

# Perceptions and attitudes towards the hospitality professions in Cyprus

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## ABSTRACT

The future of the hospitality industry depends on the quality of its people. The purpose of this research activity was to investigate the attitudes of secondary school students towards the hospitality professions. In addition, the study examines students' perceptions towards the hospitality industry of Cyprus so as to identify whether the industry's poor reputation is shared by young individuals ready to make their career decisions. Reflecting on the research findings, a suggestive profile of the secondary school student most likely to pursue a career in the hospitality industry is developed. Finally, the authors recommend specific actions that hospitality stakeholders could initiate in order to improve the perceptions and attitudes towards the professions of their industry.

**Keywords:** The Cyprus Hospitality Industry, Hospitality education, Hospitality professions, Perceptions and attitudes of secondary school students.

## INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Probably the most fundamental challenge facing the hospitality industry is "the attraction and retention of the necessary number and quality of young people" (Lewis and Airey, 2001, p.7). Especially in a country like Cyprus that relies heavily upon tourism revenues, the ability to attract qualified individuals to the industry is crucial. Many local industry stakeholders argue that while the future prosperity of the industry depends on the quality of its people, the Cypriot hospitality industry has failed, for a number of reasons, to project an image that could generate interest amongst secondary school students, and especially those with higher than average value on achievement. Consequently, it is difficult for anyone to present the industry as an attractive career option to secondary school students.

What ever the case, the hospitality industry of Cyprus faces fundamental challenges pertaining to attracting and retaining young individuals in its highly-volatile business environment. Potential labour shortages in the near future, which are foreseen by many industry stakeholders, will disrupt the industry's smooth operation and will diminish its ability to contribute to the

country's economy. The importance of the work force for the successful development of the hospitality industry and our limited knowledge regarding secondary school students' attitudes towards such careers have provided the rationale for the choice of this research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent years have shown a rapid growth of the hospitality industry in a number of countries. According to recent published statistics by the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2005), the industry is now one of the biggest employers in many Western countries and a great number of communities depend upon it to provide "quality" work opportunities for their school leavers. This section of the paper aims to present research activities which investigated the attitudes and perceptions of individuals towards hospitality careers.

A number of studies portray hospitality professions as unattractive (Getz, 1994; Koko and Guerrier, 1994; Cooper and Shepherd, 1997). In their 1994 scholarly work, Koko and Guerrier affirm that hospitality professions are "physically repetitive, poorly paid, controlled by task oriented managers and providing limited opportunities for participation and development" (Quoted in Airey and Frontistis, 1997, p. 150). Cooper and Shepherd (1997) viewed tourism as offering low-status careers and Sindiga (1994) concludes that jobs in tourism are often seen as menial and low level. These findings coincide with Getz (1994) which also showed that students perceived tourism jobs as undesirable in Spey Valley, Scotland. In fact, the most important findings from the study was the bad and worsening image of the hospitality industry within the area. This was despite the respondents' high levels of direct experience working in the industry. The study also concluded that sustainability should be a long-term goal, as well as the provision of training and information programs for employees.

In contrast to the previously mentioned research activities, a number of studies revealed positive perceptions and attitudes and enhanced interest towards hospitality professions (Ross, 1992; 1994; Choy 1995; Purcell and Quinn, 1996). Ross' (1994) scholarly work revealed that Australian secondary school students exhibit a high level of interest in managerial level hospitality professions. What is even more important is the finding that these professions attract students with high professional achievement ambitions. This encouraged the author to suggest that hospitality professions are now "regarded as holding considerable promise for future employment and career prospects in many western countries" (Ross, 1994, p. 65). In addition, Ross's findings suggest that some secondary school students may need more information supplied to them regarding factors which may influence their choices towards hospitality professions. More reliable information is important since students' level of interest was partly influenced by the level of familiarity and involvement with the industry.

Murphy (1985) informs us that individual attitudes are positive when there is a tourism related community involved. Owning or operating businesses in such a particular area, thus providing employment to a vast number of local people, has a positive impact on their attitudes and

perceptions. The authors argued that there has been a trend for more positive attitudes to the industry by those who have some contact than by those who have no direct involvement or perceive that they derive no benefit from tourism. Along the same lines, Choy's work (1995) revealed positive attitudes towards tourism employment in Hawaii while Purcell and Quinn (1996) suggest that the main factors that attract individuals towards formal hospitality management education is their positive experience and perceptions with the industry.

Lewis and Airey (2000) investigated secondary school students' perceptions towards tourism careers in Trinidad and Tobago. Their findings suggest that secondary school students have a rather favorable attitude towards a possible career in the tourism industry, which is strongly influenced by both their work values and information about the industry. The respondents believe that "tourism provides good career opportunities for people with high ambitions, that the industry is generally of a high level, not boring, and the jobs are well paid" (Lewis and Airey, 2000, p. 19). Those who are more interested in tourism careers are those who are interested in work values such as 'self development' and working with friendly people.

Airey and Frontistis (1997) looked at the attitudes of young people towards tourism related careers in Greece and the United Kingdom. Their findings suggest that UK students who enjoy the benefits of a well established career support system have a more realistic view of the nature and demands of such professions. In contrast, Greek students have a more positive attitude towards tourism professions but the authors suggest that these views were due to the respondents' relatively unrealistic views about the industry and their limited personal experiences as tourists. Overall, less than 50% of the UK students had a positive attitude towards tourism employment, compared with the surprisingly high 83% of their Greek counterparts. The authors argued that the quality of the hospitality educational system in a particular country plays a significant role in forming students' perceptions.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions and attitudes of secondary school students towards working in the Hospitality Industry of Cyprus. The following research questions, reflecting the study's primary purpose and objectives were formulated:

- RQ1:** What is the current perception of secondary school students towards the hospitality professions?
- RQ2:** Which are the most identifiable hospitality professions?
- RQ3:** Which hospitality professions are popular to secondary school students?
- RQ4:** What is the profile of the individual most likely to select a hospitality career?

For the purpose of this research activity, a comprehensive literature review was conducted by reviewing secondary data sources collected from books, journal articles, government publications, and hospitality reports and surveys. Reflecting both the issues revealed from

the literature review and the authors' subjective experience, a quantitative questionnaire was developed in order to reveal the feelings and opinions of secondary school students regarding specific issues relevant to their occupational decision-making process.

The target population of the study included all graduating secondary school students currently studying at both public and private schools in Cyprus. Due to financial constraints, the researcher decided to administer 300 questionnaires to ten institutions, both public and private, after obtaining a principal approval by their administration. Out of the 300 questionnaires distributed to the students, 150 were administered to five general public secondary schools, 50 to two public technical schools, 35 to one private Greek school and 65 to two private English schools (private schools that use English as the primary language of instruction). The schools were randomly selected in order to provide representative samples. Finally, utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), the authors analyzed the collected data using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Before administering the survey instrument was tested for reliability by using the test re-test method.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

*Table 1* displays the demographic profile of the participants in relation to three different variables: sex, type of secondary school currently studying and overall grade.

**Table 1:** Demographic Profile of the Respondents ( $n=227$ )

Variables	Frequency	Valid Percentage
<u>Sex</u>		
Male	134	59.3
Female	92	40.7
<u>Secondary School</u>		
Greek Lyceum	112	51.1
Technical School	35	16.0
Private School / Greek	23	10.5
Private School / English	49	22.4
<u>Overall Students' Grade (Academic Achievement)</u>		
Lower than 11	16	7.1
11-14	41	18.3
15-17	91	40.6
18-20	69	30.8
Other	7	3.1

*Students' Perceptions towards the Hospitality Professions*

A number of questions aimed to investigate students' perceptions towards the hospitality professions. In particular, respondents were asked to express their perceptions towards twelve variables that characterize hospitality professions. Those variables are monetary rewards, nature of work, working hours, employment opportunities, reputation, social prestige, work benefits, opportunities for career development and advancement, working relationships and working environment. The findings revealed were somehow expected. *Table 2*, displays the bipolar scales with students mean score responses on each of the twelve variables.

**Table 2:** Students Perceptions towards the Hospitality Professions

NEGATIVE VARIABLE	1	2	3	4	5	POSITIVE VARIABLE
Poor Salary			*			Excellent Salary
			(3.28)			
Boring Work			*			Interesting Work
			(3.52)			
Irregular Working Hours			*			Regular Working Hours
			(2.97)			
Excessive Work Hours			*			Normal Working Hours
			(3.14)			
Minimum Employment Opportunities			*			Excellent Employment Opportunities
			(3.15)			
Bad Reputation			*			Excellent Reputation
			(3.24)			
Hard Work			*			Easy Work
			(3.22)			
Socially Unacceptable			*			Socially Acceptable
			(3.27)			
Poor Work Benefits			*			Excellent Work Benefits
			(3.28)			
Minimum opportunities for development and promotion			*			Enhanced Opportunities for Development and Promotion
			(3.15)			
Exploitative working relationship			*			Mutually beneficial working relationship
			(3.18)			
Negative Working Environment			*			Positive Working Environment
			(3.52)			

N = 227

Student respondents' perception towards the variables that define hospitality professions in Cyprus ranged between neutral to negative. It is important to note that none of the variables falls towards the positive side of the spectrum. In general, secondary school students believe that hospitality professions offer average monetary rewards, have a rather negative reputation that is socially unacceptable, offer mediocre working opportunities, and opportunities for career development and promotion, and average work benefits. Student respondents also indicate the industry's excessive work hours and non-traditional working schedules.

### *Secondary School Students' Awareness towards Hospitality Professions*

Secondary school student's awareness towards the hospitality professions is essential in the effort to investigate their perceptions and attitudes towards them. The findings confirm the long term assumption shared by many local hospitality experts that the hospitality industry is overshadowed by food and beverage related professions. From the first seven job classifications, presented in *Table 3*, with the highest students' awareness, six are Food and Beverage related. While labeling the industry as being Food and Beverage centered might serve specific operational needs, it can also discourage individuals who would like to pursue a non-Food and Beverage related career.

**Table 3:** Secondary Students' Awareness towards Hospitality Professions – The Top 10 Positions

<b>Profession</b>	<b>No. of Responses</b>	<b>Percent of Total Cases</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Food Server	209	92.4%	<b>1</b>
Chef	199	89.2%	<b>2</b>
Cook	199	89.2%	<b>3</b>
Hotel Manager	181	81.2%	<b>4</b>
Restaurant Manager	158	70.9%	<b>5</b>
Barman	157	70.4%	<b>6</b>
Pastry Chef	145	65.0%	<b>7</b>
Receptionist	135	60.5%	<b>8</b>
Room Attendant	133	59.6%	<b>9</b>
Tour Guide	112	50.2%	<b>10</b>

*Multiple Response Questions - Total Number of Responses 2275; N=227*

Research findings revealed that food servers are the icons of the hospitality industry. Almost 93% of the respondents relate them with the industry as the most recognizable job classification. While this is not a surprise for anyone, it is important to analyze the perceptual and societal norms towards this profession. Unlike Europe and the United States, the vast majority of our food servers are foreigners, mostly part timers, below the age of 30, with moderate to low

monetary rewards, and limited ambitions to pursue this as their professional career. It is apparent that food servers share a rather negative image that discourages many to even consider the hospitality industry as one of their career options. Witness the reaction of a teenager who seeks advice and support to pursue a hospitality career, only to hear “what, you want to become a food server?”

#### *Popular Professions within the Hospitality Industry*

According to the research findings, presented in *Table 4*, the most popular hospitality professions are hotel manager, barman, chef, cruise ship manager, and pastry chef. It is important to note that managerial level positions are much more popular than entry or skilled level positions although our research findings suggest that students’ willingness to supervise others is moderate.

That makes us wonder whether secondary school students are aware of what management is and what it entails. It seems that they want to pursue managerial level positions, but they do not want to manage people. A possible explanation revolves around the amount of monetary rewards, since on average managerial level positions earn more money than the others.

**Table 4:** The Ten Most Popular Hospitality Professions

<b>Profession</b>	<b>No. of Responses</b>	<b>Percent of Total Cases</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Hotel Manager	77	33.9%	<b>1</b>
Barman	68	30.0%	<b>2</b>
Chef	49	21.6%	<b>3</b>
Cruise Ship Manager	49	21.6%	<b>4</b>
Pastry Chef	44	19.4%	<b>5</b>
Cook	44	19.4%	<b>6</b>
Night Club Manager	40	17.6%	<b>7</b>
Pilot	39	17.2%	<b>8</b>
Food Server	37	16.3%	<b>9</b>
Lifeguard	37	16.3%	<b>10</b>

*Multiple Response Questions - Total Number of Responses 756; N=227*

Another finding that caught the authors’ attention is the high popularity of “barman” compared to the “food server”. The barman job classification ranks as the second most popular hospitality profession with almost 30%, surpassed only by the hotel manager. It is the only profession ranked in the top 5 which is not at a managerial level. It seems that secondary students relate themselves with bartending due to their exposure with the particular job during their social activities. It is also important to note, that teenagers might consider bartending as an ideal job that enables them to earn money, meet interesting people, work only at night, while at the same time having fun, especially in nightclubs.

In surprisingly high ranks, respondents placed the professions of chef and cruise ship manager. In recent years, Chefs gained tremendous popularity due to the publicity earned from local electronic and printed media. This publicity enhanced the profession's image and reputation, thus making it a more attractive option to secondary school students. If you visualize the chef as simply a cook, working odd hours, in a fast paced and often inhumane environment, it will be logical to shape a rather negative perception of this position. On the other hand if you gain visual awareness of the position's uniqueness, the innovation, the symphony and harmony of taste and textures, and the artistic side of the job, many might shape a much different opinion. Awareness is the key to improving individual perceptions towards a particular profession. The chef position can become the benchmark in how we could enhance the image of other hospitality professions that currently suffer from that perspective.

### *Profile of the Students Selecting Hospitality Professions*

One of the primary objectives of the research activity was to profile the students who are interested in pursuing a hospitality career. In order to gain a better picture as to who would like to pursue such a career, the authors decided to investigate both the type of institution students are currently studying at and their overall academic performance. Findings suggest that hospitality professions attract mostly technical school students with average or below academic performance. This was again an expected finding, especially for industry experts; nevertheless, it is the first time that such an assumption is supported by a scientific research activity.

The findings reconfirm some long term arguments suggesting that hospitality professions attract only individuals with below average academic qualifications. In particular, 47.8% of the respondents who have selected hospitality professions have an overall grade of less than 14 (70/100), while in professions like educators and doctors the percentage drops down to 20%. It is apparent that hospitality professions fail to attract students with above average academic qualifications.

For many years, technical schools have had a rather "notorious" reputation of being the logical alternative for individuals with low academic qualifications. Most of the technical school students are selecting vocational courses that would prepare them for employment in the "technical" professions, such as hospitality entry level positions. Such paths, which are perceived as "easy" or less difficult than others, mainly attract individuals with low academic qualifications.



## RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the objectives of the research project was to recommend specific actions that hospitality stakeholders could initiate in order to improve the attitudes and perceptions towards the professions of their industry. What follows is a brief description of nine such actions:

### Action 1: Establishment of the Cyprus Hospitality Educators Association (CHEA)

A number of research participants recommended the foundation of a Cyprus Hospitality Educators Association (*CHEA*), which will strive to improve the image and reputation of hospitality careers by projecting the values of the local industry. Such an association will facilitate a long-term mutually beneficial relationship between industry professionals and educators. In addition, such a development will benefit immeasurably the planning and implementation of genuine internship practices by highlighting deficiencies and indicating ways to bridge the gap between educational theory and actual practice.

### Action 2: Active Government Involvement

When a country's economy depends heavily upon the hospitality industry, the government should take some measures to ensure its continuity and future. Government, and especially the Ministry of Education and Culture, needs to invest more in the industry by enhancing its involvement, which could take a number of shapes and forms ranging from informational campaigns to public high schools, organization of in-school presentations by prominent industry leaders, and the provision of special permission to conduct educational field trips to hospitality establishments.

An even more effective measure is the involvement of the Cyprus Tourism Organization (CTO), a statutory semi-governmental body aim to organize and promote tourism in Cyprus, in an effort to promote the industry's image and reputation in order to attract qualified individuals to its ranks. Presently, the primary objective of the CTO's Strategic Plan for Tourism 2000-2010 (2005), is to increase tourism financial receipts while at the same time maximising the socio-economic benefits for the local population by: (a) increasing travellers' spending, (b) improving the long-standing problem of seasonality, (c) increasing tourism arrivals, (d) increasing the average stay per guest, and (e) increasing of repeat travellers. It is important to note that the current plan focuses solely on increasing financial benefits, disregarding the fact that without qualified human capital this can not be achieved. If you want to earn money from the industry then you need to invest in its human capital.

### Action 3: Hospitality Advisory Boards

Conroy *et al.* (1996) inform us that the American institutions offering hospitality programs utilized advisory boards since their early beginnings. Advisory boards offer advice to program

administrators and faculty, provide valuable feedback regarding the industry's perception of the program's quality, assist students with their industrial placement requirements, offer ideas regarding fundraising, and strategic planning. In addition, the image and reputation of the industry leaders participating in the advisory board would most certainly enhance the program's image, visibility and reputation. Unfortunately, Cypriot hospitality educators failed to recognize the benefits of such a venue.

Reflecting on the research findings, and in particular the problems hospitality professions experience with regard to their image and reputation, advisory boards constitute an inexpensive measure that could alleviate some of these problems. Such an initiative would enhance the cooperation between stakeholders, thus increasing the industry's input in the programs' curriculum development. The authors believe that advisory boards would formalize the education-industry relationship and lay the foundation for more joint efforts in improving the image and reputation of the hospitality professions in an attempt to attract more qualified individuals to the industry.

#### Action 4: Improve the Industry's Image by Committing to a more Employee-centred Mentality

For many years the Cyprus hospitality industry has embraced the philosophy that "the end justifies the means". In other words, all means are justified when the bottom line results, always represented by financial goals and objectives, are achieved. Unfortunately, this pragmatic condition has been externalized to the public and contributed towards the development of a rather negative perception towards hospitality professions.

The ethical approach suggests that both the ends and the means must be justified. While achieving the financial objective is important for all hospitality establishments, especially in a highly competitive environment such as Cyprus, it is not a panacea. Industry professionals have to justify their bottom line results with the means utilized to achieve them. It is time to move away from short-term economic objectives and commit to a more employee-centred approach. Such a shift in mentality will benefit immensely the industry's efforts to attract more qualified individuals to its ranks.

The research study investigated secondary school students' perceptions of the hospitality professions. The findings revealed that students have moderate to negative perceptions on specific factors that define the industry. Many local hospitality stakeholders, with whom the authors talked and shared the study's findings, argued that while a number of student perceptions were unrepresentative of the pragmatic industry conditions, others were more representative. In particular, students' perceptions of irregular and excessive working hours and below average work benefits tend to reflect the actual conditions of the industry. Hospitality stakeholders should not only strive to change students' misperceptions but they should also concentrate their effort to improve the actual conditions of their industry. A pivotal role in

such an effort is a paradigm shift that will enhance the industry's level of professionalism and commit to more employee-centred practices.

#### Action 5: Organized Tours to Local Hospitality Establishments

In order to modify perceptions, we need to enhance secondary students' awareness towards the industry. The Cyprus Tourism Organization in collaboration with the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture and the local industry should organize field trips to prominent hospitality establishments in which students will have the opportunity to experience the true qualities of the industry. Industry professionals will have the opportunity to tour students through their establishment; explain to them the operation's mission and goals; define the different divisions and departments, introduce them to current employees, and answer relevant questions. If a picture is a thousand words, then imagine the impact of such an experience on students' attitudes and perceptions towards the industry.

#### Action 6: Improve the Image and Project the Genuine Qualities of Secondary Technical Education

Unfortunately, the Cypriot society perceives secondary technical institutions as inferior, compared to the other public and private secondary schools. Society stereotypes technical schools as providing a chance, some call it an alternative or even a way out, to individuals with lower academic qualifications to learn something that could help them in their future professional development.

The Government, and in particular the Ministry of Education and Culture which oversees secondary education in the country, should strive to reverse this negative perception towards technical schools, by projecting their true qualities and uniqueness of such an educational experience. The difference between regular secondary schools and technical schools is not the quality of the learning experience provided to the students but the nature of it. The authors strongly believe that the government should undertake all necessary measures to enhance the image and reputation of technical education to the public.

#### Action 7: Series of Speeches and Presentations

With the approval of the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, hospitality professionals could visit secondary schools in order to conduct informative speeches and presentations to the students. This face-to-face interaction would most certainly enhance students' awareness since it will enable them to express their concerns regarding the industry and receive comprehensive responses by industry professionals. Along those lines, individual students who expressed their interest towards such professions could be invited to visit a particular establishment with their parents, interact with employees and managers, discuss career potential, and review the physical demands and rewards of the industry.

### Action 8: Put Technology in Use

Secondary school students are internet savvy. While most of the times the internet is used by students for “entertainment” purposes, with the necessary planning and preparation it could be utilized to provide information and generate interest towards the industry. The industry could finance the development of an innovative and interactive internet web site that directly targets secondary school students. The primary objective of this site is to inform students of facts and issues relevant to their country’s number one industry enable them to request information about the industry, seek career advice from hospitality professionals, and exchange, through a forum session, their views and opinions regarding industry related issues. The site should also enable students to link with other relevant web sites such as the Cyprus Tourism Organization, local hospitality establishments, and professional associations. In addition, such a web page can be used to inform secondary school career advisors as to the latest news and trends of the industry. Therefore, the key ingredient of such a technological tool is the interaction of all industry stakeholders with the students in order to enhance their hospitality awareness.

In addition, hospitality stakeholders could utilize the media, both electronic and printed in an effort to present the industry’s activities. It is imperative that the industry’s daily activities are exposed to the general public. In the last couple of years, culinary programs, incorporated in local morning shows, are broadcast almost daily by television stations. Reputable chefs exhibit their culinary expertise and address the viewers’ questions, comments and suggestions. Television executives are quite satisfied with the popularity and acceptability of such programs. It is important to note, that a number of hospitality stakeholders have argued that such programs have enhanced the image, reputation, and social acceptability of culinary professions. Educators agree that this positive media exposure might have contributed to the dramatic increase in their culinary enrolments.

### Action 9: Mentorship Programs Targeting Secondary School Students

Mentoring is the supportive development of the individual employee or student through the use of an experienced person. It is widely recognized that mentoring success depends upon committed individuals and pre-established goals. Mentoring is a low cost technique that if implemented properly has the potential of enhancing the industry’s public image and reputation. Hospitality professionals could become career mentors for secondary school students who are interested in pursuing a relevant career. It is acknowledged that mentoring at such an early stage of the individual’s career decision stage will greatly influence their perception as to what constitutes the hospitality industry. Therefore, mentoring will help students gain a realistic view of the required personal demands and sacrifices of such a career. In the long term, such activities will enable graduated students, to socially assimilate in the organization; thus reducing their anxiety that might cause symptoms such as burnout, turnover and drop out.

## CONCLUSION

The research study investigated secondary school students' perceptions and attitudes towards the hospitality professions. The findings confirmed some long term assumptions expressed by industry stakeholders. The most important finding, which necessitates the immediate attention of all stakeholders, is the relatively low image and reputation hospitality professions "enjoy" amongst secondary school students. It is suggested that the industry provides careers which are relatively unattractive to the vast majority of secondary school students, especially the ones with above average academic qualifications. Findings suggest that the industry is able to attract individuals with average or below academic qualifications who mostly attend secondary public technical schools.

Reflecting on the research findings, the authors presented a number of recommendations that aim to enhance the public image and reputation of the industry. These recommendations are founded on a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship amongst hospitality stakeholders, secondary school students, and the Cyprus Government. The quality of this relationship will become the determining factor in all of our efforts to improve the industry, its image, and the quality of individuals attracted by it. Tertiary education has a crucial role in this effort since it represents the bridge by which individuals should successfully pass en-route to a prosperous and long-term career.

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