An Evaluation of Graduates’ Perception on Employment in Tourism and Hospitality Industry

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Abstract

An individual’s perception on his career is of pivotal to be successful in any context. Tourism industry employment being of great significant at this junction in Sri Lanka, the employment potential and the true feelings on this of its future leaders is of critical for the success of fast growing tourism industry of the country. The present study is an examination of the feelings, attitudes and perceptions of graduates who join tourism industry in Sri Lanka and other countries. Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) works closely with public and private organizations to train and develop required employees to the fast growing industry. At present, tourism and hospitality related degree programs for local students are conducted by four public universities in the country. Approximately, 200 fresh graduates join the industry annually from government universities and graduate contribution to tourism workforce has been increased with positivity. According to tourism strategy 2011-2016 the annual output of 1500 graduates is the industry requirement to facilitate 2.5million tourists in 2016. Moreover, employee attitudes, performance, and behavior are key determinants of service quality, which has a direct linkage to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser Jr., & Schlesinger, 1994). An employee’s commitment to any industry will be determined by his or her perceptions and attitudes toward working in the industry and the types of jobs available in the industry. Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) argue that this is particularly pertinent to the tourism and hospitality industry as it has been reported that working in the industry has a negative image in the eyes of potential recruits (Aksu&Koksal, 2005; Brien, 2004; Getz, 1994; Kusluvan&Kusluvan, 2000). Therefore, it is essential for tourism and hospitality management graduates to have a positive attitude toward working in the industry (Kusluvan&Kusluvan, 2000). Amidst this background, the continuation of graduate employees and their attitudes to remain in the industry has mostly been discussed in the society.

The primary objective of this study is to examine and evaluate the attitudes and perception of graduates from Sri Lankan government universities on their employment in tourism industry in Sri Lanka and other countries. This would be of great significance for human resource developers and planners in tourism and hospitality industry. The population for the study being all the graduates who joined different sectors in hospitality and tourism industry, a sample of 120 graduate employees representing four government universities were selected using the cluster sampling and convenience sampling techniques considering their working sections. Reviewing the related literature, a questionnaire was prepared including semi-structured questions. Telephone interviews and Skype communication technology were employed to gather primary data from the respondents as they have been working in Sri Lanka and in foreign countries. Secondary data were collected from documents of government universities, tourism employment related books, journals and research papers. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been used to analyze data since such an approach provide the opportunity to examine details and feelings of respondents while scientific
approach supported with quantitative analysis. The collected data were imported into Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) where descriptive analysis and t-tests were undertaken.

Results revealed that 66 percent of respondents are currently working in the tourism industry with positive perception due to main four factors; position received, compensation package, relevant knowledge and skills and available opportunities for carrier development. However, it has been recorded that 34 percent of respondents are with negative perceptions due to working schedules, job environment and personal attitudes.

Even though early researches found negative perception among tourism and hospitality graduates towards their employment, according to the findings of the current study, they have come up with positive perceptions than negative perceptions. It was also found that female graduate employees are not working in both housekeeping and culinary departments in hotel sector because of heavy works, lack of significant technical skills in area and availability of high male employees. However, it is needed to improve attitudes of undergraduates emphasizing the career progress in line with their basic knowledge. Further educating parents and the entire society regarding the tourism is a must in order to maintain positivity while converting things from negativity to positivity. Future researches should be focused to identify the intentions of potential students following tourism related degrees.

Key words: Tourism industry, employments, perception, graduates

Introduction

The Sri Lankan government has set a target of attracting 2.5 million high spending tourists by the year 2016. The five year master plan prepared by the Ministry of Economic Development for the period of 2011-2016 addresses a range of issues related to Sri Lankan Tourism including environmental, social, cultural, economic and institutional in order to create a favorable platform to achieve targeted tourist turnover by 2016. One main issue is increasing tourism related employment from 125000 to 500000 by expanding tourism based activities and services in Sri Lanka. Many kind of degrees, diplomas and courses have been formed to meet identified human resource gap in accommodation and in related services providing necessary training as required by the industry. Sri Lanka Tourism works closely with local universities, industry partners and other institutions to build and produce human resource requirement to the industry which is about 1500 graduates, the annual industry requirement. Specially, local public universities offer industry related degrees including co-courses to enrich industrial knowledge while sharpening the soft skills and broad general education. However, the hospitality and tourism sector encounters problems with a poor image.

According to the George Street Research in 2002, the majority of respondents for his study stated that they did not have a good understanding of the range of jobs and career opportunities available. Moreover, attitudes can be as important as the knowledge gained in studies to retain in the industry. Students and new graduates should approach the industry with a positive image of its opportunities and working conditions. Currently, some work experience (casual or formal requirements) gained during studies colors students' views negatively through a combination of various factors including extensive work demands, low wages and relatively poor working conditions. This does little to encourage the best graduates to work in the sector (David L. and Sandra W., 2004). The cost and efforts to build them as graduates are useless if they are not remaining in the industry. Amidst to this background it is essential to examine and evaluate the perception of hospitality and tourism graduates on their employment as positivity and continuity of them are needed to tourism industry. The findings of this study will be useful for human resource builders and tourism planners for their works. Specially, human resource builders can play a significant role to change graduates’ attitudes and perception towards tourism and hospitality industry in line with co-courses while their studies.
Literature review

Perception and attitudes toward tourism and hospitality industry

There were numbers of studies that have examined and evaluated graduates' perceptions on their employment in tourism and hospitality industry. Most studies have come up with negative perception than positive perception due to various factors. Some of the factors criticized by the respondents included low pay and stability of work, which arguably might be solved by government and sectorial policies (Akin A. and Deniz C., 2005). According to Scott R. 2011, he stated that graduates believe the working hours are too long, the hours are unsuitable to lead a normal life and the family life will be affected by the unusual working hours. Furthermore, many respondents on his study had believed that finding stable employment in the industry is difficult due to the influence seasonality has employment. When assessing the views of graduates on promotions in the industry, they believed it is to be unsure within the industry. According to Mike R. and Hugh W. (2005), yet industry focuses on graduates’ lack of practical experience, and perhaps youth, and insists that they commence employment in operational roles. Even high achieving students are recruited into management training schemes that consist essentially of operational experiences for the first 12 or 18 months.

However, it can be said that smooth change has happened recently, because the role of tourism and hospitality in the economy is now well documented (David L. and Sandra W., 2004) and the hospitality industry, in common with many other industries, has shown increasing levels of competition and complexity over recent decades (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000) and the skills needed by managers in the industry reflect these changes (Chung K.Y., 2000). An important change has been the increase in students studying at universities and the nature of the student population, with a greater emphasis made on vocational degrees (National statistics, 2004). It is argued that the changing face of higher education has placed a pressure on universities to adopt a more vocational approach to their curricula (Hyland, 2001). With increasing student numbers and changing government funding policies there has been a marked change in the nature of student experience (David L. and Sandra W., 2004). Further extensive part time work allocations during their studies, a period of internship in final academic year or semester, case study learning approaches, practical sessions, workshops and projects have applied in line with degree programs presently to avoid graduate frustrations when they are working in the industry.

As Mike R. and Hugh W. (2005) stated, on completion of students’ university studies, graduates have well developed academic skills and they expect that industry will allow them to apply the conceptual and analytical skills that have been emphasized in their courses. More graduates concentrate in the specialist area of human resources and marketing. Furthermore, students who are about to complete their degrees, when necessary information are provided, may be able to observe or even to be involved in business decisions about whether to accept a particular conference booking or how to remodel a restaurant. Students can make a positive contribution to these decisions, particularly in smaller businesses, by providing research and modeling services using university resources (Mike R. and Hugh W., 2005). According to Akin A. and Deniz C. (2005), positive perception and attitudes were found because of that they have chosen the degrees willingly, available opportunities for practice in abroad, reputation of the school, practical work experience arranged by the school. Scott R. 2011 states that most respondents for his study stated that working in the industry is interesting and they believed that there are always new things to learn each day. Moreover, the personality and character fits well with the types of jobs available in the industry and almost all believe that they will get an opportunity to use their skills and abilities working in the industry. In addition, they claimed that they can gain pleasure seeing satisfied customers.
The need of positive perception and attitudes of employees/graduate in the industry

In the tourism and hospitality industry, having a skilled, enthusiastic, and committed work force is seen as vital to the success of the firms in the industry (Kusluvan and Kualuvan, 2000). Employee attitudes, performance and behaviors are key determinants of service quality, having a direct linkage to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser Jr., and Schlesinger, 1994). This is becoming even more evident as the increasing international competition between firms and between destinations leading to organizations’ employees as a means of gaining competitive advantage over rivals (Pfeffer, 2005). An employee’s commitment to any industry will be determined by his or her perceptions and attitudes toward working in the industry and the types of jobs available in the industry (Scott R. 2011). By using staff as mechanism to gain an advantage over competitors, it is therefore argued that essential for tourism and hospitality management graduates to have positive attitude toward working in the industry (Kusluvan and Kualuvan, 2000).

Methodology

Four public universities currently conduct tourism related degree programs in Sri Lanka. The population for the research was graduates who joined different sectors in tourism and hospitality industry after the completion of their courses. The sample consisted 120 graduate employees representing all four public universities. Cluster sampling technique was employed to select the sample as they were working in several sections of the industry. Respondents were selected using convenience sampling method. Reviewing the related literature a questionnaire was prepared composing three main sections, such as, section (A) for eliciting demographic factors, section (B) included 23 statements on graduate perception and section (C) for identifying positivity and negativity working in the industry. A Five point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 5, disagree = 4, neither agree nor disagree = 3, agree = 2, strongly agree = 1) was used to measure the respondents’ degree of agreement and disagreement with various statement given to assess the relevant perception. Primary data from respondents were collected through telephone interviews and Skype communication technology as they have been working in Sri Lanka and in foreign countries. Cronbach’s alpha was used to test the reliability of 23 items. The alpha value for the tested items was more than 0.7, suggesting that the items have acceptable internal consistency. The collected
data were recorded in a Microsoft Excel file and imported into Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 20.0, where descriptive analyses and a two sample t-tests were undertaken. The present study makes use of library, field research, domestic and foreign books, articles, magazines, statistics, government officers, private and public offices and internet sites to gather secondary data to the research.

Research findings and discussions

The primary objective of this study is to examine and evaluate the attitudes and perceptions of graduates from Sri Lankan government universities on their employment in tourism and hospitality industry in Sri Lanka and foreign countries. It is important to examine the characteristics of the research sample.

Characteristics of the research sample

Demographics

This study considered 120 graduates from four Sri Lankan universities currently working in the tourism and hospitality field.

According to the Figure 2, most respondents were from UvaWellassa University and the least number of respondents were recorded from University of Kelaniya while similar numbers of students were recorded from both Sabaragamuwa and Rajarata Universities. However, 65 percentage of female graduate contribution from all four universities to the industry would be significant to fill the identified human resource gap in Sri Lankan tourism sector.

Religion could be a major influential factor for decision making on higher studies and working in the industries like tourism and hospitality hence, religion of respondents was considered under demographic factors.
Figure 3: Religions of graduates joined the industry.

Figure 3, demonstrates that the majority of respondents were Buddhists, including 34 male graduates and 61 female graduates. Secondly, the higher numbers of respondents belong to Hindu and the fewest respondents were Islam. Among Islam respondents, it has been found that six respondents were female graduates while two respondents were male.

**Areas of work**

Currently, respondents are working as employees on contract basis and permanent staff members holding positions like management trainee and supervisor for the sections of hotels. The main sections of hotels were front office, housekeeping, kitchen, restaurant and bar. Further, it was found graduates are employed in travel sector, holding positions like junior executive, travel coordinator etc. as well as some tourism related government offices holding the positions such as lecturer, development officer, and management assistant. Few respondents were recorded working for lower level positions like food server, bar tender, trainee cook, room attendant etc.

Figure 4: Working areas of respondents

It was failed to find any female graduate working at the kitchen department and furthermore, it has been recorded the less contribution of female graduates in housekeeping department. They stated that heavy works, lack of significant technical skills in these areas and availability of high male
employees were the reasons for zero contribution. Although male graduates were attached to all sectors in the industry, the most of female employees were attached to front office department. Significant female contribution has been indicated in restaurant and bar department as well as travel sector and government offices. In addition, considering location of the work, it was found 18.3 percentage from the sample were working in foreign countries specially attached to main four departments of a hotel.

Perceptions and attitudes of graduates on employment in tourism and hospitality industry

In order to examine and evaluate perceptions and attitudes of graduates on employment in tourism and hospitality industry, main seven variables were identified during literature review phase.

As Table 2 manifests, most respondents were agree with the given statements. Then a significant question was raised to discover whether they expect to continue their work in industry or not through which two groups were identified separately, comprising 66 percentage of respondents with positive perception and 34 percentage of respondents with negative perception towards retaining in the industry. Furthermore, it is worth to identify the significant factors which influence on obtaining both positive perception and negative perception. Significant factors were analyzed with the support of Mean, Std. Deviation, Std. Error Mean and results of t-test.

According to the t-test main four factors had $p$ values greater than 0.05 and it is explained that there is no significant difference between two groups towards them. Those main factors are knowledge and skills, received position, compensation package and opportunities for development and it is obvious that those factors created positive perception on employment in tourism and hospitality. Graduates with positive perception will continue their works in the industry. The remaining three items were found to be statistically different with two groups as they scored $p$ values less than 0.05. Therefore, negative perception on employment in tourism and hospitality industry is created due to working schedules, working environment and personal attitudes. Graduates with negative perception are less likely to see their future careers in tourism and hospitality industry, and it is more likely that they will definitely shift from tourism and hospitality industry to another industry.
Table 1: Feedback of respondents for given statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much do you agree or disagree with the statements?</th>
<th>Strongly agree &amp; agree (%)</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly disagree and disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language ability and creativity can be applied for working sections.</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Knowledge from the degree courses was a base to work in the industry.</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>5.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Given responsibilities and duties are matched with the position.</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Given position is matched with academic qualifications.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation package</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Satisfactory pay levels are comprised.</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Appropriate dress code is received.</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Foods and beverages are received during working hours.</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Accommodation facilities are received.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working schedules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Average working hours are allocated.</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sufficient off days are received.</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Shift works are available.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Received position is a foundation for position expected in the future.</td>
<td>92.47</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Foreign job opportunities can be obtained based on current position.</td>
<td>91.63</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language usage is helped for development.</td>
<td>93.33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Fair promotions are available.
- Academic qualifications are considered for development.

Working environment

- Safe environment is available. 92.47 6.7 0.83
- Safe environment is available. 92.47 6.7 0.83
- Fair work load is available.

Personal attitudes

- Family background is not a problem to work in the industry. 93.34 5.83 0.83
- Respect and pride is received working in the industry. 96.67 2.5 0.83
- There is a desire to work in the industry. 96.67 2.5 0.83
- There is an associated risk with the job.
Table 2: Analysis of level of significance with Mean and Std. Error Mean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and skills can be applied for working in the industry.</td>
<td>3.4 ±0.12a</td>
<td>3.6 ±0.03a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received position is satisfactory.</td>
<td>3.5 ± 0.23a</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.32a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation package is satisfactory.</td>
<td>5.4 ±0.23a</td>
<td>6.1 ±0.40a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair working schedules are received.</td>
<td>4.6 ±0.11a</td>
<td>6.4 ±0.21b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are opportunities for development.</td>
<td>6.9 ±0.22a</td>
<td>8.0 ±0.46a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working environment is satisfactory.</td>
<td>2.7 ±0.10a</td>
<td>5.6 ±0.21b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attitudes are influential to work in the industry.</td>
<td>5.1 ±0.16a</td>
<td>7.1 ±0.58b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a, b – within a row, means without a common superscript differ significantly (P<0.05)

Conclusion

The results of this study generally exhibit positive perception than negative perception towards the tourism industry. First, discussing negative perception is significant as converting them to positivity is essential because the government predicts the availability of future human resource calculating their heads too. Meanwhile, parents of potential graduates in the university system should be educated on employment opportunities in tourism industry. Most managers do not have an educational background in tourism management in tourism industry (Akin A. & Deniz C. 2005) and graduates from universities are not treated well by them. Therefore government officials must take corrective action to overcome the problems in the industry. On the other hand, positive attitudes were usually shown by students who had chosen the tourism related degree courses in universities willingly and parents of them had supported them in their education having better understanding on the industry. It is interesting to note, they had gained better positions in the tourism industry. In Sri Lankan context, it is important to continue graduates’ contribution to industry with positive perception as industry raises the need of graduate employees to achieve the set target by 2016.
References


Tourism Development strategy 2011-2016 (Sri Lanka).