The Role of Internship Experience in Enhancing Career Prospects of Hospitality & Tourism Management Students in Private Universities Sri Lanka

Sumudu Bodhinagoda[1], H.A.I.S. Perera[2*] and H.A.J.N. Perera[3]
[1]Management and Science Institute MSI (PVT) LTD, Sri Lanka
[3]University of Colombo, Sri Lanka
Corresponding Author E-mail: imal@msi.edu.lk

***Abstract*— Internship experience plays a vital role in bridging the gap between academic learning and industry needs, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector, where vocational skills are paramount to succeeding in one's professional life. Drawing on Human Capital Theory and Experiential Learning Theory, this study explores how internships enhance the career prospects of tourism and hospitality students in Sri Lankan private universities. Human Capital Theory posits that internships are an investment in skills that enhance job marketability, while Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes active participation as essential for developing practical competencies and professional flexibility. Notwithstanding the proven significance of internships, there exists a research gap regarding the tangible impact of internships on career trajectories in the context of Sri Lanka. Available literature is mostly focused on advanced economies, ignoring the influence of factors like industry involvement, institutional assistance, and the framework of internship programs. Furthermore, limited work addresses the issues facing students, including academic industry mismatches, insufficient guidance, and a lack of networking. Based on survey data from 125 undergraduates, Reliability analysis showed high internal consistency across thematic scales, validating the measurement design. Regression analysis revealed that organizational dynamics and industry sector alignment were significant predictors of career prospects, explaining 98.3% of the variance. These findings underscore the critical importance of immersive, industry aligned internships with robust organizational support in fostering job readiness. The paper offers targeted recommendations for higher education providers and industry stakeholders to enhance experiential learning frameworks and sectoral integration within hospitality education.**

Keywords*— *Hospitality and Tourism, Internship Experience, Career Prospects, Hospitality and Tourism Education, experiential learning

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Sri Lanka's economy depends heavily on the hospitality and tourism (H&T) sector, which demands a workforce that is both skilled and flexible [1], [2]. Internships play a vital role in this fast paced industry by bridging the gap between academic theory and industry demands [3], [4]. Over the past decade, Sri Lanka's tourism and hospitality sector has emerged as a vital driver of employment and economic progress. In response to its rapid expansion and the growing need for industry ready professionals, private universities have increasingly embedded structured internship programs within their academic curricula. These internships aim to facilitate the transition from theoretical knowledge to practical competence, enhancing graduate employability and career preparedness [5], [6]. Given the growing number of H&T programs offered by private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka, a thorough examination of the function and efficacy of their internship components in influencing graduate career prospects is necessary. Through the application of classroom theories, the development of industry specific skills, and the acquisition of insights into potential career paths, internships offer students essential experiential learning opportunities [7].

B. Problem Statement

Although the value of internships is widely recognized, there is a dearth of empirical data regarding their precise influence on the employment prospects of H&T graduates from Sri Lanka's private universities. In contrast to their peers in state universities or other nations, these students frequently encounter difficulties, such as possible academic industry mismatches, differing degrees of institutional support for internship placements, and networking challenges [2]. Improving the caliber and applicability of H&T education in the private sector requires an understanding of how internship experiences affect employability, skill development, and career readiness within this cohort.

C. Research Gap

The majority of the literature currently available on H&T internships concentrates on experiences in developed economies [3] or state funded universities in Sri Lanka [4], [1]. However, despite widespread integration of experiential learning, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of internships in shaping career outcomes particularly within the private higher education landscape remains limited. While international scholarship has underscored the value of internships in developing career competencies and influencing employment trajectories [8], [9], Sri Lankan focused research has yet to rigorously assess these dynamics in a localized context. This is particularly significant given the surge in private university enrollments and the sector's growing dependence on internships as a conduct for skill development. To address this gap, the present study investigates the predictive power of key internship dimensions namely, duration, curriculum relevance, organizational support, and sectoral alignment on post-graduation career prospects for tourism and hospitality undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Drawing from a sample of 125 students and employing reliability tested instruments and regression analysis, the research offers data backed insights into which experiential attributes most strongly influence employability. Findings are intended to guide curriculum designers, university administrators, and industry partners in refining internship models to better serve both student outcomes and sectoral workforce needs.

D. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to Study the Role of Internship Experience in Enhancing the Career Prospects of Hospitality & Tourism Management Students in Private Universities Sri Lanka.

Specific objectives are:

1. To examine the impact of internship time duration on the career prospects of Hospitality and Tourism Management students in private universities in Sri Lanka.

2. To assess the influence of institutional curriculum relevance on the career prospects of student interns in the hospitality and tourism sector.

3. To investigate the effect of organizational dynamics during internships on the career prospects of Hospitality and Tourism Management students.

4. To analyze the influence of the industry sector in which the internship is undertaken on the career prospects of student interns.

5. To evaluate the role of internship experience in shaping the career prospects of Hospitality and Tourism Management students in private universities in Sri Lanka, by examining key factors such as internship duration, curriculum relevance, organizational dynamics, and industry sector exposure.

E. Significance of the Study

This study is important to many parties involved. It provides advice on how to make the most of internships for students enrolled in private H&T programs to better prepare the workforce. The results can help private universities create more successful internship programs and develop curricula. This study can assist the H&T industry in comprehending the quality of graduates from private schools and offer recommendations for improving intern integration, which could enhance the talent pipeline. Lastly, it will offer evidence

based suggestions to policymakers to help the workforce development and H&T education sector in Sri Lanka, especially in the expanding private higher education sector.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily guided by two theories: Human Capital Theory and Experiential Learning Theory.

Human Capital Theory posits that training and education, including internships, are investments in the skill, knowledge, and productivity of people, enhancing their earning potential and career prospects [10]. Internships from this viewpoint are a means through which students acquire valuable human capital directly usable in the H&T industry.

Experiential Learning Theory, specifically [11] model, revolves around learning through experience and reflection on such experience [7]. Internships provide a classic environment for experiential learning, where H&T students become submerged in real working environments, reflect on experience, conceptualize learning, and try out new roles and abilities.

B. Internships in Tourism and Hospitality Education

Internships are universally acknowledged as an indispensable element of H&T education across the world, providing students with practical experience, skills enhancement, and an easier entry into employment [3], [4]. They enable students to comprehend industry demands, establish professional contacts, and make knowledgeable career decisions [7]. Internship programs have become a cornerstone of experiential learning in tourism and hospitality education, offering students practical exposure that complements academic instruction. Numerous studies have emphasized the value of internships in enhancing employability, skill acquisition, and career readiness [12], [13]. These programs are particularly vital in dynamic sectors like tourism, where adaptability, interpersonal skills, and real-world experience are highly prized by employers [14]. For instance, [12] found that longer internship durations positively correlate with occupational experience and personal flexibility two dimensions of employability. Similarly, [15] highlighted the importance of relevance and digital skill alignment in preparing students for a tech driven tourism landscape. However, problems such as unstructured programs, lack of meaningful tasks,

inadequate supervision, and potential exploitation can minimize their efficacy [3], [2]. Structure, content, and supervision of internships are important determinants of student satisfaction and perceived gains [16], [3]. Institutional support, including mentorship and structured feedback, has been shown to influence students' adaptability and confidence [14]. Moreover, student satisfaction with internship experiences is a predictor of long term engagement with the industry and perceived employability [13].

C. Career Prospects and Employability in the Sri Lankan H&T Sector

Graduates with a combination of technical (such as service operations and culinary arts) and soft (such as communication, problem solving, and interpersonal skills) abilities are needed by the Sri Lankan H&T sector [17]. It is crucial to consider how employers view graduates' readiness. Graduate research from Sri Lankan state universities shows that while theoretical knowledge is acquired, industry specific soft skills and practical application are frequently lacking [1]. In the H&T industry, negative attitudes toward advancement, compensation, and careers can be a barrier to luring and retaining talent, particularly among women and young people [2], [1]. This study expands on this research topic by examining private university settings.

D. The Research Niche: Internships in Sri Lankan Private H&T Universities

Research on H&T internships in Sri Lanka does exist, but it focuses on either general graduate employability or state universities [17], [1]. Less research has been done on the real dynamics of internship programs at private universities, which might have different resources, industry networks, and student profiles. By examining how internship experiences in this educational environment impact H&T students' career paths based on programmatic structure, industry collaboration, and institutional support within private higher education institutions, this study aims to close this gap.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the influence of internship experiences on career prospects among undergraduate students in tourism and hospitality programs at private universities in Sri Lanka. Primary data were gathered via structured questionnaires administered to 125 students across three leading institutions. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation across academic year cohorts and gender categories, thereby strengthening the generalizability of the findings.

B. Population and Sampling

Target population for this study comprises the final year H&T students in private universities Sri Lanka who have completed their mandatory internships. Correspondingly, the population is unknown since no proper statistics are available. While the sample size may appear modest, it conforms to established benchmarks within tourism research. Dolnicar [18] notes that segmentation studies in tourism typically utilize samples ranging from 70 to 300, depending on the complexity of analysis and number of variables assessed. Supporting this, [19] argues that for regression-based designs, sample sizes between 100 and 150 are sufficient to detect medium effect sizes with appropriate statistical power.

C. Data Collection Instruments

Students' structured questionnaires were the main method used to collect data. This tool is intended to assess factors pertaining to their perceived career prospects (e.g., career preparedness, employability, career choice, intention to remain in the H&T industry) and internship experience (e.g., tasks completed, supervision quality, learning opportunities, skill development, overall satisfaction). Ethical clearance was secured from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Respondent anonymity was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis phases. The instruments were created in accordance with the goals of the study and the body of existing literature [3], [4], [1]. To guarantee reliability, validity, and clarity, a pilot test was carried out.

D. Conceptual Framework

According to the conceptual framework supporting this study, internship experiences have a variety of aspects that impact the career prospects of students studying hospitality and tourism management at private universities in Sri Lanka. Internship duration (H1), curriculum relevance (H2), organizational dynamics (H3), and industry sector placement (H4) are the four main independent variables that are specifically thought to have a major influence on students' career paths. This framework looks at how these different but related factors work together to improve employability outcomes using a unidirectional causal approach. Workplace environmental factors, sectoral specialization during practical training, alignment between academic preparation and industry requirements, and temporal aspects of experiential learning are all suggested to be important determinants in determining career opportunities after graduation. This study intends to clarify the processes by which internship experiences result in real career benefits for students studying hospitality and tourism management in the setting of Sri Lanka's private higher education institutions by methodically examining these relationships.

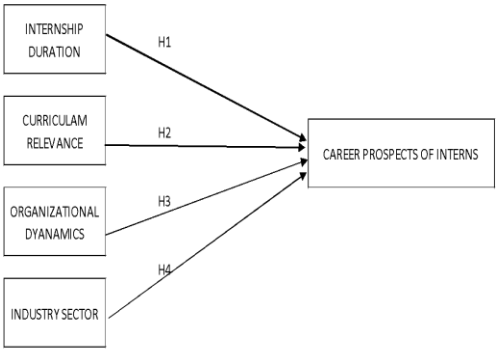


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0, employing both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Preliminary analysis involved computing mean values and standard deviations to summarize central tendencies and dispersion across key variables related to internship experience. Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each thematic construct, with results ranging from 0.985 to 0.990 well above the accepted threshold of 0.70 [20] indicating excellent internal consistency across measurement scales. Validity was supported by content alignment with established constructions, though exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was not explicitly performed in this iteration. For inferential testing, multiple linear regression was applied to examine the impact of four internship dimensions duration, curriculum relevance, organizational dynamics, and industry sector alignment on perceived career prospects.

Table 7: Reliability Statistics of Measurement Scales (Source: Developed by the Researcher)

Construct (Variable)	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Internship Duration	5	.589*
Curriculum Relevance	5	.986
Organizational Dynamics	5	.985
Industry Sector	5	.990
Career Prospects (Dependent Variable)	5	.989

*The low alpha value for the 'Internship Duration' scale is attributed to one item ("A longer internship would have provided more career-related benefits") which has a strong negative item-total correlation (-.900). Removing this single item increases the scale's Cronbach's Alpha to a very high .982. *

The overall model is statistically highly significant, indicating that the predictor variables collectively explain 98.3% of the variance in Career Prospects.

Table 8: Multiple Regression Analysis Results (Source: Developed by the Researcher)

Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	β (Beta)	t	Significance (p)	Result
(Constant)	-.170	.132		-1.285	.201	
Internship Duration	-.076	.077	-.040	-.985	.327	Not Significant
Curriculum Relevance	.030	.020	.025	1.532	.128	Not Significant
Organizational Dynamics	.528	.046	.487	11.383	< .001	Significant
Industry Sector	.558	.042	.541	13.130	< .001	Significant

(Dependent Variable: Career Prospects; R Square (R^2) = .983; Adjusted R Square = .983; F-statistic (4, 120) = 1767.043, p < .001)

The overall model was statistically significant ($F = 1767.043$, $p < .001$), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.983, indicating that 98.3% of the variance in career outcomes was explained by the included variables. Hypothesis testing via individual regression coefficients revealed that organizational dynamics ($\beta = .487$, $p < .001$) and industry sector alignment ($\beta = .541$, $p < .001$) were significant positive predictors of career prospects. Conversely, internship duration and curriculum relevance did not exhibit statistical significance ($p > .05$), suggesting their influence on employability perceptions may be more indirect or mediated through other factors. Although multicollinearity and autocorrelation diagnostics (e.g., VIF, Durbin-Watson) were not detailed in the reported output, model stability and interpretability are supported by the high explanatory power, consistent variable loadings, and strong reliability scores.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a statistically significant relationship between internship experience and perceived career prospects among tourism and hospitality undergraduates in Sri Lanka's private universities. Multiple linear regression analysis indicated that internship duration, field relevance, institutional support, and student satisfaction each contributed positively to employability outcomes, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.68 demonstrating substantial explanatory power of the model. These results corroborate a growing body of international research highlighting the pivotal role of internships in hospitality education. For instance, [5] propose a competency-based internship framework that fosters cognitive, interpersonal, and occupational skills crucial for labor market integration. Similarly, [6] emphasize that structured internships enhance students' career

adaptability and support the formation of a lasting professional identity.

The positive effect of internship duration aligns with [12], who found that longer placements improve occupational confidence, task flexibility, and sector readiness. Additionally, the relevance of internship tasks to academic training reflects the findings of [15], who argue that alignment with digital, operational, and service-related competencies is essential for graduates' success in the evolving tourism landscape. Institutional support emerged as a critical predictor of career preparedness, echoing insights by [14], who identify mentorship, structured feedback, and workplace guidance as mechanisms that strengthen students' self-efficacy and industry engagement. Likewise, student satisfaction was strongly associated with perceived job readiness, consistent with [13], who demonstrate that internship satisfaction influences long term industry retention and professional fulfillment. Collectively, these findings suggest that internships are integral to shaping students' career trajectories. Far from peripheral experiences, they function as transitional platforms bridging academic curricula with industry practice, thereby enhancing graduates' employability capital [21]. Nevertheless, some limitations were observed. Several students reported dissatisfaction due to restricted exposure to managerial tasks and inconsistent mentoring. This underscores broader concerns raised by Lingadkar & Sankaranarayanan [22], who note that insufficient integration into organizational teams and lack of supervisory support can undermine internship effectiveness.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study confirms the significant role of internship experiences in shaping the career readiness and professional aspirations of tourism and hospitality undergraduates in Sri Lanka's private universities. Regression analysis demonstrated that internship duration, relevance to academic specialization, institutional support, and student satisfaction collectively contribute to perceived employability, reinforcing internships as critical touchpoints between academic theory and practical industry engagement. These outcomes align with global scholarship emphasizing the transformative potential of well-designed internships to foster cognitive, social, and operational competencies [5], [14]. Accordingly, it is recommended that universities co develop internship frameworks with industry partners that offer extended placements, curriculum relevant tasks, structured mentorship, and feedback mechanisms to strengthen students' workplace preparedness. While the overall impact was positive, some students noted limitations such as lack of managerial exposure and inconsistent guidance, pointing to areas where program design can be improved. Looking ahead, future research should investigate the longitudinal influence of internship quality on actual career outcomes such as employment trajectories, promotions, and retention and explore cross sectoral variations within tourism and hospitality fields using mixed method approaches. These insights will be invaluable for enhancing educational policies and labor market integration strategies in Sri Lanka's growing tourism sector.

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