

PERCEPTION ON A CAREER IN TOURISM: THE CASE OF BUSINESS AND TOURISM STUDENTS

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Abstract

It is well known that tourism is a labor intensive industry. Due to the specifics of the activity, most of the jobs available in tourism are addressed to young people at the beginning of their career. For these reasons, it is very important to know their perception on this field of activity and on a future career in tourism considering the impact of specialized university studies and the skills required by the industry. By using a structured questionnaire, a survey was conducted for two consecutive years. The respondents were second-year students enrolled at the Faculty of Business and Tourism from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES). Having a 70.04% response rate from sophomore students, the research shows that the respondents are not very eager to work in the tourism industry. For those who want to develop a career in tourism, travel agencies and hotels are the first options. Main motives for not choosing a career in tourism are: personal interest for another domain, lower salary at entry-level, and family opinion about the industry. For the students involved in the study, the strongest characteristics of a career in tourism is the working environment defined as challenging and interesting and the benefits of constant learning and development. The present paper shows relevant directions for human resource managers in the industry, as students and fresh graduates are the main options for the positions at the base of the organizational chart.

Keywords

education, tourism, career, skills, student perception, satisfaction

JEL Classification

A22, I23, J81, L83

Introduction

Several studies (Freeland, 2000; Brien, 2004; Baum, 2006) have identified a series of characteristics for Hospitality and Tourism Industry (HT) jobs: increased levels of staff

turnover, low skilled jobs, high levels of female workers, working in shifts, poor utilization of students labor, part-time jobs. A cross-national study (Kim et. al, 2016) covering students living in three Asian countries (Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong) shows that entry level positions, working conditions and welfare associated to these jobs are a barrier in selecting to work in the HT industry. As reasons for choosing a career in the HT industry, the first ones would be: personal interest, opportunities and job environment. For reasons not to choose a career this industry the study revealed: the unstable job environment, poor job opportunities and low personal interest. Moreover, Brown et al. (2015) consider that the most important aspect for choosing a career in the HT industry for the employees belonging to Generation Y is the possibility to work with people from all over the world.

Another study (Richardson and Thomas, 2012) shows that students in the U.S. mark as very important the following factors for their future career: enjoyable job (81.4%), working environment (67.8%), job security (63.2%), promotion prospects (63.2%) and level of earnings over entire career (61.6%). The same study also shows that there is a gap between students' expectations and their perceptions about the HT industry, as they generally do not believe that the desired factors can be found in the jobs offered by the HT industry. Similar results were recorded for Australian students (Richardson, 2009), where undergraduate students who were not studying tourism believe that the HT industry does not provide the attributes they consider important for a future career.

In the Business and Tourism Faculty (BT) there is no clear major, at undergraduate level, for studies in hospitality and tourism (HT). The field of studies comprises both tourism and business courses. A clear choice can be made at master's studies, where students can select from two specialized tourism programs. When talking about majors at undergraduate level, domains like experimental sciences and health sciences are more valued than social sciences. In this field, HT studies are less valued by students and society than other related areas of knowledge (Airey et al., 2015).

In terms of motivations for choosing a university degree in social sciences, several studies (Guzmán and Martínez, 2012; López-Bonilla et al., 2012; Ali and Tinggi, 2013) present similar results: prestige, family and friends' advice, personal interest, lifestyle, job opportunities and working environment, admission scores. In their paper, Juaneda et al. (2012) show that motivations related to job prospects are on the first place followed by personal skills and interest in the degree; third place is occupied by reputation of the degree and job prestige. Their paper reveals that women have a higher preference for HT studies, academic performance decreases the preferences for HT studies and parents' education is not a decisive factor in the students' choice process. For Asia, a study developed by Lu and Adler (2009) reveals the undergraduate students' preferences for a future career in several fields of the hospitality industry. The hotel sector was the most interesting one (54.4%), followed by travel agencies (22.7%), conventions/events (11.3%) and tourism attractions (5.8%). Food and beverage and tourism education account for 3.2% and 2.6%.

The present paper focuses on the factors that students believe to be important in order to choose a major in business and tourism, their satisfaction after 2 years of college and plans for a future master degree. It also takes into consideration their willingness to follow a career in the HT industry, the abilities required and the degree of correlation with the curricula. Their perception on HT jobs is very important as a first step for a career in this field. Understanding students' motivations and perceptions is relevant for several stakeholders: the industry (as nowadays students may be their future employees), managers (it could help them to attract skilled staff and reduce staff turnover), universities (attracting high quality students), future and current students (to reduce cognitive dissonance related to HT jobs and industry).

Methodology

The main aim of the research was to identify students' perception on the usefulness of their future college degree for their professional life, as well as their perception on the characteristics of a career in the tourism industry, together with the impact of education in setting the ground for such a career. As a result, the specific objectives of the study were: **O1**: to identify students' level of satisfaction with the faculty they are attending and the reasons for applying to the faculty; **O2**: to determine students' perception on the importance and impact of a bachelor degree in developing a career in the tourism industry; **O3**: to identify students' willingness of developing a career in the tourism industry; **O4**: to determine students' perception on the characteristics of working in the tourism industry. This being said, the authors considered suitable to conduct an exploratory research (a survey based on a structured questionnaire) among sophomore students of the Faculty of Business and Tourism (the Bucharest University of Economic Studies), during two consecutive academic years: 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. The research was developed at the end of each academic year, via an online questionnaire posted on the *isondaje.ro* platform, targeting all second-year students enrolled at the faculty. The research instrument was designed with 14 closed questions (structured questions, with a total of 42 items to be answered) and 2 identification items (aimed at establishing the respondent's sex and study group they belong to). Out of the 741 students enrolled in the sophomore year at the Faculty of Business and Tourism for the two academic years taken into account, 519 completed the questionnaire, resulting in a 70.04% response rate. Although the sample cannot be considered representative for all the students enrolled in an economic college, the results offer a valuable insight into the undergraduates' perception on education and a career in tourism, based on a study conducted in the most important economic higher education institution in Romania.

Results and discussion

After centralizing all responses, interesting results have been highlighted, as presented in the following section. Out of the 519 interviewed students, 72.6% were female and 27.4% were male. First of all, addressing **the first objective of the research**, regarding the reason why students have chosen to study at the Faculty of Business and Tourism, most of them – 48.4% stated that they considered this program will offer them the information required for a successful career, while 18.9% mentioned the faculty was recommended to them by an alumni, 11% stated that graduating this college would enable them to easily find a job. Some students (6.4%) stated that they have chosen the college to simply earn a diploma, 3.9% of the respondents considered that graduating from this faculty would offer them a salary increase, 2.5% of the interviewed students have chosen this faculty at their parents' insistence, while the remaining 9.1% had different motives. It is worth mentioning that for 42.4% of the respondents, none of their parents have a college degree, while for a quarter (25.6%) only one of the parents is highly educated, and only for a third (32.2%) both parents have at least a college degree.

These being said, after studying for two years at the Faculty of Business and Tourism, the respondents are satisfied with the academic decision they have taken (average score of 3.86 on a scale of 1-5, 1 being "very dissatisfied" and 5 – "very satisfied"), as 75.9% of them declared to be (very) happy with their choice, only 3.9% stating to be (very) dissatisfied. These results are confirmed and strengthened by the fact that if they were to apply again for college, 60.1% of the interviewed students would still choose The Bucharest University of Economic Studies – the Faculty of Business and Tourism, while 17.5% would apply for the same university, but on a different faculty. An interesting result comes from the fact that 20.4% of the respondents would choose another university, probably because the major does not suit their abilities and passion, while 1.9% (10 students) stated they would no longer apply for college. Moreover, in case of those who have applied at this specific faculty at their family

insistence, only 2 persons declared to be dissatisfied with the decision taken, both of them stating that they would now choose to apply for a different faculty or a different university. The next section of the questionnaire was related to **the second objective of the research**. This being said, when asked whether for developing a career in tourism an academic degree (bachelor or master) is necessary, 82.2% of the respondents (strongly) agreed (average score of 4.07 on a scale of 1-5, 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 – “strongly agree”), only 3.5% of the interviewed students disagreeing with this statement. For evaluating the extent to which graduating from the Faculty of Business and Tourism contributes to developing the skills required for a career in tourism, 16 skills have been taken into account, the results being presented in figure 1.

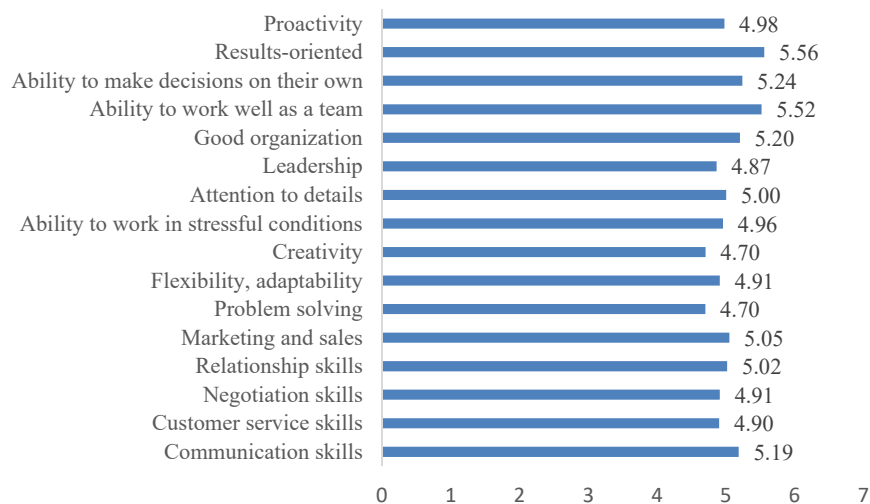


Fig. no. 1 The level of skills development after graduating from the Faculty of Business and Tourism

Students were asked to evaluate the future impact of graduating from the faculty they are attending on developing each of the 16 skills taken into account on a 7-point scale (1 – “to a very little extent”, 7 – “to a very large extent”), the average scores for all the responses being presented in figure 1. As easily observed, all the skills have been evaluated with scores higher than 4.5, meaning that the interviewed students consider that earning their bachelor degree will help them develop a complete set of skills needed to work in the tourism industry. However, the respondents perceive that during college they learn the most to be results-oriented (score 5.56), as they develop their ability to make decisions on their own (score 5.24) and to be very good organized (score 5.2). The results are interesting as they also highlight that the skills that are least developed during college are problem solving (score 4.701) and creativity (score 4.703). This may be explained by the fact that in the first two years of college, students have in the curriculum basic disciplines, such as micro- and macroeconomics, mathematics, accounting, statistics or econometrics, all requiring logical thinking, while disciplines that strongly require their creativity, such as business ethics, promotional techniques or design and aesthetics are included in the curricula in their senior year of college. In terms of the students’ interest in developing a career in tourism (**objective no. 3**), the respondents are, in general, only somehow aiming to develop their professional life in this sector (average score of 3.43, on a 7-point scale, 1 – “to a very little extent”, 7 – “to a very large extent”), as only 40.6% declared to be very interested and determined to choose the tourism industry as their career path. For those respondents who declared themselves to be

willing to work in tourism, the specific industry sector they find appealing is presented in figure no. 2.

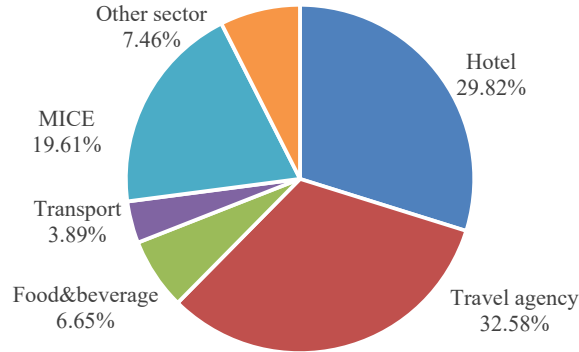


Fig. no. 2 Tourism industry sectors students are interested in developing a career

Most of the respondents (32.58%) stated that they consider working in a travel agency, the hotel industry being in their top choices as well (for 29.82% of cases), followed by the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) industry (for 19.61% of cases). The least preferred sectors of the industry to work in would be transportation and food and beverage. Moreover, in order to identify the reasons why students state that developing a career in tourism is not an option for them, the respondents were asked to state their reasons behind such a decision, the results being highlighted in figure no. 3.

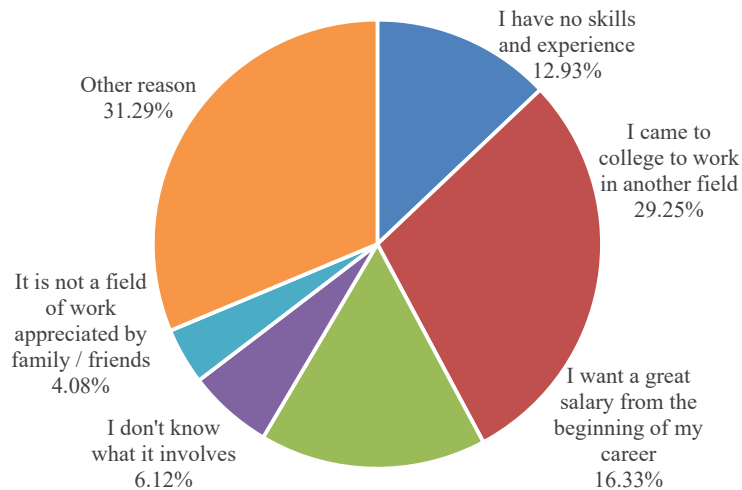


Fig. no. 3 Students' reasons for not choosing the tourism industry as a possible career path

Most of those who do not consider tourism as a career path (29.25%) state that their motives are rather simple, as from starting college they have wanted to work in a different sector. Another reason for not choosing to develop a professional life in tourism is the desire to obtain a great salary on an entry-level (in 16.33% of cases), while 12.93% of the respondents state they feel they do not have the skills or experience required for such a career path.

Regarding the **fourth objective of the research**, the next section of the questionnaire was aimed at identifying students' perception on the characteristics of a career in tourism, by taking into account 13 statements that the respondents were asked to evaluate on a 7-point scale (1 – “in a very little extent”, 7 – “in a very large extent”), the average general scores being presented in table no. 1.

Table no. 1 Students' perception on the characteristics of a career in tourism

Characteristic	Average score
To work in an interesting field that will permanently challenge me	5.70327
Working in an area that involves business traveling	5.65895
Working in an area that involves continuous learning and development	5.52793
I work in the field in which I have a degree	5.50481
Working in an area that gives me mobility in career development (transfer to another city / another country)	5.41181
To have a job that will allow me time for personal and family life	5.34104
Working in a respected field in society / family	5.33526
I have promotion opportunities	5.3314
Good working conditions	5.29094
To have the opportunity to work on a flexible schedule	5.25048
I can achieve large salary increases as my career progresses	5.1368
Job security	4.79576
I can get a great salary from the beginning of my career	3.81502

As easily observed in the table above, the respondents agreed with 11 of the 13 statements regarding the aspects of working in tourism (with general average score higher than 5), the strongest characteristics of a career in this industry being that it is a challenging and interesting working environment, that requires constant learning and development. On the opposite, students rather do not trust the opportunities of earning a great salary right from the beginning of their career, which is actually in accordance with the real labor market conditions in the tourism industry and probably one of the reasons why young professionals tend to be more attracted to work in other business sectors.

Conclusions

The present paper provides an insight on the students' opinions about a career in the tourism industry. Starting from the need for a university degree and the skills developed during college, the paper also evaluates the intentions of building a future career in tourism. The paper highlights the main poles of attraction of the industry (travel agencies and hotels), but also the deterrent factors in this regards (interest in another field of activity, low income for entry-level jobs, lack of experience and necessary skills). Overall, the tourism industry is perceived in a positive note among students (with an average score around 5 out of 7), the only characteristics with a slightly negative evaluation being the opportunities of earning a great salary right from the beginning of the career and job security. Due to recent realities (COVID-19 crisis) and the fact the tourism industry is heavily affected at present times, future studies are required to identify the impact over the general labor market, with a focus on tourism. Students' perception is very important, since they are the ones filling the positions that are labor intensive. A transversal study is intended to be conducted to see if this crisis

affects students' perception over education and skills for a career in tourism. Last, but not least, as hotels in Romania seem to be already presenting an interest in green economy and sustainable practices (Pamfilie et al., 2018; Baicu et al., 2019), the recovery from the 2020 unprecedented crisis could mean a shift towards the principles of green economy, including green jobs in the tourism industry.

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