

# THE ROLE OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY COMPANIES IN ENSURING AN EFFECTIVE INTERNSHIP PROCESS

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism and hospitality education has only been provided in Latvia as a separate curriculum relatively recently. According to legislation, the curriculum should consist of study courses, internships and the state exam.

Cooperation between all stakeholders is crucial in order to achieve the goal of internship – to increase students' knowledge and to develop skills in the study area chosen. The purpose of this study is to explore cooperation between higher educational establishments and companies targeted at enhancing students' employability skills. The survey was conducted in Latvia by addressing managers of 154 tourism and hospitality industry companies in 2014. The findings showed that only 51.30% of the companies plan interns' job assignment during internship on the basis of an internship programme and in 35.06% of the cases higher educational establishments do not contact internship companies for feedback at all. This means that, despite the importance of internships in developing students' skills, cooperation among all stakeholders does not proceed in the best possible manner. It is suggested to improve cooperation at all stages of internship – at the planning, organisational and control stages.

**Keywords:** tourism curriculum, internship, cooperation

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Internship

Over the past years there has been a significant shift in the understanding of the importance of internships, both in the industry and also in universities. In the late 1970's it was stated, that "despite an impressive list of benefits to all concerned internships are highly undervalued and under supported since they simply did not seem to fit into the "academic ballgame"" (English & Lewison, 1979).

Since then the role and importance of internships has substantially changed. Today internships are characterised as a highly important component of every modern, competitive curriculum. "Internships provide a location in which students can test theories and methods learned in courses, and they also contribute rich material to students' academic experience that they can and should draw on in the context of their learning with faculty, staff, and peers" (O'Neill, 2010).

Recently several authors have tried to define internships and to find approaches for their successful implementation. The majority of authors stress that the key components characterising an internship are 1) study internships resulting in credit points, 2) internships can be both – paid and unpaid, 3) a determined period of time spent by the student at the place of internship, 4) both - universities and companies - are involved in the implementation and supervision of internships (DiLorenzo-Aiss and Mathisen, 1996; Narayanan, Olk, Fukami, 2010; Kaşlı & İlban 2013). Some authors point to other characteristics of internships. For instance, O’Neil stresses that “an internship should be “a deliberative form of learning” that involves “doing”, reflection, and “feedback for improvement” (O’Neill, 2010).

Allen (2009, 23) based on the ideas of Allen, Wachter, Blum & Gilchrist (2009), Coco (2000), Diambra, Cole-Zakrzewski & Booher (2004), Henry (2002), suggests that “a successful business internship should (1) make supervision available, (2) provide feedback, (3) give challenging assignments, (4) provide exposure to the larger organisation, and (5) establish a clear understanding of what is to be accomplished.”

A successful internship includes cooperation among three components – student, university and company. Each of the stakeholders benefits from internships in a different way.

Employer benefits are discovered in various articles. Some authors (Coco, 2000; Thiel & Hartley, 1997; Weible & McClure, 2011; Divine et.al.2007) indicate that companies can benefit from the following:

- New, fresh ideas for business, processes improvement,
- Networking with universities,
- Selection of future employers without paying for the recruitment process,
- Best selection of employees,
- Receiving assistance in top periods, seasons,
- Releasing of employees from routine, simple tasks,
- Public manifestation of companies’ social responsibility.

Thiel & Hartley emphasise “the opportunity to establish contact with local collegiate business programs and faculty” as an important benefit, which are not always evaluated enough from the business side. Some authors (Schwarz & Kalberg, 2003) have indicated the possibility of reducing labour costs as an important benefit for a company. It is considered as being highly significant in such labour intensive industries as tourism and hospitality.

According to several researches student benefits (Coco, 2000; Thiel & Hartley, 1997; Weible & McClure, 2011; Divine et.al.2007; Jones, 2006; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008) from internships are:

- Opportunity to compare knowledge obtained in the classroom with real life situations,
- Increased qualities related to responsibility and confidence through handling of responsible duties,
- An opportunity to develop interpersonal, teamwork and leadership skills,

- Improve self-confidence,
- Acquisition of specific technical skills and knowledge related to the industry,
- Exposure of students to ethical issues and global dimensions.

Parveen and Mirza (2012) also stress that a planned internship program may serve the following functions: understanding of the target profession, opportunity of providing valuable exposure to the job, development of professional skills and attitudes as well as establishment of useful contacts. Students, especially those who already have work experience, can develop management competences (Yiu & Law, 2013; LeBruto & Murray, 1994).

According to different researchers (Coco, 2000; Thiel & Hartley, 1997; Weible & McClure, 2011; Divine et.al.2007), academic institutions can also benefit from students internships:

- Reputation of university as one which provides a curriculum based on industry needs,
- External assessment of the existing curriculum,
- A source where students can find permanent work,
- Networking.

Internships also strengthen links with industry, which can later result in common projects, research opportunities (Yiu & Law, 2012) and other long-term relationships to ensure incorporation of industry needs into the curriculum and therefore increase competitiveness of universities.

Recently researchers from John Cook School of Business in the USA published an article drawing attention not only to potential benefits, but also to potential costs or pitfalls. "Difficulty of designing meaningful work assignments", as well as the fact, that students often lack employability skills, which are very important for employers, are listed as the main pitfalls for employers. Authors also stress that internships are time consuming and require resources to mentor, supervise, and train an intern. (Maertz Jr, Stoeberl & Marks, 2014). Other pitfalls listed by the researchers include inadequate faculty involvement, which could stem from the assumption that an internship supervisor, instead of spending time spent on organization of internships, could use it for other goals, for example, research. (Maertz Jr, Stoeberl & Marks, 2014).

Authors analysing aspects and approaches for effective internship, see the role of each party involved at every stage of internship differently – before internship, in its process and analysing outcomes.

Narayanan, Olk & Fukami (2010), in their model developed stress activities, which are important to each actor. According to the authors, company and university preparedness can be captured by mutual awareness of university or company's interests, internal organisational context, and formality of structure for the internship. At this stage it is important for a student to demonstrate his/her readiness "to interpret and make sense out of knowledge in order to transfer it to others." Communication between university and company and commitment to building relationship are stressed as crucial at the process stage. It is important for a student to demonstrate his/her willingness to exert effort in the

internship role, which in its turn stems from the motivation of the student. Outcomes of interest include “(1) organisational benefits from the completion of the internship project, (2) enhanced capabilities of company and university, and, at the student level, (3) skill development and career enhancement” (Narayanan, Olk & Fukami, 2010).

### **Internship process**

Mekawy and Bakr (2014), based on a broad literature review, have come to a specific tourism internship process definition, where it is, *inter alia*, said, that “process consists of structured, supervised and well-timed activities and tourism workplace – based experiences”.

Internship is not just a student’s field practice in a particular company. The internship process includes:

- “Recruitment of students,
- Academic preparation and application to cooperative education,
- Identification of sites,
- Matching student applicants to the co-operating sites,
- Matching the co-operative experience with openings of the academic check sheet,
- Orientation of the interns,
- Intern academic assignments and appraisal process,
- Program results” (Thiel & Hartley, 1997).

The process itself can differ from university to university, but the basic principles remain the same – planning, organising and controlling. However, in the process proposed by Thiel & Hartley, the involvement of employers (companies) is missing. For the purposes of a successful internship, actual involvement of the company during its planning and organising stage is essential. Guidelines for companies for designing the internship are made by Director True of the Internship Centre True of the Messiah College (2008). He suggests 5 steps: 1) setting the goals, which implies understanding by the company itself what it wants to achieve; 2) writing a plan, which implies drafting a job description for the intern explaining duties of the job, 3) recruiting the intern, 4) managing the intern, respecting the aims of the programme and 5) evaluating the intern’s progress. Therefore, it is clear that in the internship process all parties– universities, companies and students have their tasks in order to ensure effectiveness of the internship and to achieve aims set for the programme.

Earlier surveys completed (Rothman, 2003) show that students also most often complain about poor planning of work, lack of structure. Their results are in compliance with the above mentioned process of effective internship (Coco, 2000; True, 2008).

Trilateral cooperation involving company, student and university throughout the internship process increases understanding regarding its goals and the learning outcomes planned.

## METHODOLOGY

In light of the findings of the authors reviewed above, the research purpose of this study is to establish how the tourism and hospitality industry perceives internship and if there exists sufficient cooperation between tourism employers and universities during the internship process. The research question for the current research is - How do tourism and hospitality employers describe cooperation between tourism employers and universities during the internship process?

For the purpose of the current research, the term 'tourism and hospitality industry' comprises any establishment of tourism, hospitality and related industries in Latvia, where the students of Turība University have had the compulsory internship in the year of the research.

Within the scope of this research the results of the quantitative section were used for determining the tourism and hospitality industry employers' involvement and to understand the nature of cooperation between stakeholders in the internship process. The quantitative method used for the employers' survey was a paper-based questionnaire. The survey was conducted in Latvia in May- June, 2014, using a delivery and collection questionnaire (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Overall, top or middle level managers of 154 tourism or hospitality companies were approached for this survey.

As part of the survey, respondents answered closed questions regarding cooperation between a company and a higher educational establishment prior to internship - if the company acquainted itself with the student's internship goal and programme, if internship assignments were planned on the basis of the programme, as well as the open question on how the company, as a potential employer, assessed the goals and tasks of internship. The next set of questions was related to cooperation between higher educational establishments and companies during implementation of the internship. Post-internship or internship follow-up questions were targeted at clarifying the means of ensuring feedback regarding knowledge and skills demonstrated and developed by the internee during the internship. Finally, the survey clarified if companies demonstrate activity by turning to universities by themselves offering internships for the students of tourism and hospitality.

## PARTICIPANTS

Cluster sampling was chosen for the current research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The cluster in this form of sampling is based on the fact if a company accepts tourism or hospitality students for their internship. Overall 154 companies, working in tourism and hospitality area, as well as state and municipality institutions, responsible for tourism development, were questioned.

In order to define the respondents' profile, analysis of frequencies was performed. Results indicated that out of 154 respondents 47 or 31% represented the accommodation sector, 35 or 23% - the catering sector, 14 or 9% - travel agencies

and 17 or 11% represented municipalities or tourism information centres. Other respondents represented entities different from tourism and hospitality industry related companies - museums, local culture centres and the international airport. From the frequency distribution it can be seen that the majority of the respondents - 46.10% - have been in the tourism industry for more than 10 years. Only 5.19% were very young companies operating for less than a year.

## RESULTS

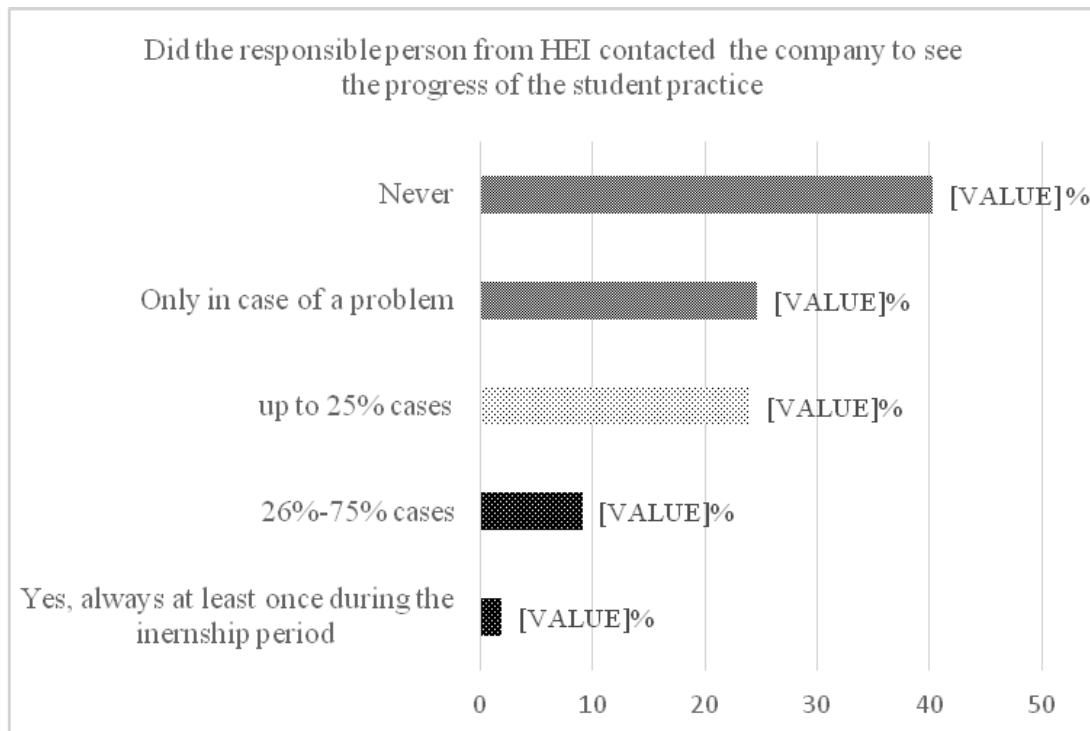
This section elaborates the findings of the tourism and hospitality industry company survey, conducted in Latvia. Results of the survey provide information on how companies see the importance of internship and how they evaluate cooperation between universities and companies during the process of internship.

In order to evaluate cooperation between internship companies and universities at the planning stage, it was important to understand if the companies had familiarised themselves with internship aims and tasks prior to the commencement of practice. Results show that 73% of respondents answered that companies' management and a person in company directly responsible for interns were acquainted with the internship programme. In comparison, it can be claimed that the closest attention to internship programme is paid by those companies, which have been in this business for 1 to 3 years - 79.17% of companies in this group responded that they had become acquainted with the defined internship aims prior to enrolment of students in their companies. Out of those companies, which do not acquaint themselves with internship programme (37 companies), 15 companies or 40.54% are catering businesses. 19 catering companies responded that they acquainted themselves with the assignments, and therefore, the claim that catering enterprises pay less attention to internship programme in comparison with other companies is unsubstantiated.

Overall, only 52% of companies designed particular internship assignments on the basis of internship tasks of a student. Specially designed assignments were not planned at 34 companies, including 13 hotels and 9 catering companies. This leads to a conclusion that internship tasks are in line with the existing job descriptions at those hospitality companies and that knowledge and skills of internees are sufficient for them to join companies of this profile without special preparation.

Analysing involvement of companies in the planning stage of internships it can be concluded that almost half (46%) of the companies do not get involved in the planning stage or are involved only partially. An in-depth qualitative research is required in order to understand the reasons for such limited involvement.

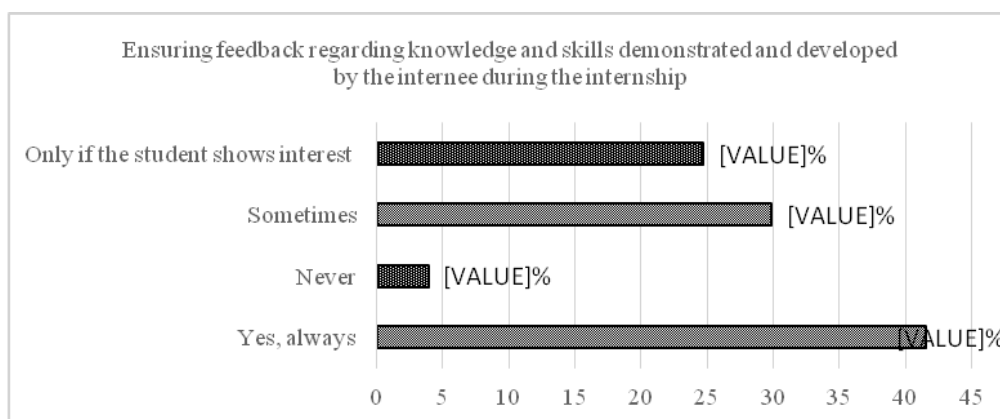
Cooperation between an internship company and higher education establishments in internship implementation and follow up stage can be evaluated as good as far as companies are concerned (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Cooperation between company and higher education institution during internship.

Analysis shows that in 64.94% of cases the responsible representatives during internship do not contact the respective company at all or contact it only in instances when a problem situation arises. Only 3 companies stated that representatives of higher educational establishments had always contacted their companies at least once during the internship period. This indicates that in the majority of cases higher education institutions take part in the planning process and during the stage of assessing internship outcomes, but during internship all responsibility lies with a company and a student.

Since higher education establishments are not directly involved in internship implementation stage, it is very important to receive evaluation of the student’s practice from the company. Therefore, it was important to assess if companies always provide universities and students with their evaluation (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Ensuring feedback about interns’ performance.

The findings demonstrate, that representatives of companies almost always inform the respective universities about performance of students. 96.10% respondents' stated that they evaluate students' performance by completing a special reference form, issued by the university. 96.10% respondents' stated that they always or quite often discuss with students the results of their internships and knowledge and skills acquired by them after completion of internship. The research findings show that progress of students is more often analysed and negotiated with the intern after the internship period in tourism agencies and operators and tourism information centres. 57.14% of tourism agencies and operators and 47.06% of tourism information centres confirmed that they not only complete an official student evaluation form, required by university, but also find time to discuss it with the student himself or herself. It could partly be explained by the fact, that in terms of staff employed most often tourism information centres and tourism agencies are smaller companies. At the same time it can be admitted, that only 6 company managers stated that evaluation of students' performance and provision of feedback to university took too much time, and they could not see the purpose of engaging in it.

In order to evaluate the level of activity of companies in recruiting students for their internships, all respondents were asked if their company had approached any higher education establishment with their offer. 31.17% answered that they had approached universities with offers for student internships in their company.

The findings show that, overall, companies are willing to cooperate with higher education establishments, particularly during performance evaluation process of students.

## DISCUSSION

Contents of any tourism and hospitality curriculum, delivered in Latvia, is determined by the EU guidelines and laws and regulations of Latvia on higher education. The legal documents in force establish that the mandatory structure of a study programme is, *inter alia*, formed by an internship at least to the extent of 30 ECTS. Students benefit from internship by enhancing their knowledge, professional and employability skills, it provides a bridge from theory acquired in university to real work in the industry. It is crucial to ensure that internship is built in an efficient way, allowing achievement of programme aims.

Effectiveness of internship depends on different criteria, analysed in the theoretical part. All researchers, examined within this framework, expressed a view that in order to ensure an effective practice, cooperation between the university, the student and the company is crucial. For that "it is vital that internship agencies and students have comparable perceptions and expectations of the internship experience" (Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008). Cooperation can manifest itself in various forms at the internship planning, organizing or controlling phase. Sing and Dutta (2010) stressed, that "establishing good training programs for



students, giving them meaningful tasks, and empowering them to manage those tasks in a more creative way could all enhance the internship experience. It is clear that induction and supervisor support are important to students." Students also are willing to receive feedback from both- their employers and academic tutors. "Employers should monitor the student and check in with him or her periodically; at the end of the internship, the student should be provided with an official evaluation." (Yiu & Law, 2012). The findings of the current research support these statements.

Based on the afore-mentioned stages of internship process, companies, that are stakeholders within the internship process, whose point-of-view was explored and results were analysed within this article. The main focus was laid on the stage of planning and assessment or, according to True (2008) classification, on the stage where company understands itself, what it wants to achieve and sets up duties, respecting the aims of the programme and evaluating the intern's progress.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the perception of tourism and hospitality companies regarding internship of students of higher education establishments and to evaluate cooperation between companies and universities.

This paper draws the conclusion that, in order to achieve the aim of internship, cooperation between all stakeholders is highly important during all of its stages - planning, organisation and control and feedback phases. The current research reveals that companies are willing to cooperate with higher education establishments, but greater involvement is desirable, especially during the planning stage. The involvement of higher education establishments in the internship process can be evaluated as sufficient at the planning and assessment stage, but greater involvement in the process itself would increase confidence in achieving the aim of the internship.

Understanding of students' perception about the internship process and involvement of each stakeholder in one or another activity would require more research.

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