new graduates entering this market (Giousmpasoglou, 2012). Given the paucity of research in this area despite the long history of hospitality and tourism education in this country, an exploratory research was conducted in this study in order to investigate the internship experience in the context of the Greek hospitality industry. Further, tourism plays a vital role in the country's economy, thus qualified and trained employees are required to provide a series of diversified quality services. Based on this necessity, internships may provide the basis for the development of professionals and future managers. Building on Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1988) research on customer satisfaction, three constructs were measured: students' expectations, students' perceptions, and their overall satisfaction towards internship programs in the Greek hospitality sector.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was designed based on extensive review of the literature on student satisfaction and expectations from internships. A self-administered questionnaire was created and it was pilot tested with 10 tourism and hospitality students who had just completed a 3-month internship in Greece during the summer 2011. Content validity (Zikmund, 2002) was employed to examine items and provide feedback for greater clarity and alignment with construct dimensions in the study. Although all participants were Greek nationals, the questionnaire was in English, so little or no changes were required and thus a final version was created. The structured self-administered questionnaire included five sections. Section one included questions on demographic information. In section two, students were asked to rate certain aspects of their experience during the internship on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "Always (1)" to "Never (5)". Section three examined the student's employability options and section four measured the overall internship experience with a single-item instrument developed by Van de Ven and Ferry (1980) on a 10-point scale ranging from "Terrible (1)" to "Excellent (10)". Section four measured students' likes, dislikes, and expectations from their internships, in which students were required to choose their most preferred one among a list of factors that emerged from the literature review. In order to identify any other factors that were not included in the previous sections, section five asked the students to comment on their internship experience. These qualitative data were cross tabulated with the findings of the quantitative data.

The questionnaires were distributed to hospitality and tourism students in private (two) and public (two) higher education institutions in Greece that had to undertake an internship as part of their curricula and had already completed that. Although convenience sampling technique was used, the sample was representative of the population, as students from all types of higher educational institutions that offer hospitality and tourism programs within Greece were used. In total, 125 questionnaires were distributed and 116 students returned the questionnaire, with a response rate of 92.8%. The questionnaire was distributed in the classroom by lecturers who agreed to participate in the study and they explained to the students the purpose of the study and the procedures on its completion.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data and determine any statistically significant opinions and factors that contribute to student satisfaction from internships in hotels. The results are discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussions

For testing the reliability of the findings, Cronbach's alpha tests were conducted on all variables and they varied between 1 and 0 assuming that the data are reliable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). For all statistical tests, an alpha level of 0.05 was used. The sample included a balanced participation regarding gender, as male students were 52.6% and female 47.4%. Since the participants were all undergraduate students between 18 and 24 years old, it was decided not to include age in demographics. Participation from private and public institutions was almost equal, with the latter providing slightly more participants (53.4%). Most students (69%) were on the first or second year of study (during their internships). It has to be noticed that only two out of four participant institutions provide a 4-year program, a fact that justifies the low senior (4th year) student participation. More than half of the student internships (51.7%) took place in Rhodes and Crete, two of the most popular tourist destinations in Greece. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants in the study.

Table 1

Profile of the Participants

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	61 (52.6)
Female	55 (47.4)
Institution	
University (private, two)	54 (46.6)
TEI (public)	21 (18.1)
ASTER (public)	41 (35.3)
Hotel location	
Athens	20 (17.24)
Thessaloniki	10 (8.63)
Rhodes, Kos	37 (31.89)
Crete	23 (19.82)
Cyclades	11 (9.48)
Other	15 (12.94)
Year of study	
First	37 (31.9)
Second	43 (37.1)
Third	15 (12.9)
Fourth	21 (18.1)

Note. $N = 116$.

Further, comparisons of means were conducted to investigate the value students place at their internship experience. Table 2 shows details on students' evaluation of their work experience.

The overall mean value was 1.86 out of 5 (with 1 as the best response and 5 the worst), meaning that the overall perception of the respondents towards their experience from their internships was very favorable. More specifically, the data showed that students found that they performed meaningful tasks, as 47.4% agreed with this. They found their experience relevant to their studies (41.4%) and their interests (46.5%). Further, they found the supervision provided (39.7%) and the availability of staff during their internship (63.8%) as always there, in agreement with Collins' (2002) suggestion that most students value the professional relationship with other members of staff. Moreover, they stated that they acquired new knowledge (53.4%), new skills (44.8%), and they learned something new about themselves (41.4%). These findings affirm Chen and Shen (2002) who also

proposed that hospitality students acquire mainly technical skills during their internships. The means showed that the majority of students believed that they learned something new ($\bar{x} = 2.0$) and they acquired new skills ($\bar{x} = 1.97$).

Table 2

Work Experience Evaluation

Variable	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	\bar{x}	S.D.
	Frequency (%)						
Meaningful tasks	55 (47.4)	35 (30.2)	20 (17.2)	6 (5.2)	0	1.80	0.906
Relevance to my studies	48 (41.4)	38 (32.8)	20 (17.2)	8 (6.9)	2 (1.7)	1.95	1.012
Relevance to my interests	54 (46.5)	32 (27.6)	22 (19.0)	8 (6.9)	0	1.86	0.959
Supervision	46 (39.7)	43 (37.1)	14 (12.1)	10 (8.6)	3 (2.5)	1.95	1.016
Availability of staff	74 (63.8)	28 (24.1)	6 (5.2)	8 (6.9)	0	1.55	0.878
New knowledge	62 (53.4)	26 (22.4)	18 (15.5)	6 (5.2)	4 (3.5)	1.83	1.090
New skills	52 (44.8)	32 (27.6)	20 (17.2)	8 (6.9)	4 (3.5)	1.97	1.103
Self-knowledge	48 (41.4)	34 (29.3)	22 (19.0)	10 (8.6)	2 (1.7)	2.0	1.055

Note. $N = 116$.

The authors also conducted multiple response frequencies to identify the students' motivation/demotivation factors and the qualities they value most of their internships. The results are shown in Table 3. It is evident from this dataset that students liked firstly the professional environment at the hotels where their internships took place (50.4%). This study affirms others' findings (Roney & Öztin, 2007) that students value their internship experience in forming perceptions for their future in the industry. The least liked was the flexible schedule (9.7%), mainly due to the fact that work in the hospitality industry requires long hours and there is a lack of flexibility to work especially during the high season when these students did their internships. Dickerson (2009) and Girard (1999) similarly found that low pay and long working hours are less valued by interns. Roney and Öztin (2007, p. 13) affirmed this and stated that "irregular working hours is a well-known negative characteristic of tourism employment". Additionally, students found the work interesting (40.7%) and they believe that they learned a lot (47.8%), however, they did not like very much that they were not paid well (28.1%). Although Riley, Ladkin, and Szivas (2002) proposed that there are occupations in tourism that are well paid, this study proposes that internships are not among these, as students did not like their pay. This view is in agreement with Zopiatis and Constanti (2007), as students are not highly paid during their internships, and they do not approve the existing working conditions. Additionally, students did not like the volume of their work and sometimes they found there was a lack of organization. Moreover, others found the work boring or menial (13.5%), this is due to the fact that students during their internships usually perform routinized tasks, as they are not always given the opportunity to make decisions as according to Lam and Ching (2007, p. 348), "Managers are reluctant to empower decision-making authority to students, as they are afraid of taking the risk of complaints from customers". One responded stated:

I was placed in a position that was not included to the guidelines of my internship. I did learn several things as a "Doorman-Groom", but I didn't have the chance (and I asked for it) to go through different departments of the hotel such as the restaurant, the bar, or perhaps the kitchen. I was interested on the F&B Dept. but didn't have that chance to serve tables, taking orders, or serving wines and beverages. It was a bit disappointing the fact that I was given duties that didn't learn in the first year of my Tourism Academy.

The students did not feel disconnected from co-workers, as this was the least in their order of preferences. Students put as the first choice the learning they get from their internships (58%), and then the professional working environment (53.6%). The findings affirm Collins (2002) who suggested that internship programs provide students with knowledge and skills necessary to pursue a career in the industry. Students equally value being accepted in the teams and making valuable contacts that will help them find a job in the future. Similarly, Zopiatis (2007) suggested that students participate in professional networks. Finally, students put last in their preferences the money they can make and to gain credit for their studies.

Table 3

Students' Motivation/Demotivation Factors and Expectations Frequencies

Motivator	Frequency (%)
Professional environment	50.4
Learned a lot	47.8
Interesting work	40.7
Good supervisor	30.1
Made valuable contacts	27.4
Felt like part of the team	26.5
Made good money	23
Liked co-workers	21.2
Flexible schedule	9.7
Demotivator	Frequency (%)
Not paid well	28.1
Too much work	22.9
Disorganized work environment	20.8
Not enough to do	14.6
Work was boring or menial	13.5
Not enough supervision	12.5
Did not learn anything	10.4
Work was not well defined	10.4
Disconnected from co-workers	8.3
Expectation	Frequency (%)
Learned a lot	58.0
Professional environment	53.6
Felt like part of the team	36.6
Made valuable contacts	36.6
Interesting work	34.8
Good supervisor	28.6
Liked co-workers	20.5
Received a job offer	19.6
Received school credit	14.3
Made good money	10.7

Note. N = 116.

Finally, students evaluated their overall experience. In order to identify whether students' evaluation of their experience influences (independent variable) the overall satisfaction (dependent variable), simple linear regression was performed. There was no statistical significance between the variables. Further, overall satisfaction was grouped into four main categories: bad (1-3), fair (4-6), very good (7-8), and excellent (9-10).

The majority of students evaluated their overall experience with 8 (very good, 62.8%) and 9 (excellent, 36.3%), only one of the participants evaluated the experience as 1 (bad, 0.9%). Evidently, the overall experience was very good. The qualitative question also affirmed this finding, as for example, one of the students stated “That was such a brilliant work experience actually we had the opportunity to learn enough and the team spirit was so open mind and helped me improve my abilities”. Another reply was “My experience of the hotel gave me the footsteps to achieve my expectations to fulfill my career! The hotel environment is the root to accomplish my professional dreams”.

Conclusions and Implications

This study investigated the factors that contribute to student satisfaction from their internships in hospitality. In addition, it explored the moderating factors (motivators/demotivators) as well as the factors students value in their internship experience. The study shows that students overall rate their internship experience as very good. The study proposes that students value considerably the learning experience and the knowledge and skills they acquire. Thus, educational institutions should promote experiential learning and focus their studies on the practical aspect of work in the hospitality industry. Moreover, educational institutions should monitor internships, as the students were not satisfied with the organization and planning of their internships. In many cases, the working conditions were negatively viewed by students. Trained educators should participate in the learning process with evaluation and feedback of the overall learning experience as well as the working and learning environment provided at hotels for internships. As low pay, routinized tasks, the lack of decision-making, and long working hours were among the factors that influence student satisfaction, educators should prepare students on the expectations and the working culture in hospitality organizations. At the same time, they should choose such establishments that offer the best possible working conditions for training students. In addition, students value their participation in professional networks and the social interaction with colleagues at work. This interaction enhances their experiences and their interests regarding work and helps at minimizing the dissatisfaction created by the long working hours and the occasional poor organization of work. Hospitality institutions should inform students of the demands of work in the industry, and other stakeholders involved in the internship should be informed of the importance of creating a learning environment for students that will enhance their perceptions of the industry and urge them to continue their careers in the sector. Although, some dissatisfaction factors were identified, internships play a vital role in students’ learning, experience from the industry, and their decisions to pursue a career in the sector.

Limitations of the study include the sample size and its composition. Only four higher education hospitality institutions are included in the study and only Greek students. A comparison may be conducted between Greek and non-Greek students’ satisfaction in order to identify any other potential factors. Further research could also be conducted to compare students’ satisfaction between private and public educational institutions.

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