

## Research Paper

# Perceived Expectations of Internships: Case Study of a Private University in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** With the intergenerational changes that are taking place, the hospitality industry has to continuously look into better employee retention plans in order to keep up with the ever evolving industry and high turnovers. Internships is the most commonly used method to expose students to the industry as well as allowing them to explore career pathways. This study was conducted at a well-known hospitality school in Asia to examine students' perspectives of the industry before internships. The findings can also aid stakeholders in developing effective internships that can help retain talents and to minimize its loss even before students graduate. Primary data collected from 142 hospitality students prior to their internships using a questionnaire was subjected to descriptive statistical and Pearson correlation analysis. The findings indicate that well-managed internship experiences have a significant impact on future career retentions.

**Keywords:** Perception, internship experience, future career, hospitality.

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## Introduction

As an industry with one of the highest growing gross domestic product (GDP) worldwide, the hospitality industry requires many skilled and trained staffs for many expanding and evolving positions. The importance of a trained staff is widely recognized (Bai, Lee & Billinghamurst, 2014) and hundreds of millions are spent on staff training annually by businesses (Murphy, Pritchard & Smith, 2000) to ensure services of the highest standards. As an integral component of the industry, in addition to imparting hospitality knowledge, hospitality schools and institutions also aim to

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produce skilful personnel who meet the needs of the employers. Beyond theoretical learning, students are often required to do internships to help them get exposure in the industry and to put to practice what they have learned in the classroom.

In the past, studies have shown that hospitality graduates and undergraduates leave the industry after their internship or actual work stint (Wan, Wong & Kong, 2014). A study on hospitality employee turnover found that generation Y graduates have a higher chance of leaving the industry after a short period of full-time employment (Brown, Thomas & Bosselman, 2015). The high turnover in this growing industry is indeed worrying and thus the need to address the contributing factors (Mohd Ali Tan et al., 2016; Sharon, Goziker & Shahrabani, 2014). While there are many researches on student internship satisfaction, few have focused on students' initial perception and expectation of internship. The authors believe there is a strong need to understand better the initial perception of students in order to identify the disparity between expectations and reality. In this study, a quantitative method was used to capture data on variables of satisfaction from a large sample of students who have yet to have any industry experience. Certainly, the present study is exploratory in nature in understanding the perception of hospitality students towards the industry.

Our study aims to answer the following three questions:

- What is the perceived knowledge of internship amongst students?
- What are the expectations that are built while they are in hospitality schools?
- Which variables are more important from the student's perspective?

## **Literature Review**

### **Internship**

To meet the expansive growth of the hospitality industry, a sufficient supply of skilled workforce is required and internship has been long recognised as a good avenue to build these skills. According to Taylor (1988), internship can be defined as an experience related to work and career meant for students before they graduate. Hence to ensure students gain exposure and working experience in the related industry, most universities and colleges either require or encourage their students to undergo internships before they graduate. In hospitality diploma or degree courses, internship is an integral component of the curriculum.

There are many types of internship available today. As an example, for internships with credit hours, collaborations and agreements between academic intuitions and industry players enable the placement of students in actual workplace settings. Upon the completion of said internship, students can earn their academic

credits, in exchange for assignment reports of their experience (Oancea, Pospisil & Dragoescu, 2016). Other types of internship include summer internships, which calls for a shorter period and independent applications are also available, and unpaid internships, usually for non-profit organizations as well as internships at libraries, shelters or community centres that allows one to acquire service-related skills. During internship, students will acquire managerial and supervisory skills as well as learn to manage customers (Dhevabanchachai & Wattanacharoensil, 2017).

It is common understanding that internships help students grasp the work culture better and manage themselves more efficiently. It is also believed that students with internship experience perform and cope better when they step into the working world.

As mentioned earlier, nowadays, internship is considered a necessary programme in hospitality colleges or universities aimed at preparing students with hands-on experience in their chosen industry. Unfortunately, some colleges and universities had presented the internship programme as a requirement for graduating without explaining the implications of internship on the student's future career. As such, many students form the misconception that internship is forced upon them which often leads to an unhealthy perception about internship from the beginning itself.

While there have been many researches that examined the perspective of students on internships (Sharon, Goziker & Shahrabani, 2014; Mohd Ali Tan et al., 2016; Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015), these were conducted after the completion of the internship and looked at the outcome and the gap between expectations and reality, particularly in satisfaction. Moreover, only a limited number of studies have focused on the hospitality student's expectations for their internship with regard to the influence of the hospitality school and their ability to perform.

Not to mention, students nowadays are also very much influenced by the social media and its outlook on internships. This means that more empirical studies are needed to understand better students' expectation of their internships. Expectation can be defined as one's vision as a result of one's experience (Harris, 2002). With regard to internship, students usually have a list of things that they hope to attain or achieve. Expectations can be either positive or negative partially based on our perceptions or outlook on matters around us.

Past research has shown that there is a broad disparity between students' expectations and the perception of education institutions regarding these expectations and the resulting level of satisfaction. This lack of understanding (Harris, 2002) can be attributed to the lack of communication between the academic institutions and students themselves. In his work on internship experience and student expectations, Rothman (2007) confirmed the need for evaluating every internship program with regard to the intern's job performance. This helps to ensure that students maximize their opportunity to learn and to meet the expectations of the internship employers. In other words, consistent evaluation is needed throughout the

internship period to ensure it benefits students, employers, and academic institutions. Typically, administrators of academic programs are responsible for assessing a student's internship experience to ensure that learning objectives and student expectations are met (Sapp & Zhang, 2009). The gap between student expectations and actual outcome is a cause for concern and continues to receive substantial interest because these gaps can cause students to become frustrated and result in low job satisfaction (Polach, 2004). Studies have shown that when students with these unresolved expectation-reality gap join the work market, it can significantly increase turnover rates and the attendant cost in rehiring and retraining (Holton III, 1995). Businesses that do not address this gaps in their new hires can face potential damage especially in a turbulent economy. Thus, some create a cohesive work environment to enable new staff especially recent graduates to adapt to the business' work culture and environment. While there are some other studies that have proven internships can meet student expectations, it would be better to develop effective internship programmes to avoid unreasonable and unachievable expectations which will cause students to become demotivated and do their internship half-heartedly.

### **Internship Experience**

Internship can be defined as “structured and career-relevant work experiences obtained by students prior to graduating from an academic program” (Taylor, 1988). While the first definition limits the context of internship as something that is obtained before graduation, and the word graduation itself acts as a limitation, Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) define it more broadly as “part-time field experiences which encompass a wide variety of academic disciplines and organizational settings.” Some industries such as hospitality and culinary, medicine and other technical fields that consists of predominantly practical work strongly require internship experience as a learning stage for acquiring hands-on skills. Today, many students have come to believe that internship is more towards gaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace for jobs and less so for the sake of their education only (Cannon & Arnold, 1998).

Additionally, internship is sought for the valuable experience and exposure to help graduating students adapt themselves to the industry. Thus overall, internship is seen as beneficial for academic programs (Gordon, 2002), adds value to the education of students (Little, 1993), and also advantageous to industry players (Brady, 2007). During internship itself, many companies strive to provide practical experience to students in terms of know-how skills and about the industry (Gabrowsky & Fitz, 2007). Rehling (2000) maintained that internships can be utilized to help students develop their skills, initiative, and other traits required for the working life.

Based on past surveys (Gloria, Castillo, Choi-Pearson & Rangel, 1997 ), good grades, especially those obtained from prestigious universities or colleges, help

students secure better internship positions. Hence, this research will focus more on internships in the hospitality industry.

The hospitality industry is a service industry and is usually referred to as “human service industry”. Thus, Human Service Internship is an experience which is sponsored by educational institutions such as colleges or universities whereby their students acquire practical education and training while working in a human service organization for an allocated period of time (Kiser, 2015). As a service industry, up-close knowledge about the industry and work specifications are vital for any hospitality employee; thus, the importance of internship. However, while the benefits of internship are manifold, a number of challenges remain as a hindrance towards the effectiveness of any internship programme.

### **Future Career**

Sometimes the transition from being a student to working professional can be hard (Polach, 2004). Ko and Sidhu (2012) contended that a negative internship experience can bring about more negative impact to businesses and career choices compared to no internship experience. This is attributed to internship programmes that are unstructured and poorly organized (Lam & Ching, 2007). In contrast, the positive impacts of internship are often associated with the working environment itself such as teamwork, type of work, involvement in actual work, and autonomy (McCaffery, 1979).

Many studies have also shown that there is relation between internship experience and career success. Experiences gained during a student’s internship will result in quicker employment after graduation, higher salary, and higher job satisfaction (Gault et al., 2000). Moreover, the internship experience will smoothen the transition from student life to work life.

Furthermore, internship allows students to experience real work and learn aspects of the industry that are not taught in the classroom or lecture. Armed with knowledge, new entrants will be more prepared to face the many challenges in the industry. Internship is used as a platform to build and develop the awareness of the skills needed in the industry. When students experience this, it helps them to adapt and thrive in the industry while pursuing their career ambitions.

### **Attitudes**

Attitudes are important for explaining and predicting behaviour. Yet, the relationship between attitudes and actions (behaviour) is controversial (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Attitude refers to the way an individual’s character reacts with a certain degree of favourableness or unfavourableness to another behaviour, person or object (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). There are theories of attitude that consist of cognition, components and conation or behaviour.

Sadly, many managers perceive interns as “cheap labour” and utilise them in any department that is shorthanded (Roney & Öztin, 2007). This results in interns becoming demoralized and an unsatisfactory internship experience. Many students undergoing internship are creative and technologically literate and while they may expect immediate rewards and constant feedback, their employers may not always have the luxury of time to do so and this can also affect their internship expectations (Fok & Yeung, 2016). Their work ethics will also be, to some extent, affected by the social status of their job, working conditions in terms of pay and benefits, promotion opportunities and relationships with co-workers and managers (Fok & Yeung, 2016).

During internship, some students become convinced that working in the hotel industry is quite boring and is not worth it (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). At the same time, some may also find it quite stressful. Moreover, students who intern are not given full autonomy for their tasks or given opportunities to communicate with international guests as expected as their supervisor may assume that they are not capable (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Often, they have to work under close supervision or micromanaged and this can result in a less than satisfactory internship experience.

In other instances, some students may feel that they are over-qualified for the tasks assigned to them leading to dissatisfaction, demotivation and unmet expectations (Dhevabanchachai & Wattanacharoensil, 2017).

Further, having no or little knowledge about the industry, many internship students experience “reality or culture shock” once they delve deeper into actual operations and settings (Teng, 2008). Knowledge encompasses acts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education in the form of theory or practical work. The knowledge gained in classrooms is expected to be translated into actual practice during internships (Mihail, 2006). However, this classroom-based knowledge is very limited in its scope to help them perform in their internship. In order to gain better experience from the industry, hospitality students must demonstrate good analytical skills, independence and competency when performing the tasks assigned (Mihail, 2006). In addition, the hotel industry not only demands thorough academic knowledge but also traits such as good team player and problem-solving skills which are essential for a successful internship (Renganathan, Abdul Karim & Chong, 2012). During their internship, hospitality students not only have the opportunity to learn, but also interact and work with supervisors, colleagues and clients. This experience can equip them with the relevant knowledge and practical skills for a successful career start (Mihail, 2006). However, if the acquired knowledge is insufficient or not beneficial for them, they end up becoming demotivated and go off on a bad career start. As their expectations for their internship are unmet, a sense of overall disappointment with the industry develops and brings about a feeling of wasted time, money and effort (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Sadly, some students choose hospitality as a career path without fully understanding the practices, culture or working conditions of the industry.

## **Influence**

Personal expression is linked to work that influences professionalism (Fok & Yeung, 2016). This problem also occurs when there is a strong culture of company rules and disciplines (Fok & Yeung, 2016). However, a majority of internship students are not in favour of strict rules and regulations and readily disclose confidential information through social media. Since the social media has become an indispensable part of the young generation, the best way is avoid this is by manipulating this communication trend to support the needs of the working environment (Fok & Yeung, 2016).

Additionally, many graduates enter the job market expecting high-level managerial positions with good remuneration (Roney & Öztin, 2007) but unfortunately, when the reality contradicts with their expectations, it becomes a source of dissatisfaction. As with other industries, promotion is based on merit in the hospitality industry (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). However, at times, the opposite takes place and opportunities are limited. Not to mention, the number of years of hard work and sacrifices that seem to go unappreciated (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). All these become sources of dissatisfaction.

However, some trading enterprises are able to offer competitive salaries and benefits compared to hotels even though many students perceive hotel industry jobs as a shortcut to a higher position (Fok & Yeung, 2016).

On the other hand, some studies argue that organizational culture in the hospitality industry influences work attitude (Teng, 2008). For example, the informal rules of working extra hours generate job dissatisfaction and create a hindrance for jobseekers to work in hotels (Fok & Yeung, 2016). Internship students who are coached and supervised by bad managers or supervisors leave a bad taste and negative perception of the working world (Dhevabanchachai & Wattanacharoensil, 2017). Further, if the assigned supervisor or manager fails to impart the right knowledge or skills, the internship students' experience will be ineffective.

## **Ability**

Irregular or long working hours is not uncommon in the hospitality industry (Roney & Öztin, 2007). However, studies show that generation Y is averse to working irregular hours (Brown et al., 2015), be it during their internship or actual work.

Further, expectations of high pay, high qualifications for entry and working hours affect their decision to join this industry (Fok & Yeung, 2016). In some countries like Hong Kong and Australia, most students avoid this industry or would change their major of study after their internship (Fok & Yeung, 2016). As a result, employers continuously face a shortage of skilled workers and high retention costs (Fok & Yeung, 2016).

Sadly, many internship students do not acquire important working skills

such as problem-solving or financial skills. Additionally, the right work attitude and behaviour are the most critical elements for those working in this industry as performance is directly related to service excellence, which in turn contributes to the image of the company (Teng, 2008). Moreover, generic skills such as communication and personal relationship skills are not normally taught in the classroom, so it is questionable whether students graduate with these vital skills (Fok & Yeung, 2016).

## **Value**

Many internship students believe they can enter directly to management roles after graduating (Fok & Yeung, 2016). Furthermore, many do not understand the value of their job description. While the majority of them expect work and fairness in their internship, many come to a decision that they made the wrong career choice once they realise their work-life balance is compromised. Moreover, they have valid concerns about their personal development as to whether their employers will invest in training and development for them (Fok & Yeung, 2016). Thus, they would prefer to choose an industry that offers a satisfactory work-life balance (Teng, 2008).

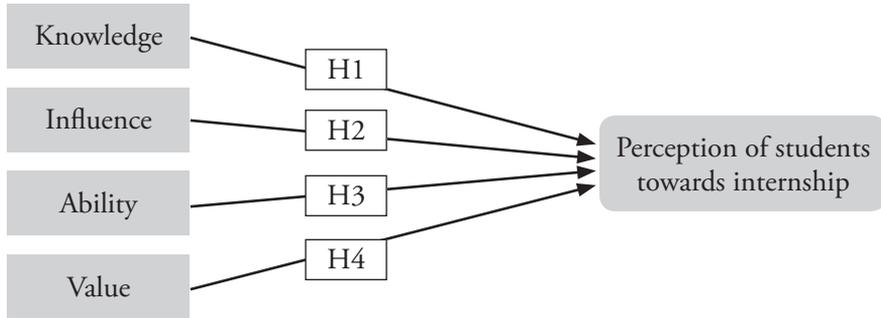
In order to be competent, interns are also expected to acquire vital work values such as teamwork, good ethics, productivity, honesty and integrity (Moghaddam, 2014). These values are related to the organisational culture to which interns will be exposed to during their internship. Therefore the organisational culture that one encounters may affect that person's value system. Thus the outcome of an effective internship program should not be limited to only providing industry-related skills but also integral values to help these interns face working life challenges (Moghaddam, 2014).

Some of internship students also perceive that hospitality-related careers are not highly valued in the society (Kuslivan & Kuslivan, 2000). There is also a common misconception that hospitality related careers are usually associated with the decay of morals. At times, managers value their employees' suggestions but not that of internship students. These managers also do not reward employees who do a good job (Kuslivan & Kuslivan, 2000).

Another reason why some expectations of the interns are unmet is the short internship period. Some interns believe it should be extended because they only have few weeks to learn about various roles and functions (Dhevabanchachai & Wattanacharoensil, 2017). Some interns admit they do not feel confident when it comes to operational work and often this leads to confusion about their future career (Dhevabanchachai & Wattanacharoensil, 2017).

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was developed based on the literature review discussed earlier and looks at the expectations of internship.



**Figure 4.1** Conceptual Framework

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Undergraduates perceive that the industry allows for more learning opportunities.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Undergraduates perceive that the industry allows for good career advancement.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Undergraduates perceive that internships provide an opportunity for explicit guidance by their supervisors

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Undergraduates perceive that internships are able to provide them with good career decision-making.

### Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach and data was collected using questionnaires. The study sample was chosen through purposive sampling, targeting students who are pursuing Hospitality diploma and degree programmes, who will be going for their 4-month internship and have not undergone any internship prior. In total, 142 questionnaires were collected in a period of 3 months. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to measure respondents' feedback, with "1" for "strongly agree" and "5" for "strongly disagree". The questionnaire was first tested in a pilot study with 10 Taylor's University students awaiting their internship. Minor changes were made to the order of the questions to explore further opinions on the topic. Content validity was employed to test the clarity of the construct dimensions used in the study (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2013). A reliability analysis was carried out and Cronbach's alpha was calculated at .948 for 7 items. Whereas for influence, the value was .941 for 6 items, ability was .905 for 7 items and for value was .883 for 6 items. Thus, these entire segments were confirmed reliable and acceptable to be used

in this study. Each item was correlated with its own scale and with other sub-scales. According to Sekaran & Bougie (2016), coefficients less than .60 are considered to be “poor”, those in the .70 range “acceptable”, and those over .80 “good”. Thus, the internal consistency of the statements used in this study can be considered good.

### Findings and Discussion

The first four questions of the questionnaire looked at demographics. The rest of the questionnaire looked at a list of factors that affect student’s expectations for their internship that emerged from the literature review. After examining the contents of these items, it was decided not to move or delete these items.

The sample consisted of 142 students, of which 35.5 % were male and 64.5 %, female (Table 1). All the respondents were undergraduate students between the ages of 18 to 25 years old. With regard to years of experience in the hotel industry 93 (58.1%) admitted that they did not have any hotel industry experience, 45 (28.1%) had 1 to 2 years of hotel industry experience and 3 (1.9%) had more than 2 years of hotel industry experience (Table 2). This shows that the majority of students did not have any working experience in hotel industry prior to any internship.

**Table 1.** Respondent by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	50	31.3
Female	91	56.9

**Table 2.** Respondent by years of experience

Years of Experience	Frequency	Percent
None	93	58.1
1-2 Years	45	28.1
> 2 years	3	1.9

In descriptive analysis, mean scores were derived (see Table 3) to determine student’s expectation of their internship. On average, students rated their industry expectation positively, with an overall mean score of 2.03. This implies that a majority of them assessed their expectation as “good” or “excellent”. The table also shows very high expectations (mean 2.56) during their internship for meetings and briefings and ability to make own decisions (mean 2.43). The finding also suggests that students want to be treated like a full-time employee (mean 2.32). This can be attributed to the majority of the students not having any experience in the hotel industry and their enthusiasm to learn new things. When asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to continue

working in the hotel industry during the internship, the mean value was calculated at 2.33. This indicates that about 63% are interested in continuing in this line of work but 26.3% are not. This could be due to student's expectations for very high salary, promotion, reasonable working hours and comfortable working conditions.

**Table 3.** Mean analysis of expectations of internships

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fun	141	2.3191	.88090
Coordination	141	2.0780	.98612
Treated	141	2.3050	.97059
Challenging	141	1.9858	.94858
Opportunity	141	2.2057	1.08574
Support	141	1.9291	1.05996
Training	141	2.0142	1.07561
Full-Time	141	2.3262	1.02467
Meeting Brief	141	2.5603	1.05132
Learnnew	141	1.7092	1.06596
Softskills	141	1.8156	1.07307
Apply	141	2.0638	1.09030
Orientation	140	2.0857	.94820
Professional	140	1.8786	1.04205
Return	141	2.3333	1.08672
Appreciated	141	2.1702	.98530
Responsibilities	141	2.0496	1.00943
acquaintances	141	2.0426	1.06148
Ekeeptrack	141	2.1773	1.03014
Skeeptrack	141	2.1915	.98499
Makedecision	141	2.4326	1.01633
Lexperience	141	2.1915	1.01359
Strengthen	141	1.9362	1.04343
Understand	141	1.8014	1.04348
Satisfied	140	2.2000	.91510
Career	140	2.1571	1.06123
Valid N (listwise)	137		

### Expectations in hotel industry internships

In view of the above findings, we decided to test any correlation of student's internship expectations. The dependent variable, overall expectation, was regressed on four items measuring students' internship expectations. The Pearson correlation analysis was performed to identify the factors and perceived image of student's expectations for their internship. Four factors were used to extract factors for expectations for

internship in the hotel industry. Thus all items with a factor loading of above 0.30 were included in the constructs. As shown in Table 4, the four factors extracted were “knowledge” (factor 1), “influence” (factor 2), “ability” (factor 3), and “values” (factor 4). Since all four factors showed a p-value of more than 0.05, we conclude that there is a significant difference between the four factors. The results indicate that the students have very high expectations for their internships in terms of knowledge, influence, ability and value. Belief was positively related to knowledge, as hypothesized ( $r = .049$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Additionally, value was also positively related to influence ( $r = .035$ ,  $p = .001$ ), ability ( $r = .053$ ,  $p = .001$ ), and value ( $r = .042$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 4.** Pearson correlation of student’s internship expectations

		<b>Expectations</b>
1. Knowledge	Pearson Correlation Significance (2-tailed) N	0.049141
2. Influence	Pearson Correlation Significance (2-tailed) N	0.0351411
3. Ability	Pearson Correlation Significance (2-tailed) N	0.0351411
4. Value	Pearson Correlation Significance (2-tailed) N	0.0421411

Ability (53%) was what most students expect from their internship. The second highest expectation was knowledge (49%). This is most probably because students expect to learn more than what was taught in the classroom. While some may believe knowledge taught in classrooms is sufficient for internships, in reality, this is not the case. This finding correlates with Roney & Öztin (2007) who noted that students value their internship experience. Moreover, if the internship is turned out satisfactory, more often than not, the interns strive to return to the same company as an intern or a full-time employee. These students tend to value the internship more as their supervisors supported them and were willing to teach.

Sadly, a majority of students fail to realize that their career is significantly affected based on their internship performance and progress and rightly, the internship stint propels them towards their future career goals.

## Conclusion

The findings show that all four factors listed were significantly important for students in building and understanding their perceptions; value, ability and influence significantly more than knowledge. While academics believe that knowledge is a never-ending journey, not all students share this view. Many seem to seek extrinsic and social values that may not be particularly aligned with the learning outcomes of the internship. Further, it may seem that students are not aware about the reality behind the glamour of the hospitality industry (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Proper guidance and proper internship programmes are a major concern. Additionally, the findings reveal that career retention was not affected by the outcome of the internship (mean 2.1). This rings alarm bells for all stakeholders concerned as it would be harder to find out the reasons behind the career choices of students.

As many of the high expectations before undergoing an internship was not met, this created dissatisfaction and demotivation. Based on the findings, the study suggests some recommendations to stakeholders. For the academic community, it is vital to build linkages with the industry to provide the right exposure and experience to students to align their expectations to the actual reality in order to avoid any disappointments. Industry players should take the initiative to start communicating with their future employees through platforms such as roadshows, talks, or seminars conducted at institutions with hospitality programmes. Employers should also take into account the new generation's different mind-set (especially the millennial) and work towards providing better work life balance in the jobs offered (Brown et al., 2015).

As this study is exploratory in nature, future research should utilise qualitative research to look in-depth on how hospitality students build their perceptions or expectations, and the effect it has on future career decisions. This would further help educational institutions develop better internship programmes that meet the expectations of students and requirements of other stakeholders.

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