Motivations and Attitudes of Students Towards Tourism and Hospitality Study: The Case of Thailand

Chanin Yoopetch, Mahidol University International College, Thailand
Jürg Stettler, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Switzerland

The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
As the tourism and hospitality industry in Thailand grows rapidly, the demand for new qualified human resources has also increased to support the development of the industry. The objective of the study is to explore motivations and attitudes of students and factors influencing their decision to study the tourism and hospitality program. With in-depth interviews, the results showed that the interest of starting their own business attracted the students to select the tourism and hospitality management program. The recommendations of parents and friends are crucial to the student’s decision to study. In addition, the opportunity to learn about improving service mind is considered one of the most attractive aspects of tourism and hospitality education. Discussions, conclusions and directions for future research are also provided.

Keywords: Motivations, Attitudes, Tourism and Hospitality Study

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org
Introduction

Tourism and hospitality program is the foundation for students to be well-equipped with skills and knowledge in order to work effectively in the workplace. Tourism industry is obviously crucial for Thai economy and its long-term economic development in the future. Tourism and hospitality sectors are also considered the important job markets for the new graduates. However, with the fast growth of tourism demand, hotels, tour operators, and airlines faced shortages in human resources across sectors.

The purpose of this study is to understand the motivations and attitudes of students in studying tourism and hospitality program in the context of Thailand, where tourism industry is the major driver for its economy. Thailand is known as one of the highly popular tourism destinations in Asia and the increasing number of international tourists has surged significantly in the past decades. In addition, to strengthen the foundation for long-term development of tourism industry, human resources are essential to be further developed and recruited for achieving sustainable growth in the future. Amoah and Baum (1997) noted that development of human resources in tourism is highly important to support the growth of the tourism industry in all levels, from operations to managerial levels. Furthermore, in order to enhance the quality of human resource development, tourism education should be consistently improved to be in line with the tourism and hospitality trends or new groups of tourists. Dale and Robinson (2001) stated that tourism education has to combine both theory and practices and tourism stakeholders have responsibilities to also help shaping the tourism education policy so that the graduates can be well-prepared to start working the industry.

Tourism activities in developing countries has been growing rapidly, especially in tourism education (Zhao, 1991 and Airey et al., 2015) in response to the need for the systematic management in tourism and hospitality sectors. This implied the necessity of tourism and hospitality education to be developed to cope with the fast growth in tourism development, driven obviously by tourism demand in the developing countries.
Literature Review

Tourism education
Based on the study of Amoah and Baum (1997), several aspects should be incorporated in developing the new groups of tourism human resources, including acquiring new information technology and facilities, raising the image of careers in tourism, and responding to the new demand of tourists. Mayaka and Akama (2007) and Hjalager (2003) identified that human resource training and capacity building, especially at supervisory and managerial level, are the key for success to support tourism development in the developing countries. In addition, this effort should be supported by governmental organizations and tourism educators. Sheldon et al., (2008) and Hjalager (2003) highlighted that there are five important skills for students to develop to be successful in tourism organizations, including destination stewardship skills, political skills, ethical skills, enhanced human resource skills, and dynamic business skills. Obviously all these skills require time and willingness to develop through years of practical experiences. O’Mahony (2015), noted that government has great responsibility to promote tourism and hospitality to prepare the human resources to support the growing demand of tourism, because it is not only the functional skills, but it is also about the knowledge and managerial skills to develop the tourism and hospitality organizations successfully. According to Wu et al., (2014), one of the limitations in tourism education is that faculty members lacked practical industry experiences, affecting the student’s perspectives about the expectation about the real work environment. Sigala and Baum (2003), noted that there are five forces of change, which affected tourism education, including global competition, the student market, educators and teaching methods, and the changing characteristics of tourism and hospitality industry. According to Sigala and Baum (2003) and O’Mahony (2015), there are clear challenges for both students and universities to adapt in order to meet with the environmental changes, especially information literacy and knowledge management skills. Formica (1996), Sheldon et al., (2008) and Hjalager (2003) suggested that the development of hospitality and tourism education needed to be international standards (such as American or European standards). For example, it is beneficial to students to have a combination of European and American educational systems to enhance the perspectives of students when it comes to working the real environment because the customers can come from anywhere around the world. Tourism educators can provide clear career paths for the tourism students so that the students can have sustainable career in the future (Dale and Robinson, 2001). Based on the study of Airey et al., (2015) and Wu et al., (2014), tourism education has significant impact on the quality of their graduates. Therefore, the measurements of the tourism and hospitality program development are crucial to verify the quality of those educational programs for students to work effectively in their careers.

Motivations to study tourism and hospitality management
In order to study in any educational field, students are driven by different motivations in finding information, selecting the program, and deciding to pursue their career goals through the education. Kim et al., (2007) stated that based on the empirical research of the students from China, Taiwan and South Korea, there are six types of motivation, including job opportunity, interest in practical aspects, scholastic achievement, apparent attraction, interest in foreign country, and ease in studying. Furthermore, Cothran and Combrink (1999) indicated that it is worth exploring the
level of motivation in different ethnic group to identify similarities and differences among many countries to achieve better understanding. In addition, Kim et al., (2007), stated that students studying tourism and hospitality programs in several countries had different types of motivation and the level of motivation for each nationality was also varied.

Attitudes towards Tourism and Hospitality
Attitudes toward the industry can directly affect how tourism and hospitality graduates intended to work or to join the industry after their studies. Li et al., (2012) and Beeka and Rimmington (2011) noted that students tended to have positive attitudes towards the tourism industry in terms of career orientation and employment. Furthermore, the attitudes about working in tourism sectors can also influence the length of time that the employees will continue to work in that industry or to change to work in other industries. In addition, Getz (1994) conducted the longitudinal study on the change in perceptions and attitudes towards careers in tourism and hospitality and found that people working in the industry for over 14 years had higher negative attitudes towards the industry. The reasons for having negative attitudes included the absence of local training, problems in local tourism industry and increasing negative views about their jobs.

Research Methodology

Demographic information was collected at the beginning of each interview. The semi-structured interviews allowed in-depth investigation that included key terms of the study, such as intention to work in the tourism and hospitality industry, sources of influence for their decision, and expected duration of working in the field.

Furthermore, interview process was designed to be open-ended and flexible, giving participants opportunity to develop their responses. During the interview, related questions were included to be consistent with qualitative semi-structured interview approach. 35 interviews with current students of tourism and hospitality programs in Thailand were conducted. The target samples were undergraduate students from the first year to the fourth year in order to understand viewpoints of all the groups.

Results

Demographic characteristics indicated that more than half of the respondents (65%) were female students. Out of 35 respondents, 25% were first year students, 20% were in their second year, 18% were in the third year and the rest were in the fourth year and beyond. Our interviews indicated that the students provided insights related to the key concepts of the study, including types of motivation and positive and negative attitudes towards the industry.

From the results and keywords mentioned by the respondents, the key themes can be concluded into several important aspects as follows.

Information Search
To find information about the university, programs and other details of the tourism and hospitality program, students received information from mainly teachers, advertisements, social media (e.g. Facebook) and university websites.
One respondent stated that “I learned about the program from my high school consultant.” Another respondent noted that “I know it from advertisement, Facebook and the university websites”.

-Motivations to study tourism and hospitality programs

Learning about the program through various sources, the respondents contemplated and eventually decided to study. Entrepreneurial opportunity is one of the motivations for students to study tourism and hospitality. The growth and important roles of tourism industry to the Thai economy clearly affected the students’ decision. In addition, the nature of industry is attractive to many respondents. One respondent stated that “Tourism and hospitality are the main source of income in Thailand. So, I want to be in the growing industry and in addition, knowledge from this field can be adapted to my own business in the future....”

A male respondent noted that “After graduation, I want to start my own boutique hotel. I want to learn how the hotel operates. This can help me to prepare myself to start my own business. There are great opportunities for young people now to start their own companies.”

Furthermore, one female student mentioned that “I love hospitality business and I love to service people to make them happy.”

Another student noted that “Thailand is known for tourism and has more opportunity to grow in the future. That is why I join the program.” Moreover, the influence of parents and friends are highly crucial for the educational decision. This issue was mentioned by many respondents.

One respondent stated that “For me, it is really important to meet parent’s expectation and that is also self-preference in my career.”

Another respondent said that “I am usually influenced by my friends and parents. They have high influence on my decision about big issues in life”.

-External environments

About 70% (25 respondents) said clearly that the growth of Thai tourism and hospitality had a major impact on joining the program. The continuous growth in hotels and tourism businesses has spread from highly popular tourism destinations (e.g. Chiang Mai and Pattaya) to smaller destinations around the country. This led to the development of new tourism destination to be promoted to both Thai and foreign tourists.

One stated that “Since tourism businesses are still growing not just in Thailand but also in the southeast Asian region. It helps opening more opportunities for works and career growth”.

Another student mentioned that “As in Thailand now, there is an increasing number of international tourists and there are many more activities to help promote tourism in Thailand. The more I hear about the development of tourism development and strong supports from the government in both policy implementation and the
involvement of several organizations to increase the importance of tourism industry. So, I feel that I want to be working in this industry”.

-Benefits from studying in tourism and hospitality program

Based on the results of the interview, the respondents noted that the main purpose of joining the tourism and hospitality program is to prepare themselves for work in the industry. Most respondents acknowledged that they have gained variety of useful concepts and practical skills.

One stated that “The main benefits for me are to be able to handle a variety of things at the same time, including customer services, manners, language and people.”

Another student mentioned that “The most important thing that I learned is that I have a chance to study about people, or customers and it is complicated but there are many ways that I can apply to those issues.” One respondent stated that “I feel that I am equipped with knowledge and skills that I can work in many different types of tourism and hospitality fields.”

-Attitudes to tourism and hospitality program

Regarding attitudes of the respondents, in terms of positive aspects, the respondents explained that tourism and hospitality industry is about happiness (making people happy) and good income as the respondents stated as shown below; “For me the most attractive feature of this field is that we can find the solutions to meet the needs and wants of the tourists and the hotel guests. I like to service people and make them happy.”

“It is fun and the returns are high.”

“The characteristics of tourism and hospitality are to always be active and I can always meet new people. I hate working on the desk with only papers and files.”

On the contrary, a number of respondents mentioned some of their negative aspects, such as uncertain working hours, stress from dealing with difficult customers. Some of their responses were identified as follows; “Most works have uncertain working hours. We have to work in shifts and it is difficult to manage time.”

“Dealing with difficult customers appears to be the unavoidable issue and it can be very stressful.”

“Time management is the real challenge because in tourism and hospitality industry, you tend to have different working periods from other industries.”

In addition, external environments played important roles in the ups and downs of tourism industry. One male respondent noted that “I feel that tourism industry is highly sensitive to the political situations happening in Thailand. Some hotels had extremely low occupancy during the political unrest. If this persists, I do not know whether I want to continue working in this industry, because it means that I may not have a stable or good income in the future.”

To summarize the results from the interview, the Figure 1 was drawn to represent the findings.
External Environment (e.g. economic, political factors and trends)

Figure 1: The Model of Studying Tourism and Hospitality

Figure 1 summarized the results and key themes of the study. External environments, including the growth of tourism development, provided greater opportunities for the students to pursue their career and to earn a good salary. In addition, motivations and attitudes toward tourism industry led students to join the tourism and hospitality program.
Discussions

Based on the results, respondents stated that learning in tourism and hospitality program supported them to improve both knowledge and practical skills to be ready to work in the future. The study of Sigala and Baum (2003) and Hjalager (2003) had also highlighted that there is a challenge in tourism education to properly prepare students to be ready for real work life in the tourism industry.

Variety of motivations was mentioned such as loving to travel, gaining high income, and having service mind. Similar findings were also found in the work of Kim et al., (2007). In terms of attitudes, most students indicated positive attitudes towards tourism industry and expecting to be working in the industry. This is supported by Li et al., (2012). In addition, tourism industry of Thailand has been well-known among international tourists and the number of tourists has been increasing annually, despite of some political problems. The political and economic environments caused the changes in attitudes of the respondents. For example, a series of negative political unrest made the respondents uncertain about the future of the industry and they cannot decide whether they will continue to be a part of the industry in the long run.

The respondents feel that they can earn good income working in tourism and hospitality industry. This may result from the great importance of tourism for Thailand and therefore, the income discrepancy was not significant comparing with those working in other industries in Thailand. However, the work of Chang and Tse (2015), showed that graduates in tourism and hospitality field earned less than those in other industries.

Most students are concerned about salaries and other benefits that can be earned from the organizations. This is supported by the study of Shibata et al., (2015). Suriyent et al., (2014) support that job characteristics, which should match with the employee expectation, can influence the decision to leave or to stay with the organizations.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Positive attitudes and passion to service others are important for the students to join the tourism and hospitality program to later build their career. In addition, tourism industry in Thailand has generated income for the country and tourism and hospitality organizations. For this reason, working in this area can gain high financial returns and employee benefits, not less than in other industries, and this dimension of the findings is different from the past literature. However, the current study was conducted in the context of emerging countries and therefore this may present the limitation of the findings to be used to explain the context of developed countries, such as Switzerland.

This raised a crucial point for further study and also an important concern for sustainable human resource development for the industry. In order to improve tourism education and the future of tourism industry, tourism educators have to always update the contents and topics provided in the curriculum so that students can directly start working in the industry.

Future research may investigate the changing nature of tourism and hospitality education as mentioned by Sigala and Baum (2003) and its role on intention to work after graduation. In addition, more research studies should be conducted in the area of cultural dimensions of working in tourism and hospitality industry. The level of development of tourism industry in different countries can affect its tourism and hospitality job markets.
References


**Contact email:** chanin.yoo@mahidol.ac.th