

## **The assessment of internship programs. A view point of the undergraduate tourism students from the Transilvania University of Braşov**

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**Abstract:** *Practical education influence the development of a future professional, helps him to understand theoretical concepts, the way in which a company is organized and operates, to identify activities that fit and, finally, to shape future career. In this article are analyzed the attitudes of final year students and master students from the specialization Tourism, Trade and Services within the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration Brasov regarding the content and organization of internship performed within the faculty. The results obtained can help to improve the syllabus at the practical discipline and to adapt this discipline at the students' needs and expectations.*

**Key-words:** *internship, tourism education, carrier*

### **1. Introduction**

The tourism sector has increased rapidly in recent years, both on international level and in our country. The need for skilled labor force has risen accordingly, which has increased pressures on educational systems in the sense of providing tailored training programs. Estimates of the scale of tourism employment vary but suggest that, globally, it is rising in the order of 2 % per annum and will constitute approximately 3.6 % of direct employment and 9.5 % of total employment by 2015 (WTTC, 2015).

Obtaining performance in educating the human resource relies, to a great extent, to the practical training included in the curriculum. Its content, venue, organization and methods of evaluation are key elements to shape future professionals. To earn their degrees, students must complete an internship program in the private sector, working at least 90 h in their second year. Internship placements are either arranged by schools or by the students themselves. The majority of internships consist of entry-level positions.

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The main objective of this paper was to identify the attitudes of the undergraduate students enrolled in the tourism study programs from Transilvania University of Braşov on the internship program they attended during academic preparation.

## 2. Theoretical background

A career is broadly defined as a lifelong process of work-related activities (Hall, 2002), and its development is an ongoing series of stages characterized by unique concerns, themes and tasks (Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk, 2000). The tourism and hospitality industries worldwide have been confronted with the problem of attracting and retaining quality employees, which has led to a shortage of skilled employees to staff the ever-growing number of hospitality businesses (Baum, 2006; Richardson, 2010).

Many students are entering tourism and hospitality programs with no real understanding of the types of work available in the industry and with little idea of the employment conditions in the industry (Barron and Maxwell, 1993). Hospitality students are now more concerned about their careers due to the ongoing challenging labor markets, particularly for youth, found in many countries (Choi, Kwon and Kim, 2013). In this respect, universities provide internships in order to ensure tourism management students an opportunity to experience real working conditions while completing full time academic courses, to help ensure that they will become future successful professionals (Hsu, 2012).

Students and the tourism industry are well aware of the advantage of incorporating practical experiences into tourism and hospitality school curricula (Lam and Ching, 2007). Busby (2002) identified the following aims for students undertaking an internship:

- to experience employment and, where appropriate, accept responsibility for completing tasks and supervising others,
- to obtain insight into management and management methods,
- to gain greater maturity and self-confidence,
- to be involved in the diagnosis and solution of problems.

As Hsu stated (2012) "an internship system is not only an important shortcut for students to adapt to the actual workplace, but also a way for students to test the suitability of the hospitality industry, deeming it integral to curriculum planning". Successful work experiences can positively influence students' intentions of pursuing a career in the hospitality industry (Fazio, 1986). "Undergraduates' perceptions of career paths in the hospitality and tourism industry can be heavily influenced by first impressions formed during their internships, which can either enhance or damage the industry's reputation" (Kim and Park, 2013). Inappropriate design of internship programs, unequal treatment of interns by employers, and wage

discrepancies may cause students to leave the industry after their internship (Roney and Tin, 2007).

Furthermore, "a good supervision mechanism, partnership building, and challenging assignments are also positive factors for students' career development" (Chen and Shen, 2012). Also, efficient internship can be developed by joining educators' and industry operators' efforts, smoothing the student's progress from school to the real world (Marinescu, 2006; Solnet et al., 2009).

### **3. Method of research**

The Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration coordinates eight full time Bachelor's degree study programs (out of which the Economics of Trade, Tourism and Services study program) and nine Master's degree study programs of (out of which the Business Administration in Tourism study program), being the largest faculty of the Transilvania University of Braşov. The two academic programs in the tourism field counted in January 2016, a number of 116 students in their final year, out of which 91 were attending full time and distance learning bachelor program and 25 students the master program.

A quantitative marketing research was conducted among these undergraduate students in order to reveal the level of their satisfaction regarding the knowledge and skills acquired during the academic years, their attitudes towards internship and their intentions on the future career. The questionnaire included 14 questions, and a number of 107 questionnaires were completed, representing the results from 92% of the population studied. In this article are analyzed only the questions related to internship activities developed within academic preparation.

### **4. Results**

The first question highlighted the benefits felt after internship program. The question was semi-closed, with 5 predetermined response options and a free option. Being a multiple choice question, 133 answers were formulated, their assessment being shown in Figure 1.

Most of the advantages identified were linked to acquiring new knowledge, the number of recorded answers being 68 (51,1%). It is relevant the fact that respondents appreciated the knowledge gained after practical training as superior to the theoretical one, as quantity and quality.

A relatively equal number of benefits mentioned by respondents aimed to create friendships (25 answers, 18,8%) and identification of opportunities for finding a job, option chosen by 24 of the students (18,1%). A number of 7 respondents had

financial benefits (5.2%), while 9 answers (6,8%) were free, being recorded opinions according to which students had the opportunity to know what they like and also, the fact that it was an experience considered important for their future career.

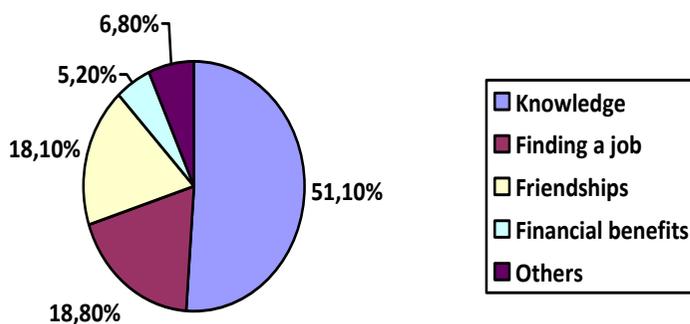


Figure 1. Benefits felt after internship program

There were further analyzed the negative experiences recorded by the students. The question was opened, the opinions being interesting and diverse.

It was shown the fact that, in some companies, the managers and staff had a passive attitude, not being involved and interested in the organization of an efficient program for the trainees, having an indifferent behavior towards the students and showing that the presence of the students tangles them in carrying out daily activities.

On the other hand, neither the students have shown a particular interest for the proper running of this activity. Other shortcomings outlined were linked to the inconsistency and banality of received information, being identified cases when the internship program was to intense and exhausting, the trainees being involved in the companies' present activities, in a work pace similar to the employees, but without payment.

Based on the aspects mentioned above, it was assessed the professional experience acquired during internship. Most of the opinions were satisfactory (33%), while an equal number of answers, namely 21%, was recorded for neutral attitude and the one that shows the unsatisfactory character of the practical activities. Of the total responses, 18% identified a very favorable attitude, while 7% considered that the practical experience was totally unsatisfactory.

At the end of the research, it was analyzed the intention of respondents regarding the immediate future of their career. 19% of the subjects showed the fact that they do not consider to be sufficiently trained for employment, being decided to continue the academic training in universities from other countries. The main reasons that justify this decision are presented in Figure 2.

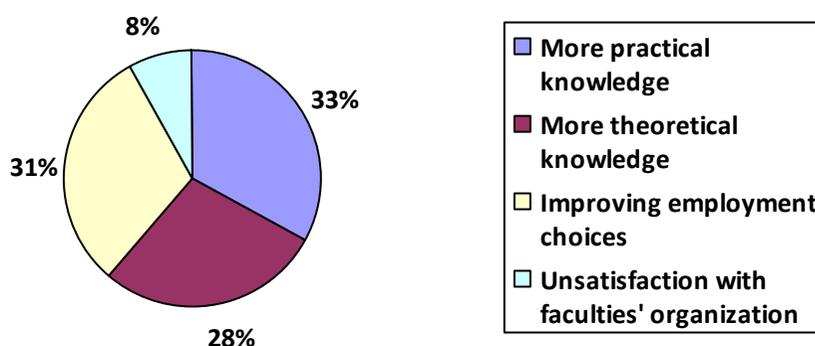


Figure 2. Reasons to continue the academic training in universities from other countries

The highest percentage of answers was recorded for the alternative “I will acquire more practical knowledge” (33%), 31% consider that in this way they will improve the employment chances, 28% considered that in foreign universities they will acquire more theoretical knowledge, while 8% declare to be unsatisfied with the organization of faculties in the economic field from Romania.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of the research reflect the importance granted by the students to practical training organized within the second year of their academic training. The internship is an activity that takes place in a manner appreciated as satisfactory by a high proportion of the interviewed students from the specialization Tourism, Trade and Services within the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration Brasov.

Also, the internship program is considered an important professional experience for the future career, an opportunity to consolidate the students' social and professional networking in the same area of activity, a mean to find a job in

accordance with the professional aspirations, etc. The opportunity to develop practical activities and the contact with the real world contribute to deepening theoretical knowledge, which is considered either unnecessary or insufficient. An important percent out of the respondents highlighted the fact that internship offers much more knowledge as compared with the theoretical training. Also, students are able to identify which field suits them best and, overall, if choosing a career in the tourism industry is what they really want for their professional future.

The research presented within this paper also highlights the negative aspects associated with the internship program. There are companies that are not interested in organizing this activity, thus the internship program becomes useless, or staff appreciates that students' presence is a burden, or, at the opposite side, there are situations when students are considered an unpaid workforce, easily to be exploited. These aspects outline the deficiencies of internship programs, but also the directions of improvement. Some of these directions can be summarized as following: increasing the effective number of hours for the practical training, adapting theoretical contents to specific economic activities, improving the syllabus of the Internship discipline, and also a managerial improvement of the overall practical training. It is well known that "quality management is an organizational strategy based on the idea that higher performance is achieved only by involving the perseverance of the entire organization in continuous improvement processes" (Neacşu, 2015).

Developing connections with the economic environment, finding partners eager to get effectively involved in internship programs, supporting them in selecting the most suitable students according to the company's specificity are also relevant elements to improve the practical training. The current student is the future proficient employee and the companies can be actively involved in its training (Madar and Neacşu, 2014). New approaches and innovation "can help companies to survive on the market and can offer the advantage in a highly competitive environment" (Epuran, 2015).

From the companies' point of view, dedicated and well trained employees consolidate its position within the global market (Madar, 2014). From the universities' point of view successful high skilled undergraduates represent one of the most important "business cards". As Boşcor stated (2015) universities should adapt to the new competitive landscape and should use new strategies in the field of human resources, partnerships with companies and other universities, quality being the basis of sustaining competitive advantage (Bărbulescu, 2015; Brătucu and Boşcor, 2008).

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