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Understanding aspirations in tourism students

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ABSTRACT

Tourism education is frequently challenged with lower quality student intake, disjointed engagement, and poorer academic performance leading to uncertain career aspirations. Low aspirations tend to predominate among tourism students, with many having little interest in the industry as a long-term career option. This, in turn, affects employer perceptions and graduate employability. We use capability and uncertainty theory in this qualitative study to understand the aspirations, employment perceptions, barriers, and expectations of graduate students of a tourism programme at a post-92 British university. We find marked differences in aspirations and in clarity and appreciation of opportunities within the sample and suggest suitable recommendations that can lead to greater engagement with the tourism industry and long-term employability.

1. Introduction

A focus on aspirations and effort has never been stronger than in the current global economic climate. Governments and educational institutions are trying to raise school children's aspirations from the very basics to broaden their horizons and encourage them to strive for better jobs. This effort is supported by a drive to increase opportunities through training schemes, apprenticeships, job creation, increased childcare provisions, and so on (Spohrer, 2011). A sense of fairness and equal opportunities underlie this, with institutions, including the OECD, arguing for schools to give all pupils a chance to succeed and to tackle the stubborn, talent-constricting link between circumstances and career ambitions. The future, according to economies and industries, lies in societies with a skilled workforce with high aspirations. This paper undertakes multi-level analyses to understand the development of aspirations of undergraduate tourism students through the lenses of uncertainty and capacity, to identify the need and role of intervention, and to provide useful recommendations.

Tourism education suffers from poorer academic intakes often combined with low levels of aspiration and performance, leading to low long-term engagement with careers in the industry. Although tourism is a strong academic subject in some institutions, overall it suffers from a long tail of relatively poor performance (Airey, Tribe, Benckendorff, & Xiao, 2014) and perceived lack of intrinsic motivation (Stansbie & Nash, 2016). This is due, in part, to an increase in the fragmentation of student engagement (Lugosi & Jameson, 2017) and lower entry levels than other subjects such as economics and business studies, attracting many students who take the course for lack of choice, alongside high performing school leavers who are interested in tourism is a career choice. In the United Kingdom, the undergraduate entry requirements are measured in UCAS points on a national level; a study conducted in 2012 showed that students required an average of 258.8 UCAS points for tourism, while the average points for medicine were 516.8, for mathematics 402.9, for economics 372.2, and for business studies 312.6; similar discrepancies in entry requirements have been recorded across Europe and Australia (Airey et al., 2014). In Australia, although the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) identifies tourism requirements to be closer to business management and social sciences, Airey et al., 2014 contend that the figures are distorted due to the selective nature that compares 15 universities that offer tourism programmes, excluding most prestigious universities which do not offer tourism programmes and have the highest entry scores. Issues of lower quality of intake to tourism programmes were also found in Norway (Xiang, 2017) and China (Airey et al., 2014). Data collected in a separate study from 75 international tourism management students over three years of study (Ciolanel, 2017) reveal that students choosing a tourism degree consider a wide range of programmes, including nursing, criminology, and languages. Furthermore, the choice to study tourism has been linked to an interest in travel, personal circumstances, and convenience, with little attention to subject relevance. The challenges carry on throughout the course of the programmes, with many students displaying low levels of classroom engagement and high dropout rates (Domene, Socholotiuk, & Woitowicz, 2011; Wang & Peck, 2013). In addition, students whose achievement are satisfactory are

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more prone to become affectively disengaged, withdrawn, or passively compliant and at risk of under-achievement and low aspirations (Smith et al., 2001; Tribe, 2006), leading to poor image for future student recruits (Richardson, 2009; Stone, Padron, Wray, LaLopa, & Olson, 2017). Despite the perceived disconnect among students between the study programmes and the employability prospects upon graduation, tourism programmes continue to focus on the development of critical perspectives on the nature of curriculum content with little focus on wider stakeholder needs (Daniel, Costa, Pita, & Costa, 2017; Kim & Jeong, 2018).

In terms of graduate students working in the tourism industry, studies have shown that the average level of education is low (Prize, 1994; Stansbie & Nash, 2016) and that employees with a tourism education constitute a small proportion of the overall number of employees in the catering, accommodation, and travel industries (Hjalager & Andersen, 2001), with research arguing that many tourism employers do not require a tourism degree (Airey, Tribe, Benckendorff, & Xiao, 2015; Evans, 1993). A combination of poor image (Richardson, 2009; Riley, Ladkin, & Szivas, 2002) poor pay and working conditions as well as absence of motivation (Doherty, Guerrier, Jamieson, Lashley, & Lockwood, 2001; Jenkins, 2001) brings additional challenges in recruiting the right candidates to tourism programmes (Mei, 2017). More recently, employment in the tourism industry has been based on qualifications (Baum, 2015; Baum et al., 2016), though studies indicate that jobs in tourism are not the first career choice among young graduates (Getz, 1994). Instead, tourism is regarded as a temporary solution, even by those with dedicated professional training. In terms of job opportunities, graduates have a far wider perspective than accounted for in curriculum designs (Purcell & Quinn, 1996) but offer little added value, as they compete with low-skilled, ordinary workers for traditional tourism jobs (Baum, 2018). Furthermore, around half the tourism and hospitality students never fulfil their potential nor enter the tourism industry, with many going on to low paid employment (Costa, Breda, Malek, & Durao, 2013; Hobsons, 2012; Walmsley, 2009) even though their training was geared towards a tourism career (Hjalager & Andersen, 2001; Purcell & Quinn, 1996). Limited research, particularly recently, has examined whether such low engagement could be indicative of a mismatch in uncertainty or capability in career choice.

The role of aspirations as part of the individual construct becomes a key influence in deciding and defining the shape of career choice and is largely considered a product of individual agency and contextual factors (Sibson, 2011, as discussed in; Barron & Knight, 2017). The factors come together to shape and nurture perceived achievable and or desirable aspirations that are particular to individuals while tied together by common themes. Research into hospitality and tourism career aspirations frequently examines the role of nature of the job, skills, human capital development, and context, in addition to focussing on the causes and consequences from a vocational perspective (Ross, 1992). There is recognition that opportunities available to individuals do not always get converted into actions for a host of reasons, including self-efficacy, human capital, choices available at the particular time, personal and professional circumstances, individual skills and proficiency, perceived worth, perceived barriers, agency, and influences of peers and others (Cabrera, Weerts, & Zulick, 2005; Scandone, 2018). However, the roles of uncertainty and capacity to aspire have received insufficient focus, particularly in tourism education (Ross, 1994; Sibson, 2011).

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of aspirations

The concept of aspirations by default evokes elements of ambition and dreams—the sense of a better tomorrow driving today. Conradie and Robeyns (2013) identify aspirations as the idea of a person's dream or how he or she could have a “good life” with the resources of health, material benefits, creativity, and agency available (Scandone, 2018). Hart (2016) highlights the complex nature of the term and argues that it is not unidimensional and could be based within the realms of rationality, emotion, pragmatism, or idealism. Appadurai (2004) contends that aspirations deal with both material needs and non-material hopes and dreams as well as with the values and norms that shape them. For students, aspirations are intangible objectives regarding their future educational or employment plans, values, and beliefs about their tomorrow.

Hart (2004, 2012) further conceptualises the nature of aspirations as dynamic, related to other aspirations held by an individual or by others relevant to the individual. An individual can hold multiple aspirations that have differing levels of significance and priority over time. Ray's (2002) aspiration window confirms this multi-dimensional aspect of aspirations and its dynamic nature within changing contexts. This is particularly important for educators as they attempt to understand and influence particular aspects of aspirations at a particular point in time. Simply targeting career aspirations in isolation, as many educators do, and providing specific prescriptions without appreciating the underlying interplay of various aspirational dimensions and dynamics will lead to frustration and disappointment.

2.2. Career aspirations

Gottfredson (2002) observes that career aspirations are as likely to be based on mature evaluations as on wishful views of the future. Creed, Wong, and Hood (2009) distinguish between idealised and realistic aspirations, which Thozhur, Riley, and Szivas (2007) mirror in their definition of the “better job,” one that is free of perceived barriers and limitations. It is important to note that realistic aspirations and idealised ambitions are both equally relevant to understanding the formation of career choices and the subsequent strategies to achieve them. Rojewski (2005, p. 132) defines career aspirations as “expressed career related goals or choice” that provide important motivational momentum for career-related behaviours and future educational and career success. The “expressed” aspect is significant to understanding some of the challenges in identifying and measuring aspirations, as individuals might not always profess their personal desires and goals to outsiders. In Hart's (2012) study, one in four individuals reported having aspirations they had never shared with anyone else, and one-third admitted that they were sometimes afraid to tell other people about their aspirations. Elucidating information thus requires multiple measures and approaches that account for both stated ambitions and unstated hopes. Although research has seldom investigated the aspirations of tourism students or recognised the need for vocational literature to be expanded across subject matters other than sciences (Fouad & Guillen, 2006), the tourism industry has received increased attention over the years. Findings show that exposure to the industry leads hospitality students to become considerably less interested in selecting hospitality as their first career choice (Johns & McKechnie, 1995) and, in turn, aspire to more prestigious positions (Getz, 1994); they perceive tourism jobs as having low social status, low pay, and insufficient benefits (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000) and as stressful, with long working hours and limited progression (Newburry, Belkin, & Ansari, 2008).

2.3. Theories defining aspirations

Based on Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory, social cognitive career theory attempts to explain the process by which individuals create, develop, achieve, and sustain career goals. The focus here is on both educational and career development, and the theory explores the process by which individuals develop interests, make choices, and achieve performance in education and work (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). The theory posits that self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, social support, and perceived barriers, as well as socio-

demographic factors, come together in the planning and revising of career development goals. Of particular interest are the environmental context and barriers that have the potential to promote or restrict certain choices. The role of the environment in the form of a facilitator or controller is also crucial in self-determination theory (SDT), which arises from cognitive evaluation theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The role of the facilitator as needs supportive is considered invaluable to achieve best results, with non-supportive control leading to frustration and disengagement (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). The instrumental role of the external facilitator, be it an academic or employer, is fundamental to nurturing students' career aspirations, while recognising the conditions that can lead students to motivational frustration and disengagement.

Recognising the role of compromise in the development of occupational aspirations, the theory of circumscription postulates the developmental process by which youngsters progressively eliminate further considerations of whole sections of the occupational world incompatible with their developing self-concept that is socially unacceptable or unachievable for people "like them." Although this resonates with SDT's aspect of competence, it recognises and validates the external environment as an inherent factor rather than an influence of the development of aspirations. The psychological self is viewed as significantly influenced by the social self (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997). Certain variables are considered key influences, including gender, interests, social class, and perceived abilities. Individuals develop awareness of these key influences through childhood and adolescence and of how occupations fit within these constructs (Bynner, 2001; Domene, Socholotiuk. & Woitowicz, 2011). This leads to the construction of socially suitable alternatives appropriate from an employment perspective (Hardie, 2015) that are then juxtaposed with the self's perceived capability, interest, prestige, and willingness to take on a particular occupation. Over time, expected and actual barriers along with revised capability and skills perceptions lead to circumscription of employment aspirations.

2.4. Uncertainty in career aspirations

The concept of uncertainty is important in the development and sustenance of aspirations, in that it has a direct impact on the progressive circumscription and narrowing over time of the various options individuals deem as suitable. This quite often is associated with limited awareness of opportunities, experience, financial resources, knowledge, and networks (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Sharif, 1991; Vondracek, 1998; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986). Although there is a lack of research on tourism students, anecdotal evidence confirms the existence of uncertainty with regard to career choices across cohorts and programmes in tourism education (Fouad & Guillen, 2006; Johns & McKechnie, 1995). Thus, under the circumstances it can be argued that uncertainty is as influenced by bounded rationality as it is by circumstances and, as such, unintentionally leads to compromise. Despite uncertainty's central role in developing the society of tomorrow, information about young people who express it in their educational and career aspirations is scant.

2.5. The capability approach

Going beyond the dynamics of choice and circumstances, Hart (2016) recognises the role of capability to aspire as being an inherent part of the decision-making and compromising process. Simply understanding expressed aspirations is not sufficient to grasp an individual's capacity to appreciate the perceived barriers and constraints influencing the decisions. Human beings in their quest to fit in with society and expectations tend to mould themselves in a manner that fits with expected societal norms. Herein lies the core issue with regard to the lack of aspirations and the underlying uncertainties conundrum. A way forward to gain a better sense of aspirations and to find ways to support it would be to use the lenses of "uncertainty" and "capability," with a clear grasp of the underlying context and circumstances. The obvious question then is, to what extent is the lack of various resources influenced by individual differences and circumstances? Appadurai's (2004) work on aspirations, particularly his view that the poor must be taught to aspire, is an interesting approach, in that it recognises the exceptionally different circumstances of the poor and the economically marginalised and introduces this idea of intervention. This concept of lack of choices and the disadvantaged circumstances of the working poor is very much mirrored in tourism employment and education, whose participants would greatly benefit from any such interventions and support.

3. Method

The study aims to capture the views of a small group of students to glean insight into their perceptions and expectations of barriers, opportunities, and support that lead to the development and achievement of their career aspirations. Qualitative research is apposite when exploring new relationships and when researchers want to inductively generate data (Newton, Cabot, Wilson, & Galagher, 2011) to discern participants' decision-making processes. This research method enables researchers to go beyond behaviour and explore the whys and hows with regard to a phenomenon. As such, it provides specific details about a cohort that allows for the development of targeted support and guidance. Research was conducted during the course of a weeklong field trip taken by the researchers and one group of second-year students (n = 39). Students were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, and 23 students who were willing to participate were interviewed. The field trip involved long journeys and free time after daily activities that allowed for one-to-one interviews, in a relaxed and leisurely atmosphere.

3.1. Study design

The particular group was chosen mainly for reasons of convenience, as the researchers were members of the party going on the trip. In addition, as second-year students, they had a relative amount of time and experience with their programme and logically a greater awareness of employability opportunities through internship and placement experiences. They were also relevant as a group, as the findings would allow for support and intervention to be developed to assist them with their aspirations as they moved into their final year. Participants were interviewed using structured one-to-one interviews over the course of the week. The interview was guided by the research objectives and was developed from existing research.

Of the 39 students who went on the field trip, 23 were interviewed for the purpose of this research. The interviews took place towards the end of the second term, as some of the students were beginning to plan for summer internships and placements. All the participants had some level of work experience, and the majority held part-time jobs throughout their studies. Those who had experience working in the industry held entry-level jobs in, for example, restaurants, hotels, and airlines, as discussed further in the findings section.

3.2. Research instrument

Career aspirations are measured using a range of options, including a single-item question on aspiration and also well-tested scales. The theoretical underpinning is a combination of social cognitive career theory, circumscription and compromise, and SDT. A qualitative interview approach was considered the most suited to understand the complexities of the cohorts' career ambitions. Information on work experience and the current job was elucidated to gain a sense of the circumstances. This was supported by information on reasons for studying tourism at the current university, to better appreciate the

wider aspirations and experiences of the participants. The subjective issue of perceived individual opportunities needs an individualist approach. Howell, Frese, and Sollie (1984) contend that any measures of perceived opportunities must be anchored with the concept of individual "opportunity," rooted in the preferences of participants' concept of relevant job opportunities. As Thozhur et al. (2007) observe, the notion of a "better job" will allow for delineation of horizons and indirect operationalisation of perceived opportunities. A single open-ended question, devised by Looft (1971) and used widely in the literature (e.g., Watson, Quatman, & Edler, 2002), which asks: "If you were completely free to choose any job you like, what job would you MOST LIKE to have?" was included. This ideal job served as an anchor to appreciate opportunity and barrier perceptions. The Career Development Inventory (Creed & Patton, 2004; Lokan, 1984) was modified and adapted as two open-ended questions about career planning and support sources in achieving aspirations. A modified Perceived Barriers Scale (Howell, Frese, & Sollie, 1977), which asks students to identify perceived barriers to achieving their dream job, provided further insight into the development of aspirations.

Inductive thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the data. Initially, the two researchers transcribed the interviews verbatim, to be read independently and reflected on. Both authors then analysed the transcripts individually in a systematic manner to explore common themes. Multiple coding was carried out separately on the interview transcripts by the researchers, who then met to discuss and refine the generated codes and agree on a common framework. The coded data were then discussed and refined into 10 candidate themes. The themes were further refined into five main themes with some having relevant sub-themes (please see Table 1). The final stage involved the selection of compelling, relevant extracts. Although thematic analyses aim for a systematic approach, flexibility in the process was adapted, with an emphasis on capturing what was important to the overall research agenda, rather than a simplistic quantifiable analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The ultimate goal here was to both appreciate the prevalent themes and identify those that provided profound insights into student aspirations. The five main themes were "motivation to study tourism," "expectations from the tourism programme," "career ambitions immediately after graduation," "dream job," and "perceived support and barriers." Some of themes had relevant sub-themes (see Table 1).

3.2.1. Motivation to study tourism

In the early part of the interviews, students were asked a series of questions about their motivations to study tourism. The students reported having a variety of reasons for choosing the programme of study, some of which related to the programme fitting their career plan and others to wanting to learn about tourism or to study in London. Passion for travel and meeting people was by far the key motivation to study tourism.

A recurrent theme identified across the participants was an interest in travelling:

I love travelling, I am not interested in anything in particular.

I love meeting people from different parts of the world.

The desire for travel was the starting point for career choice that then led to an interest in working in the industry. There almost seemed to be a naivety in linking likes to hobbies and interests without considering capability and skills.

I am passionate about travelling. I want to do a degree to learn about tourism and what it entails as a profession as well as a hobby.

I would like to travel and work. I like meeting new people and working in hospitality.

Some practical benefits were also considered, including language, convenience, and location that complemented personal interests.

I am passionate about tourism. I wanted to improve my level of English by studying in the UK.

I am passionate about tourism. I have friends and family studying here.

These strong words of like were frequently expressed and indicative of the participants' desires for and like of tourism. The fit with the broader career agenda was the interest in running their own enterprise, with many participants identifying this as an ultimate career aim:

I love travelling, enjoy meeting people;, I would like to experience different types of jobs. I always wanted to start my own business.

The various themes were always underpinned by this interest in travel and people, and the choice of study was guided by interests and hobbies.

3.2.2. Expectations from the tourism programme

While students expressed motivations for choosing to study tourism, their expectations of the programme were less clearly defined. Although some were able to provide a scope as to why they opted for this programme of study, which related to a desired profession in or gaining knowledge of the industry, others were more ambiguous, without having a certain professional outcome in mind.

I would like to learn about tourism jobs around the world.

I love travelling, enjoy meeting people, like to experience different types of jobs. I always wanted to start my own business.

Furthermore, their generic interest in the direction of tourism supported by their broad understanding of the various tourism industries created vague job-related expectations:

I want to work in the airline industry.

I would like to work in events management.

Convenience, combined with an interest in working in a particular sector, was also noted.

I am interested in working in the airline industry. I chose to come to [this University] because of friends who are already studying here.

I want to start my own events business. I have friends studying here as well.

3.2.3. Career ambitions immediately after graduation

Analysis of career ambitions among participants showed that the initial divide was between students who had a set goal in mind after graduation (whether this was a specific role, sector, or further studies)

Table 1
Emerging themes towards understanding student aspirations.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Motivation to study tourism	a) Passion for travel and meeting people
	b) Linking career plans to hobbies and interests
	c) Practical benefits
2. Expectations from the tourism programme	a) Learn about tourism jobs in general
	b) Specific interest in particular industries
	c) Interest influenced by convenience
3. Career ambitions immediately after graduation	a) Generic tourism jobs
	b) Becoming a Manager
	c) Enterprise
	d) Uncertainty in ambitions
4. Dream job	a) Uncertain
	b) Becoming a manager
	c) Enterprise

and those who were not yet certain of their future after graduation.

There was a recurring theme of wanting to work in the broader tourism industry:

I would love to work in the tourism sector after graduation to gain more experience, either in the UK or [my] home country.

Career ambitions included a focus on various sectors rather than job types:

I want to work in an international events management company.

I would like to work in events management and experience running and organising events. I would like to work for a high profile events company, managing luxury events like Ascot.

With regard to mentions of particular jobs, "manager" was a popular choice, preferred by many students as an immediate choice after graduation:

I want to become cabin crew [for an airline] and progress to airline manager.

I would like to work in a hotel or a resort as general manager or in marketing.

There was also an interest in saving money by working in any job to ultimately start their own business.

I want to work on a cruise ship and save money to start my own business.

I would like to work in events, earn lots of money, and gain knowledge to start [my] own business.

A significant proportion of the sample was uncertain with regard to careers after graduation. Wanting to work in the industry appeared to be a popular choice for many.

I would like to work in the tourism sector. I am not sure what role.

I don't know. It would be great to find a job in the industry.

Furthermore, some participants were drawn to particular industries but were unsure about specific plans:

I am not sure yet. I want to explore different roles within tourism to decide on a career path. I would like to pursue a tourism role not relating to hospitality and events to be able to compare the different experiences.

I want a travel related job, not sure if for an airline or working in different places. [I am] also interested in adventure and sports.

The students seemed to have a relaxed attitude towards ambitions, with some directional indicators of interest and convenience:

I don't know. I am interested in doing an MA in Tourism in Spain to improve [my] level of Spanish. I aim to be working at the same time in any job relevant to the industry, to gain more work experience and hope to be able to decide on a career after achieving this.

I would like to work in [my] home country, Spain, in tourism sector, but not sure what specific role or career path.

3.2.4. Dream job

With regard to "dream job," three broad themes emerged from the interviews. First, there was a significant theme of uncertainty when asked to define their dream job.

I don't know

Not sure. Exploring options.

A second theme that appeared consistently was to become a manager relevant to jobs they had identified in their career ambitions immediately after graduation.

I want to work in Dubai for a few years in a five star hotel and work as a manager in a hotel chain that allows travel.

I would really like to work as a senior manager of airline and progress as much as possible.

The third and most common theme was the ultimate ambition of owning their own business.

I would ultimately like to move to Australia and start my own coffee chain.

I want to be an International events manager, wedding planner. Eventually would want to start my events planning business.

This interest in enterprise appeared to be influenced by flexibility in work and combining work with leisure:

I want to work around the world in small eco-friendly businesses. I don't want to earn a lot but to have fun. I would love to open a diving company in the Maldives.

I would love to become a travel writer and food critic as well as [run my] own travel company.

To better understand students' career aspirations, a concept that by default evokes elements of ambition and dreams, the answers related to "career ambitions after graduation" are analysed in parallel with those related to the "dream job." Students who expressed both a career aspiration after graduation and an ideal job had clearer ideas about specific job types both immediately after graduation and in the future.

I would like to work for an airline either in the airport or in flight crew [immediately after graduation]. [My dream job is] to be an Airline manager or hotel manager in the Middle East.

I plan to stay in London after graduating in the current position until a better position becomes available. I am considering doing an internship in the hospitality sector for the work experience in a management role, either for the summer of after graduating. [My dream job] would be a management role in the hospitality industry. I would also love to work on a cruise ship.

The students who were uncertain about their career ambitions or dream jobs recognised their lack of experience and understanding of the opportunities and aimed to discover their passions by exploring various options

Not sure yet. After graduation, I want to explore different roles within tourism to decide on a career path. I would like to pursue a tourism role not relating to hospitality and events to be able to compare the different experiences. At present, I am not sure what my dream job is. I am exploring options.

I don't know. I am interested in doing an MA in Tourism in Spain to improve [my] level of Spanish. I aim to be working at the same time in any job relevant to the industry, to gain more work experience and hope to be able to decide on a career after achieving this. I don't know what would be [my] dream job.

I would like to work in [my] home country, Spain, in tourism sector, but not sure what specific role or career path. Regarding my dream job, I don't know.

Upon discussing their career aspirations, students were asked how they could prepare to attain their dream jobs, other than joining the programme. They identified generic professional skills, gaining industry experience, ability to speak multiple languages, and networking and having contacts within the industry. In addition, students referred to support systems especially for starting their own businesses, including the development of financial and business management skills and access to funds. Of note, no one identified knowledge content as a key source of support.

3.2.5. Perceived support and barriers

In preparing to attain their dream job, students were asked to identify sources of help, the nature of support required, and the potential key challenges perceived. To answer, students considered myriad players who could have an impact on their career aspirations and help them attain their dream job. For example, a repetitive theme of self-support emerged in the analysis, regardless of having an immediate career aspiration or a future dream job:

Myself, bank and the university, by providing courses in running a business and tourism.

I am self-driven. Working hard and having access to information.

Students also identified the university, employers, and banks as additional support beyond themselves:

Myself by getting work experience, employers by offering a job in their hotels, career office by providing help with CV and interview.

Importantly, many students did not know the type of support they required to achieve their aspirations. Among others, job-related experience and professional skills were again indicated as support toward achieving their dream jobs, with little mention of subject-specific knowledge. For example:

Get help with securing a placement, have relevant work experience on CV.

I want access to job opportunities, knowledge of where and when to apply, knowledge on the topic of tourism sustainability

Knowledge on different businesses in the field. Networking opportunities, job vacancies details. Career fairs and advice from businesses on how to achieve entry into this sector.

I would like information on job openings, help with CV and interviews.

Having knowledge of vacancies, the best time to apply for a job, help with CV and job searching.

The barriers students perceived as inhibiting them from achieving their career aspirations are the lack of personal and professional factors. These barriers fit broadly into three subthemes. First, a lack of job searching knowledge, not knowing where to look for jobs, and little understanding of the scope of job opportunities available in tourism were considered significant obstacles:

Lack of knowledge, no relevant work experience, I don't know how to apply for the jobs I want.

I don't know where to start looking for a job.

Second, a lack of work experience was emphasised by many participants, who perceived it as a key weakness in a competitive environment:

I applied for cabin crew positions three times and not heard back. There is too much competition in the industry.

Not having any work experience in management and seeing that many other students are doing internships and will graduate with some relevant experience.

Third, the participants perceived time and monetary constraints as frustrating and impeding skills development:

Many internships are unpaid and require full time applicants. The cost required to finish such an internship are unrealistic for students who need to support themselves.

I don't know where to start looking for a job. Don't have time, I am studying and working full time.

4. Discussion

As the findings reveal, the students' goals are to choose a professional degree in a field that intersects with their hobbies and personal interests. In particular, vocational studies are quite often driven by career objectives that help fulfil a psychological need influenced by intrinsic desires rather than competences as recognised by SDT. The role of the facilitator in supporting and sustaining these desires becomes invaluable, especially given the hint of the “lack of capability to aspire” (Appadurai, 2004), as students are persuaded more by personal interests than by the wealth and diversity of tourism employment opportunities available. Expectations and awareness of opportunities offered by the programme are limited and demonstrated by the uncertainty of programme potential. Given that the participants are second-year students who have embarked on specific career pathways (by choosing optional modules and placements), a lack of clear understanding of the programme scope is limiting their career choices. Their social cognition is reliant on a bounded environmental construct of perceived traditional tourism job opportunities, leading to possible non-optimal functioning and frustrating the development process. Circumscription here is influenced by a lack of understanding of the wider opportunities available and unintentional compromises. Students choosing a vocational tourism programme had no defined professional goals in mind, were either uncertain about their career aspirations or had unrealistic ambitions. The findings corroborate notions of aspirations as motivations and desires towards something that is a perceived improvement over the current situation (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Daniel et al., 2017). Confidence of wanting to work in the tourism industry co-existed with ambivalence regarding specific job roles and means of achieving them. The influence of uncertainty appears to act as a barrier to the development and maintenance of aspirations and has an immediate impact on appreciation of choices and progressive unintended circumscription over time. Consequently, supporting the capacity to aspire within the tourism programme by providing more choices within curriculum and addressing the uncertainty issues are recommended. Unrealistic aspirations seem to go beyond the idea of needs and expectations, incorporating elements of ambitions and dreams. Marjoribanks (1998) defines unrealistic aspirations as idealistic values that do not necessarily reflect specific socio-economic realities but are equally relevant in determining future mobility.

There is an emerging distinction between students with clear goals and those without, with a running theme of uncertainty across immediate and long-term goals and in perceptions of support and barriers. There is also a strong preference for enterprise, with many students identifying it as the ultimate ambition, and although the underlying aspect of remuneration associated to enterprise has not been explicitly expressed by students, further research is recommended to explore the connection between the two. However, too often tourism programmes focus on mechanistic learning, with little support for or focus on the enterprise (Ahmad, 2015; Daniel et al., 2017). According to Jamal, Taillon, and Dredge (2011), tourism education needs to find ways to balance vocational skills and liberal thinking to promote deep learning. The responses also suggest putting emphasis on aspects of well-being and new horizons, something that mirrors the changing meaning of work and life and the increasing popularity of the “portfolio” career, though further research is necessary here. While recognising the changing attitudes of Generation Y towards work–life balance, particularly within the hospitality context, Baum et al. (2016) call for additional research on the topic with regard to specific facets of organisational behaviour.

In addition to uncertainty and lack of knowledge, concealing or supressing aspirations could lead to an inability to express a plan, a dream job, or even a set career ambition or interest. The discrepancy between current entry-level positions and high aspirations that pose financial and managerial challenges is consistent with aspirations being able to determine future mobility. At the same time, the theory of

circumscription, which uses psychological and non-psychological approaches to provide a more detailed understanding of the process of the development and sustenance of career aspirations for the working poor, may also explain why students who work in low-paid jobs within hospitality aspire to higher positions within the same industry and completely eliminate other roles in the industry, which they may perceive as incompatible with their developing self-concept or unachievable for people like them.

Tourism-specific knowledge skills were not perceived as critical to achieving career aspirations, with most students identifying professional and human capital skills as central. Previous research has identified the value and content of tourism education to the industry (Hsu, 2018), but its relevance to tourism students needs further investigation. The recurring theme that emerged in analysis, regardless of whether students had a career aspiration or not, was that they saw themselves as the answer to who could help them achieve their ambition, whether this was gaining work experience, acquiring new skillsets and knowledge, or learning a new language. Uncertainty was recognised by the students themselves and is demonstrated by their frustrations with their lack of knowledge, skills, and work experience.

Although this cross-sectional study focussing on a small second year tourism cohort has the apparent limitations of variability in applications, aspirations and experiences, it contributes by adding on to the discussions on a topic that is currently being debated by academic institutions and policy makers as they consider the role, make up and relevance of tourism education. The study reveals the need to appreciate the dynamic nature of aspirations and to consider the roles of both uncertainty and capacity in determining it. Moving forward, it would be useful for research to explore the impacts of suitable interventions as recognised by this group and their likely effect on aspirations.

5. Conclusions

The anthropologist Appadurai (2004, as discussed in Conradie & Robeyns, 2013) suggests that the poor and marginalised must be taught to aspire. He advises that this should be done within the capability approach, so that specific focus on the aspirations of the poor can unlock the door to increased potential and capabilities. This tactic can have relevance for the tourism vocational cohort, in which students often default into the course or choose it as the last academic option and thus are perceived to be marginalised in an academic sense. The findings here strongly support this notion of a lack of appreciation of the wider opportunities available in tourism employment, with a need for intervention in the first year, by teaching to aspire and providing the students with a wealth of current and dynamic tourism employment opportunities as well as tangible opportunities for placement and internships to gain experience and create awareness of career structure. The naive and simplistic understanding of the industry and opportunities demonstrates the existence of a bounded rationality approach that disadvantages future ambitions and growth opportunities. Hsu (2018) argues for a radical transformation of tourism education across the learning content, pedagogy, and learning environment. As Lugosi and Jameson (2017) contend, the role of education should go beyond a simplistic focus on employability towards developing rounded reflective practitioners who can enrich wider society. There is recognition of increasing pressure for academic studies of tourism to demonstrate their wider relevance to businesses and societies as they generate new knowledge (Filep, Albrecht, Lee, & Coetzee, 2018). If education wants to keep up with the dynamics of industry and technology, an overhaul of attitudes and approaches is required to suit the requirements in enterprise, innovation, change and crises management, social media and data management, robotics, and people management, all crucial to the survival of tourism education. New research is needed to revisit and reinvigorate the well-trodden paths of tourism education. Moreover, addressing the profile and image of tourism education by working towards attracting students interested in tourism education and employment (Mei, 2017) and focussing on outreach programmes at school level to give a taste of what tourism education is becomes more imperative for tourism education in its quest to provide value, as it competes for students in an increasingly market-oriented environment in which student consumers consider it just one among myriad options.

Although tourism education appeals to those in marginalised circumstances constricted by uncertainty and capacity, as we move to service-reliant creative economies, its potential to influence the employment narrative by empowering the ordinary worker is immense. The significance of career aspirations for students, organisations, occupations, and policy makers has received a great deal of attention, with focus on both high and low career aspirations, their link to achievement, and attainments or lack thereof in later life (Schoon & Polek, 2011). However, as Gutman and Schoon (2012) observe, there is little focus on students who express uncertainty about career aspirations. Empirical evidence clearly shows the existence of a significant proportion of students displaying uncertainties about their aspirations (Croll, Attwood, Fuller, & Last, 2008; Gutman, Schoon, & Sabates, 2011), which leads to lower scores, lesser likelihood of completing further education (Croll, 2009), and higher levels of unemployment (Yates, Harris, Sabates, & Staff, 2011) or comparatively lower wages. This cohort also mirrors previous research. Whether it is the lack of knowledge or a willingness to share personal dreams and plans, it is imperative to find meaningful ways to support all students in achieving their career aspirations. Consistent support of their studies, as identified by the students themselves, will only be successful if the students are introduced to the ever-changing world of opportunities available to them. The employment agenda should become integral to modules and assessments rather than remain as a supportive service. This paper has attempted to understand a concept for a particular cohort. In the process, it has identified some wider issues that affect tourism education and all its stakeholders. The relationship between academia and students has never been more relevant as students around the world question the role and relevance of university education and its value for life.

6. Qualitative research method details for the study

Research was conducted during the course of a weeklong field trip taken by a group of second-year students from a class of 109 students involved in an UG degree in International Tourism Management. Students were informed about the nature and purpose of the study before the start of the trip, and 23 students who were willing to participate were interviewed at various times during the field trip. The field trip involved long journeys and free time after daily activities that allowed for one-to-one interviews, in a relaxed and leisurely atmosphere. The average duration of the interview was between 60 and 90 min.

The particular group was chosen mainly for reasons of convenience, as the researchers were members of the party going on the trip. In addition, as second-year students, they had a relatively longer amount of time and experience with their programme and logically a greater awareness of employment opportunities through internship and placement experiences. They were also relevant as a group, as the findings would allow for support and intervention to be developed to assist them with their aspirations as they moved into their final year. Participants were interviewed using structured one-to-one interviews over the course of the week. The interview was guided by the research objectives that was developed from existing research.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Initially, the two researchers transcribed the interviews verbatim, to be read independently and reflected on. Both authors then analysed the transcripts individually in a systematic manner to explore common themes. Multiple coding was carried out separately on the interview transcripts by the researchers, who then met to discuss and refine the generated

codes and agree on a common framework. The coded data were subsequently discussed and refined into 10 candidate themes. The themes were further refined into five main themes with some having relevant sub-themes. The final stage involved the selection of compelling, relevant extracts. Although thematic analyses aim for a systematic approach, flexibility in the process was adapted, with an emphasis on capturing what was important to the overall research agenda, rather than a simplistic quantifiable analysis. The ultimate goal was to both appreciate the prevalent themes and identify those that provided profound insights into student aspirations.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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