



## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Career Perception of Undergraduate Students on Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Thailand**

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**Tourism and Hospitality Industry is the largest foreign exchange generator in Thailand. Beyond its adverse effects, it has been justified that tourism generates employability. But still it is often criticized as generating low-skilled and low-paying jobs that offer little job satisfaction. This research was conducted based on a previously tested model to understand the underlying factors influencing students' commitment to employment in the tourism and hospitality industry. Based on the literature review surrounding the topic, six factors i.e., nature of work, social status, career prospects, promotion opportunities, physical working conditions, pay and fringe are the likely benefits to influence commitment. The model was tested using responses collected from 110 students studying tourism and hospitality related undergraduate programs in various Institutions of Thailand. The study relied on the use of a structured questionnaire which was pilot tested with 30 students. The results of One-Way ANOVA indicate that the factor 'Nature of Work' is not strongly associated with the variable, "the advantages of working in tourism outweigh the disadvantages", but have positive relationship. Regression analysis performed based on enter method shows that all variables related to Nature of work ( $b=4.45$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) have significant and positive impact towards overall evaluation for working in tourism industry except one variable, 'meeting new people by working in tourism' is a pleasant experience having negative impact on overall evaluation.**

**Keywords:** Career perception, undergraduate students, tourism and hospitality industry.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Thailand's tourism industry contributes a major proportion to the country's GDP. When looking into statistics of the number of tourist arrivals, number of hotels and number of destinations, it is obvious that substantial proportion of GDP would increase. In 2012, the tourist revenue accounted for 983,928 billion Thai baht. It was more than 34 billion U.S. Dollars at the exchange rate, at that time.

Visitors spend about 4,800 Thai baht per day, and stay about 10 days on an average.

Thailand has a tourist season, when more visitors arrive. The Figure-1 presents the quarterly arrivals of tourists between 2007 -2014. In every quarter of this period, the tourists' arrival has always increased. Nevertheless, the tourism sector does not only depend

on foreign visitors, but also the domestic tourists. The number of domestic tourists is more than the number of foreign tourists. However, the local tourists do spend much less per day and their trips are shorter, on average two days and a half.

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry and a major source of employment. A principal argument made for encouraging the development of tourism is that it produces a considerable number of jobs, both directly in the sectors, in which, tourist expenditure occurs and more widely via inter-industry linkages. The growth of tourism and related employment is seen as part of the broad shift from manufacturing to a service economy in many developed and developing countries, around the world. However, even though development of tourism industry creates new employment opportunities, it is often criticized as generating low-skilled and low-paying jobs that offer little job satisfaction. Consequently, the tourism industry has a reputation for high staff turnover and a waste of trained personnel. The Quality of Hotel and Tourism Industry depends on the quality of manpower involved and with Tourism being the largest in Thailand the demand for manpower is expected to increase in the coming years. If today's students are going to become the practitioners of tomorrow, it is fundamental to understand their perception towards their employment with the Industry. This research paper focuses on undergraduate level students with Hotel and Tourism as major in Thailand, and analyzes their perception towards the Industry.

### **Statement of Problem**

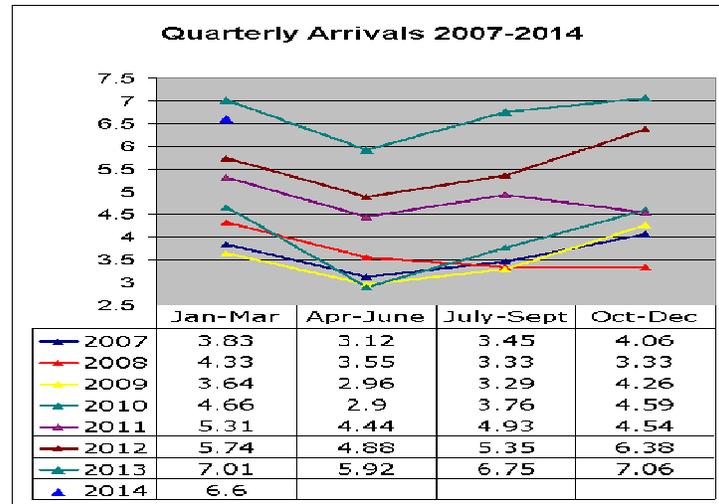
The Growth of Hotel and Tourism Industry to a large extent depends on the employment of well educated, motivated and committed people. It is important to provide qualified tourism students with a positive attitude towards work in the hotel and tourism industry. According to Blomme (2006), many students who embark on a tourism and hospitality education trek do not join the trade, upon graduation. It is generally taken that students who enroll in a hospitality course will pursue a career in the tourism and hospitality industry immediately after graduation. This research looks at the perceptions and attitudes of students who are joining the Hotel and Tourism trade after graduating in Thailand. It seeks to understand the causes and factors that are attracting or repelling students from joining the industry. As future employees and managers of the industry (Kusluvan & Kusluvan 2000), the students' understanding and perception of career in tourism and hospitality in Thailand and beyond need to enhance. Undoubtedly, the continued prosperity of tourism depends to a large extent, on the employment of well educated, motivated and committed people, who are satisfied with their jobs, it is

important to provide qualified tourism students with a positive attitude towards work in the tourism industry.

### **Review of Literature**

Early researchers have examined management within the hospitality industry for many reasons, including: examining job satisfaction of general managers (Frye & Mount, 2007), determining factors on a resume that may lead to being contacted for an interview (Countryman & Horton, 2006), and determining the causes of management turnover and what could be done to increase retention (Stalcup & Pearson, 2001; Walsh & Taylor, 2007). In addition, research has been done examining graduates from specific institutions (Walsh & Taylor, 2007) as well as perceptions of current students and what they expect when they graduate (Richardson, 2009). Blomme, Van Rheede, and Tromp (2009) found differences between pre- and post-entry expectations of hospitality management graduates in the hospitality industry. However, no past research has examined differences in hospitality graduates with respect to experiences, importance, and turnover in the hospitality industry. Researchers have found many hospitality graduates either never entered the industry, or left the industry with no intent to return (Blomme et al., 2009; King, McKercher, & Waryszak, 2003; Stalcup & Pearson, 2001; Walsh & Taylor, 2007). In addition, Blomme et al. found significant differences in pre- and post-entry expectations of hospitality graduates.

Although there is substantial literature about tourism employment, only a limited number of studies were conducted to highlight the perceptions of students towards careers in the tourism industry. This means that more empirical studies focusing on tourism students' perceptions of the industry are needed in order to evaluate the status of tourism jobs in the human resources (HR) planning process for the tourism sector. Several researchers have also studied the perceptions of undergraduate tourism and hospitality management students. Casado's (1992) survey on student expectations of hospitality jobs revealed that, although they tended to be fairly realistic before their graduation, the turnover of these students seemed to be high. Barron and Maxwell (1993) examined the perceptions of new and continuing students at Scottish higher education institutions. They found that in general the new students had positive images of the industry, whereas the students with supervised work experience were much less positive in their views. Purcell and Quinn (1995) surveyed 704 former tourism students and discovered that graduates complained of having little opportunity to develop their managerial skills. A relatively recent study, conducted by Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000), of four-year tourism and hotel management students, in seven different schools in



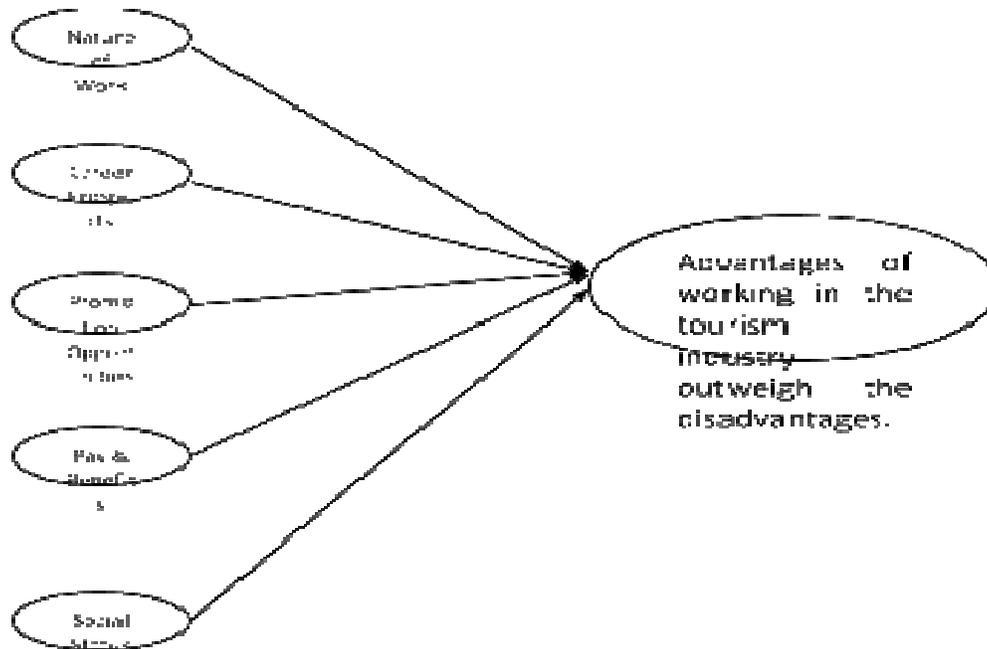
**Figure 1.** Number of Tourists' Arrival (in millions)

Turkey, reported negative perceptions towards different dimensions of working in tourism. Kozak and Kızıllırmak (2001) carried out a similar survey among the undergraduate tourism students in three different vocational schools in Turkey. Like Barron and Maxwell, they too indicated that work experience as a trainee in the industry affected their perceptions in a negative way. In his comparative study of hospitality students' future perceptions at two different universities in the UK and in the Netherlands, Jenkins (2001) also showed that, as they progress in their degree, the students' perceptions of the industry tend to deteriorate

Studies completed on perceptions and attitudes of tourism as a career have widely reported that students perceive the industry as having poor wages, low stability, poor working hours and working conditions (Aksu & Köksal, 2005; Barron & Maxwell, 1993; Barron, et al., 2007; Chellen & Nunkoo, 2010; Kim, McCleary, & Kaufman, 2010; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Richardson, 2008, 2009a; Richardson, 2010a, 2010b; Roney & Öztin, 2007). This also reflects the characteristics of the industry that were discussed previously. Students can be seen as the future face of the tourism and hospitality industry and therefore it is imperative to understand their employment intentions. Some evidence shows that students and graduates of tourism and hospitality programs have little or no intention of entering the industry upon graduation (King, Mc Kercher, & Waryszak, 2003). King et al. (2003) found that approximately half of their Melbourne and Hong Kong tourism and hospitality graduate respondents never entered the industry or if they did, they left within a few years. This is an alarming statistic for the tourism and hospitality industry. Another study completed in the Netherlands and the UK found that a high percentage, over 70%, of students in their first year of studying hospitality at a degree level would look for work in the

industry but as students progressed into their degree this decreased to as low as 13% (Jenkins, 2001).

Kim (2008), in his research, concluded that the majority of the students wanted to work in the tourism industry after graduation. Richardson and Butler (2009) determined as a result of their study on career expectations of tourism students that the students did not believe tourism would present significant opportunities with regard to their career in the future. Sibson (2011) determined that an interesting and fun job and a pleasant working environment had a positive effect on the career choice. Zengin (2011) determined in a study carried out for the students' career expectations that gender was an important factor in making career plans, females preferred to work in the human resources department more than males and males preferred security department more than females. Baltacı (2012) concluded in his field survey for measuring satisfaction from education that the students preferred tourism department unconsciously, senior students' concerns for the future increased, and their satisfaction from education decreased. According to the results of their study for measuring the opinions and career expectations of undergraduate students in tourism degrees, Korkmaz et al. (2012) indicated that students perceived working conditions in the sector as negative. However, most of the students would like to pursue a career in the sector. It is also characterized by a vast range of perceptions which include low wages, poor working conditions, unsocial working hours, high levels of staff turnover, a low skill base, seasonality and high mobility (see Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge, & Ogden, 2007; Baum, 2006; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). These features result in fluctuations of employment for people and this in turn, calls into question why so many people put up with the unpredictability of employment (Shaw &



**Figure 2.** The Conceptual Model

Williams, 2002). Such challenges for the industry are an old phenomenon and date back over a century (Baum, 2006). With these issues still in existence today it is necessary to understand how tertiary education in tourism/hospitality impacts upon students' perceptions.

As current students are the next cohort of employees to enter the tourism/hospitality industry it can be anticipated that perception changes may begin to emerge as a result of increased graduate numbers, and that they may be different to those who currently work in the industry that may be without formal tertiary qualifications. Yet, there is such a diversity of tourism and hospitality education providers and therefore, some suggestions have surfaced that the industry does not value a tertiary qualification (specifically a degree) and is unlikely to employ graduates, opting instead for employing people with experience instead (Ayres, 2006; Costley, 2011; Dale & Robinson, 2001; Harkison, Poulston, & Kim, 2011; Jameson & Holden, 2000; Liburd & Hjalager, 2010).

If hospitality graduates are entering the industry without an accurate understanding of the industry, this could be the cause of many leaving the hospitality industry. With hospitality management graduates not working in the hospitality industry, and instead working in other areas, it is important to determine where gaps exist so educators and practitioners can make a difference. A discrepancy between what employees expect and what they experience has been suggested as one of the reasons hospitality employees leave the industry (Blomme et al., 2009; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Because turnover is high in the hospitality industry and retaining educated staff is becoming increasingly difficult

(Walsh & Taylor, 2007), determining the gap between importance and experiences of hospitality graduates is important, so educators and industry professionals can attempt to reduce the gap.

Some research completed on students' perceptions of the tourism and hospitality industry reveals that some perceptions are not as bad as first assumed and that in some countries (Mauritius, Australia and Turkey) students are interested in entering the industry (Petrova & Mason, 2004). In Mauritius, Chellen and Nunkoo (2010) found that over 80% of respondents were pleased to have chosen to study tourism and that they would like to work in the industry, with 61% of respondents not planning on working in any other industry. Also a study on tourism undergraduate perceptions in Turkey found that approximately 65% of respondents wanted to work in the industry once they had graduated and surprisingly a higher percentage (76%) of respondents had work experience in the industry (Roney & Öztin, 2007). Australian school-leavers were also interested in entering the management aspect of the industry (58%), in particular those whose family or friends had already employed in the industry (Ross, 1992b).

Previous studies have found that hospitality students are much less committed to the hospitality industry when they have more experience within the profession (Purcell and Quinn, 1996; Getz, 1994). Research has also shown that internship experience negatively affects the hospitality students' attitudes toward the industry and their intentions in terms of getting hospitality jobs (Waryszak, 1999). Zhang and Wu (2004) also identify that most students of vocational hospitality and tourism

**Table 1.** Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
Nature of Work	.834 <sup>a</sup>	.695	.687	.42168	.695	80.618	3	106	.000
Career Growth	.930 <sup>a</sup>	.865	.861	.28092	.865	225.936	3	106	.000
Social Status	.955 <sup>a</sup>	.913	.910	.22594	.913	368.565	3	106	.000
Pay Benefits	.981 <sup>a</sup>	.962	.961	.14943	.962	888.034	3	106	.000
Promotion Opportunities	.975 <sup>a</sup>	.951	.951	.16699	.951	2110.214	1	108	.000

colleges in China know very little about hotels and tourism before entering colleges and many of them experience a “reality shock” when they find out more about hospitality and tourism operations.

Finally, the most recent survey, conducted by Aksu and Köksal (2005) at the Akdeniz University School of Tourism and Hotel Management in Antalya, investigated the main expectations of students from the tourism industry. The results indicated that generally they had low expectations. However, positive perceptions were found among respondents who had: chosen the school as one of their top three choices at the university entrance exam; chosen the school willingly; and carried out practical work experience outside of Turkey. This research seeks to fill the gap by enhancing the students’ understanding and commitment towards tourism industry in Thailand based on theoretical framework of Chellen and Nunkoo (2010). The proposed model is shown in Figure-2 and focuses on the factors that have a direct bearing on the level of commitment toward the industry.

## METHODOLOGY

The research adopted descriptive research design. The graduate students from hotel and tourism are the target population for the study. Thus, the generation of population frame was derived from the list of colleges located in Thailand. The size of the population was estimated based on the number of colleges taken for the study; the 4 colleges chosen for the study are located at Bangkok. The colleges were chosen based on its reputation and existence in the education sector. From the estimated population (120), a sample frame had been effectively generated using random digit number table and simple random sampling method was adopted to select the samples of students in 4 different colleges. The sample frame for the study is the graduate students of hospitality and tourism (from the list) on the day, the researcher conducted interviews with them. The sample

size was estimated with the help of online sample size calculator specially designed for such kind of study (Rao software Sample Size Calculator, 2013). The margin of error is 5 percent (thumb rule) (The margin of error is the amount of error can tolerate in a research). The confidence level is 95 percent (99%, 95%, 90% are the standards) (The confidence level is the amount of uncertainty can tolerate). The response distribution is 50 percent (what percent of expected the results from the question). Thus, the estimated sample size was 92. It was targeted to do interview schedule for a minimum of 92 and any number above the target yield better results

The primary data were collected by interview with a structured questionnaire and secondary data from the statistical reports of Thailand, journals, magazines, published thesis, websites and books relevant to career perception of Graduate students towards hospitality education. Hypotheses on work related variables and perception were framed and tested in the study. The gathered data was statistically treated with tools Descriptive statistics, One-Way ANOVA, Correlation and Multiple Regression

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

It is inferred that in overall, female respondents were the majority i.e., 78.2% with a major proportionate of 53.5% and 35.5% from final year and third year respectively, among the sample. From the results it is inferred that only 3.6% of the respondents had previous qualification such as vocational or short term courses related to tourism and hospitality industry. The most important finding of the results is that, majority of the students i.e., 92.7% of the respondents chose tourism and hospitality willingly as their major field of study. It is also inferred from the results that 53.6% of the respondents had early practical experience in the field of tourism and hospitality industry, which mean they already knew about the industry and its working atmosphere and 46.4% of the responded did not

have any practical experience or knowledge about tourism or hospitality industry. This research also explored the fact that most of the respondents i.e. 85.5% have either their friends or relatives working in the Industry.

From the overall research, it is understood that only 70.9% of the respondents have their intention to work in tourism industry after graduation and 29.1% of them don't have the intention at all to work with tourism related industry. And, among the respondents who had an intention to work with the Industry, 51.8% have Accommodation industry as their choice of preference to enter and 9.1% are interested to work with food and beverage outlets. Among the remaining respondents, 2.7%, 1.8%, 2.7% & 2.7% answered Travel agency / tour operators, Air transportation, entertainment industry and other industry respectively, as their choice of entry after graduation.

The results of One-Way ANOVA indicates that all the attributes related to nature of work, career growth, promotion opportunities, pay benefits and career growth are less than 0.05, except the attribute 'irregular working hours'. Hence, the hypothesis is rejected to accept that there is significant difference in students' perception towards career in hotel and tourism. But for the variable irregular working hours in tourism, it affects family life and meeting people by working in tourism is a pleasant experience; as far nature of work factor, it does not differ among the students. Students have same kind of perception towards these two variables and for other variables significant difference exists. The factor 'Nature of work' is not strongly associated with the variable "the advantages of working in tourism outweigh the disadvantages", but have positive relationship. And, all the other factors are better correlated with each other (Table-1).

The results of regression analysis (table 1.1) performed based on enter method shows that all variables related to Nature of work ( $b=4.45$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) has significant and positive impact towards overall evaluation for working in tourism industry, except one variable, meeting new people by working in tourism is a pleasant experience, having negative impact on overall evaluation. The factors career growth ( $b=-.296$ ;  $p>0.05$ ); promotion opportunities ( $b=-.659$ ;  $p<0.05$ ); pay benefits ( $b=-.289$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) and social status ( $b=-.689$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), it is insignificant and have negative impact towards overall evaluation for working in tourism industry, whereas, the individual variables have positive impact on the overall evaluation. And, it is evident from the table that the model is fit with good R-Square and Adjusted R-Square Values.

The point to ponder out here is that students' career perception towards all the factors related to hotel and tourism industry is highly positive except for one factor i.e. the nature of work, because nature of work has positive impact, but not has greater impact like other factors.

## SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

It is obviously noted that there is a difference between the level of students' career perception towards hotel and tourism industry. As earlier pointed out, the students have differences in the levels from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The colleges can promote hotel and tourism courses to eliminate the differences in the level of student' perception and can bring positive level of perception for investing their career in the industry. The Tourism Authority can emphasize the importance of tourism in the country. Also, the colleges can motivate students by building awareness about the tourism and hospitality related courses. Further, it is suggested that the Nature of Work doesn't correlate stronger, and its impact is low on the variable; the advantages of working in tourism industry outweigh the disadvantages. In future, the educational institutions can consider this factor, explain about the concept of work with leisure, fun and joy and counsel the students on the nature of work factor and turn it on to positive perception. The perception of students can be turned on to positive, from the 1<sup>st</sup> year. And, extensive promotion of courses can be done by colleges with the support of government.

This research addresses the students' career perception towards hotel and tourism industry. It reveals the perception of students towards hotel and tourism industry and answers the queries like, what is the present level of students' career perception? Is there any difference in the level of perception of students towards various factors? Is there positive relationship among the factors related to students' career perception on hotel and tourism industry? Is there positive impact of all the factors related to career perception towards advantages of hotel and tourism industry? And, it provides information related to perception of students towards hotel and tourism industry. These findings would help Colleges, Universities and Tourism Authority in Thailand to design the course curriculum and job description to ensure job opportunities that fits and reflects positive perception of students' towards hotel and tourism industry in the future. Also, this will enhance the interest of students towards the field and make them positively perceive!

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