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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

gender, personality and nationality seem to regulate student satisfaction (Aitchison, 2003; Chen & Shen, 2012; Robbins & Judge, 2007) and may partly explain the inconsistency in the results produced by pertinent investigations.

Dissatisfaction with internships may equally arise as a result of high student expectations. Dickerson (2009) argued that hospitality and tourism students hold generally high expectations of working in the industry, with their actual satisfaction not corresponding to initial expectations. In this regard, understanding how student expectations are formed is important. Evidence showed that student expectations are largely shaped by the perceptions held prior to the internship, which are influenced by an array of factors including: academic theorising, information sources, past industry experience, the level of training provided at university and the degree of work readiness of the student (Chen et al., 2009; Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Singh & Dutta, 2010; Zopiatis, 2007). However, the most cited determinant of student expectations is study motives. Several studies have looked into the motives for studying tourism and hospitality degrees. The most predominant motivation factors identified within the literature are interest in tourism, parental influences, cultural enrichment and the ability to travel as well as the assumption that a degree in an industry with low levels of graduates will guarantee a 'quick way to the top' (Chak-keung Wong & Jing Liu, 2010; Kim & Park, 2013; Wan & Kong, 2011). Evidently, there are several factors that shape student expectations and perceptions of internships within tourism and hospitality. If expectations are not consistent with student perceptions of internships, dissatisfaction arises which in turn may influence the career-related decisions of tourism and hospitality tourism students.

Several studies have been performed on the impact of student satisfaction with internship programmes on the career development of tourism and hospitality students. Previous studies confirm the influence of the perceived quality of and satisfaction with the internship programme on students' career decision-making (Chen & Shen, 2012). For example, it was found that student satisfaction with the training received during the internship reinforces career progression (Ko, 2008). Overall, researchers concluded that negative internship experiences lead to decisions to exit the tourism and hospitality industry and/or pursue another career path (Chen & Shen, 2012; Koc et al., 2014; Lu & Adler, 2009; Richardson, 2008). In particular, job burnout during the internship was found to negatively impact the intention to work in the industry (Richardson, 2008). On the other hand, Koc et al. (2014) argued that negative internship experiences lead to students opting to work in other sectors of the tourism industry than originally intended rather than to drop out. This finding is in agreement with Robinson et al.'s (2015) study, which revealed that many interns expressed interest to work in tourism rather than hospitality, indicating the complexity of graduates' career decision-making process contrary to the widespread belief that economic rationalism is a career-decision making motive (Walmsley, Thomas, & Jameson, 2012).

Regardless, internships have a profound effect on the career development of students, primarily their intentions to continue working within tourism and hospitality. Considering the need to reduce the high employee turnover characterising the tourism and hospitality industries (Chen & Shen, 2012; Yang et al., 2012) and the requirement for a diversely trained workforce with a variety of skills and competences (Kim, 2014), investigations of the influence of internship experiences on the career decision-making of tourism and hospitality students are of value. Knowledge on student expectations and perceptions of internships and enhanced understanding of their career intentions, following the completion of the internship programme, may improve the design and implementation of internships and alleviate the challenges facing internships within tourism and hospitality. By extent, the career aspirations of tourism and hospitality students may be strengthened, leading to a more productive future labour force.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore the influence of internship experiences on the career intentions of interns. In doing so, students' pre-internship expectations and post-internship perceptions were evaluated, compared and contrasted. A qualitative research framework was adopted to collect and analyse the empirical data. The rationale for the research approach was two-fold. First, qualitative research was deemed appropriate given the purpose of the study as it allows the in-depth exploration of factors influencing the career-related decisions of tourism and hospitality students. Second, the majority of past studies looking into the effects of internships on the career choices of students adopted a quantitative approach. Hence, a qualitative study may offer insights on the interplay of factors shaping the internship experience and, in turn, influencing students' career-related decisions. Given that previous studies adopted a hospitality-specific focus in their investigation, this study expands the research focus to consider the perceptions of both hospitality and tourism interns.

To this end, in-depth interviews were performed with students who pursued either an undergraduate hospitality management or a tourism management degree in Cyprus. The informants were purposively selected. In qualitative sampling, neither statistical representation nor scale are key considerations (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). Precision and rigour of the qualitative research sample is defined by its ability to represent salient characteristics (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). The rationale of purposive sampling rests on the fact that the researchers, based on their *a-priori* theoretical understanding of the topic, assume that certain individuals may have important perspectives on the phenomenon in question (Robinson, 2014). Thus, sample selection considered the backgrounds, nationality and gender of the informants to ensure that enough diversity is included (Ritchie et al., 2014) within the sample. Specifically, all of the students were in their third year of study with a final year remaining before graduation whereas care was undertaken to ensure an adequate number of female and male students as well as home and international students were included in the sample. Age was not considered in the sampling process, nonetheless, all of the students were under 25. Table 1 shows the profile of informants.

Data saturation was reached after 30 interviews. As can be seen in Table 1, 15 students were home students and 15 were international students from several countries (e.g. Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Nepal, Bangladesh and Nigeria). Out of the 15 home students who agreed to participate in the study, 8 were male and 7 were female. Conversely, out of the 15 international students taking part in the research, 8 were female and 7 were male. All of the students included in the sample had to

Table 1
Profile of respondents.

Nationality	Home				International			
	Female		Male		Female		Male	
Gender	7		8		8		7	
Degree pathway	H	T	H	T	H	T	H	T
	2	5	5	3	6	2	5	2

complete an internship as part of their degree, whether this was paid or unpaid. In the case of hospitality students, it was noticed that paid internships were offered unlike the majority of tourism management students who had to secure an unpaid internship. This is due to the attempts of the Cyprus government to provide financial incentives with regard to employment in the hospitality sector. Students were enrolled on a full-time study basis, with 75% enrolled at private institutions and 25% at a public institution in Cyprus. It must be noted that the minimum required number of hours for the internship varied slightly among the educational institutions; nonetheless, a minimum of 12 weeks of internship duration was used as an average in the sample selection. Although shorter internships exist, a longer internship was considered more effective in allowing adequate interaction with the industry as well as giving time to participating interns to reflect on their internship experience.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher face-to-face and on a one-to-one basis. The interviews, which lasted approximately 45 min each were conducted at the university in which students studied or a preferred meeting point (i.e. cafeteria). The interviews were conducted in two phases. First, students' pre-internship expectations were investigated from January to March 2016 in order to examine the way temporal evolution regulates behavioural outcomes. Indeed, psychological theory suggests that memory and recollection of past events weakens after a certain amount of time has passed from the occurrence of an event, as the human mind stores new memories which may lead to an older memory being extinguished or altered when the subject tries to explain it (Inda, Muravieva, & Alberini, 2011). Then, between September and October 2016 the students were asked to reflect on their internship experience and explain their career intentions following the programme's completion. The questions asked were framed according to the research objectives. Each interviewee was further probed if necessary and notes were taken before, during and after the interviews to capture verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interviews

Data were thematically analysed, whereby emerging topics were grouped into interrelated themes, following an open coding scheme. Specifically, transcripts and notes from the interviews were read several times in order to identify key themes. Additionally, blocks of verbatim text were copied, re-organised and cross-referenced to allow the identification of thematic categories as emerging from the discussion. Sub-categories also emerged, allowing for greater consistency in structure and elaboration on key issues, which consequently encourage evidence-based understanding (Hennik, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Overall, findings are presented sequentially in accordance to the objectives of the research which focused on the examination of students' expectations of the internship, interns' perceptions of the internship programme and, consequently, their career-related decisions following the completion of the internship. As such, a better understanding is gained with regard to the determinants, the influencing factors and career-related outcomes of internships within tourism and hospitality.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Students' expectations of the internship

In the first phase of the data collection process, students' expectations of the internship were examined in accordance to the research objectives. As informed by the literature, the factors determining the formation of students' expectations were also sought. Prior research identifies study motives as a key determinant of internship expectations. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the industry, one would expect that varying motives would be expressed across the two programme pathways. Equally, the existing gender bias characterising tourism and hospitality education was expected to unveil diverse study motives. Nonetheless, neither gender nor degree pathway selection appeared to influence informants' study motives. Rather, in accordance to Aitchison's (2003) conclusion, nationality emerged as an influencing factor with international students' arguments providing support to the widespread belief that employment prospects are the main motive for studying tourism and hospitality.

"A degree in hospitality management in my country means that I can get a good job as the tourism industry there is flourishing. It is a booming business but there are not a lot of people with degrees in the Asian tourism industry ..." said one student.

Indeed, informants from Asian countries agreed that a tourism and/or hospitality management degree would improve their employment prospects. Contrary, nearly all of the students from Eastern Europe regarded a tourism and/or hospitality management degree as a 'passport' to the European labour market. Interestingly, half of the Eastern European students stated that they possess undergraduate degrees in other disciplines but claimed that they opted for a second degree in tourism or hospitality management in an attempt to improve their emigration prospects into Western Europe. As one student commented:

"I already have an undergraduate and a postgraduate degree in translation. But I couldn't find work in my country so I decided to study tourism as together with my language skills it would help me to find a job in the UK or Germany"

Home students expressed different reasons for studying tourism and hospitality management, with nearly all who studied in a public university (50% of home students) stating that their study choice was an unconscious decision and a result of their university entry exam grade. An exception were two students, who made an informed decision to study tourism and/or hospitality management due to their parents' business background. Similarly, three home students studying in a private university argued that the main driver of their study choice was their parents' encouragement to study tourism and/or hospitality management. Hence, the study concurs with previous findings of parental influence on career choice (Chak-keung Wong & Jing Liu, 2010). Interestingly, the 10 home students studying in private universities in Cyprus stated that although previously they would never have contemplated studying tourism and hospitality, following the 2013 financial crisis that took place in Cyprus, a tourism and hospitality degree seemed more appealing with regard to employability opportunities. Indeed, tourism is the backbone to Cyprus' economy and the only sector of the island's economy that has been expanding steadily despite economic challenges.

With employability acting as the main motive for their study choice, the strengthening of students' employability prospects was identified as the main expectation tourism and hospitality management students had from the internship. The majority of students stated that working in a well-known company in the industry would improve their resume and help them make important contacts that would enhance their employment opportunities. As an international student posited:

"I expect to gain a lot from the internship. First, I will gain the practical knowledge that my lecturers cannot teach me at university and second, I expect to get to know important people working in the industry who might hire me when I graduate".

A predominant comment made by both home and international students was the expectation of knowledge enhancement and skill acquisition gained from the internship. In particular, informants expressed a concern over the lack of vocational knowledge they receive at university and view the internship as the tool to gain required skills. The comment below is indicative of the perceived contribution of internships on employment prospects.

"We need the internship as without it we are not employable. When we will go to an interview the employer will ask us if we have any experience, as experience is an important aspect in this industry. If we have not done the internship and we don't have any experience, companies will not hire us!"

Although, in general, students highlighted the expected value of the internship in terms of skill development and employability prospects, four home students expressed cautiousness over the assumed benefits of internships. As one informant put it:

"I heard many negative things from students who completed their internship last year so I don't know what to expect ... lecturers who also warned us not to have high expectations with regard to what we will be doing and what we will gain at the end".

Negative word-of-mouth has been identified in past studies (Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Singh & Dutta, 2010) as an influencer on students' expectations of the internship. Interestingly, two home students highlighted that the compulsory nature of the internship was restricting their expectations. Their argument confirms Klein and Weiss (2011) conclusion that mandatory internships create negative internship emotions and is based on the tenet that other work commitments limit interns' ability to commit to the internship. Indeed, interns' level of commitment and engagement with the internship was found to impact the experience (Chen & Shen, 2012). Additionally, students from non-EU countries highlighted the financial benefit the internship offers, stating that due to their international student visa they are not allowed to work under other circumstances in a European country like Cyprus. For these students, the internship not only provides a learning environment but also alleviates, at least temporarily, potential financial challenges.

4.2. Internship experience

The second phase of the interviews aimed at evaluating students' perceptions following completion of the internship programme and uncovered some alarming outcomes, as only two students expressed satisfaction with the internship. These students acknowledged the challenging nature of the internship but expressed positive perceptions and higher confidence following its completion; thus, supporting past studies on the benefits of internships (Ko, 2008).

"I learned so much from the internship ... after completing the internship I feel more confident to get back to the classroom as now I have practical knowledge to share and examples to draw from" said one student.

Similarly, another student argued that the internship experience exceeded her expectations and offered employment opportunities at the restaurant chain where she worked as an intern. As discussion progressed, it became evident that the two satisfied interns had worked in international companies (a well-known hotel chain and a reputable restaurant chain) whose internship programme was rigidly structured.

"They (the company) were so organised ... it made an impression to me that from the first day they gave me an orientation, a booklet and hard-core training ... even though I worked mainly at the reception, the manager made sure I spent time in all of the departments", commented one informant indicating that organisation culture influences satisfaction with internships.

Nonetheless, the majority of students (both local and international) expressed dissatisfaction over their internship experience due to challenges inherent to the internship itself as well as industry factors. The following comment is indicative of the argument supported by most Asian students, which highlights the presence of racial discrimination in the industry.

"I spent an entire summer at the hotel and was never allowed outside of the kitchen ... other fellow classmates who are local or from

European countries were placed at the reception or in waitressing positions, but this was not the case for any of the Asian students ... I confronted the maître about this one day and she said the customers prefer not to be served by dark-skinned employees! I did not expect this from a five-star hotel”.

Similar concerns were echoed by another Asian student who argued that despite his numerous requests for an improved mentorship by his supervisor, his attempts came to no avail. The following comment is reflective of a problematic condition in the Cyprus tourism industry, where an influx of foreign cheap workers exists as a result of mass tourism development.

“I repeatedly asked the supervisor to show me things, but he would not and always came up with excuses ... one day I overheard him talking to a colleague of his ... he said he will not teach foreign interns how to do his job as the company would eventually fire him and recruit them for a lower salary ...”

All of the Asian students worked in the hospitality sector and although Zopiatis and Constanti (2007) identified the cultural environment and industry sector as influential on internship experiences, it cannot be deduced that the specific sector is at fault for the discrimination the interns experienced. Rather, findings are indicative of previous studies' conclusions that the supervisor's mentality and treatment of the intern influence of the internship experience (Lam & Ching, 2007; Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). Racial discrimination was not reported by other ethnic groups. Contrary, students from Eastern Europe argued that they secured internships relatively easily due to their ability to speak Russian, which is considered a pre-requisite in many organisations within the Cyprus tourism and hospitality sectors. However, as the comment below shows, male informants faced another form of discrimination.

“I started working at the reception but after a few days the manager moved me to the restaurant as a waiter ... he replaced me with a female student, also from Russia. I asked him if I had done something wrong and he simply said that customers prefer to be greeted by a female”.

With regard to gender discrimination, similar arguments were put forward by home students. Specifically, it was repeatedly mentioned by female home students that during the internship they were given different tasks than their male counterparts. Consequently, the students expressed concerns over the perception in the Cyprus industry regarding the management ability of females. Interestingly, this was an issue that was more common among hospitality management students rather than tourism management students. The internship experience of a female home student, as explained below, is of concern.

“I realised during my internship that I will never become a manager of a hotel. All of the managers in the hotel were men ... they gave me and other female interns simple tasks like making beds ... it is not fair because none of the male interns had to complete such tasks, they worked in other posts. How am I supposed to gain practical knowledge and apply what I learned at university by making beds every day?”

Indeed, the type of tasks performed during the internship was a factor of concern for both home and international students regardless of degree pathway. Nearly all of the informants claimed that the tasks performed during the internship were operational and lacked management orientation. Ko (2008) acknowledged inappropriate training and mentorship as potential deterrents of positive intern perceptions and the following comments are indicative of students' frustration.

“My degree is hospitality management, I did not expect to wash dishes or to make beds throughout my internship ... if I am performing such tasks every day, how am I supposed to learn how to manage a hotel?”

“It is clear that we were hired by the companies to do the donkey work ... the tourism businesses are seasonal, they want cheap labour and they see interns as a cost-efficient opportunity to fill in the gap ... that's why the supervisors don't train us properly”.

Apart from the lack of appropriate training which hinders the achievement of the internship's full potential, informants identified the low salary received as indicative of the exploitative nature of the industry. As it was reported, full-time employees who perform the same tasks as the interns receive higher salaries. Such findings are affirmative of previous studies identifying low salary as a cause for intern dissatisfaction (Chen et al., 2009). Interestingly, the challenges of the internship led to one home student abandoning the programme mid-way, and opting to cease his studies, claiming that the internship made him realise that he did not aspire to work in the industry. Such radical decisions were not expressed by the rest of the informants; nevertheless, the internship did appear to have an impact on students' career-related decisions albeit not in a positive way.

4.3. Career-related decisions

Overall, the career intentions of home students differed from those of international students whereas differences were noted according to the gender of informants too. Specifically, three home female interns and one home male intern studying hospitality management decided against working in the hospitality sector of the industry. The interns attributed their decision to the heavy working schedule that comes with the job as well as the pressure related to the nature of the job, which demands courtesy, a service-oriented approach and politeness at all times. Rather, the informants expressed willingness to work in another sector of the industry; thus, concurring with past findings (Koc et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2015).

“It is a difficult industry to work in [the hotel sector] ... the internship was a compulsory programme I had to do to get my degree but I cannot voluntarily choose this as a career ... but I can't throw away four years of study ... the best thing would be to get my degree and see if I can work in the travel sector instead” said one hospitality management student.

Other hospitality management students agreed that switching sectors is more reassuring than exiting the industry altogether, with

the flexible working hours and the ‘office’ type of job involved being identified as appealing factors. Nonetheless, four female and three male home students stated they decided against working in the industry due to dissatisfaction with the internship. “I am realistic and I know that I will never become manager in this man-dominated industry ... but I studied management and I want to pursue a career in management” said one female home student. Conversely, several home students argued they would possibly follow a more business-oriented route and build on existing knowledge by pursuing a postgraduate degree in human relations management or marketing. The rationale behind their decision was that a more general postgraduate degree in management would open up alternative employment options. Such a decision was made regardless of their initial study motive and was considered as a corrective career measure. Likewise, international students stated that they intended to work in the industry and acknowledged the challenges present in the industry as pertinent to the Cyprus context. In particular, the seasonal nature of the tourism product, the presence of a patriarchal mentality in the Cyprus society and the small labour market were identified as key problems. The comment below reflects foreign students’ thoughts.

“There are opportunities in other countries where there are bigger companies, more choices in terms of which sector to work in ... the mentality abroad is different as hospitality and service-based occupations are valued ... not like here (Cyprus) where the hotels dominate the market, but with half of the hotels on the island closing during the winter employment opportunities and career progression are minimal”.

5. Conclusions

This study attempted to explore the influence of internships on the career intentions of tourism and hospitality management students by examining their expectations prior to the internship and their perceptions of the internship experience following its completion. Drawing from qualitative data, the study contributes important insights that advance understanding on the aspects pertaining to the efficient design and informed management of internship programmes. Study findings encapsulate the multi-faceted, complex nature of the career-related decision-making process of graduates and reveals that an interplay of factors influence the relationship between internships and career intentions. First, the study identifies individual factors such as study motives, information sources and commitment level as well as factors related to the organisation in which the internship takes place (e.g. organisational culture, management mentality, salary and efficacy of training) as proximal to the internship experience. While individual factors are important in shaping student expectations of the internship, their interaction with organisational factors impacts students’ post-internship perceptions. Second, findings highlight contextual dynamics pertaining to the industry (e.g. the stability of the economy, development stage) as regulating the conditions of the internship. Third, the study emphasises the mediating role of the socio-demographic factors of gender and nationality of interns on their career aspirations. Derived from the findings and serving as a potential methodological framework, a distal-proximal mediation model (Fig. 1) is developed, illustrating the relationship between the: (i) individual and organisational factors that are regarded as proximal influencers on interns’ experience, (ii) conditioning factors pertaining to the distal, contextual environment which regulate the experience and (iii) socio-demographic factors of interns which serve as mediators to the internship experience.

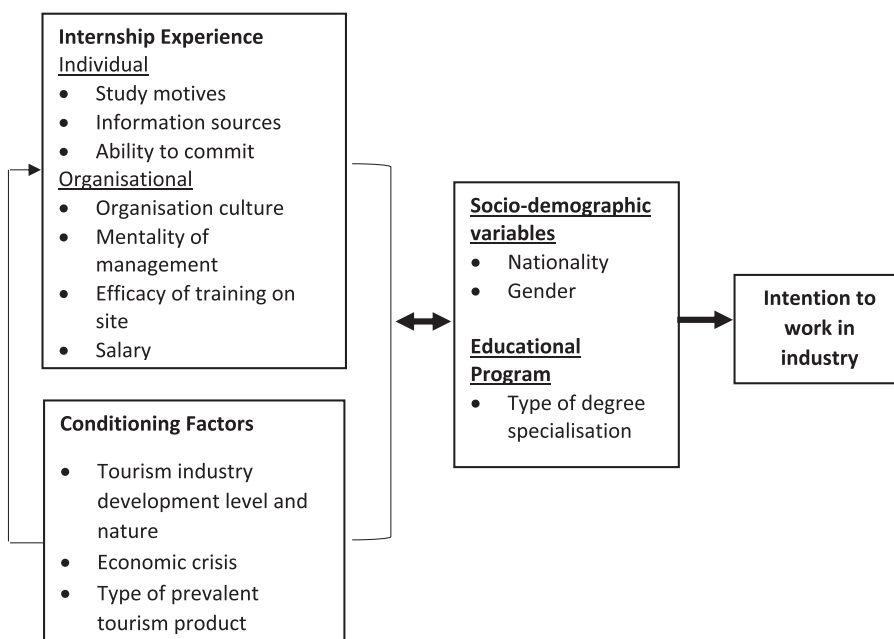


Fig. 1. Antecedents of career intentions. Source: Author.

Overall, important implications arise from this study. By highlighting the influential role internships play on students' early career staged, the study cautions that care is required in the design of internship programmes as the specificities of the industry in question need to be considered. It is likely that future discourse on tourism education will be preoccupied with the effect of industry dynamics and evolve in parallel to a rapidly changing environment. Further research is required to examine the impact of the perplexed nature of internship experiences and their employment outcomes on the pattern of the labour force within the industry. Additionally, researchers are invited to consider employment outcomes by comparing and contrasting internships taking place in various types of organisations and industry sectors. Moreover, the study supports Crawford and Wang's (2016) argument that internships impact home and international students differently and proposes that intercultural dimensions are incorporated in the curriculum. Intercultural internship programmes may contribute to higher education's potential for a collective transformation of the society. Given the migration problem reported in Western Europe (Farmaki & Christou, 2018), further research is required to illuminate understanding of intercultural curriculum aspects. Likewise, study findings highlight the need for curricula in general and internships in particular to address issues of gender bias by considering the structures and practices that contribute to the development of gender inequalities. Knowledge derived from research of gender-based internship experiences, particularly in industries where dispositions of gendered habitus are noticed, can contribute to the elimination of gender segregation within and beyond the university sphere.

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