

The Effectiveness of the Tourism and Hospitality Management Programmes in the Professional Careers of Their Graduates in North Cyprus

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ABSTRACT The study aims to examine the effectiveness of the education the graduates received from the Tourism and Hospitality Management undergraduate programmes in the universities of North Cyprus. Primary data of this research were obtained by using qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews, and non-participant observation have been applied as data collection methods. Sampling strategy used in this study is maximum variety sampling. To analyze the data content analysis was used. The results reveal that developing academic knowledge is significant for the graduate careers yet real life experiences need to be shared during their education by establishing a more powerful cooperation between the higher education institutions and the industry. Higher education institutions should consider the needs of the industry regarding their programmes, curriculums, and qualifications gained by their graduates. Tourism and Hospitality Management programmes need to improve their relations and cooperation with tourism sector stakeholders in order to educate sector-ready graduates.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism as one of the fastest growing industries in the world is the backbone of the service industry, which highly depend on human effort in the production of services for the guest satisfaction. According to Hausemer et al. (2014) “employment in the tourism sector is typically very fluid, being sensitive to seasonal demand and economic factors”. In 2012, the total contribution of travel and tourism to employment, including jobs indirectly supported by the industry, was 8.7 percent of total employment (261,394,000 jobs) (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC] 2013).

It is more than 40 years since tourism first appeared as a distinct area of study (Airey 2005: 13). Sheldon et al. (2008) mentioned that “the world is experiencing seismic changes and they are happening with an increasing frequency. Society and tourism are being shaken by these external shocks and need to adjust to the impacts and prepare to act, think, and plan differently”. Moreover, “the expansion of the tourism education has resulted in wide variations in program structures, curricular offerings, and course content, all of which have prompted researchers to examine essential competencies and industry

needs to inform programmatic restructuring” (Ruetzler et al. 2014).

People are critical dimension within the successful delivery of tourism services (Baum 2007). Thus emphasis must be on developing the students’ communication skills, the ability to work in teams and with people from different cultures. Therefore, it is also significant for tourism businesses, especially for hotels, to employ highly skilled employees in order to gain competitive advantage within this dynamic and global business environment. In this manner, qualified and educated employees are to be the main important stones of those businesses, as the quality service production highly depends on their job performances.

There is a need for an effective hospitality education system to satisfy customers through the delivery of quality services by skilled and competent staff. Like all education institutions, one of the most important input of a higher education institution is the student, whereas the output is also the student with high quality and outstanding academic background. Sheldon et al. (2008) in their studies suggested that, tourism employment in the coming decades will have a very different profile than it does today.

Zagonari (2009) mentioned that it is important for schools to teach well-defined completion of their curriculum, while students in universities are more likely to learn how to learn. The author also said that with well-defined curriculums students can be flexible enough to cope with the changing skill requirements and the rapid technological advances (Zagonari 2009). In other words, students start their academic careers in order to improve their knowledge and vision onto the field they wish to continue their future professions. This objective does not only belong to the students, but it is also viable for higher education institutions as the products they produce are their highly skilled and qualified graduates. Hence, the quality of curriculum of higher education institutions programmes is also significant in order to educate qualified and highly skilled graduates for their future professions.

Fidgeon (2010) said that "to a large extent, the justification for the provision and development of a wide number of tourism programmes lies in the size and significance of the tourism industry". The aim of tourism and hospitality management education in higher education institutions must be in line with the actual needs of the industry. According to Christou (1999), to satisfy customers through the delivery of quality services by skilled and competent staff, an effective hospitality education system must exist. The author also mentioned that "to examine the nature of hospitality management education, a distinction between education and training has to be made" (Christou 1999). Educational institutions must be involved in the process of educating and training students (Zagonari 2009).

"For many university students at the time of graduation, getting a job is foremost in their minds." (Chuang et al. 2009). According to Inui et al. (2006), "tourism education at universities tends to focus on enabling students for future careers in the industry".

Chen et al. (2011) in their studies pointed out that, "traditionally, college (university) education emphasizes teaching theoretical knowledge, but industry demands practical skills and practice". Hence, internship is crucial for students as to its positive effects on developing their practical skills in the industry.

One of the fundamental purposes of the people working in various profession group is to continue their career development by obtaining important positions in the relevant enterprises

(Selvi and Demir 2007). According to Chuang et al. (2009) "once students enroll in a program at a university, their selection of an academic major will influence their career choice and planning and vice versa". The authors also mentioned that "in hospitality management, students are equipped with knowledge and skills required by the industry is either associated with specific industry areas (such as food service or lodging) or functional areas (such as accounting, marketing, or management)" (Chuang et al. 2009).

Chuang et al. (2009) suggested that an academic major plays an important role in students' career choice behaviour. Moreover the authors also noted that, faculty expertise is also significant for students as they need to be well-informed for their professional life. Hence, faculty expertise is also crucial to lead students for their internships in the right places according to students' priorities and qualifications. Faculty should assist to the students' during their education both in the well-developed academic curriculum and real life experience.

The industry professionals' perspectives influence significantly on the development of tourism program for the educators to provide tourism education meeting the needs of the tourism industry (Sammachani 2009). Therefore it is crucial for the Tourism and Hospitality Management programmes to provide and have a relevant curriculum for quality education, to the industry.

The purpose of this study was to examine the success of the tourism and hospitality undergraduates in their professional careers and the quality of the education they received from the Tourism and Hospitality Management undergraduate programmes in the universities of North Cyprus. There is a very few scholarly work that explores the perceptions of the graduates of North Cyprus tourism and hospitality departments on the effectiveness of the education they received. The study also aims to be a reference point for tourism research, for Tourism and Hospitality Management programmes, in North Cyprus and focuses on the five star hotel employees who graduated from the Tourism and Hospitality Management undergraduate programmes in the universities of North Cyprus.

The following research questions have been developed for the study:

1. How effective did the university education prepare students for their professional lives?

2. What are the differences among Tourism and Hospitality Management and non-Tourism and Hospitality Management graduates in the light of their performances in working environment?
3. How effective did Tourism and Hospitality Management curriculums meet graduates industrial skills?
4. What kind of skills Tourism and Hospitality Management education has provided to the students?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Primary data of this research were obtained by using qualitative methods. In order to explore the sufficiency of Tourism and Hospitality Management education in North Cyprus, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with Tourism and Hospitality Management graduates who work in five star hotels. The research method is also based on a multi-case study approach. According to Yin (1994), "case study method is used if more than one data source and evidence exist and data can be gathered largely from documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations and participant observation".

Sampling

Participants were chosen with a purposive sampling technique and thus maximum variety sampling is used where sixteen Tourism and Hospitality Management graduates who are employed in five star hotels are interviewed. Maximum variety sampling as a sampling strategy is preferred in order to expose different values and common themes between the cases. Seven participants were male and nine of them were female. According to their graduation years, two of those participants were graduated in 1999, one of them in 2000, two of them in 2009, six of them in 2012, and four of them graduated in 2013.

Data Collection and Procedure

Based on the purpose of the study, theoretical data have been gathered from the relevant literature. Data triangulation has been applied to increase the reliability and validity of the research and semi-structured interviews, documentary

analysis, and non-participant observation have been applied as data collection methods. Yildirim and Simsek (2006: 258) suggest that in qualitative studies multiple data collection methods should be used together as much as possible.

Subsequently, in the light of the aim of this research, interview forms consisting of nine questions have been prepared. The interviews were conducted using a voice recorder and completed within 10 days. Non-participant observation has been done by joining to the working places of the graduates working environment as a guest. To obtain supportive data for research, during the non-participant observation, notes have been taken and recorded based on the questions which have been determined by the researcher in order to be able to describe the phenomena.

Data Analysis

In analyzing data from the interviews descriptive analysis was used. With this method, the researcher gained the opportunity to transfer the data gathered from the research participants which are directly related to the discourse by quoting descriptive approach. During the analysis, the participants were identified with nicknames. Besides, the higher education institutions the participants graduated were identified with the letters as U1, U2, and U3. With regard to non-participant observation method, the researcher has made interpretations and discussions based on the perceptions of Tourism and Hotel Management graduates regarding to the efficacy of the education they have completed for their professional lives. The data were analyzed in manageable categories and afterwards *sufficiency and effectiveness of education for a professional career, the practicability of the curriculum, managerial skills, language and analytical skills, interpersonal skills, and leadership and professionalism* have been composed as research themes. The research findings were also supported with the relevant literature sources.

RESULTS

Tourism and Hotel Management graduated hotel employees from the North Cyprus universities were asked questions with regard to the following issues: sufficiency and effectiveness of Tourism and Hotel Management education,

skills gained from education, training opportunities, and the curriculum.

Sufficiency and Effectiveness of Tourism and Hotel Management Education

The way to increase competitiveness does not only concern the services provided, but also belongs heavily dependent on the service provider. However, effective and sufficient Tourism and Hotel Management education brings the opportunity to both employees and employers in the global competitive working conditions. Concerning the sufficiency of Tourism and Hotel Management education in North Cyprus universities one of the graduated hotel employees, with nickname Doga, said:

"...tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world. In my country, the number of hotel establishments are increasing day by day and they will continue to increase in the future. I think without university education we cannot suffer in this growing sector. These were the reasons why I decided to study tourism and I choose U1 because of good reputation in tourism education...another reason was that the university was situated in an island country where there are many employment opportunities in the tourism sector". Additionally, Devastated that "...with regard to the academic knowledge I believe graduated hotel employees are be able to meet the needs of the tourism sector...the quality of education we received was good and we can survive in this sector because of that education."

These two quotes from Doga stress the importance of the effectiveness of Tourism and Hotel Management education in order to be able to meet the industry needs. As it is mentioned by Leslie and Richardson (2000), "the dynamic growth in the provision tourism courses since the late 1980s raise the profile of the tourism sector as an economic factor which boosts the demand for tourism". Therefore it seems that the students' reasons for selecting tourism education is the economic factor. To meet the industry needs their decisions are affected by the reputation and sufficiency of higher education institutions.

Another participant, named Aylin, commented as *"...I did not aware the importance of tourism when I was in high school...by chance I came to U3 and as I started to study in Tourism*

and Hotel Management department I understood that importance of the sector. When I compare myself with other tourism graduates from different universities I saw that I have been educated very well."

Contrarily, according to the participant, sufficiency and effectiveness of tourism education does not really meet the industry needs.

The participant explained this as follows:

"I have been decided to study tourism because of its interdisciplinary feature...there is no difference between tourism and business administration education...this should be changed because the sector needs experience more than the academic knowledge and managerial skills."

Contingently, the participants' views revealed that Tourism and Hotel Management education in North Cyprus is sufficient due to the country's geographic situation. The employment opportunities lead students to select North Cyprus universities Tourism and Hotel Management departments and gain benefits of being employed in the tourism sector. By this way, they also increase the opportunity to gain experience in the sector and involve in the international market. These have been explained by Fehim as follows:

"...I chose a North Cyprus university (U3) because one of our relatives graduated from the U3 Tourism and Hotel Management department and gained opportunity to go the USA. This motivated me for my future career and during my studies, I have worked in a five star hotel to gain experience for the future."

Skills Gained from Education and Training Opportunities

It is important to expose the interpersonal communication skills, language and analytical skills, managerial skills, and leadership skills of the university students through the education they receive. The participants showed different views with regard to managerial and leadership skills.

One of the participants, Rohan, said:

"...academic knowledge we gained during our education does not really match with the real life...more improvements need to be carried out and more needs to be done by the instructor during the education...no one teaches me what to do. Or how to keep calm. If one of the guests' tries to beat me...we might face with this

kind of people and because of any reason they might behave you improperly. We did not experience these at the university, but every day we meet with different people whom we have to take care of their needs."

On behalf of Orhan's interpretation it is open that students are lacking in problem solving, with regard to their educational background, which is one of the most important managerial skills that should be gained.

According to Esat, differences among individuals and jobs need also be differentiated for tourism education as well. He stated that:

"It is not like other sectors which you sell customers the product and they go back home you need to satisfy them. In academic manner I have learned the importance of the sector, the organization structures or management types, but I did not learn how to communicate and cope with customers..."

Moreover, Aziz, another participant mentioned that:

"...I think there are huge differences between educated and uneducated tourism employees. I studied in U2 and found an opportunity to work in university's establishments...this helped me improve my interpersonal communication skills and provided me with the opportunity to interact with guests a lot...but I did not learn how to cope with customers I just learn these by myself."

"...we did not have the opportunity to interact with guests during our internships...because of the internship period we join to the hotel during the restoration and maintenance session...I learned how to communicate with guests in my professional career, but read more about management courses" said Hasan.

Similar to Hasan, Emre, another participant, stated that:

"...when I started studying at the university I did not know how to say water in English. It has been three years since I graduated from the university and now I have just started understanding what guests are saying to me but, cannot communicate with them..." He also agreed that *"...unfortunately there is a lack of education in terms of improving foreign language, but more managerial skills and knowledge is gathered because of the courses we have taken."* With regard to Hasan's explanation he ex-

pressed the teaming process based on the management courses load in the curriculums.

On the other side Cihan expressed the teaming process as:

"...one of the most important sore of the tourism sector is the qualification...I mean even those who received education without real life experience are not be able to compete with uneducated tourism employees...educating tourism employees should be based on less academic knowledge and more industrial experience...unfortunately our instructors were good academicians, but they were lacking in real life experience...the internship periods must be increased, otherwise when students enter the sector they will feel like a fish out of water because they have no experience in communicating with guests and analyzing the situations in the hotel."

Cihan also mentioned the internship opportunities as follows:

"...we had only a hundred days of internship and this just allowed to get involved in A group travel agents or five star hotels. I have worked both in a travel agency and in a hotel...if you ask me what I have learned, my answer would be that I have learned how to take photocopies and polish silvers...it could not meet my expectations in terms of gaining industrial experience. I know that many of my friends had a similar experience."

Cagla, another participant, also agreed with Cihan's argument. She stated that:

"...during the internship period, I felt as if I was working in a barber shop as an apprentice. I think a lot on how many years will I need to learn how to cut a customer's hair...almost ten...ohh those days had been terrible because uneducated tourism workers were resisting our work and this does not change even when you graduate...it takes your years..."

Esat on the other hand explained the internship opportunities from another perspective, but similar to Cihan and Cagla. Esat mentioned that:

"...internship is the backbone of the tourism education. Without any experience you cannot adopt yourself to the hard working conditions of the sector. We are working hard and trying to cope with many different guests in this sector. Our university was trying to bring together the sector representatives and the students with seminars and workshops, but I don't think they are collaborating. These were only

academic activities. It does not give you additional skills. They need to work together to develop programs according to the industry's needs. So when we go for internship the business also would help us improve our skills."

In consequence of the interview results quoted above, it is clear that internship is highly significant for improving different industrial skills and helps students learn from experiences.

The Curriculum

Curriculum as one of the significant success determinant of an education institution with regard to its' education quality need to be taken into account seriously. It is believed that "since curriculum involves choice of what knowledge is, it is important to understand the relationship between tourism knowledge and the curriculum" (Tribe 2005a: 47). In this manner, understanding the relevance of the Tourism and Hotel Management curriculums and its' impacts on looking at tourism phenomena is crucial. Based on this perspective participants were asked to share their ideas regarding to the quality of Tourism and Hotel Management curriculums.

Ferdi, one of the participants, works as a waiter in a hotel. He stated his views in regard with Tourism and Hotel Management curriculums:

"...it was really hard for me to understand the theoretical information and study those theories...the reason why I chose this department was that I wanted to learn how to serve customers...but at the end of the day I have learned many different management theories and just memorized them. Instead of those theories I'd prefer more practical courses because customers don't ask for our theoretical knowledge. They are interested in how do we serve them."

Another participant, named Mehmet, touched upon the coherence between the industry's needs and the curriculum as follows:

"...to be honest the mentality in all Tourism and Hotel Management programs is the same... we have taken English, Russian, German as foreign languages, but we learned a lot about the grammar. Another thing was that, how the hotel sector operates in the USA is not the same with how it is operated in North Cyprus or Turkey...this is due to the different customers, different service products, and of course due to the different needs of the industry...when I start-

ed working at the hotel I learned everything regarding the sector here and not from the curriculum." His explanation about the curriculum here is focused on the lack of practical courses. He continued to describe their curriculum as follows:

"...we have taken a housekeeping management course and were sent to the hotel just once to make beds and see a hotel bedroom."

DISCUSSION

Education is one of the most important subsystems under the general socio-economic and cultural system for all countries. For a sustainable and healthy development, each country needs to take into account the importance of the education system for all education levels. Higher education for North Cyprus' socio-economic development is crucial due to its' highly positive effects on both employment and in education of qualified human resources to the rest of the world. "Tourism education is of growing significance and attracting a growing body of research" (Tribe 2005b: 25). With the uncontrollable fast developments in the world economic conditions, tourism as one of the fastest growing sector needs more care in terms of the employment due to the impact of the huge competitive developments. Therefore, employing highly skilled employees becoming much more important for the tourism sector. "Employees therefore need professional qualifications that are recognized and "portable" across national boundaries, and here accessible tourism qualifications should also be included" (Hausemer et al. 2014).

North Cyprus as an island state benefited from tourism and education services. There are nine universities in North Cyprus and six of them have Tourism and Hospitality Management programmes. Results of the research revealed that, students, who study in these programmes, have internship opportunities to gain practical skills related to their professions. Tourism discipline attributes tend to include adaptability at work, industry knowledge and management skills (Wang et al. 2009). But as the internship periods are short in these programmes, it can be said that students are not able to get enough experience in tourism and hospitality enterprises. Thus, it is crucial for both the higher education institutions and hotel businesses to be in cooperation for mutual benefit. Therefore, "curricula should be

developed and monitored through dialogue and partnerships among teaching staff, students, graduates and labour market actors” (McAleese et al. 2013). Hereby, in case of improvements in internship conditions from the hotels and expanding the periods by the universities more experiences might be gained by the students. Hence, it is essential for educators and internship employers to better understand the factors that interns have high expectations, which in turn, are more likely to result in negative disconfirmation (Hoc Nang Fong et al. 2014).

According to the results, the majority of Tourism and Hotel Management graduates believe that undergraduate Tourism and Hotel Management education had prepared them for their future careers especially with the internship programs offered. Majority of the participants also believed that the Tourism and Hotel Management programmes curriculum need to be improved in order to better prepare them for interpersonal communication, leadership, and management skills.

It should be noted that, grade point average (GPA) is not a technical skill, which may indicate in turn a student’s success in acquiring the competencies demanded on the job market (Ruetzler et al. 2014). The results of this study reveal that developing academic knowledge is significant for the graduate careers yet real life experiences need to be shared during their education by establishing a more powerful cooperation between the higher education institutions and the industry. Koc et al. (2014) in their studies mentioned that a powerful collaboration between the higher education institutions and the sector will result to an effective and productive feedback system where the students and sector relationships will also be strengthened as well. Different perceptions between the female and male graduates also analyzed in terms of the efficiency of the education they had received from the higher education institutions they graduated. It has been observed that male graduates are less willing to work in the sector rather than female graduates. Female graduates have more chance to work in the front office, public relations, accounting, reservation, and human resources departments, whereas male graduates much more work in food and beverage department or as a bell boy. Due to the lack of opportunity to be employed in PR or reservation departments, they prefer to work in other sectors.

Moreover, the results showed that, curriculums of the Tourism and Hotel Management departments need improvements and renewals according to the industry needs. This can be only achieved with mutual cooperation of all stakeholders, namely students, Tourism and Hotel Management departments, government, and the tourism sector, in order to graduate highly skilled employees from these universities.

CONCLUSION

Based on the general results of the research following themes for the undergraduate tourism and hospitality management in North Cyprus can be attained.

Due to the sufficiency and effectiveness of the tourism education in North Cyprus higher education institutions is *competence* as an island country. As it is mentioned earlier, today’s economy demands not only a high-level competence in the traditional academic disciplines but also what might be called 21st century skills. Results showed that graduate hotel workers gain interpersonal communication skills, language and analytic skills, and managerial and leadership skills through real life experience rather than the academic knowledge.

Therefore the theme for the skills is determined as *poor skills*. Another theme which relates to the internship opportunities is *apprenticeship*, as graduated students felt strange after their academic lives. Results showed that cooperation between the sector and the Tourism and Hotel Management departments must be taken into account not only for meeting the industry’s needs, but to provide the graduate students with practical skills.

As one of the most important sectors of service industry, higher education institutions need to take into account the needs of the industry regarding their programmes, curriculums, and qualifications gained by their graduates. This becomes more significant for vocational education as Tourism and Hospitality is among the most important sectors which have a strong link with industry practice.

In conclusion, higher education institutions’ Tourism and Hotel Management programmes need to improve their relations and cooperation with tourism sector stakeholders in order to educate sector-ready graduates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is limited with only 16 hotel employees graduated from Tourism and Hotel Management programmes in North Cyprus higher education institutions. For further research, comparison of tourism graduates from different education systems and sector representatives can be included in the sample in order to enrich the data. Moreover all stakeholders in North Cyprus tourism sector, including the administrators of Tourism and Hospitality departments in North Cyprus universities, sector representatives, government, and the tourism graduates -who are employed in the sector- need to collaborate for future development of both the tourism education and the sector. In this way new tourism education model, which should be concentrated more to redound the practical skills of the tourism students, with a mutual strategy can be attained.

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