

Analysis and Evaluation of the Professional Practical Training (Internship) of the Students in the Specialty "Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna

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Abstract

This article aims to present the results from a study conducted by a research project titled: "The prerequisites for professional development of students of" Tourism "at the University of Economics in Varna within the tourist area Varna (North Black Sea Coast) and tourist district Burgas (Southern Black Sea Coast) ". The paper shows the attitude of the students majoring in "Tourism" at the University of Economics in Varna to the overall process of conducting professional practical training (internship) in the specialty.

Keywords: Higher Education; Curriculum; Extracurricular Educational Forms, Student's Internship.

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1. Introduction

The practical training of the students Bachelor's degree in Tourism is an integral part of the professional training of the Department of Economics and Organization of Tourism at the University of Economics-Varna to offer high quality education in tourism. Its purpose is to cooperate and partnership between university education and tourism practice in Bulgaria and in particular in the tourist regions of Varna and Burgas Black Sea coast. Therefore, the analysis of the present study is related to the understanding that academic training in tourism and practical training must be interconnected and correspond to current trends and practices in the tourism industry.

This publication presents part of a study related to the attempt to answer at least some of the questions related to the practical training of students in tourism by fulfilling the objectives of a research project on: Prerequisites for professional realization of students majoring in "Tourism" in UE-Varna on the territory of the tourist region of Varna (Northern Black Sea Coast) and the tourist region of Burgas (Southern Black Sea Coast), by scientific priority "Regional Policy and Economy", by professional field 3.9 "TOURISM".

The subject of this article is the practical training of students in tourism, and the aim is based on a previously developed methodology for analysis and evaluation of professional practical training to analyze and evaluate the attitude of students to the overall process of its implementation. The research tasks are reduced to: first, to briefly present the organization and the procedure for conducting professional practical training in the specialty "Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna. Second, based on the results of the study to present the student's attitude to the overall process of the internship. Third, to provide guidelines for improving the effectiveness of practical training of students majoring in "Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna.

2. Organization and procedure for conducting the internship in the Department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna.

The methodology of the organization and conduct of the internship in the Department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism" shows an enviable stability over the years, despite the changes and innovations.

At present, the practical training in the Department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism" is carried out in various forms, one of which is the conduct and defense of mandatory professional work experience, according to the curriculum after the third year. The program is part of the training of students majoring in "Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna. The aim is to deepen the practical knowledge of students by studying the activities of tourism enterprises, analysis of specific problems with personal conclusions and recommendations.

The period of the internship before 2017/2018. was limited to the months of May-August of the current school year. Currently, the mandatory internship is 45 calendar days or 240 hours and can be completed within one calendar year, from September of the current academic year - until September of the next academic year. The period was chosen so that students have already gained significant knowledge in major tourism disciplines such as: "Introduction to Tourism", "Hotel Management", "Restaurant Management", "Social Psychology in Tourism", "Tourist resources", "Tourist markets", "Travel agencies and transport in tourism", etc. The period of the internship meets the different needs of the tourism industry for staff during the different phases of the tourist season. The students themselves find a company in which to conduct it. The duration of the internship of 45 calendar days or 240 hours allows students to enter the work, acquire the necessary skills and develop their own abilities to cope with their assigned work. The Department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism" also recognizes practical training conducted under the project of the Ministry of Education and Science "Student Internships", as well as training practices (student brigades abroad) in the specialty.

Organization and procedure for conducting the internship in the Department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna.

The main stages of organization and conduct of the internship in the department "Economics and organization of tourism" are:

First stage: preliminary work with students. The leaders of the internship from the Department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism" hold two meetings with third-year students full-time and distance learning in March and April, in which they learn and explain about the objectives of the internship, documentation, rules for conducting and passing the final exam. According to the students' interests in a certain type of tourist activity, they focus on getting acquainted with future employers and the traditional partner organizations for the department.

Second stage: organized events. Every year before the beginning of the summer tourist season, meetings "job fairs" or forums "Careers"¹ are organized, with potential employers, where they represent their organizations, the positions for which they are looking for interns and the main requirements for them. After the presentation of the tourist organizations, their programs and vacancies, in the second part of the labor exchange, students have the opportunity for direct communication. Its purpose is to get acquainted, exchange contact details and schedule interviews for future interns. The annual meetings with the business are important for the university and the department, because in this way they receive direct feedback from the tourist organizations for the presentation of the students.

Third stage: selection of interns, start of the internship. Students participate in internship selection procedures - they appear for interviews and choose their internship positions. The department provides personal logistical assistance to students and employers. Communication with trainees in the country and abroad is carried out by the heads of practical training through online correspondence.

Fourth stage: performance appraisal. In August at the latest, the students prepare an Employer's Assessment and an Internship Report, on the basis of which the final internship assessment is performed at a later stage.

Fifth stage: final report, passing an exam and evaluation of the internship. At the beginning of September, the interns present a set of documents related to the practical training. The internship

¹ The Careers Forum is one of the most successful events in the Northeast region, bringing together companies from different industries in order to offer students opportunities for internships and / or work, and employers - highly trained young professionals in the field of economy, management, information technology and tourism. The focus of the event in recent years is the preliminary preparation of students to appear before employers and start their own business, which we believe that together we will contribute to improving the entrepreneurial environment regionally. During the event there is an opportunity for preliminary presentation of the employers and the offered positions for work and internship, as well as presentation in a hall during the event.

Available from:<http://forumkarieri.ue-varna.bg/forumkarieri/>, [Accessed 20/10/2020].

leaders conduct personal interviews with the intern, ask questions, check the available documentation and confirm his / her final performance.

Sixth stage: preparation of a summary report. The heads of the internship annually prepare a summary report with the results of the internship, which they present to the department council of the department of "Economics and Organization of Tourism". The list of tourist organizations, partners of the department is updated, good practices and problems of professional practical training are discussed.

From the academic year 2017/2018, the reporting of the practical training is carried out only through the university platform for cooperation with business UEBN – University of Economics Business Network (<http://uebn.ue-varna.bg/bg/>).

The time for conducting the defense of the practical training is determined according to a schedule approved by the Rector of UE-Varna, as follows:

- first (regular) examination session - in September,
- second (resit) examination session - in October,

The practical training of the students in the specialty "Tourism" is carried out within the approved curricula through certain forms, duration and ways of control of the students.

3. Evaluation of the professional practical training (internship) of the students in the specialty "Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna. Results and discussion.

According to the survey, after completing the internship, students acquire practical skills, as shown in Table 1 below (see Table 1). The highest percentage of respondents (60%) rated the highest (with a score of 6) the acquired skill for working with documentation and reporting, and the lowest rated (with a score of 0) the ability to use machinery and equipment (1%). The data obtained point to the following:

- More than half of the surveyed students, during the seminars in the various disciplines, have access to documentation that is standardly used in practice and this helps them to prepare in advance for their practical training in a real environment. However, it is also possible that the documentation in a travel company is strictly profiled and individual (only for this company), and is bound primarily by internal rules and procedures. This may be one of the probable reasons for the remaining 40% of the answers. Another reason, of course, can be found in the available documentation that students work with during the seminars, where it is possible to establish the use of outdated information in some of the practical training classes;

- The extremely low percentage of answers (1%) to the development of preliminary skills for working with machinery and equipment refers to the level and type of education that students receive through their studies in the specialty "Tourism" - higher, economic. These skills are subject to study and development in the lower levels of education, preparing learners for work with a high degree of use of manual labor and production equipment, i.e. for work with greater technical orientation. However, the low level of readiness to work with machinery and equipment should be taken into account and report when summarizing the results and making proposals thereafter.

- Practical skills for presenting information (3%) and knowledge of the product / tourist organization (8%) are also assessed low by students. The results can be explained to some extent by the greater focus of tourism education at the University of Economics in Varna on building skills for searching, summarizing, synthesizing and analyzing theoretical and practical information to serve management decisions. However, the presentation of information and knowledge about a specific product / tourist site is often strictly specific and this is done according to certain work standards in the given travel company. Perhaps a further study could clarify the extent to which the employer himself has missed the introductory education to include this training. At the same time, the skills for presenting oral information and knowledge of a specific tourist product / organization are considered an important element of the overall process of service, work with customers, colleagues, associates and partners. For this reason, these results should be taken into account later in this article, when preparing proposals for

improving the preparation and implementation of practical training;

- The low percentage of skills for researching and dealing with complaints (7%) may have several explanations: inability of students to put into practice what they have learned in an academic environment; inexperience in dealing with high levels of stress in the workplace, which emotionally blocks students and prevents them from using the knowledge gained during training; insufficient use of case studies, role-plays and videos during the seminars. This should apply to all disciplines taught, including service, employee service and customer service.

Table 1. Practical skills acquired by students after completing the internship

Practical skills	Assessment of student (0-6)	Students (%)
1. Use of machines and equipment	0	1
2. Submission of information	1	3
3. Animation	2	5
4. Knowledge of the product / tourist organization	5	8
5. Ability to advertise the product	6	13
6. Work with documentation and reporting	3	60
7. Surveying the opinion of tourists and dealing with complaints	4	7
8. Physical endurance	0	3
Total:		100

In addition to practical skills, at the end of the internship students acquire social and personal competencies. The trainees rate the highest skills "Level of proficiency in the first foreign language and second foreign language" - (40% of respondents rate 6) and "Opportunity for teamwork" - (35% of respondents rate 5). The lowest scores of 2 and 3 are given for social and personal skills related to dealing with conflict situations and self-government (according to 3% and 10% of students). (See Table 2).

The relatively low results obtained in terms of time planning (12%), self-management (10%) and dealing with conflict situations should draw attention to the prevailing theoretical training in the academic environment. It is a widespread practice (all over the world) for the prevailing theoretical training in universities to create a precondition for a lower degree of building social and personal skills. On the other hand, building personal skills is considered to be a task of the individual himself, and the academic environment can only support this process. However, the data point to specific areas where further research is needed to refine the causal relationship in order to make suggestions for improvement.

Table 2. Social and personal skills acquired by students after completing the internship

Social and personal skills	Assessment of student (0-6)	Students (%)
1. Time planning	4	12
2. Self-management	3	10
3. Team work	5	35
4. Dealing with conflict situations	2	3
5. Level of proficiency in the first foreign language and the second foreign language	6	40
Total:		100

According to the survey data, the subjects and practical skills that were in favor of students majoring in "Tourism" during the vocational training were the following: (see Table 3).

Table 3. Subjects in favor of trainees majoring in specialty "Tourism"

Courses	Students (%)
1. Hotel Management	17
2. Social psychology in tourism	12
3. Restaurant management	10
4. English language	7
5. Introduction to tourism	7
6. Marketing in tourism	6,5
7. Tour Guidance	6,4
8. Culture and civilization	6,2
9. Business correspondence	5,3
10. Travel agencies and transport in tourism	5,1
11. Informatics	4,9
12. Career development	4,7
13. Accounting	4,3
14. Basics of management	3,6
Total:	100

The results presented in Table 3 provide an opportunity to discuss that with relatively low rates of utility in terms of practical knowledge and skills that were in favor of students were assessed subjects from the so-called *fundamental disciplines*, i.e. general subjects studied by all students at the University of Economics in Varna. The reasons can be sought in several aspects:

- ✓ the knowledge from the first two years is not permanently accepted due to the still missing (or low level of) skills for learning and processing a large amount of information by students;
- ✓ the knowledge from the first two years has been replaced by the special disciplines studied in the third year (immediately before the practical training). It is possible that the displacement occurs because the special disciplines are perceived by the students as more interesting and closer in content to the specifics of work in tourism;
- ✓ inability of students to link knowledge accumulated from the general disciplines with knowledge in specific disciplines.

To the next question from the self-assessment questionnaire about what other additional knowledge and practice would be needed in order to enrich the curriculum, students indicate the following possibilities:

- Handling hospitality software
- More practice in special subjects
- More foreign language learning
- More training practices in hotels, restaurants, agency companies
- Learning a third foreign language
- Study trips (traveling seminars)
- Guide practices
- Event management
- Ethics of nutrition
- Innovations in tourism
- International marketing
- Others

After processing the data from the information sheets for feedback with the trainees, it becomes clear that 82.8% of them have worked in the specialty, and for 90.6% the internship is a job for the first time in the respective tourist organization. Students are appointed to work as follows: 84.8% of students are in such positions for the first time, only 15.2% of them occupy them for the second or third time. The trainee students worked most often as senior administrators (11.4%), waiters (10.2%), chefs and bartenders (9.9%), animators (8.7%) and office assistants (7.4%). %). The results in Table 4 point to several discussion assumptions:

- students have the greatest preference for these positions because they perceive them as interesting and enjoyable;
- in these positions students have the greatest opportunities to work during the practical training, ie. this is related to the supply on the labor market;
- in these positions students feel most confident with the knowledge gained in an academic environment;
- these positions are perceived by students as the closest to their idea of working in tourism practice and therefore they choose them.

The positions held by the trainees in descending order are listed in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Positions held by interns in the specialty "Tourism"

Positions held	Students (%)
1. Senior administrators	11,4
2. Waiters	10,2
3. Chefs	9,9
4. Bartenders	9,8
5. Animators / chief animators	8,7
6. Office associates	7,4
7. Restaurant manager	7,2
8. Assistant Front Office Manager	6,5
9. Maid	5,7
10. Event coordinator	5,5
11. Organizer of activities	5,4
12. Reservation Officer	4,9
13. Sales representative	4,8
14. Piccolo	4,3
15. Currency exchanger	4,0
16. Hostesses	3,8
17. Lifeguard	3,5
18. Croupier	3,0
19. Complex manager	2,7
20. Accountant / credit consultant	2,4
Total:	100

According to the survey, 73.6% of students find a job for an internship "through an acquaintance", including a friend, relative, teacher, colleague, family business. The remaining 26.4% find the position for internship through ads (jobs.bg), agencies or intermediary companies such as: Work and Travel, Cool Travel. At the time of the survey, 5.2% of students had used the university platform for cooperation with business UEBN to find an internship position. The results point to the assumption of several problem areas that emerge in the search for and finding jobs for

practical training by students:

- Based on the publications analyzed by the author on the topic of professional practical training, it is worth noting that the problem of insufficient cooperation between business and universities is one of the inherent in the tourism industry (Veleva, M., K. Yancheva 2019);

- Employers, for a number of reasons (remaining unexplored at this stage of the study), are not in the habit of looking for candidates for vacant positions first among students, but prefer to advertise vacancies on specialized sites and recruitment agencies. In all likelihood, this saves time and effort, but on the other hand it is very likely to bet on hiring unsuitable and low-professional employees, which will subsequently form turnover - a common phenomenon in the tourism industry in our country, common in the middle of the season, when it is most difficult to find other suitable candidates. (Veleva, M., K. Yancheva 2019)

All trainee students who participated in the survey worked on employment contracts and 97.6% defined the internship as successful and useful because:

- have achieved the expected results during the practice;
- have successfully resolved problems that have arisen during the performance of the tasks;
- if necessary, they have performed successfully and additional tasks than those in the program;
- have acquired new knowledge and skills and have quickly entered the nature of the practice.

The results show that the vicious practice of businesses from the recent past to hire employees without an employment contract has been overcome, thus depriving them of the protection of their labor rights guaranteed by the Labor Code in Bulgaria.

Also, the achievement of 97.6% by students of the expected results during the internship, the successful solution of problems related to work tasks and the rapid acquisition of new knowledge and skills can be interpreted as an indirect indicator of their high evaluation of the received theoretical and practical knowledge during their academic training in the specialty.

The following results of the survey also indicate the overcoming of a problem from the recent past - the disregard for trainees and the saving of introductory training or reducing it to a minimum by the employer: in 88.6% of respondents, the employer assisted in the successful implementation of professional training. practical training, for easy adaptation to the work environment and for seamless integration into the team through:

- conducting initial training for introduction to work;
- showing attention;
- providing work clothes;
- assistance in regulating the level of stress in the workplace;
- giving clear instructions for work;
- feedback on the tasks performed by the trainee and the achieved results;
- creating conditions for conducting professional practical training.

The relationship between the employer and the organization of vocational training has motivated 76.3% of students to continue working for companies, and 23.7% to terminate employment after the internship. It is an interesting fact that in 100% of the respondents, during the practical training, the languages they speak are practiced. A high percentage (98.3%) of the students evaluate the organization of the internship with a positive assessment and define it as useful and effective. The results obtained in practice mean that as a result of their practical training, students form positive attitudes towards the tourism industry and the likelihood of developing a career in it, in the long run.

4. Guidelines for improving the effectiveness of practical training of students majoring in "Tourism" at the University of Economics - Varna.

According to data from the information sheets for feedback, the recommendations of the interns for enrichment of the program for conducting the practical training at the Department of Economics and Organization of Tourism, UE-Varna include the following suggestions:

- Transforming the university into an intermediary between students and business. The aim is to support finding an employer in a relevant specialty and the opportunity for realization of students after graduation. As already discussed above, students also report that the university-business relationship is still not strong enough and this affects the effectiveness of their practical training;
- Concluding contractual relations with travel companies to offer internship programs for third-year students;
- Deepening the study of foreign languages, which are the basis for the successful realization of students in the tourism industry;
- More hours for practical work during the training in the third year, with the help of which students can more easily and quickly integrate in the workplace;
- Presentation of tourism companies in seminars in the third year, in which students could pass their professional practical training;
- Visit of the trainee by a teacher on site in order to monitor the progress, conditions and organization of vocational training;
- Reducing the involvement of employers registered in the UEBN business cooperation platform.

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