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Moments that Matter: Experiences, Commitment and Career Decisions of Young Professionals in the Tourism and Hospitality Sector

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Expression of Gratitude

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DISSERTATION

Moments that Matter: Experiences, Commitment and Career Decisions of Young Professionals in the Tourism and Hospitality Sector

1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism and hospitality sector is one of the most dynamically growing sectors worldwide, significantly contributing to economic development (OECD, 2024). Michalkó's (2016) tourismological approach highlights the highly complex nature of tourism, encompassing elements of both tourism infrastructure and suprastructure, such as accommodation facilities, food and beverage outlets, and various tourist attractions–all of which contribute to the sector's diversity and economic strength.

According to the latest WTTC report, the tourism and hospitality sector provided nearly 348 million jobs globally in 2024, exceeding the 2019 peak by more than 13.6 million. Of the 185 countries surveyed, 142 have already surpassed pre-pandemic records, demonstrating the sector's vigorous global recovery (WTTC, 2024a). In Hungary, the number of employees in tourism approached 400,000 in 2023, with approximately one-third working in hospitality. Within accommodation and food service activities, 179,500 individuals were employed, representing a slight decrease of 2,400 compared to 2022. At the same time, the number of unfilled positions declined somewhat, suggesting a modest easing of labor shortages in the sector (turizmus.com, 2024).

While this trend signals some improvement, the sector's long-term sustainability continues to face challenges regarding workforce capacity. It is widely recognized that the sector suffers from an unfavorable image among potential employees, despite the significant economic benefits it provides. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian–Ukrainian war, and the rise in

inflation and energy prices have substantially impacted the labor market situation in tourism and hospitality (Gössling et al., 2021; OECD, 2024).

The pandemic further exacerbated the existing challenges affecting the workforce in tourism, including high turnover, unpredictability, low base wages, and frequently unfavorable working conditions (Baum et al., 2020). Following COVID-19, tourism and hospitality reached a critical turning point, as attracting and retaining skilled labor has become an increasingly pressing challenge worldwide. With the emergence of generational change, engaging young employees offers a promising opportunity for the sector (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2021; Richardson, 2009). At the same time, acquiring talented and highly skilled workers and ensuring their long-term commitment remains difficult. The notion of the so-called "Great Resignation" phenomenon has emerged, as intensified competition across industries contributes to the persistence of labor shortages that have long characterized the tourism and hospitality sector (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023).

Labor shortages have long represented one of the most pressing challenges in the sector, driven in part by the continuous decline in the number of skilled workers. Trends in applications to tourism and hospitality degree programs over recent years clearly illustrate how external circumstances–such as the COVID-19 pandemic–have influenced young people's career choices and the perceived attractiveness of the sector. Although the most recent data indicate a moderately increasing interest in the field compared to previous years, the sector continues to face an ongoing struggle in offering long-term attractive career opportunities for fresh graduates (Benaraba et al., 2022; felvi.hu, 2025; Gössling et al., 2021).

The development of the tourism and hospitality sector is inextricably linked to the capacity and quality of its human resources. Without these, new tourism projects and the long-term sustainability of the sector's dynamic growth may be jeopardized globally. A shortage of adequate labor not only hinders operational efficiency in the short term but also significantly constrains the sector's competitiveness in the long term (Griffin et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). In response to the increasingly urgent labor shortage, the tourism and hospitality sector has adopted various strategies to attract and retain young professionals. These include talent management initiatives and the development of employee experience–focused programs that communicate the unique value proposition of working in the sector (Baum et al., 2020; Georges and Losekoot, 2024; Goh and Okumus, 2020). According to some studies, the shortage of employees can partly be attributed to the fact that a considerable proportion of tourism and hospitality graduates pursue careers in other industries after completing their degrees, where

they may find more stable and favorable working conditions (Brown et al., 2015; Wen et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the positive attitude of employees working in the tourism sector is indispensable for maintaining guest satisfaction and loyalty, which are crucial for the industry's long-term success (Lin et al., 2021; So et al., 2025). Achieving this goal, however, is difficult if the disadvantages of employment in tourism–such as low wages and unfavorable working conditions–continue to outweigh the benefits (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2021; Grigoryan, 2024). It is therefore essential to probe the problem's root causes and understand which factors influence young people's commitment to careers in tourism and hospitality.

Research into this issue has gained increasing attention, as labor shortages represent a global challenge, drawing heightened focus to tourism talent management programs, career orientation initiatives, and the strategic role of mandatory internships (Baum et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2021).

In this study, **young people** are defined as those between the ages of 18 and 30, as this is a life stage in which education and employment increasingly play a central role. **Students** are considered those enrolled in higher education institutions, while **young professionals** are defined as individuals actively seeking or entering employment. This phase often overlaps with their university studies or closely follows their completion (Super, 1953).

In Hungary, the studies of Formádi and Papp (2022) drew attention to the fact that although the number of domestic publications addressing career perspectives is relatively low, interest in the topic has been increasing in recent years. These studies primarily assessed students' future aspirations and career choice considerations; however, they also pointed out that the Hungarian literature has yet to develop into a coherent knowledge base, forming a professional network. Research by Formádi, Gyurácz, and Németh (2021) conducted during the COVID-19 period revealed that junior tourism management students maintained a distinctly positive outlook on the profession, while uncertainty and thoughts of career change also emerged among graduating students. One of their key findings was that a positive professional orientation and a genuine passion for the profession held particular significance for students. Career decisions were found to be influenced mainly by financial and professional recognition, professional challenges at work, task variety, and adequate working hours. Jandala et al. (2021), analyzing the post-pandemic tourism labor market situation, highlighted the high number of individuals leaving the profession and the sector's low wage levels, raising the need to restructure the industry's wage system. Dán's (2021) research examined the labor market situation of employees working

in hospitality, highlighting the main challenges: the shortage of skilled labor, the decline in motivation and commitment, and high turnover rates. Somlai's (2021) doctoral dissertation investigated the role of human resources in enhancing competitiveness in tourism, pointing out that the quality of education is crucial for students' success in the labor market. Finally, Berghauer et al. (2024) explored the challenges of tourism education during COVID-19, emphasizing the difficulties of online teaching formats and presenting possible solutions through best practices.

These Hungarian research findings also demonstrate that tourism and hospitality continue to face numerous challenges that affect both the labor market and career choice decisions, making it particularly timely to examine how an environment that supports the long-term commitment of young professionals in the sector can be created. A fundamental question concerns which strategies may help improve the sector's negative image and which factors influence university students' career orientation and specialization choices. It is also important to explore which experiences and formative encounters can strengthen early-career professionals' sectoral embeddedness, supporting long-term retention in the field. Answering these questions requires identifying the key factors that determine the sector's labor market attractiveness and students' career choice motivations. A comprehensive, holistic approach lays the foundation for developing strategic directions that may improve the sector's image and ensure the long-term retention of talented young people.

For tourism and hospitality to remain attractive to young employees in the long term, it is essential to pay particular attention to the role of early-career professionals' experiences and encounters. The parallels between service marketing and employee experience theories offer opportunities to approach labor market challenges from a novel perspective. While the labor market challenges of tourism and hospitality could be examined from several angles–such as purely economic, human resource development, or social science perspectives–this dissertation builds its analysis on the parallels between customer experience design in service marketing and employee experience theories. This approach provides a unique opportunity to interpret early-career professionals' experiences through an experience-based lens, thereby identifying new directions for enhancing the sector's attractiveness (Horváth and Kenesei, 2023; Liu et al., 2022).

The primary aim of this dissertation is to explore the formative experiences, connections, and learning processes that support young people's professional orientation, commitment, and long-term embeddedness in the tourism and hospitality sector, with particular emphasis on the role of experience design.

The research focuses on identifying which personal and community experiences, mentoring processes, and professional connections support career choice, commitment, and long-term retention in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Three specific research sub-objectives are linked to this overarching aim:

- To explore the experiences and motivations underlying career choice decisions and professional orientation, with particular attention to formative, educational, and professional experiences.
- To examine career-building strategies and professional connections, especially the role of mentoring and professional communities in the process of career development.
- To map how experience design along the career path can contribute to young professionals' sectoral embeddedness and long-term commitment.

This research contributes to both the theoretical and practical understanding of young professionals' sectoral embeddedness by creating a bridge between career theories, organizational theories, and experience-based approaches. The aim is to establish a common interpretive framework grounded in these three perspectives, offering new insights into examining young professionals' career paths. Building on empirical experiences, the dissertation demonstrates how experience design tools–such as mentoring programs–can strengthen long-term commitment to tourism and hospitality. In addition, it identifies the socialization experiences and community touchpoints that foster professional embeddedness and, in turn, contribute to rethinking workforce retention strategies in the sector.

As a foundation for this research, providing a comprehensive overview of the succession and workforce challenges facing the tourism and hospitality sector is essential. In Hungary, only a limited number of academic studies have addressed HR issues related to tourism and hospitality (Grotte et al., 2021; Nagy et al., 2021), and even fewer have examined the interconnections between consumer and employee experiences or the role of experience-centered employee experience design and mentoring programs.

Given that labor shortages and the sector's unfavorable image currently represent two of the most pressing challenges for tourism and hospitality, it is essential to examine and interpret this phenomenon scientifically. A deeper understanding of the problem may contribute to the development of strategies that, in the long term, can promote the labor market sustainability and competitiveness of the sector (Baum et al., 2020, 2016; OECD, 2024; "Talent management in hospitality and tourism," 2025).

Although numerous studies have examined the role of organizational commitment and embeddedness–for example, in the context of job satisfaction or turnover intention–the analysis of the commitment process at the sectoral level and the examination of the impact of sectoral attractiveness represent a novel approach even at the international level (Holtom et al., 2006; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2001; Richardson, 2009).

This research, therefore, offers a broader perspective, namely a tourism and hospitality ecosystem-level approach. The focus on the cyclical nature of career choice and the role of experiences represents an innovative direction that the dissertation applies consistently while exploring the underlying factors of the process. Emphasizing the role of experiences is particularly relevant in tourism and hospitality, where attachment to the sector is shaped not only by rational decisions but also by emotional experiences and personal connections (Akkermans et al., 2018; Forrier et al., 2015; Kravariti et al., 2022).

The overarching aim of this research is to understand how an experience-based approach–that is, the deliberate and strategic design of employee experiences–can provide a competitive advantage for tourism and hospitality in the ongoing and future competition for talent, particularly in fostering commitment and long-term retention.

The dissertation seeks to answer the following main research questions:

RQ1: What factors and underlying needs shape university students' motivations for career choice in the tourism and hospitality sector?

RQ2. What key experiences influence career decisions of young professionals entering the tourism and hospitality sector?

RQ3. What decisive experiences lead to either commitment or career exit in tourism and hospitality?

This study first examines the attractiveness of employment in tourism and hospitality, exploring the motivational factors that influence university students' career choices. It then focuses on the factors that foster sectoral commitment and professional embeddedness, with particular attention to formative experiences and best practices that support career development. Special emphasis is placed on the concept of experience-based mentoring programs, which promote engagement with professional communities and foster long-term career orientation.

Following the literature review, the dissertation presents the research methodology based on a mixed-methods approach combining focus group interviews, in-depth interviews, content analysis, and participatory action research. The subsequent chapters present the findings from three distinct phases of study, followed by the conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the research and outline the conceptual and practical frameworks that support a deeper understanding of career choice and commitment in the tourism and hospitality sector.

The chapter is divided into four main sections:

- First, I outline the **labor market context of Hungary's tourism and hospitality sector,** with particular attention to the current labor shortage, generational characteristics, and structural challenges that directly influence the sector's long-term attractiveness.
- Second, I address relevant **theories and models related to career development,** highlighting the connections between career choice and career planning.
- Third, I analyze **organizational theory approaches**, emphasizing those applicable at the sectoral level: the concepts of sectoral attractiveness, sectoral commitment, and sectoral embeddedness. These frameworks help uncover how organizational and sectoral factors contribute to retaining and motivating young professionals.
- Finally, I examine **experience-based approaches** that influence career decisions through learning experiences, employee experiences, and professional community connections. This section is critical, as it provides the foundation for the empirical focus of the dissertation, which centers on analyzing early-career experiences and identifying critical experience points along the career path.

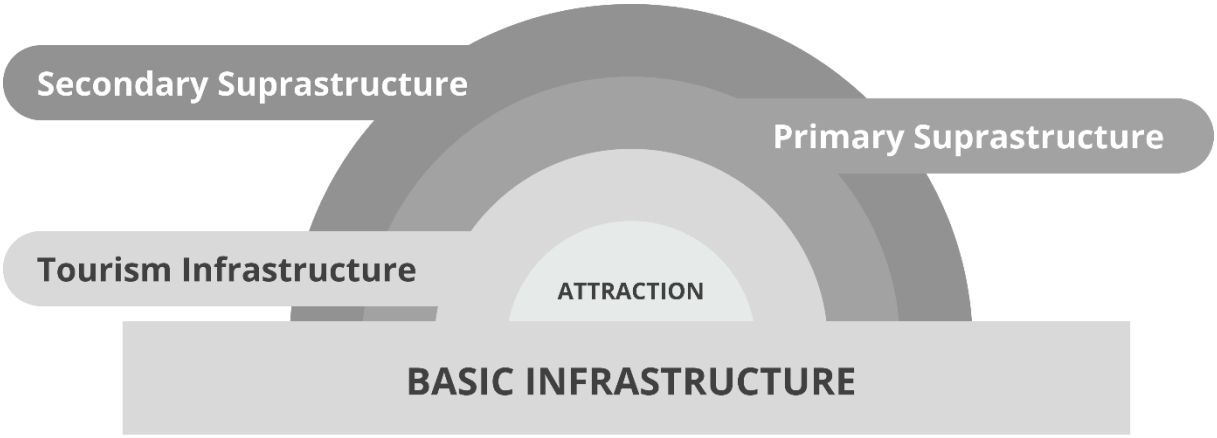
This structured literature review creates the opportunity for the research to later examine career retention and commitment processes in tourism and hospitality within a holistic analytical framework.

2.1. Tourism and Hospitality Careers in Context

The tourism and hospitality sector encompasses highly diverse and multifaceted fields, covering a wide range of professions–some directly belonging to the sector, and others closely linked to it, yet forming an integral part of its operation. For this reason, the first step is to

clarify precisely what tourism and hospitality mean and the related occupational categories. This clarification is a fundamental prerequisite for examining the sector's attractiveness and the motivations behind career decisions. It is also important to note that young people themselves often lack a realistic and comprehensive understanding of the vast array of professions that fall within this domain, which may contribute to uncertainty in their career choice decisions. In this dissertation, therefore, careers in tourism and hospitality are interpreted through Michalkó's (2016) infrastructural and suprastructural model (Figure 1), which encompasses both the primary and secondary services of the tourism sector, thereby providing a comprehensive framework for subsequent analyses.

Figure 1. Tourism Infrastructure and Suprastructure (based on Michalkó, 2016)



Source: Michalkó (2016), author's own compilation

This approach extends to career paths linked to destinations, the hotel industry, hospitality, event management, travel organization, gastronomy, and other related professions. Career opportunities connected to tourism and hospitality include the infrastructural elements of the sector, such as accommodation facilities (e.g., hotels, apartments, campsites), arrival services, tourist information centers, and the maintenance of routes and trails.

In addition, paratourism infrastructure–including transportation facilities, local public and mass transit systems, and commercial and service units–also plays a fundamental role in the sector's functioning. Furthermore, gastronomic establishments (restaurants, bars, cafés) and active leisure services (such as ski resorts, sailing schools, and golf clubs) form an integral part of this ecosystem.

The career map published by the Hungarian Educational Authority (available in the original language in Appendix 1) illustrates the various and diverse positions that graduates of bachelor's programs in tourism and hospitality may occupy after completing their studies. The data clearly

indicate that the degree does not exclusively lead to classical tourism and hospitality positions (e.g., hotel receptionist, event organizer, reservation manager). It also opens pathways into related areas such as HR, marketing, customer relations, and even IT development or administration. This highlights that the skills and competencies acquired through tourism and hospitality education can also be transferred and utilized in other sectors (Sisson and Adams, 2013).

At the same time, it suggests that graduates face a vast horizon of opportunities after obtaining their degree. While this diversity may be advantageous, it also poses a challenge, as it calls for greater emphasis on strengthening sectoral identity and commitment.

The interconnection and interaction of sectoral actors together form a complex tourism ecosystem that influences the sustainability and competitiveness of the sector and the career opportunities of those employed within it (Michalkó, 2016). Understanding this ecosystem and consciously shaping career pathways can contribute to the sector's long-term labor market stability and foster professional embeddedness.

As previously discussed, one of the most significant challenges for the tourism and hospitality sector is ensuring a sufficient talent pipeline and retaining the workforce. The sector must offer attractive workplace opportunities and career pathways for new generations. However, establishing clear career planning opportunities within tourism and hospitality is often tricky and challenging. According to the WTTC's September 2024 report, tourism and hospitality is a major global employer of young people and, proportionally, engages more youth workers than the overall economy. Yet the pandemic severely affected this group: although the direct employment of young people is slowly recovering, in 2022 the tourism sector employed 16.1 million youth directly, representing 15% fewer than in 2019, with recovery lagging behind that of older workers. Young people are particularly vulnerable, as they are often employed under short-term or casual contracts or placed in entry-level positions. At the same time, youth employment is showing continuous improvement; for example, in 2022 it increased by 11% year-on-year. A significant share of youth employment is found in the hospitality industry, which was especially sensitive to the impacts of the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the recovery of youth employment has been faster in Europe and high-income countries than in other regions (WTTC, 2024b).

Individuals typically select the sector of interest when planning their further education and subsequently decide whether to remain in the field after graduation, weighing the career

opportunities available to them (Super, 1953). The sector's current attractiveness fundamentally influences this evaluation.

The number of applicants to tourism and hospitality programs in recent years reflects how young people's perception of the field has shifted. In 2019, a particularly successful year for the sector, 5,584 applicants in Hungary applied to tourism and hospitality programs, with 2,938 ranking it as their first choice. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the number of applications declined sharply: 4,399 applicants (2,063 first-choice) applied that year, falling further to 3,392 in 2021 and 3,096 in 2022, with only 1,439 selecting the program as their first choice. In 2023, however, an increase was observed again: with 4,287 applicants, tourism and hospitality became the 15th most popular program out of 145 available (eduline, 2025). In 2024, the program was offered by 17 universities, attracting a total of 8,179 applications, though only 1,864 of these marked it as their first choice, meaning that the program did not make it into the top 10 most popular programs (eduline, 2024; felvi.hu, 2025). According to the most recent data from 2025 (Table 1), 17 institutions once again offered tourism and hospitality in some form, attracting 10,331 secondary school applicants, of whom 2,250 selected it as their first choice, while nationwide, nearly 134,000 young people submitted admission applications. Based on these figures, the program still does not rank among the top 15 most popular fields of study, indicating moderate yet stable interest in the field (turizmus.com, 2025).

Table 1. Number of Applicants to Tourism Programs Starting in September 2025

INSTITUTION	LOCATION	PROGRAM	NUMBER OF APPLICANTS – 2025
Budapest Business University	Budapest	Tourism & Hospitality / Tourism Management	4,145
Budapest Metropolitan University	Budapest	Tourism & Hospitality / Tourism Management	425
University Of Debrecen	Debrecen / Siófok	Tourism & Hospitality	1,038
Edutus University	Budapest	Tourism & Hospitality	407
Eötvös Loránd University	Szombathely	Tourism & Hospitality	133
Eszterházy Károly Catholic University	Eger	Tourism & Hospitality	382
Kodolányi János University	Budapest	Tourism & Hospitality / Tourism Management	1,070
Hungarian University Of Agriculture And Life Sciences	Gödöllő / Gyöngyös / Keszthely / Szarvas	Tourism & Hospitality / Tourism Management	413
University Of Miskolc	Miskolc	Tourism & Hospitality	252
John Von Neumann University	Kecskemét	Tourism & Hospitality	314
University Of Nyíregyháza	Nyíregyháza	Tourism & Hospitality	342
University Of Pannonia	Nagykanizsa / Veszprém	Tourism & Hospitality / Sustainable and Circular Tourism	505
University Of Pécs	Pécs	Tourism & Hospitality	637
University Of Sopron	Sopron	Tourism & Hospitality / Responsible Tourism Development	122
Széchenyi István University	Győr	Tourism & Hospitality / Tourism Management	781
University Of Szeged	Szeged	Tourism & Hospitality	663
Tokaj-Hegyalja University	Sárospatak	Tourism & Hospitality / Tourism Management	131
TOTAL (17 INSTITUTIONS):			**10,331 applicants (2,250 first choice)**

Source: felvi.hu (2025), own edit

According to the data of the Graduate Career Tracking System of the Educational Authority, several labor market indicators differ between graduates of economics programs and those of tourism and hospitality programs (available in the original language in Appendices 2 and 3). Across the broad field of economics (N=5,532), 55.2% of graduates are employed, whereas among tourism and hospitality graduates (N=888), this ratio is higher, at 60.3%. At the same

time, the proportion of those pursuing further studies is lower among tourism and hospitality graduates (27% vs. 34%), which may reflect their intention to enter the labor market more quickly. Regarding average monthly gross income, tourism graduates earn 472,670 HUF, which falls short of the average for economics graduates (523,198 HUF). In the tourism sector, a slightly higher percentage of graduates work domestically (94.9% compared to 94.1%), and entry-level graduates secure employment more quickly, averaging 1.08 months instead of 0.97 months. Higher education qualifications generate a substantial wage premium in economics, tourism, and hospitality. Nevertheless, this added value is somewhat higher in economics bachelor's programs (107%) compared to tourism and hospitality (96%), pointing to the particular profitability characteristics in the sector. These differences highlight that tourism and hospitality offers a more specialized career path, characterized by stronger local embeddedness and faster entry into the labor market, yet with somewhat lower profitability than the broader spectrum of economics programs (Educational Authority, 2025).

According to the latest data from the Educational Authority, the labor market situation of tourism and hospitality bachelor's graduates has shown a mixed picture in recent years (available in the original language in Appendix 4), comparing the cohorts of 2017/18 and 2021/22. While the average time to employment after graduation has significantly decreased (from 1.73 months to 1.08 months), average monthly gross earnings have dropped considerably–from 581,523 HUF to 472,670 HUF–representing a decline of nearly 19%. In parallel, the proportion of graduates employed in graduate-level positions has also fallen, from 62.5% to 48.5%, and the wage premium associated with higher education has diminished. These trends indicate that although the sector is able to absorb early-career graduates quickly, they are increasingly employed in lower-prestige positions that do not necessarily require a degree. This tendency aligns with the fact that a growing number of graduates are choosing to continue their studies, with the proportion of those enrolling in master's programs increasing from 16.8% to 22.8%. Overall, the data reinforce that for graduates in tourism and hospitality, establishing a secure and long-term career path with high added value remains a challenge (Educational Authority, 2025).

These trends highlight that career building in tourism and hospitality continues to face numerous challenges, which have only been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although detailed statistical data on the long-term post-pandemic effects are not yet available, the results of a domestic study from 2021 previously mentioned suggest that the crisis significantly influenced students' career plans and work orientation: while junior students

generally displayed greater optimism regarding employment in tourism and related fields, graduating students showed far higher levels of uncertainty (Formádi and Gyurácz-Németh, 2021).

Professional and financial recognition remain key motivators; however, the instability experienced during the pandemic led many to question the future of a career in tourism (Formádi and Gyurácz-Németh, 2021). At the same time, several international studies emphasize that the sector possesses unique advantages–such as an enjoyable and diverse work environment, international career opportunities, and continuous skill development possibilities–that can make this dynamically changing field attractive in the long term (Kusluvan et al., 2010; Richardson and Thomas, 2012).

2.2. Theoretical Approaches to Career Development

The dynamic labor market of the 21st century–particularly in the post-COVID-19 period–confronts young people with increasingly complex decision-making situations. The early stage of a career is especially sensitive in this regard: young professionals must not only secure employment but also begin consciously building their career paths in a sector characterized by frequent uncertainty, seasonality, and strong international dynamics (Baum et al., 2020; Richardson, 2008). Career planning- that is, the definition of long-term professional goals, the deliberate consideration of pathways to achieve them, and the conscious development of the skills required–has thus become essential in tourism and hospitality as well. The following section reviews the key concepts and models related to career planning, with particular attention to the decision-making mechanisms of early-career young professionals.

2.2.1. Super's Life-Span Theory of Career Development

For the interpretation of career planning, Donald E. Super's life-span theory (Super, 1953) is of outstanding importance, as it explains career development by linking it to the evolution of an individual's self-concept (Borbély-Pencze, 2017). **According to Super, individuals' career identity is continuously shaped, with life experiences, environmental influences, and self-perceptions playing a significant role in their decisions.**

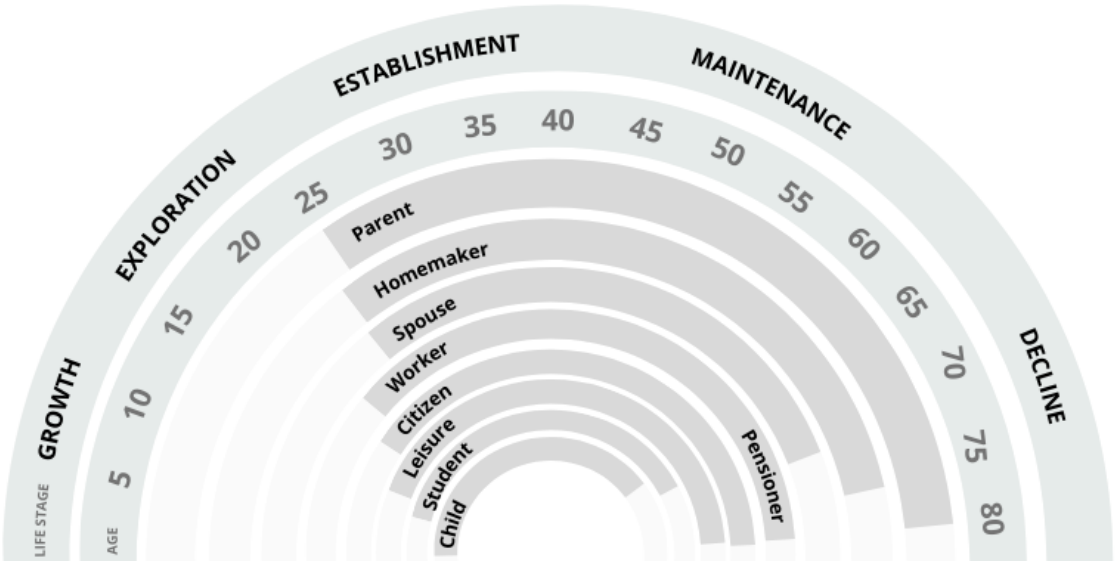
Super's theory posits that a career is not the result of a single decision but rather a lifelong process unfolding through multiple stages. These stages are understood flexibly, as individuals may return to an earlier stage depending on their life circumstances or interests:

- **Growth (0–14 years):** developing self-awareness, interests, and core values.
- **Exploration (15–24 years):** mapping and trying out career options, making initial decisions.
- **Establishment (25–44 years):** consolidation of the chosen career path, professional experience, and advancement.
- **Maintenance (45–64 years):** stabilizing achievements, sustaining professional identity.
- **Disengagement/Decline (65+ years):** gradual withdrawal from the labor market, seeking new roles.

From the perspective of career planning, the exploration and establishment stages are particularly decisive for early-career professionals–indeed, in my research, young professionals' narratives and experiences are clustered around these two stages. At the same time, it is essential to emphasize that, according to Super, these stages are not strictly bound to age: individuals may return to earlier stages in response to new circumstances (e.g., sectoral change, international experience, re-education) and redesign their career paths. This is especially relevant in the field of tourism and hospitality, where flexible career trajectories, non-linear development paths, and the search for self-identity often come to the fore.

Super's so-called *Rainbow Model* (Figure 2) also vividly illustrates how the different roles of life (e.g., student, worker, friend, parent) intertwine throughout career development, and how a career becomes an integral part of an individual's life story. Career planning, therefore, is a series of overlapping decisions–an ongoing process of life construction–in which personal values, environmental influences, and self-knowledge are dynamically interconnected (Super, 1980)

Figure 2. Supers' Life Rainbow Model



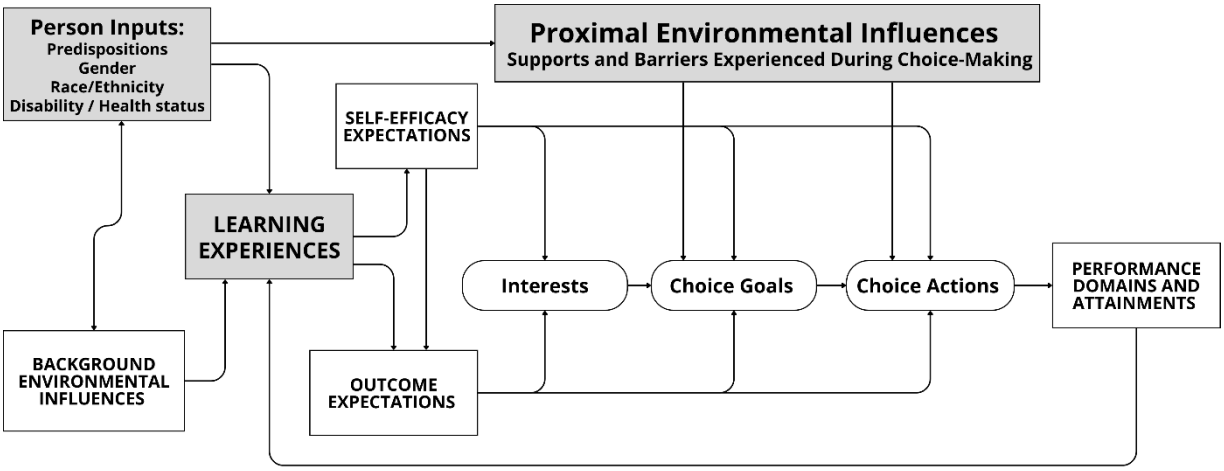
Source: Super (1953)

2.2.2. Social Cognitive Career Theory

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), builds on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and **examines the psychosocial determinants of career decision-making**. The theory highlights **three key cognitive variables: self-efficacy expectations, outcome expectations, and personal interests.** Their interaction determines the career goals individuals set for themselves and the actions they undertake to achieve them.

The model (Figure 3) also incorporates background contextual factors (e.g., gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity) and proximal environmental influences (e.g., supports, barriers) that shape an individual's choices in decision-making situations. SCCT emphasizes that self-efficacy and outcome expectations–developed through learning experiences–shape areas of interest, which in turn form the basis of career goals and decisions. This dynamic model allows career planning to be understood not as a one-time choice but as a continuous developmental process, characterized by feedback loops in which outcomes feed back into self-efficacy as learning experiences, thus restarting the cycle. SCCT serves as an instrumental framework for analyzing the career-building strategies of early-career professionals and their coping mechanisms with environmental influences–especially in sectors such as tourism and hospitality, where career paths are highly context-dependent (Lent et al., 2022).

Figure 3. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) framework



Source: Adapted from R. W. Lent, S. D. Brown, and G. Hackett (2002)

2.2.3. Savickas' Career Construction Theory

Mark L. Savickas' (2002, 2005) Career Construction Theory (CCT) **interprets career development within a narrative and constructivist framework.** As a student of Super, Savickas builds on his mentor's self-concept–based career theory. The central premise of Career Construction Theory is that individuals do not merely adapt to a predetermined professional role; instead, they actively construct their career paths while attributing meaning to their professional experiences. A career, therefore, is a unique, self-constructed story that evolves in parallel with the development of identity (Wang and Li, 2024).

The model identifies four main phases of career narrative construction:

- **Construction –** developing micro-narratives about the self and critically reconsidering dominant stories.
- **Reconstruction –** restructuring significant life events, recurring experiences, and identity-shaping encounters into a coherent life trajectory.
- **Co-construction –** creating a shared narrative in the relationship between the individual and a helper (e.g., counselor, mentor), which supports the shaping of the desired identity and fosters greater awareness of career decisions.
- **Action –** implementing career planning through active engagement with the world, going beyond verbal commitment.

Savickas' career adaptability model further identifies four key dimensions of adaptation: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. The attitudes, skills, and behaviors associated with these dimensions enable individuals to construct and reconstruct their own career stories consciously.

Career Construction Theory thus provides **an interpretive framework for analyzing student narratives, in which career choice is both the result of external factors and an internal interpretive process through which individuals connect their past, present, and envisioned future.** A career, therefore, becomes a form of self-actualization project, experienced by young people as both a **reinforcement of identity and an active shaping of their future.**

2.2.4. Taxonomy of Career Decision-Making Difficulties

For conscious career planning, it is essential that young people possess adequate self-knowledge, realistic occupational awareness, and an understanding of the structural characteristics of the labor market, while also being able to formulate long-term career goals and consciously build their professional networks. However, for many graduates, access to such information is often limited–particularly regarding the content of professions, the competencies required, or the working conditions–which can lead to uncertainty and difficulties in decision-making. In addition, several studies have pointed out that university students typically lack sufficient career management skills–such as goal-setting, decision-making, or self-advocacy competencies–that would enhance the awareness and effectiveness of their career orientation processes (Boo and Kim, 2020; Bridgstock, 2009; Jackson and Wilton, 2016).

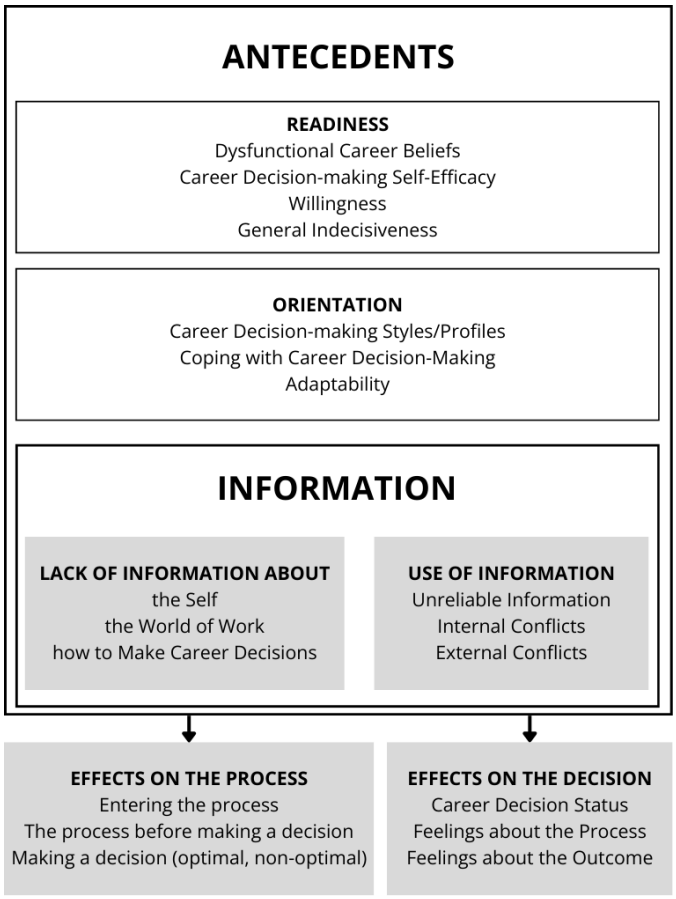
To address these challenges, Kulcsár et al. (2020) proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework based on Gati and colleagues' (1996) work for **interpreting career decision-making difficulties**, which distinguishes three main categories: **antecedents**, **process influences**, and **decision influences** (Figure 4).

Among the antecedents, three subgroups can be identified:

- **Readiness**, which includes dysfunctional career thinking, self-efficacy, willingness, and general indecisiveness.
- **Orientation**, which refers to career decision-making styles, coping strategies, and adaptability.

- **Information** that concerns deficiencies in occupational knowledge, self-knowledge, or decision-making procedures, as well as the use of unreliable information, internal conflicts, and external pressures.

Figure 4. A Taxonomy of Difficulties in Career Decision Making



Source: Gati et al. (1996) and Kulcsár et al. (2020)

This rather complex model is in line with other empirical research findings, which emphasize that difficulties in the career decision-making process arise not only from a lack of information or motivation, but also from the overwhelming abundance of available options, which may itself become a significant challenge. For one example, according to Wang and Tsai (2014), an excessive number of alternatives–particularly for early-career individuals who are still uncertain about their decision-making competencies–can lead to increased stress and decision deferral. A lack of confidence in making career choices hinders young people from identifying and pursuing career paths that align with their personality and can be sustained in the long term (De Pauw et al., 2009).

Career choice is therefore an exceptionally complex process, shaped by numerous individual and environmental factors. Jackson (2015) emphasizes that decision-making is not an isolated

cognitive act, but a socially embedded mechanism influenced on multiple levels. This is supported by the research of Lee et al. (2019), who identified five key groups shaping students' career decisions: advisors, educators, professional mentors or partners, parents, and social media platforms. These actors–though with varying intensity and often simultaneously–affect the individual's decision-making processes, future vision, and professional orientation. The influence of these factors can be particularly significant in the tourism and hospitality sector, where career opportunities are often less clearly defined, and sector-specific commitment emerges more gradually as a result of strong external influences and formative experiences.

2.2.5. Summary of Relevant Career Theories

In this research, **career is understood as a dynamically evolving, lifelong developmental process encompassing an individual's goals, motivations, and professional experiences** (Super, 1957). My approach aligns most closely with Hall's (2002) *protean career* concept, which emphasizes self-direction and value-driven choices instead of traditional, linear career paths. In this sense, a career also serves as a tool for identity formation and self-realization.

Career decision-making, therefore, cannot be regarded as a single event, but rather as a longer-term, feedback-driven process in which students make choices by balancing their own preferences and values with external contextual factors (e.g., economic situation, family background, regional opportunities) (Savickas, 2005). Theoretical approaches to career planning highlight that career decisions presuppose realistic self-knowledge and adequate occupational knowledge, as well as the ability to evaluate available alternatives and identify which of these align with one's goals, competencies, and life situation (Hoff et al., 2022).

2.3. Organizational Theories

The presented career decision-making research has focused mainly on individual psychological and social dimensions, highlighting the need for further exploration of organizational and sectoral factors in shaping career trajectories (Super, 1957; Savickas, 2002; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994; Baruch, 2004). A key premise of this research suggests that **the connection young professionals have with their chosen profession and sector is indicative of their values and experiences of their engagement and commitment to their chosen field.**

Organizational theory approaches–especially the concepts of attractiveness, commitment, and embeddedness–offer a valuable lens through which to explore how tourism and hospitality can become an appealing and retaining sector for younger generations.

Although these theoretical approaches were initially developed in relation to organizational-level functioning, this study examines their contextual applicability at the **sectoral level.** The aim here is therefore not to provide a general theoretical overview, but rather to demonstrate how these three concepts–sectoral attractiveness, sectoral commitment, and professional embeddedness–can be interpreted and applied in the context of tourism and hospitality.

2.3.1. Sectoral Attractiveness and Perceptions

The concept of **organizational attractiveness** refers to the general appeal of an organization as perceived by various stakeholder groups, including employees. Out of this stream emerged the notion of **employer attractiveness,** which specifically examines the attractiveness of organizations as employers in relation to recruiting new talent and retaining existing employees. In the present research, these concepts are extended to the level of **sectoral attractiveness**, which addresses questions of appeal and commitment at the sectoral level (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Bakanauskienė et al., 2016; Berthon et al., 2005). When considering a career choice, the attractiveness of a single organization must first be understood in the context of the sector as a whole. In this sense, employer value propositions can also be applied at the industry level, with particular attention to understanding employee motivations and commitment processes to enhance the sector's overall appeal and retain talented professionals.

The initial attraction toward tourism and hospitality education often stems from a general interest in travel, which promises joy and adventure (Blomme et al., 2013). Students, therefore, choose the field of tourism and hospitality; however, throughout their studies and practical experiences, they encounter various factors that may alter this initial enthusiasm.

According to the literature, the main reasons for such disillusionment include the sector's often-precarious labor market conditions, the dominance of seasonal employment opportunities, and the less favorable characteristics of working conditions (e.g., long working hours and low income). These factors can gradually reduce students' commitment to the sector and lead them to consider career opportunities outside the industry (Amissah et al., 2020; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; Richardson, 2008). One of the main underlying reasons is the negative image associated with tourism and hospitality, as well as the unrealistic expectations formulated about

the profession, which partly stem from students' own experiences and those of their social environment (Griffin et al., 2021; Kelley-Patterson and George, 2001; Setiyorini et al., 2015).

The attractiveness of the tourism and hospitality industry is also significantly influenced by the degree of **person–profession fit.** According to John Holland's career choice theory (*RIASEC - Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional*), individuals tend to prefer professional domains where they can work alongside people with similar personalities (Reardon and Lenz, 1999). Previous research has shown that within this sector, the alignment between personality and professional domain, as well as the experience of passion and a sense of vocation, are particularly important factors in career choice (Birtch et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies focusing on Generation Z students in hospitality highlight that work-related motivation is closely linked to the experience of work, value alignment, and the development of professional identity (Georges & Losekoot, 2024; Goh & Okumus, 2020).

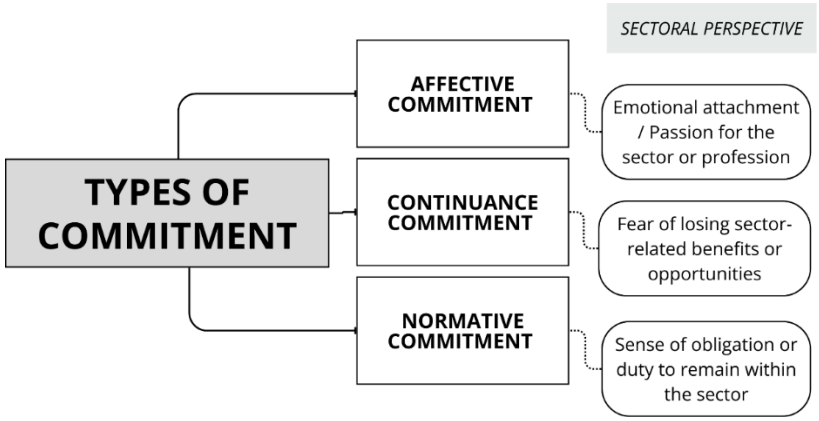
This implies that students are drawn to workplaces and industries where they can effectively utilize their abilities (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; Zhou et al., 2021). For instance, extroverted students are more likely to choose people-oriented, service-related jobs (Cran, 1994). In addition to person–profession fit, **person–organization fit** plays an equally important role in both the job search process and in fostering long-term organizational commitment (Park and Hai, 2023). From these perspectives, if students are aware of the personality traits required for tourism-related jobs, this can enhance their self-awareness, thereby reinforcing their attraction to the profession and their willingness to commit to a career in tourism and hospitality (Setiyorini et al., 2015).

2.3.2. Commitment

Similar to **customer experience design,** which aims to foster consumer loyalty and commitment, positive outcomes can also be achieved among employees working in tourism, assuming that a strong, emotionally grounded attachment to the sector develops. Such emotional bonding encourages employees to maintain a positive attitude and to (re)commit to their profession and the industry even in times of crisis (Mitev and Kelemen-Erdős, 2017; Verhoef et al., 2009). The ongoing "*war for talent*" motivates employers to construct attractive images in order to draw high-quality applicants (Chambers et al., 1998). At the same time, in tourism and hospitality–where attrition is frequent–the sector's stability depends not only on successful recruitment strategies but also on fostering long-term commitment (Kilson, 2025).

According to the literature, three levels of commitment can be distinguished: **continuance, normative, and affective commitment** (Figure 5). Young employees with **continuance commitment** often perceive themselves as being "locked in," with few opportunities outside the industry. This perception may lead to dissatisfaction and decreased performance (Chen and Francesco, 2003). In contrast, **normative commitment** reflects a sense of obligation and moral responsibility toward the industry, encouraging employees to remain part of the professional community and to relate to the sector in a responsible way (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). **Affective commitment**, which represents desire and a more profound emotional attachment, inspires employees to be loyal to their employer. When such emotional bonding is reinforced at the **industry level**, employees begin to perceive their professional environment as a community, willingly collaborating and supporting one another in the pursuit of shared goals, thereby contributing to the stability of the sector (Kim et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 1990).

Figure 5. Types of Organizational Commitment



Source: Adapted from Meyer & Allen (1991, 1997)

2.3.3. Sectoral Embeddedness

Research on the relationship between commitment and embeddedness suggests that employee commitment does not merely depend on satisfaction, but instead on the degree to which individuals feel embedded in their organization or industry (Ampofo, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2001; Robinson et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2019).

Job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) identifies three main dimensions:

- **fit**, the extent to which an individual's values and abilities align with their position and organizational culture;
- **links**, referring to the individual's connections with colleagues and supervisors; and
- **sacrifice**, which reflects the perceived costs of leaving the current workplace

Studies indicate that when these dimensions are strongly present, employees are more likely to feel committed (Robinson et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2019). At the **industry level**, embeddedness also enhances affective commitment, as individuals perceive their work and professional relationships as closely tied to the sector, which generally strengthens their long-term loyalty (Ampofo, 2020).

For university students, **sectoral embeddedness** and belonging to professional communities play a crucial role in career planning, as these factors reinforce early-career commitment over the long run. For young professionals, it is imperative to feel that their voice matters and that they have opportunities to actively contribute to the community from the outset of their careers, as this supports the development of professional identity (Brown et al., 2014). For emerging talents, being able to enter the professional ecosystem as full members from the beginning is decisive (Zhou et al., 2021). Such positive experiences enable them to assert themselves and pursue personal career goals, thereby further strengthening their commitment to the chosen industry through early embeddedness (Chiţu, 2020).

2.3.4. Summary of Organizational Theories

In tourism and hospitality, career development, commitment, and long-term professional attachment are less the outcomes of purely individual choices than of systemic factors. **Organizational theories**–although developed initially at the corporate level–provide a valuable framework for interpreting the career trajectories of early-career professionals at the **industry level** as well.

The classical dimensions of commitment–particularly affective attachment–can be applied to the motivational patterns that shape whether newcomers remain in or disengage from the sector. Similarly, embeddedness can be understood beyond the level of individual careers: whether one feels "at home" in the profession often depends on how they connect with sectoral norms, communities, role models, and developmental perspectives.

Accordingly, in this research, organizational theories are not used as abstract sociological schemas but as **practical analytical tools** that help uncover the links between industry-level dynamics and early-career experiences. Learning environments, workplace cultures, and community-based experiences together shape how individuals find their place in the profession–and how strongly they are able to remain attached to it in the long term.

This perspective contributes to extending the relevance of organizational theories beyond the micro level to include meso- and macro-level interpretations. When complemented with experience-centered approaches, these theories offer a more comprehensive understanding of potential pathways for **industry-level talent retention**.

2.4. Experience-based Approaches

Experiences today play an indispensable role in shaping economic and consumer processes (Verhoef et al., 2009). From a consumer perspective, Schmitt (1999) defines experience as the outcome of encounters and situations that connect a company with its customers, emerging when the individual becomes engaged on an emotional, affective, or physical level. The concept of service experience goes beyond service quality, as it also encompasses the interaction between consumer and provider and the role the consumer plays in the realization of the service.

One perspective of experience design is **experience design** itself, which aims to create touchpoints that consciously shape the experiences of users or customers. The methodology of **design thinking** supports this approach by offering human-centered, iterative solutions for improving the service environment (Kenesei & Kolos, 2018). An experience thus arises whenever a customer interacts with the service provider or acquires new information related to the provider. Recognizing the significance of experiences, an increasing number of service organizations place customer experience at the core of their operations (Meyer and Schwager, 2007).

These companies deliberately design the customer experience by offering experience-centered services that aim to create distinctive product and service offerings (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010). It is therefore of great importance to consciously design the service process – that is, the **consumer journey** – step by step, as this allows for a better understanding of customers' concrete experiences and the factors that influence them. Actively shaping the consumer journey is especially crucial in determining the impressions, emotions, and values associated

with a given service, which in turn may influence loyalty and commitment in the long run (Kenesei and Kolos, 2018; Mitev and Kelemen-Erdős, 2017).

In addition to the previously discussed factors influencing career decisions, it is essential to recognize that **experience design** and the **customer experience ecosystem** are not only crucial from the perspective of consumers but also from that of employees. Employees' personal experiences directly affect their commitment to both the profession and the sector, while simultaneously playing a decisive role in shaping the customer experience (Manning and Bodine, 2012). The process of experience design encompasses the deliberate structuring of the entire **employee journey**, including recruitment, onboarding, and internal communication. This process aims to optimize the interactions experienced at employee–organization touchpoints and to effectively convey the organizational value proposition (Horváth and Kenesei, 2023).

Experience design originally emerged as a concept for shaping consumer experiences; however, it has increasingly gained prominence in the interpretation of learning and employee journeys as well. The **experiential value model** developed by Mathwick et al. (2001) identifies four dimensions–**return on investment, service excellence, playfulness, and aesthetics**–through which individuals perceive value. These dimensions can be readily adapted to the analysis of students' and early-career professionals' academic and professional experiences, as the quality of these experiences plays a crucial role in shaping sectoral commitment and professional identity.

Similar to customer experience design, the **employee experience** can also be mapped along a kind of *"service journey"*, where interactions with educators, employers, or professional communities leave emotional and experiential imprints on early-career professionals. Such experiences can foster positive attitudes, attachment, and loyalty, but they may equally lead to uncertainty or even career withdrawal. Consequently, **service design** and **touchpoint-based thinking** provide an essential framework for workforce retention and talent development (Kenesei and Seprődi, 2017; Schmitt, 2010; Schmitt and Schmitt, 2003).

In this context, experience design is especially significant, as **value-creating and personalized interactions** can also exert an identity-shaping influence (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). This is particularly critical during the period of early career-related experiences, when the foundations of career paths are being established (Savickas, 2005; Super, 1980).

In the design of employee experiences, it can be helpful to define **ideal employee target groups and personas**, which allow organizations to deliberately tailor experiences, thereby enhancing

employee satisfaction and fostering long-term commitment. Just as customer personas contribute to a deeper understanding of ideal consumer profiles and enable more precise service design, **employee personas** can support the creation of optimal employee experiences (Mikhlina and Saukkonen, 2024). By identifying these personas, organizations can uncover the **key touchpoints** that shape employee experience, as well as the necessary areas for development and potential interventions (Verhoef et al., 2009).

Employee personas may also include **students and early-career professionals**, for whom initial work experiences fundamentally shape attitudes toward the profession and the sector. Conceptualizing students and later employees as consumers highlights that **learning and employee experiences can be designed and shaped with the same intentionality as traditional customer experiences** (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Jackson and Wilton, 2016).

This dissertation emphasizes an **experience-based approach**, which holds that the responsibility of organizations extends beyond merely providing an operational environment. It also encompasses the creation of **inspiring and supportive experiences** that contribute to the formation of professional identity, foster employee commitment, and enhance the attractiveness of the tourism and hospitality sector. Within this perspective, the **design of experiences** is particularly critical in this field, where young professionals' embeddedness is strongly influenced by their first encounters with the profession and by the various forms of connection they establish with it (Gannon and Maher, 2012; Richardson, 2009).

The following section introduces the **three main dimensions of early career experiences** that can be shaped both at the organizational and sectoral levels. The first dimension is the **learning experience**, which examines how young people encounter the field of tourism and hospitality through education–be it formal higher education programs, dual training schemes, or other practical learning opportunities. The second dimension is the **employee experience**, which addresses the first encounters with work and the role of the workplace environment in shaping commitment and sectoral embeddedness. The third dimension is the **experience of professional communities and professional connections**, which play a pivotal role in engaging young people and fostering their long-term retention within the field.

2.4.1. Learning experiences

In professions related to tourism and hospitality, the nature of the sector implies that **experiential learning** plays a central role in the early career development process. This approach provides students with opportunities to acquire professional competencies in real work environments through interactions and experiences (Kolb, 1984; Lashley and Barron, 2006). According to Dewey's (1938) theory of progressive learning, education is most effective when it is grounded in experience and practical application. Consequently, collaboration with industry actors, professional internships, and experience-based pedagogical methods become crucial elements in professional training.

From a constructivist pedagogical perspective (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978), the effectiveness of learning experiences depends on **active exploration and social interaction**, where learners construct knowledge from their own experiences (Pulinka, 2015). Experiential learning theory suggests that learning is most effective when it is based on **active participation, knowledge gained through practice, and reflective thinking**. Experiential learning theory suggests that learning is most effective when it is based on **active participation, knowledge gained through practice, and reflective thinking** (Kolb, 1984).

Experiential learning models, such as **work-integrated learning (WIL)** (Jackson, 2015; Jackson and Wilton, 2016) or **learning within communities of practice** (communities of practice, (Lave and Wenger, 1991) highlight that the effectiveness of the learning process can be significantly enhanced when education takes place in real work environments, grounded in practical experience, and involves the active participation of relevant actors within the professional community. In the case of tourism and hospitality, **integrating formal education with practical experiences** is of particular importance for increasing the attractiveness of the sector. Such integration not only supports the development of professional competencies but also contributes to students' **career building and long-term commitment** to the profession (Jayawardena, 2017).

According to Lee et al. (2019), faculty members play a pivotal role in students' career decisions, particularly those who actively contribute to their professional development and provide guidance during the career choice process. In this context, **educators assume a dual role:** on the one hand, they are responsible for delivering professional knowledge in line with curricular requirements; on the other hand, they are expected to assist students in forming a realistic

understanding of the tourism and hospitality industry (Amissah et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2000; Dawson, 2020; Wen et al., 2019)

Fraser's (2020) research highlights that within the tourism and hospitality sector, leadership and influence, decisive and responsible decision-making, guest- and people-oriented attitudes, commitment and positivity toward service, effective verbal communication, as well as ethics, value-based conduct, and integrity constitute key factors for professional success. Based on these insights, curriculum design must ensure alignment between educational standards and students' expectations, while providing knowledge that fosters professional development and enhances employability. The **quality of education** is further strengthened when educators inspire students through their professional expertise and dedication–since both practical experience and enthusiasm for the field play a decisive role in shaping students' attitudes and reinforcing their professional commitment (Chen et al., 2000; Dawson, 2020; Gannon and Maher, 2012).

The development of a realistic self-concept plays a decisive role in students' successful career planning, and this is shaped both by educational institutions and by professional experiences. A key factor in effective career planning is **person–profession fit.** Teng's (2008) research demonstrated that extroverted personality traits are strongly associated with students' positive attitudes toward tourism-related jobs, with this effect being mediated by the extent to which individuals perceive alignment with the sector's requirements. University- and industry-based programs play a crucial role in fostering this alignment, as they help students to recognize and reflect on their own abilities and preferences. Career guidance initiatives thus contribute to a deeper understanding of students' professional interests, supporting them in choosing pathways that are more likely to result in long-term success and satisfaction (Lee et al., 2019).

In addition to university education, various other factors can also shape students' career plans. **Extracurricular activities (ECA)**, such as membership in student organizations, play a particularly significant role in professional orientation. Participation in industry-focused student associations provides opportunities for students to engage in professional programs, training sessions, and conferences, as well as to establish direct connections with employers and professional communities. Such career-oriented extracurricular activities not only support professional development but can also offer students a competitive advantage in the labor market. Furthermore, alumni networks and the experiences of graduates can also influence career decisions, as former students provide authentic insights into sectoral opportunities and

challenges (Lee et al., 2019). At the same time, it is essential to recognize that these opportunities should remain voluntary, since excessive early involvement may lead to burnout during the study period, which in turn can further increase the risk of long-term attrition from the profession (Luo et al., 2018).

In the transition between university and the world of work, the compulsory internship carried out during higher education plays the most critical role. In most tourism and hospitality programs, acquiring practical experience is a core requirement, as it enables students to gain insight into professional work environments, become familiar with the specific characteristics of the field, and develop a clearer understanding of the type of job roles and organizations in which they would like to build their careers. Moreover, internships can also help students to recognize the extent to which their personality and competencies align with their chosen career path (Kim and Park, 2013; Lee et al., 2019; Rothman and Sisman, 2016).

Experiences are crucial in career orientation and sectoral commitment. When students gain positive professional experiences, they are more likely to develop a more substantial commitment to tourism and hospitality, thereby reinforcing the connection between their chosen field of study and their future career (Chuang et al., 2009). However, internships may also involve unfavorable experiences that can foster negative attitudes toward the sector (Brown et al., 2014; Chen and Shen, 2012; Farmaki, 2018). Some studies indicate that students without prior work experience tend to hold more positive perceptions of the industry, whereas those with work experience are more likely to develop critical views of tourism jobs (Amissah et al., 2020). Furthermore, research highlights that the more experience students accumulate in the profession, the less committed they often become to the sector, suggesting that the realities of the workplace frequently fall short of their initial expectations (Chen and Shen, 2012; Farmaki, 2018).

During students' professional socialization, the experiences gained throughout their university years–such as participation in professional programs, practical training, and community engagement–contribute to the formation of their professional identity. For students to develop an emotional attachment to their chosen field during their studies, it is essential that the socialization process provides them with experiences that enable them to understand and appreciate the significance of the profession, thereby fostering commitment to their chosen career path (Weidman et al., 2001).

2.4.2. Work-related / Employee experiences

At the earliest stages of employment, the initial impressions experienced by young professionals play a decisive role (Rothman and Sisman, 2016). The new work environment, interactions with colleagues, and first tasks collectively shape their initial perception of whether they have indeed chosen the right career path. This early period often functions as a kind of "trial phase or period," during which fresh employees may face a critical decision point: whether they are able to identify with the organizational culture and discover those points of connection that will render their work meaningful in the long term. Research indicates that employees who encounter positive experiences in their workplaces are more likely to remain loyal to their organizations and actively engage in organizational activities (Ampofo, 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Conversely, uncertainty and a lack of support may result in significant attrition. Career development theories, as discussed earlier, emphasize that organizational support is a crucial factor in enabling new employees to feel secure and to genuinely become part of the organization. Internships and first work experiences, therefore, play an equally important role in establishing affective commitment (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Zhou et al., 2021).

Commitment and embeddedness are essential factors in workforce stability and long-term success (Ampofo, 2020). However, the degree and depth of such commitment and embeddedness are heavily influenced by the quality of experiences gained in the workplace (Mitchell et al., 2001). **Workplace experiences** can take various forms: positive feedback, recognition, opportunities for development, and a supportive work environment. These experiences play a critical role in shaping how employees perceive themselves within the organization and the extent to which they feel valued and significant (Rich et al., 2010). Studies suggest that employees with positive workplace experiences are more likely to recommend their employer to others and demonstrate higher levels of job satisfaction (Ilyas et. al, 2017; Yu et al., 2021). Overall, the role of experiences is highly significant when discussing workplace commitment and embeddedness (Horváth and Kenesei, 2023).

Attracting and retaining young employees remains a continuous challenge for organizations, particularly in rapidly changing and high-intensity business environments. With the increasing competition on the labor market, organizations increasingly rely on strategies that foster long-term employee commitment and retention (Ronda et al., 2018). One of the key tools in these efforts is **employer branding,** which aims to authentically communicate the benefits of the

employee experience and to position the organization as an attractive workplace for potential candidates. Employer branding has been defined as "*the sum of corporate efforts aimed at managing and balancing employees' perceptions of the company as the best place to work"* (Itam et al., 2020, p. 4).

Authentic communication of positive employee experiences enhances the perceived advantages of working within the organization. From a psychological perspective, it is vital that young employees typically favor organizations whose values align with their own, and where they experience a strong sense of person–organization fit. When designing an **employee value proposition (EVP),** organizations must therefore incorporate elements that genuinely reflect the culture and values of the workplace. **Storytelling** plays a prominent role in reinforcing brand identity and has become one of the most effective corporate communication tools in the digital era. Emotionally driven narratives may also strengthen existing employees' engagement and internal motivation (Näppä et al., 2023). Employer branding thus extends beyond traditional recruitment approaches: organizational authenticity, transparency, and the cultivation of community experiences jointly contribute to the development of long-term employee commitment (Itam et al., 2020).

At the same time, it is increasingly evident that early-career employees pursue **multi-directional, portfolio-oriented career planning,** where they do not envision a single linear career trajectory but instead keep multiple professional pathways open in parallel (Baruch, 2004). Employees are increasingly seeking flexible and diverse career paths that allow for continuous development and alignment with personal goals. Simultaneously, work–life balance has become a critical concern, particularly among younger generations, who tend to switch jobs rapidly if another position or organizational culture better fits their expectations. For recent graduates, generational differences present an additional challenge during workplace transitions. Age gaps and divergent work attitudes within organizations may pose difficulties for new entrants, potentially reducing organizational commitment (Barron et al., 2007; Weingarten, 2009). Nonetheless, research highlights that initiatives promoting intergenerational relationship-building–such as mentoring and facilitated integration into professional communities–can effectively support young employees in adapting to workplace challenges and in finding a sustainable place within the profession (Bakanauskienė et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2015; Goh and Okumus, 2020; Gursoy et al., 2008).

2.4.3. Professional and Community Experiences

The Role of Professional Communities in Commitment

Career choices and career development decisions are not based solely on knowledge acquired in educational institutions or on formal work experience (Horváth and Kenesei, 2025). The formation of young people's professional identity and the development of long-term commitment to the sector are closely linked to the community experiences that create opportunities for experiential learning, knowledge sharing, and the building of professional networks. In tourism and hospitality, this is particularly crucial, as the sector is characterized by personal interactions, experiential learning, and tacit knowledge (Blomme et al., 2013; Papavasileiou and Stergiou, 2025). In this context, a **key theoretical question arises:** what types of professional communities do young people engage in–and how do these contribute to the shaping of their professional identity, the deepening of their knowledge, and their embeddedness in the sector? The following subsection discusses the significance of these processes of community learning and connection, with a particular focus on how professional communities and mentoring programs may contribute to sectoral embeddedness and the foundations of commitment.

Professional communities are formal or informal structures that bring together members of a given profession, providing opportunities for knowledge exchange, advocacy, networking, and the collective strengthening of professional identity. Such communities include professional associations, alumni networks, or groups organized around sector-specific events, where participation may enhance young professionals' visibility and integration (Črnjar and Hrgović, 2016; Head, 2007; Mcmillan and Chavis, 1986). Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the **concept of communities of practice to** describe learning environments where members, motivated by shared interests or activities, gain new knowledge and enhance their professional skills through active participation and informal learning. Knowledge does not flow hierarchically within such communities but emerges through joint practice, making learning an integral part of community interaction. The overlaps and distinctions between these two types of communities are particularly relevant in tourism and hospitality, where professional learning and sectoral embeddedness often occur in informal contexts. While professional communities typically serve long-term career development, visibility, and expansion of social capital, communities of practice and professional learning communities go beyond networking: by fostering everyday learning, knowledge sharing, and involvement, they can significantly

strengthen young people's commitment (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Lee and Shaari, 2012; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

For university students and young professionals, joining professional communities primarily provides opportunities for building social capital, while also serving as a mechanism for gaining job-related experience in authentic professional environments. Moreover, such communities strengthen social bonds essential for long-term career development and professional commitment. Developing these communities holds strategic significance for organizations, as they may facilitate the successful integration of younger generations and increase retention in the sector (Eissner and Gannon, 2018; Lesser and Storck, 2001). **Professional communities** support the adaptive capacities of individuals and organizations by promoting knowledge exchange and providing spaces for experimentation, thereby enabling young people to participate actively in professional discourse (Wenger et al., 2002).

However, commitment is not determined solely by the existence of community structures: the quality of community experiences, opportunities for engagement, and forms of individual participation are equally decisive (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This also aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, which emphasizes learning through experience and reflection. In light of this reasoning, it is worth considering that approaches specifically tailored to these experiences may present valuable long-term solutions to the labor market challenges currently confronting the tourism sector (Fraser, 2020; Sipe and Testa, 2020). Personal development and experiential learning thus represent a key condition for both participation in professional communities and continued involvement in the sector. Therefore, industry professionals must support newcomers in processing experiences and applying acquired knowledge (Črnjar and Hrgović, 2016; Lashley and Barron, 2006).

The Role of Mentoring in Integration into Professional Communities

The relationship between commitment and mentoring is often framed in tourism and hospitality research as part of talent management (Gannon and Maher, 2012; Horváth and Kenesei, 2025; Sipe and Testa, 2020). However, the specific role of mentoring programs targeting youth has received limited attention, which underscores the novelty and relevance of this research. Mentoring may serve as a crucial element, as it fosters personal professional development, increases satisfaction through connections and achievements, and thereby contributes to workforce retention in the sector. An experience-centered mentoring program can provide a more effective solution beyond the boundaries of mandatory internships, offering young people

the opportunity to build deeper connections with the profession and acquire the necessary competencies through personal experiences (Deale et al., 2020).

Clarifying the Concept of Mentoring

The practice of mentoring, which dates back to the medieval master–apprentice system, has evolved into one of the most important tools of career development today, where novice and inexperienced employees acquire the skills of the profession alongside experienced professionals (Kravariti et al., 2022; Sipe and Testa, 2020). This methodology plays a critical role in supporting the transition from educational institutions to the labor market, functioning as a facilitating mechanism for overcoming the challenges and barriers faced by early-career entrants. During mentoring, mentors open new perspectives, encouraging young people to set ambitious goals that may previously have seemed unattainable. According to Adler (1984), mentoring enables young people to integrate into a professional network, giving them the opportunity to influence the so-called "luck factor." Mentors can enhance the professional recognition and visibility of their mentees while providing valuable guidance for addressing both personal and career-related questions.

As a developmental and supportive pedagogical tool, mentoring closely aligns with the career theories introduced in earlier chapters of this dissertation. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasizes the role of learning experiences, self-efficacy, and environmental factors (e.g., support, scholarships, financial constraints) in shaping career decisions (Lent et al., 1994). Mentoring programs play a crucial role in reinforcing these factors by providing structured opportunities to acquire experiences that enhance early-career professionals' confidence and self-efficacy in the long run. Savickas's career construction theory also offers a relevant interpretative framework for examining the impact of mentoring. Through the concept of co-construction, the mentor–mentee relationship can be understood as a narrative space in which the young professional receives support for shaping their professional identity. Within this process, mentees receive tailored advice while also becoming active agents in reconstructing their career narratives and developing forward-looking interpretations.

In addition, positive psychological resources–particularly the components of psychological capital, such as confidence, resilience, and optimism–are also essential in the adaptation processes of young professionals. These resources contribute to both academic and workplace success and support the rapid and flexible responses of young professionals to labor market challenges (Borbély-Pencze, 2017; Safavi and Bouzari, 2019; Scerri et al., 2020). Mentoring

programs, as formal structures of socialization and support, facilitate the activation of psychological capital by offering opportunities for professional networking, gradual adaptation to new roles, and integration into professional communities (Deale et al., 2020; Sipe and Testa, 2020; Zhou et al., 2021).

Mentoring can take multiple forms and approaches, drawing on different types of relationships and methods, such as traditional one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring, or peer mentoring, where individuals at similar levels support each other. While these methods primarily focus on knowledge transfer and relationship-building, they also provide rich experiences for participants, thereby advancing career development in a given field. Mentoring programs are offered across a broad spectrum of purposes, including leadership development, entrepreneurship, early-career support, or the career advancement of women professionals. Such programs provide critical opportunities for early-career entrants to gain insights into the functioning of an industry, understand its challenges and specificities, and thereby acquire relevant knowledge and form realistic expectations at the beginning of their careers (DuBois et al., 2011; Eby et al., 2008; Sipe and Testa, 2020).

According to Scerri et al. (2020), most Fortune 500 companies employ mentoring programs designed to strengthen employees' organizational commitment. Effective mentoring programs place strong emphasis on developing emotional bonds through interpersonal relationships. These positive interactions not only promote the personal and professional growth of mentees but also reinforce their attachment to industries and organizations. In this way, mentoring plays a pivotal role in fostering integration into professional communities and in establishing long-term commitment (Črnjar and Hrgović, 2016; Dutton, 2003; Sipe and Testa, 2020).

The literature offers numerous definitions of the mentor role and the practice of mentoring. For example, Kram (1983) defines **mentoring as an intensive relationship based on the transfer of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support.** In this process, the more experienced person functions not only as a mentor but also as a role model, with the goal often being the attainment of a specific personal career objective. This definition highlights the depth and significance of the relationship for the mentee's personal and professional development (Sipe & Testa, 2020). The various forms and styles of mentoring employ different methods to support the mentees' professional and personal growth (Deale et al., 2020; Gannon and Maher, 2012). At the start of a career, the mentor's role lies in offering professional guidance and providing reflective feedback and new perspectives to shape career plans and foster professional self-direction. Mentoring is particularly significant during periods when individuals formulate

career goals, make decisions, and take concrete steps in their chosen direction. This approach is consistent with Super's (1957) career development model, which argues that mentoring is most valuable during the exploration and establishment stages–life phases in which young adults actively search for their place in the world of work, make career orientation decisions, and begin shaping their professional identities.

Thus, in educational institutions, mentoring is not limited to being a formal developmental tool but also functions as a critical support mechanism for career building. In this context, teachers, peers, and alumni networks emerge as particularly important actors who, through their experiences and feedback, can reinforce students' career directions and foster the development of their professional confidence (Gannon and Maher, 2012; Kravariti et al., 2022; Scerri et al., 2020; Siow et al., 2021; Sipe and Testa, 2020).

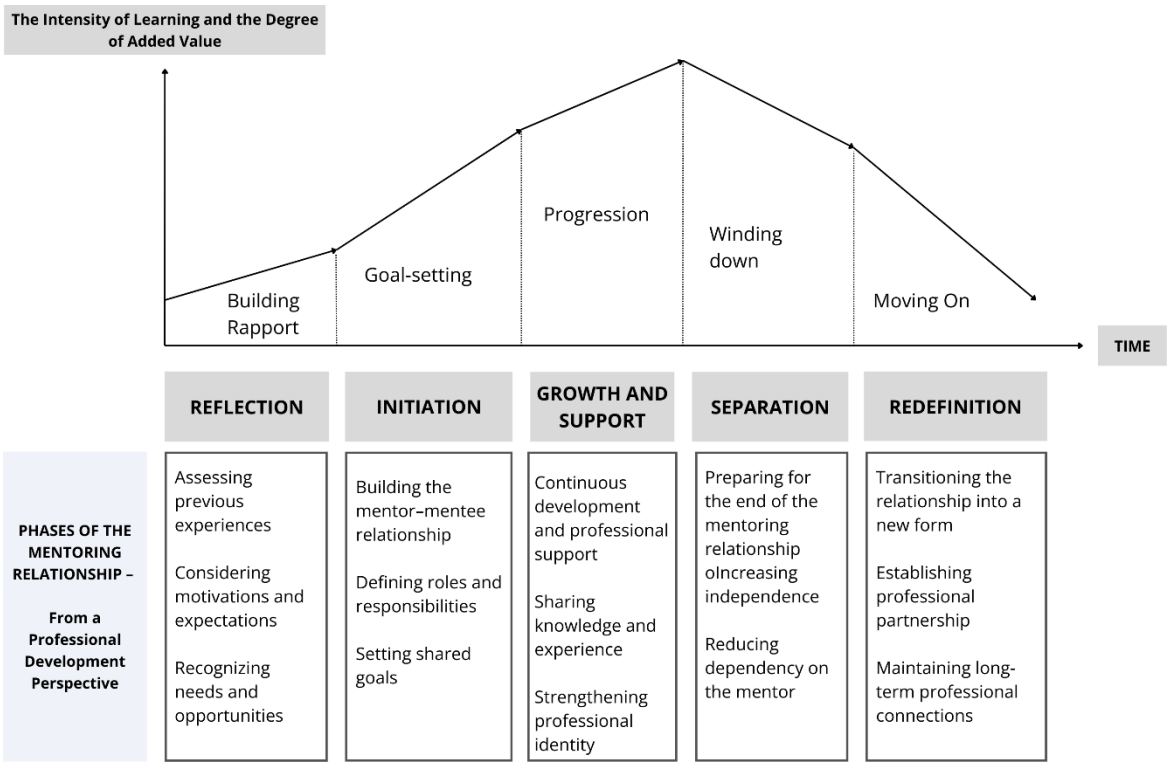
In summary, mentoring is a dynamic and multifaceted process. It's structured and goal-oriented approach enables mentees to maximize the resources and opportunities available to them, thereby facilitating both their career advancement and personal development (Deale et al., 2020; Gannon & Maher, 2012).

Mentoring framework theory

The mentoring process is a dynamically evolving relationship in which the roles and interactions of the participants change over time. Kram (1983) identified four phases in a typical mentoring relationship: **Initiation, Cultivation, Separation, and Redefinition**. This model emphasizes the developmental trajectory of the mentee–from the initial acquaintance stage to the point where they are able to continue independently with a well-defined professional identity.

In subsequent decades, scholars pointed out that while Kram's phases provide a solid theoretical foundation, they require further operationalization. Clutterbuck's (2004) holistic perspective expanded this framework by including the pre-engagement stage–the phase of intention and orientation during which potential mentors and mentees consider participation. This perspective also highlights the **temporal and intensity dimensions** of the relationship, which shape its depth and added value. In *The SAGE Handbook of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, Fletcher and Mullen (2012) elaborated the phases of mentoring from the mentee's perspective, outlining behavioral indicators for each stage. Similarly, Abegunde and Park (2022) conceptualized mentoring as a **contemplative and reflective practice**, stressing its holistic dimensions.

Figure 6. Phases of a mentoring relationship – from the perspective of a mentee



Source: Adapted from Clutterbuck (2004), Mullen and Schunk (2011, 2013), and Abegunde & Park (2022)

These approaches share the goal of making it possible to observe and assess which phase a mentee is currently experiencing (Figure 6), since recognizing and managing these phases is crucial to the effectiveness of mentoring (Abegunde and Park, 2022; Clutterbuck, 2004; Goh and Richardson, 2024; Kram, 1983; Mullen, 2011; Schunk and Mullen, 2013)*:*

- **Reflection / Building Rapport**

  This preparatory phase precedes the formal start of the relationship. Both mentor and mentee reflect on their goals and intentions, considering whether the relationship is a good fit. Establishing trust and mapping shared values are essential here.

- **Initiation / Goal Setting**

  The relationship formally begins. Mentor and mentee get to know each other's styles and jointly establish objectives. This stage involves self-awareness development, mutual respect, and laying the foundations of the relationship

- **Cultivation / Progression**

  The most intensive stage is where feedback and developmental opportunities enrich the learning process. The mentee refines their goals, becomes increasingly self-aware, and receives psychosocial as well as professional support.

- **Separation / Winding Down**

  The mentee gains independence and requires less support. This transitional phase includes joint evaluation of outcomes and preparation for closure or redefinition of the relationship.
- **Redefinition / Moving On**

  The relationship transforms: the mentee may become a colleague, employee, or even a future mentor. Formal mentoring ends, but collaboration may continue informally, either within professional communities or as friendships. This phase enables the continuation of community learning cycles.

The structured phases of mentoring relationships are particularly relevant in the highly interpersonal and practice-oriented tourism and hospitality context (Liu et al., 2024). Adler (1984), applying Kram's model to the hotel sector, highlighted that while the developmental nature of mentoring can provide significant professional resources, its intensive and often informal dynamics may also entail risks such as burnout.

Scerri et al. (2020) developed a four-stage dynamic mentoring model in the Australian hospitality industry, guiding participants from **goal-setting to evaluation**. Their model emphasizes the intentionality of initial interactions, joint goal-setting, and the active nurturing of collaboration, framing mentoring as a **structured learning space** that complements formal studies. Similarly, Sipe and Testa (2020) identified four key elements essential in practice-driven environments: (1) mapping relevant competencies, (2) supporting self-development, (3) integrating experiential learning, and (4) providing continuous feedback and reflection.

This structure aligns closely with Kolb's experiential learning model and reinforces mentoring as a deliberately designed developmental tool, integrating personality–profession fit with sector-specific practices.

Designing a Mentoring Program

The structuring of mentoring is critical for both effectiveness and long-term impact. A comprehensive framework should extend beyond the definition of stages, encompassing mentor preparation, guidelines for mentees, and systematic monitoring of program outcomes (Abegunde and Park, 2022; Eby and Lockwood, 2005; Scerri et al., 2020).

Developing a mentoring program involves several **strategic decision points**: whether to adopt a directive or laissez-faire approach, and whether to implement a centralized or decentralized structure. A key factor in the success of mentoring is the degree of **organizational support**–

the extent to which the relationship is embedded in structured frameworks and aligned with organizational or sectoral goals (Brown et al., 2015; Clutterbuck, 2004).

Training both mentors and mentees is essential to program quality. Beyond clarifying role expectations, training enhances **interpersonal and reflective skills**, which are vital for effective mentoring. Guidelines and support materials for mentees facilitate active engagement and realistic goal-setting. Continuous monitoring and regular feedback from participants serve as quality assurance and allow adaptive program development, thereby strengthening the practical effectiveness of mentoring (Baranik et al., 2010; Črnjar and Hrgović, 2016).

The Advantages and Risks of Mentoring

Based on the theories of experiential learning and service design, career choice can also be understood as a structured process comprising various stages and milestones, with touchpoints and pain points along the way (Horváth & Kenesei, 2023). In this perspective, the mentoring relationship can likewise be conceptualized as a learning journey that supports professional development through multiple stages, although not all mentoring relationships automatically yield positive outcomes.

Ragins and Verbos (2007) distinguish three qualitative states of mentoring relationships: dysfunctional, traditional, and relational. Dysfunctional relationships are low-quality, often characterized by exploitative or damaging behavioral patterns, typically leading to adverse outcomes for the mentee. Traditional relationships are of moderate quality, where the mentor provides career development and psychosocial support, but the relationship remains largely instrumental and one-sided. By contrast, relational relationships are built on high levels of trust, mutual learning, and strong mentor bonds–since mentors' own development can also gain momentum through the organization and transfer of experiences (Deale et al., 2020; Holland, 2018a). These types of relationships provide the most significant added value for both parties.

Ideally, mentoring extends beyond individual support: it becomes a participatory process of collective learning that links educational institutions, businesses, and organizations engaged in designing and operating mentoring programs. In this sense, mentoring programs become strategic tools for both the sector and organizations. They promote professional knowledge development, strengthen workplace communities, and enhance organizational adaptability in rapidly changing environments (DuBois et al., 2011; Gannon et al., 2021; Scerri et al., 2020)

When **designing the mentoring process**, it is not sufficient to focus solely on benefits; potential risks must also be considered, as these may undermine program effectiveness or even lead to negative consequences. The literature clearly highlights that mentoring does not automatically yield positive outcomes and may, under certain conditions, become counterproductive (Deale et al., 2020; Eissner and Gannon, 2018; Simmonds and Zammit Lupi, 2010). One of the most common risk factors is the lack of interpersonal fit. Personality differences or divergent levels of commitment to collaboration often lead to disengagement or conflict. If sufficient trust or "chemistry" is absent between mentor and mentee, the relationship may become a burden rather than a support system–an especially sensitive issue for early-career individuals still in search of their professional identity (Gannon & Maher, 2012).

Eby and McManus (2004) emphasize **the role of negative relational turning points**, which–unlike positive experiences–can weaken the relationship and undermine its supportive function. Examples include lack of recognition (when the mentee is treated merely as a "student" rather than a partner), clashes in learning or mentoring philosophies, and inappropriate, destructive feedback. Excessive expectations or unclear communication may heighten uncertainty, which in turn can derail the mentee's professional trajectory–particularly when their career commitment is still fragile. Dysfunctional mentoring relationships, therefore, are ineffective and can even be harmful in the long term: mentees' self-confidence may be eroded, they may question their career suitability, and in extreme cases, this can result in career abandonment (Ragins and Verbos, 2007)

In light of these concerns, careful design of mentoring programs, adequate preparation of participants, and continuous monitoring of relationship dynamics become indispensable (Eby and Lockwood, 2005; Gannon et al., 2021). Theoretical approaches underscore that mentoring is not a static but a continuously evolving process, in which stages and turning points are strongly shaped by participants' subjective experiences (Clutterbuck, 2004; Mullen and Fletcher, 2012). Such turning points–whether positive or negative–can leave lasting impressions on the formation of professional identity, the level of commitment, and the mentee's long-term career trajectory. Mentoring, however, does not in itself guarantee successful career entry; its effectiveness depends heavily on the structure of the relationship, the mutual clarification of role expectations, and the support system provided by the organizational context (Sipe and Testa, 2020). Only when these conditions are jointly fulfilled

can mentoring become a forward-looking, sustainable, and value-creating process (DuBois et al., 2011).

2.4.4. Summary of Experience-Centered Approaches

To summarize the chapter on experiences, the experience-based approach is of growing importance in tourism and hospitality–not only in shaping guest experiences but also in fostering employee development and commitment. The application of experience design and experiential learning creates opportunities to enhance and deepen both newcomers' and experienced employees' job satisfaction and embeddedness in organizations and the sector as a whole.

Experiential learning encompasses pedagogical methods that allow students to actively participate in the learning process, thereby preparing them more effectively for the world of work. Employee experience plays a pivotal role in workforce retention and the formation of professional commitment. Professional experiences support career development and contribute to sectoral embeddedness (Dutton, 2003; Jackson and Wilton, 2016).

Experience-focused mentoring programs provide structured learning processes through which students and employees can connect with professional communities, acquire new knowledge, and–when successful–develop an emotional attachment to their chosen field. Community experiences and structured mentoring can, in the long run, help mitigate labor market challenges within the sector and foster more positive attitudes among young professionals toward tourism and hospitality (Eby et al., 2008; Gannon and Maher, 2012; Siow et al., 2021).

In light of the above, it may be concluded that along the **three dimensions of experience–positive learning experiences, favorable employee experiences, and emotional connections to professional communities–**it is possible to improve the attractiveness of the tourism sector, enhance levels of embeddedness, and contribute to the sustainability of professional talent pipelines. Building on this reasoning, the next section of this dissertation presents the stages and findings of the primary research.

3. RESEARCH PLAN

3.1. Research objectives

The review of the literature highlights that the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the tourism and hospitality sector is closely tied to the replenishment and quality of its workforce. One of the key drivers of the sector's persistent labor shortage is the lack of sufficient workforce inflow, mainly due to the fact that a significant proportion of graduates from tourism-related programs do not enter employment in the sector (Hu et al., 2025). Based on the literature review, my assumption is that learning experiences, work-related encounters, and engagement with professional communities play a crucial role in fostering positive sectoral commitment. However, existing research primarily examines these dimensions in isolation and places less emphasis on their interconnections.

The aim of my primary research is to explore which personal and community-based experiences, career-related decision-making situations, and professional connections support young people's professional embeddedness in the tourism and hospitality industry. The research specifically focuses on how career motivations, experiential learning practices (e.g., internships, mentoring), and connections to professional communities contribute to commitment and long-term retention. The study seeks to integrate career theories, organizational theories, and experience-based approaches.

The following section outlines the **research questions and methodological approaches** that guide the study, aiming to provide both scientifically grounded and practically relevant answers to one of the sector's most pressing challenges.

3.2. Research questions

My literature analysis suggests that young people's career choice motivations are shaped by several factors, including short- and long-term career opportunities, salary, professional development, alignment with personal interests, as well as the reputation and prestige of the sector. As a first step, it is crucial to identify these motivations and factors, especially in the post-pandemic context, so that both educational institutions and industry stakeholders can

adequately address them. This foundational research can help identify the experiences that accompany early career trajectories, as well as those that support retention or, conversely, contribute to attrition (Črnjar and Hrgović, 2016; Dutton, 2003; Hu et al., 2025).

In the first stage of the research, to map motivations and the criteria influencing post-graduation career decisions, I address the following research question through qualitative methods:

RQ1. What factors and underlying needs shape university students' motivations for career choice in the tourism and hospitality sector?

Career decisions at the start of one's professional journey may evolve over time across different stages of life. From a commitment perspective, the experiences gained during studies are critical. Intentions to leave the sector do not always arise after graduation; instead, they may already be shaped by formative experiences during the period of study, which exert long-term influence on whether one connects to or distances themselves from the industry. Similarly, work experiences and early professional encounters strongly affect graduates' commitment, as career-related experiences increasingly accompany their pathways.

The first career decisions are significantly influenced by touchpoints where graduates form positive or negative impressions of the sector. These encounters play a determining role in either strengthening commitment or contributing to attrition. Engagement with professional communities and the growing integration of mentoring practices into educational systems aim to support students in the transition between education and employment, while also serving as a mechanism to help overcome early-career challenges (Sipe and Testa, 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). The examination of a sector-specific mentoring program can provide insights into its impact on young professionals' commitment and embeddedness (Črnjar and Hrgović, 2016; Dutton, 2003; Sipe and Testa, 2020).

The second stage of the research aims to identify what kinds of experiences and mentoring strategies in the tourism and hospitality industry can support talent retention and reduce turnover.

RQ2. What key experiences influence career decisions of young professionals entering the tourism and hospitality sector?

My assumption is that when young professionals work in supportive environments, are provided with development opportunities, and perceive their work as meaningful, they are more

likely to remain in the sector. Conversely, negative experiences–unfavorable working conditions, limited growth opportunities, or unsupportive organizational cultures–may alienate them and even result in career exit.

In the third stage of the research, the examination of formative early-career experiences seeks to identify the critical points that positively (commitment) or negatively (attrition) shape graduates' relationship with the sector. This leads to the following research question:

RQ3. What decisive experiences lead to either commitment or career exit in tourism and hospitality?

The three-tiered structure of this research thus aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how parallels between experience design and employee experience theory can be leveraged to address tourism labor market challenges and strengthen early-career professionals' sectoral commitment.

3.3. Research design

3.3.1. Mixed-method research

The aim of my primary research is to provide a complex account of the interconnections between career choice motivations and perceptions of the tourism and hospitality sector, and to identify the formative experiences that can foster young professionals' long-term embeddedness in the industry. The labor market in this sector was susceptible to the consequences of the pandemic, which makes mapping the pathways leading to graduates' career decisions both timely and significant.

The complexity of the topic–arising from the multi-actor, interdisciplinary, and dynamic nature of labor market phenomena–justified the adoption of a mixed-method approach. Qualitative insights are indispensable in capturing young people's attitudes toward a career in tourism. In my research, I applied an iterative use of methods to construct a comprehensive picture of tourism graduates' experiences, motivations, and commitment-shaping encounters. This necessitated the use of multiple qualitative techniques, including focus group discussions, narrative content analysis, participatory action research, and expert interviews.

Notably, the research uniquely reflects on the period before, during, and after the pandemic, enabling me to dynamically track the long-term impacts of a global crisis–in this case, COVID-

19. Dividing the study into multiple stages allowed for examination of the same issues across different time points and perspectives. In doing so, I approach a longitudinal, experience-based framework that not only captures the stages of career decision-making but also interprets their emotional and socialization aspects.

Accordingly, the research is structured into several phases, requiring the application of multiple methods to reveal details and interconnections. The outcome is a comprehensive overview that enables the creation of a theoretically grounded yet practically applicable framework. Such a framework can provide strategic support for building professional communities, fostering embeddedness, and strengthening commitment.

The specific research objectives, questions, and sub-questions linked to each stage are summarized in Table 1. The applied research methods will be presented in greater detail in the subsequent sections when discussing the individual phases and stages.

Table 2. Detailed Description of the Research Phases

PHASE	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	RESEARCH QUESTION	RESEARCH STAGE	EMERGING CONCEPTS	SUB-QUESTIONS	METHO-DOLOGY	TIME-FRAME	PARTICIPANTS
Phase I.	Mapping career choice motivations	RQ1: What factors and underlying needs shape university students' motivations for career choice in the tourism and hospitality sector?	Stage 1 – Mapping career choice motivations	Sectoral attractiveness, Person–profession fit, Career choice	RQ1.1 What motivations and perceptions do young professionals hold toward the tourism and hospitality sector? RQ1.2 Which factors shape the sector's image in either a positive or negative way? RQ1.3 How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected young professionals' career plans?	Focus group	2021, 2022	University students, graduates
			Stage 2 – Exploring study choice motivations	Career planning, Learning experience	RQ1.4: What factors motivate students to choose a degree in tourism and hospitality? RQ1.5: What short- and long-term career goals do first-year tourism and hospitality students articulate?	Content analysis	2024	First year TH students (BBU)
Phase II.	Identifying decisive early career experiences	RQ2: What key experiences influence career decisions of young professionals entering the tourism and hospitality sector?	Stage 3 – Career decision-influencing experiences	Work-related experience, Community experience	RQ2.1: What formative experiences do young professionals encounter that influence their career decisions?	Focus group	2024, 2025	University students, graduates
			Stage 4 – Role of mentoring experiences	Embeddedness, Mentoring framework, Professional communities	RQ2.2: What individual and community experiences contribute to young professionals' sectoral embeddedness through the experiential learning processes of a mentoring program?	Action research (participatory), Content analysis	2022–2025	Young professionals who participated in a mentoring program
Phase III.	Identifying experiences leading to commitment or career exit	RQ3: What decisive experiences lead to either commitment or career exit in tourism and hospitality?	Stage 5 – Identifying commitment/exit triggers	Career exit, Commitment	RQ3.1: What positive experiences contribute to the development of commitment? RQ3.2: What negative experiences lead individuals to exit the sector?	Expert interviews	2022–2025	Committed professionals in TH, and TH career exiters

3.3.2. Research method

The qualitative research consists of several phases, each contributing to a more comprehensive understanding and the attainment of deeper insights. First, the study explores the career plans of participants, tracing their pathways from decision-making through university studies to their initial professional experiences and the levels that establish long-term commitment. This enables the identification of motivations and goals, as well as the examination of critical milestones along the career trajectory. Subsequently, the research focuses on experience-based approaches, professional experiences, and the role of mentoring. This is followed by the identification of both positive and negative experiences influencing career decisions, drawing on the perspectives of both committed professionals and those who have exited the field.

Accordingly, the research unfolds along three strands: (**1) motivations, (2) experiences shaping professional embeddedness, and (3) influences on the decision between career commitment and career exit.** The qualitative study, therefore, consists of three phases, applying different yet complementary methods to provide a holistic understanding. Each phase is presented in detail, with explicit justification of methodological and analytical design choices to ensure transparency and reliability of findings.

Phase 1

The first phase aimed to explore the study and career choice motivations of university students, carried out in two stages, each focusing on different aspects of career planning.

- In the first stage (2021–2022), **focus group interviews** were conducted to examine the background **of students' career-related decisions**, with particular emphasis on their perceptions of working in tourism and hospitality, the motivational factors influencing these decisions, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured questions enabled an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and attitudes.
- The second stage was initially designed during 2021–2022; however, given the distorting effects of the pandemic, data collection was postponed and eventually carried out in 2024. This involved a qualitative content analysis that revealed **students' motivations for choosing their field of study** and their short- and long-term career goals. A narrative approach was applied, considering the story-like structures of responses and their self-reflective elements.

The findings of these two stages jointly provide a comprehensive overview of students' career decision-making motivations and lay the foundation for analyzing formative experiences in subsequent phases.

Phase 2

The second phase focused on identifying the experiences that significantly influence students' career decisions, building on the first phase's findings, which highlighted students' search for workplaces offering positive experiences.

- As an initial step (3rd stage), two temporally distinct **focus groups** were conducted during the post-pandemic stabilization period (2024 and 2025). Participants included both domestic and international students, allowing for comparison of perspectives and experiences across different backgrounds. Special attention was paid to mapping those experiences that had positively or negatively influenced students' career aspirations and professional commitment.
- In the second part of this phase (4th stage), I examined in **greater depth the relationship between professional experiences and early-career embeddedness.** This was carried out within the framework of **participatory action research** (2022–2025), which enabled interactive exploration of experiences, reflective analysis, and feedback integration into the processes of the mentorship program. While interviews and focus groups were also conducted, the primary focus of this analysis rested on participant observation and content analysis of textual feedback.

Together, these investigations contribute to a deeper understanding of how professional experiences can be designed and structured more consciously, ultimately strengthening the attractiveness of tourism and hospitality as a sector and supporting young professionals' embeddedness.

Phase 3

The third phase aimed to explore in depth the positive and critical experiences and factors that drive professionals in tourism and hospitality either towards long-term commitment or, conversely, towards career exit.

- In this phase (5th stage), expert interviews were conducted with both committed professionals and career leavers who had previously spent considerable time in the sector. The retrospective approach made it possible to identify key experiences, decision points,

and the positive and negative influences that shaped their career trajectories. Special emphasis was placed on critical junctures and experiences that weakened early-career commitment and eventually led to career exit.

Taken together, the three phases allowed for a complex, experience-based examination of the whole career cycle in tourism and hospitality–from initial career choice, through professional commitment, to career exit.

3.3.3. Data analysis

In this study, I conducted a qualitative inquiry based on grounded theory with the aim of exploring and understanding in depth the implications of current labor market challenges in the tourism sector from the perspective of early-career professionals. The analysis follows the grounded theory methodology, which allows for flexible adaptation to the research design throughout the entire process. The first step of the analysis was open and axial coding, which served to structure and categorize the data. This method made it possible to highlight the key themes and relationships emerging from the data and to establish a comprehensive, theoretically grounded framework for understanding the phenomenon of experience-based mentoring programs (Creswell, 1998; Mitev, 2019, 2012).

Grounded theory is a research approach that places behavior and interaction at the center of analysis. Developed originally by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory seeks to generate theory about a studied phenomenon directly from the data, rather than imposing pre-existing frameworks or hypotheses. As a form of inductive research, grounded theory emphasizes that concepts and theoretical constructs emerge from the data itself. The process is iterative and cyclical, requiring constant feedback between the researcher and the data, thereby allowing the gradual refinement and deepening of theoretical understanding. In grounded theory, researchers approach questions with openness and flexibility, focusing on the field of inquiry rather than on pre-formulated assumptions. Data are typically collected through qualitative techniques such as interviews, observations, or content analysis. During the coding process, researchers employ open coding to identify significant themes and categories, which are then connected through axial coding to establish relationships among them. The ultimate goal of grounded theory is to arrive at a more profound theoretical comprehension of the studied phenomenon and to facilitate the discovery of new perspectives, concepts, and interrelations. The outcomes usually consist of detailed descriptions, categories, relational patterns, and

theoretical frameworks that provide a solid foundation for further research and theoretical development. The application of grounded theory has become widespread across disciplines such as sociology, psychology, healthcare, and business studies. Its main strength lies in its inductive reasoning and data-centered approach, which enable the emergence of unique insights and empirically grounded theory building (Mitev, 2012).

In addition, I also employed qualitative content analysis, which involved the systematic and detailed examination of textual data from diverse sources, including questionnaire responses, interviews, focus group discussions, and evaluation forms. This approach was also integrated into the participatory action research design (O'Leary and Coghlan, 2022). Content analysis allowed for the objective identification of key themes, patterns, and meanings within the data. Through an inductive approach, relevant codes and categories were defined in an emergent manner from the data, rather than being predetermined. This approach proved suitable for uncovering deeper insights into participants' underlying perspectives and motivations, and for drawing broader conclusions from them (Creswell, 1998).

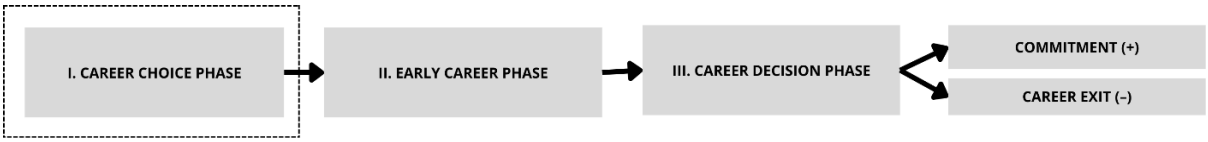
The presentation of the research phases includes a detailed account of the specific methodological procedures, as well as the rationale for the design and analytical strategies applied, in order to ensure transparent, coherent, and reliable results. The combined application of grounded theory and qualitative content analysis has contributed to a nuanced examination of early-career professionals' experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of career planning and commitment factors within the tourism sector (O'Leary and Coghlan, 2022).

4. RESEARCH

4.1. Phase 1: Career Choice Motivations among Tourism and Hospitality Students

In ensuring the future workforce supply of the tourism and hospitality sector, it is essential to understand the factors influencing young people's decisions regarding study programs, career choices, and career planning. The following figure (7) illustrates the bases of a career path framework used in this dissertation, which situates the empirical research phases along three critical stages of career development–career choice, early career, and career decision–thereby helping to identify where respondents are positioned on their trajectory towards either long-term commitment or career exit.

Figure 7. Career Path – Career Choice Phase



The investigation was divided into two research stages, each employing distinct qualitative methodological approaches to provide a nuanced understanding of decision-making processes and motivations. Focus group interviews shed light on the personal motives underlying career choices, while content analysis enabled a more detailed identification of students' career goals and professional visions.

Based on these objectives, the following key research question was formulated:

RQ1. What factors and underlying needs shape university students' motivations for career choice in the tourism and hospitality sector?

The subsequent subsections present the findings of the first three research stages, organized around the sub-questions, providing a detailed account of students' decision-making mechanisms, motivations, perceptions, and attitudes.

4.1.1. Stage 1 – Mapping Career Choice Motivations

Description of the Study

The primary aim of the first sub-study was to explore the key factors influencing university students' career choice decisions, with a particular focus on attitudes toward the tourism and hospitality sector and the motivations behind their professional orientation. This inquiry sought to provide a deeper understanding of students' decision-making processes, as well as the values and perceptions shaping their career trajectories.

The following sub-research questions were formulated to refine the research focus and to guide the systematic analysis of qualitative data:

- **RQ1.1 What motivations and perceptions do young professionals hold toward the tourism and hospitality sector?**
- **RQ1.2 Which factors shape the sector's image in either a positive or negative way?**
- **RQ1.3 How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected young professionals' career plans?**

To examine students' career planning processes, I employed the focus group interview method. Focus groups are a qualitative research technique typically conducted with multiple participants, enabling interaction among them and the sharing of different experiences, opinions, and perspectives. In this study, the focus group discussions centered on career planning within the tourism and hospitality sector. The interviews were generally moderated by a facilitator, who steered the discussion and posed questions to the participants. Respondents not only answered the questions but also engaged with one another's contributions.

The interviews followed a partly structured guide, supplemented with reflective prompts designed to encourage deeper consideration of participants' ideas. The advantage of this method lies in its capacity to foster active dialogue, where group dynamics enrich the exploration of issues that are inherently shaped by experiences, attitudes, and subjective impressions (Krueger, 2014). Special attention was paid to eliciting participants' reflections on both pre- and post-COVID-19 experiences, as this period profoundly shaped perceptions of the sector and influenced career decisions. As such, the interviews offered valuable insights into how young people's professional orientations and commitments evolved under shifting circumstances.

The data collection involved three focus group interviews, with a total of 18 participants. The first set of interviews was conducted in person in autumn 2021. To broaden the temporal scope and complement the initial findings, an additional focus group was organized in autumn 2022. Participants were recruited from various universities and different years of study. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90–120 minutes. With participants' consent, all sessions were recorded. Confidential handling of data and participant anonymity were ensured. A descriptive overview of the sample is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Description of the Focus Group Participants

ID	AGE	UNIVERSITY	YEAR OF STUDY	WORK EXPERIENCE IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY	RELATED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY
#01	22	UD	3	Summer job (0-1 y)	-
#02	22	CUB	3	-	-
#03	22	CUB	3	Internship (0-1 y)	Student organization
#04	20	CUB	3	Internship (0-1 y)	-
#05	20	CUB	3	2+ y	Student organization
#06	21	CUB	2	-	Student organization
#07	22	KJU	3	Internship (0-1 y)	-
#08	23	KJU	4	6+ y	-
#09	21	KJU	1	3+ y	Mentoring program
#10	21	CUB	2	1+ y	-
#11	24	METU	graduate	3+ years (incl. abroad)	Student organization, Mentoring program, Professional association
#12	29	CUB (post-graduate)	2	8+ years (incl. abroad)	Mentoring program
#13	22	UD	3	Beginner (0–1 year)	Mentoring program
#14	22	CUB	4	Beginner (0–1 year)	Mentoring program
#15	22	CUB	4	Summer job (0-1 y)	Mentoring program
#16	20	CUB	4	Beginner (0–1 year)	Mentoring program
#17	20	CUB	1	5+ y	Mentoring program
#18	21	CUB	4	Internship (0-1 y)	Professional association, Mentoring program

Given the exploratory nature of the research, semi-structured interview questions were employed, informed by relevant literature, particularly regarding perceptions of working in tourism and hospitality, motivational factors influencing career planning, and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (Appendix 5).

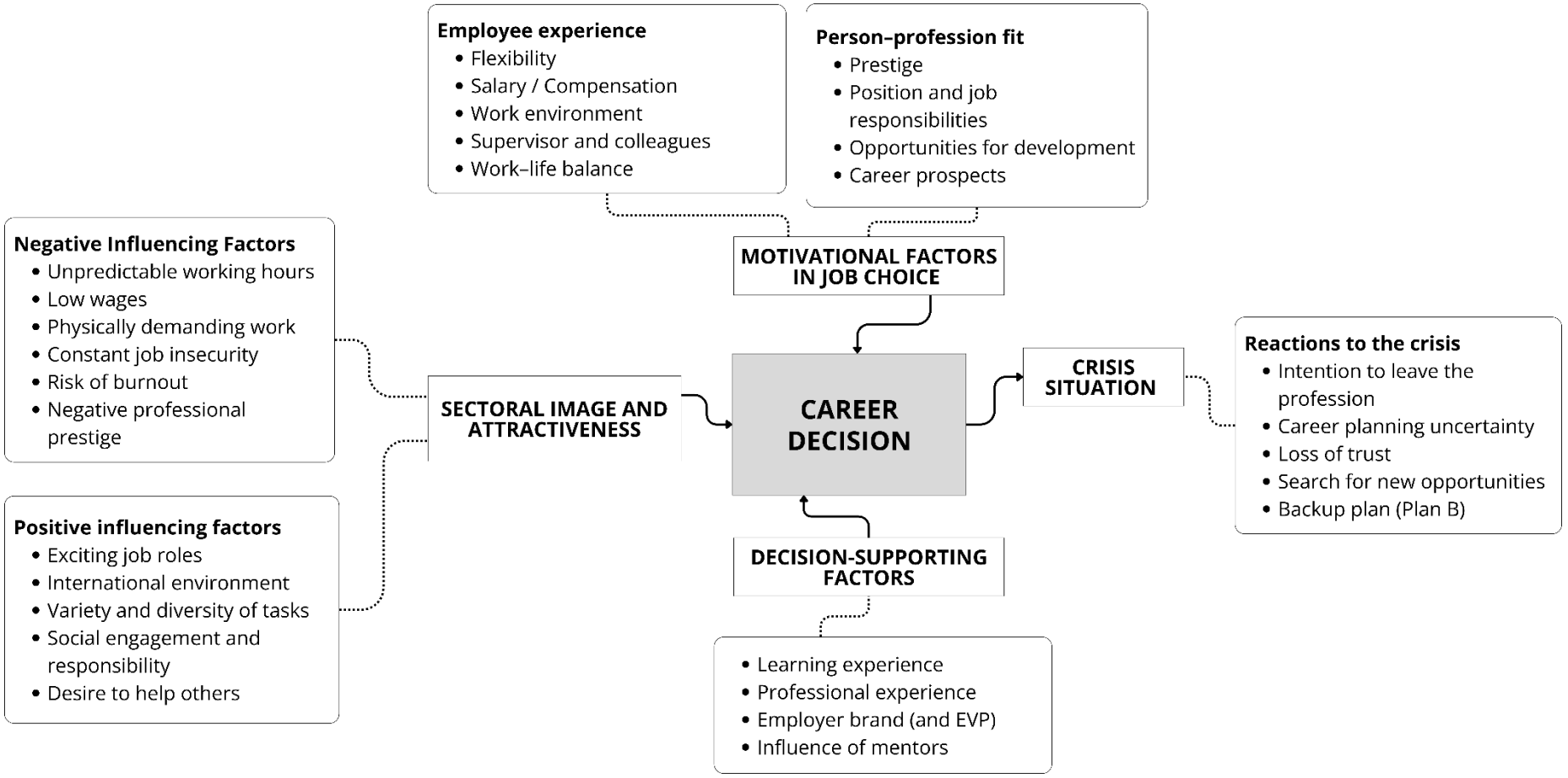
For the analysis, I applied thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for the structured interpretation of textual data. The goal of the procedure was to identify patterns and thematic units within the dataset and to derive meaningful conclusions relevant to the research questions. In the initial phase, open codes were generated, marking coherent units extracted from the transcripts. These codes were then clustered into higher-order categories, or thematic units, which were further refined to create a thematic structure aligned with the research focus.

The strength of thematic coding lies in its ability to systematize qualitative data while offering flexibility for iterative interpretation. Therefore, the analysis was conducted cyclically, involving repeated transcripts reading, creating new codes, and refining existing ones to ensure robust interpretations. Thematic analysis first revealed the main motivational factors, and subsequently allowed for the preliminary mapping of deeper structural relationships influencing career decisions (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Findings

The thematic analysis of the focus group interviews produced the following thematic map, illustrating the key codes and their interrelations (Figure 8). Within the seven predefined themes, two additional, inductively emerging categories were identified: **employee experience** and **person–profession fit**. These themes arose organically from participants' accounts and proved to be closely linked to early-career decision-making processes. Both themes permeated the motivations, expectations, and future career aspirations voiced by respondents. The subsequent sections present the codes organized around the main themes.

Figure 8. Thematic Map of Focus Group Interview Findings



The Attractiveness of Working in Tourism and Hospitality

The first set of themes explored participants' general attitudes and perceptions toward the tourism and hospitality sector. Most respondents began by highlighting the positive aspects of the profession. Frequently cited motivators included the diversity and variety of career options, the excitement of different roles, the social and interpersonal dimensions of the work, and the opportunity to help others. In addition, participants emphasized the value of applying language skills and the vast array of potential career pathways within the industry.

One participant reflected: *"I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I enjoy languages, I like working with people, and I've always been interested in tourism. It feels like a typical Generation Z profession – you can switch quickly if you don't like it."* (#10) Another participant similarly stressed versatility: *"If you study tourism, you can become many things."* – #11

However, respondents shared negative experiences alongside these positive attitudes, primarily rooted in prior work or internship placements. Common criticisms included low wages, long working hours, physical strain, job insecurity, and burnout stemming from these challenges. Several participants also pointed to the unfavorable social perception of the profession.

As one participant noted: *"I don't like that most jobs are either under the table or semi-legal, and since the physical workload is not attractive from a health perspective, I immediately ruled out jobs in hospitality."* – #10

Motivations

During the focus group discussions, students were asked which factors most strongly influence their work-related decisions. Their answers clearly reflected the logic of Herzberg's two-factor motivation theory (Herzberg, 1959). Motivators appeared as primary determinants, while hygiene factors were only mentioned secondarily.

Participants emphasized the importance of jobs that provide professional development, career advancement opportunities, and the chance to improve language skills. Challenging tasks, transparent feedback systems, and long-term career prospects were also significant motivators:

> *"What motivates me is the possibility to develop and practice languages, where there is a chance for promotion and continuous feedback. At this age, money doesn't matter that much."* – #02

Hygiene factors – such as appropriate working conditions, flexible schedules, competitive pay, or work–life balance – appeared less frequently as primary concerns, but were still relevant in choosing a workplace:

> *"I'm looking for part-time jobs and flexible scheduling, so I can do them alongside my studies and still have my weekends free."* – #21

Special attention was given to workplace relationships, particularly the role of supervisors and colleagues in creating a supportive environment. Respondents stressed the importance of being able to ask questions without fear and feeling safe at work:

> *"It's good if you don't feel that hierarchy is being imposed on you. A leader should be someone you can turn to at any time, but mutual respect is crucial."* – #10

It also emerged that for young professionals, it is essential that the chosen position aligns with their personality and values. Participants unanimously agreed that, beyond professional knowledge, traits such as empathy, patience, helpfulness, and adaptability are necessary for long-term success in the sector.

> *"The most important thing is that the guest leaves with a good feeling, and if you are willing to do everything for that, then this is really you. I'll happily do all the silly tasks, but you must endure the pressure (...) in English they call it having a 'golden heart'."* – #03

Individual characteristics such as openness, emotional intelligence, multitasking ability, and an extroverted personality were also factors contributing to feeling comfortable in the sector. The demand for workplaces that allow personal authenticity and professional fulfillment increased following the pandemic.

Many participants emphasized that their primary expectation was a workplace where they "feel good." Interestingly, this sense of well-being extended beyond supportive workplace relationships, encompassing emotional attachment to the company, professional pride in one's position, as well as employer flexibility and the stability of secure employment:

> *"The point is that the community should be good, that everyone feels comfortable and has a shared vibe. If I feel awkward or unaccepted, I leave, even though I don't like quitting."* – #10

Crisis Situations – Critical Points and Experiences

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted students' career planning and their relationship with the tourism and hospitality sector. The interruption of internships and the uncertain labor market environment undermined trust in employers operating in the industry. According to respondents, early-career entrants were particularly vulnerable during this period, with many losing their internship positions.

> *"COVID–19 ruined my life. I had just started my internship at a travel agency in January, but by February, I was dismissed. It was obvious that we would be the first to go."* – #11

Although no definitive career-exit decisions were made at this stage, students' level of commitment to the sector noticeably decreased. The sense of uncertainty about the future and declining trust in the educational system also emerged in their answers. The learning experience was strongly influenced by the period of online education during the pandemic, which many associated with demotivation and disillusionment.

> *"COVID–19 took away my motivation not only for the profession, but also for university and learning itself. It was a very demotivating period."* – #01

> *"It didn't change my goals, because now I don't even have any."* – #05

In response to the crisis, two markedly different strategies emerged. One group sought to build a "safety net" by pursuing alternative career paths and enrolling in parallel study programs to cope with the unpredictability of the future.

> *"As a result of COVID–19, I applied to another program as well, because this period taught me that I always need a Plan B if Plan A cannot be realized at the moment."* – #09

Others interpreted the crisis as an opportunity, believing that the gaps created in the sector could open doors for young and innovative actors.

> *"I wasn't discouraged by the massive damage caused by the virus, because I believe that precisely after this period there will be a real need for innovation, new ideas, solutions, and energetic young talent."* – #08

> *"Tourism has always existed and always will; robots cannot replace it." – #10*

Decision-Supporting Factors

During the focus group interviews, participants were asked to share what kind of support they would need for career planning. The first responses centered around the role of educational institutions, which, according to the feedback, showed a very mixed picture. Several participants emphasized the lack of practical orientation in the curriculum and the limited number of professionally relevant courses–particularly in an applied field such as tourism. They also underlined the importance of instructors' credibility, which they felt strongly depended on practical industry experience. Guest lectures were mentioned as a positive element, providing fresh, relevant knowledge and inspiration.

> *"More emphasis should be placed on presenting a vision of the future, so that we can map out the career opportunities in tourism."* – #08

Opinions on dual training were divided. While in principle participants supported work-integrated learning, they criticized the program's structure and the lack of flexibility among corporate partners.

> *"There is no flexibility in dual training; it is an unworkable concept. (...) Many quit because they can't handle the workload. Moreover, partner companies are often not sufficiently monitored, so we don't always receive relevant support."* – #04

Students expressed the need to gain practical experience in the sector as early as possible during their university studies. Such experiences allow them to develop a realistic understanding of working conditions and to build professional networks.

> *"I learned much more from professional events, workshops, and guest lectures than from my entire university program*." – #14

Expectations toward tourism businesses also included the need for stronger employer branding. Students expect employers to communicate proactively with them, to be open to applicants without prior experience, and to provide transparent information on entry-level opportunities.

> *"Openness is important, so that we can see they are not only looking for already trained employees (...) entry-level opportunities should be transparent for us as well."* – #05

Mentorship programs received extreme positive feedback. Respondents stressed that mentors' real professional experience, supportive presence, and authentic role modeling significantly strengthened their commitment to the profession. Several participants noted that outside of the university, mentorship programs provided them with practical support. Personal inspiration and

direct professional support also contributed to increased self-confidence and a rethinking of career goals.

Discussion

The findings show that students initially approached the tourism and hospitality sector with positive attitudes. Career choice was often motivated by the desire for self-realization and the diverse career paths offered by the profession. However, as they gained deeper insights into the realities of the sector and their first work experiences, their enthusiasm gradually weakened.

Among motivational factors for employment, the search for learning and development opportunities stood out, along with the aspiration to find a workplace that could provide a long-term vision and professional perspective. There was also a strong emphasis on person–profession fit and the expectation of a positive employee experience.

The impact of the COVID–19 pandemic appeared in an ambivalent way. While the crisis generated uncertainty and a loss of trust, it did not directly result in career-exit intentions. Most students continued to see opportunities in the sector, and with adequate support and impulses, they were prepared to enter the labor market as motivated and committed early-career professionals. At the same time, an increasing number of people plan multi-track careers, which means that although tourism and hospitality remain essential, for many, it may appear as a secondary rather than a primary career path.

Regarding education, students reported mixed experiences. Compared to their expectations, they often missed practical training elements and instructors' professional credibility. It was confirmed that the presence and supportive attitude of industry actors–such as mentors, guest lecturers, or internship providers–can play a decisive role in shaping students' professional orientation and commitment.

In summary, the career decisions of tourism and hospitality students participating in the focus groups were primarily influenced by positive points of connection to the profession and inspiring impulses–even in the face of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

4.1.2. Stage 2 – Exploring the Motivations Behind Field of Study Choice

Description of the Study

The aim of the second phase within the first research stage was to explore the factors that motivate students to choose a bachelor's degree in tourism and hospitality, as well as to examine how these initial motivations connect to their long-term career aspirations and the development of professional identity. Previous studies have highlighted that one of the primary reasons for career attrition lies in the mismatch between students' expectations at entry and the experiences they encounter during their studies. The decision to pursue a degree in this field is shaped by a complex structure of motivations, including individual attitudes, social and family background, the perceived image of the sector, and prior professional experiences. It is therefore critical to understand the expectations and visions that students bring with them into higher education, as these significantly influence both their commitment to the field and their likelihood of leaving the profession later on (Richardson, 2009; Teng, 2008).

Although this study on study-choice motivations was conducted at a later stage of data collection – in 2024 – thematically it forms the second element of the research process. Already in the 2022 phase, the intention was to address these questions, but due to the lingering impacts of COVID-19, adequate conditions were not available at the time. This temporal shift, however, provided the opportunity to apply a new methodological approach, enabling the investigation of students' study choices in a way that was less influenced by external distortions.

A deeper understanding of students' motivations and career aspirations can also help industry stakeholders to develop more effective recruitment strategies in cooperation with educational institutions (Richardson, 2009).

The following sub-research questions were formulated based on these objectives:

- **RQ1.4: What factors motivate students to choose a degree in tourism and hospitality?**
- **RQ1.5: What short- and long-term career goals do first-year tourism and hospitality students articulate?**

This phase employed a qualitative research design, specifically textual content analysis, which enabled a deeper understanding of students' narratives. The aim of qualitative research is not to generate quantifiable data, but to interpret phenomena and uncover the underlying attitudes, motivations, and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Marshall and Rossman, 2006). This

method allowed me to systematically identify how students made their study-choice decisions and what expectations they expressed regarding their future careers.

The research sample consisted of 121 first-year bachelor students in tourism and hospitality at Budapest Business University in 2024. Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire containing open-ended questions, enabling respondents to freely express their reasons for choosing the degree and their future career aspirations. One of the main advantages of this qualitative approach is that it allows students to articulate their motivations and expectations in their own words, yielding answers that reflect self-reflection and personal experience (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Simon, 2016). Participation was voluntary, anonymity was fully ensured, and data were used exclusively for research purposes.

For analysis, I applied **narrative content analysis**, which allowed for the structured interpretation of student life paths, ideas, and career-related narratives. Coding of the data was organized around four thematic dimensions:

1. **Motivations for study choice** – Why did students choose the tourism and hospitality program? (RQ1.4)
2. **Career plans** – In which professional field do they wish to work after graduation? (RQ1.5)
3. **Short- and long-term goals** – How do they envision themselves in 5 and 10 years (e.g., based on their desired job title)? (RQ1.5)
4. **Career-planning strategies** – What steps do they plan to take during their studies to achieve their career goals? (RQ1.5)

The coding process followed an inductive approach, allowing categories to emerge directly from the narratives and capturing recurring themes, motifs, and patterns of study choice (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In the interpretation stage, these inductively developed categories were then related to existing career-planning models and theoretical dimensions of sectoral commitment, establishing links between students' lived experiences and established conceptual frameworks.

Data analysis was conducted manually. The open-ended responses were first thematically categorized, after which the frequency and content-related connections of each theme were examined. Manual analysis allowed for deeper contextual interpretation of the data, thereby revealing the underlying motivations behind study choices, students' long-term career goals,

and the forms of support they expected from the university. The outcomes of this analysis also prepared the ground for the subsequent research phase, in which students' lived experiences and the determinants of sectoral commitment are examined in greater detail.

Findings

The results of the content analysis are presented across three thematic units: first, students' motivations for study choice; second, their career plans and short- and long-term goals; and third, their career-planning strategies. In presenting these sections, I also interpret the underlying attitudes and patterns in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the decision-making mechanisms of tourism and hospitality students.

Motivations for Study Choice

The exploration of study-choice motivations revealed several interconnected dimensions reflecting students' personal interests, past experiences, and future goals. The responses were structured along primary and secondary coding categories (Table 4), illustrating the diversity and complexity of the decision-making process.

Table 4. Coding Process – Motivations for Study Choice

PRIMARY CODE	SECONDARY CODE	QUOTATION
Interest in the profession/topic	General interest in tourism	*"I was attracted to the world of tourism."*
	Interest in hospitality	*"I am interested in hospitality and want to work in it."*
	Interest in event management	*"I like event management."*
Travel-related motivations	Travel experiences, love of traveling	*"I love traveling and wanted to pursue that."*
	Language learning and international experiences	*"I wanted to study languages and gain international experience."*
Professional/family legacy	Continuing family business	*"I wanted to continue the family business."*
	Influence of family/friends	*"My relatives and friends are also working in this field."*
Professional experience, prior studies	Previous studies	*"I had already studied tourism at vocational school."*
	Previous work experience	*"I have been working in hospitality for 8 years."*
Future career opportunities	Establishing one's own business	*"I would like to open my own sustainable café."*
	Occupying specific positions	*"I would like to work as a tour operator in the future."*
Uncertainty, lack of concrete motivation	General uncertainty	*"I didn't know what to apply for, but this seemed close to me."*

	Fit with personality	*"This field perfectly matches my personality, and I feel I can fully realize myself here."*

A large proportion of students reported choosing the degree based on **personal interest**. Within this theme, distinct codes emerged for a general attraction to tourism ("*I was drawn to the world of tourism*"), interest in hospitality ("*I am interested in hospitality and already work in it"*), and a specific focus on event management ("*I would like to continue as an event organizer").*

For many respondents, motivations were strongly linked to **travel-related experiences**, the desire to explore the world, and interest in learning languages and gaining international exposure. This is reflected in answers such as: "*I love traveling and eating good food*," or *"I wanted to learn new languages."*

Some students were influenced by their **family or professional background**. Continuing the family business *("To continue the family enterprise*") or following the example of relatives ("*My mother also worked in this field")* were reported as strong factors. Prior study or work experience also shaped choices: some students had already pursued tourism-related training during secondary education *("I studied tourism in vocational school*"), while others had substantial work experience ("*I have worked in hospitality for 8 years").*

Future-oriented motivations frequently included the aspiration to establish one's **own business**, for example: *"To create my own sustainable café."*

At the same time, some responses highlighted **less deliberate or less well-informed decisions**. These included choices without clear positions or visions *("I didn't know what else to apply for, but this seemed interesting"*) and motivations based on personality fit (*"This profession perfectly suits my personality"),* suggesting that study choices often emerged from personal interests and values rather than from a clearly defined career trajectory.

Overall, the findings show that study-choice decisions were shaped both by **conscious professional ambitions** and by **previous positive experiences, personal connections, and the diverse opportunities offered by tourism**.

Career Plans: Short- and Long-Term Goals

In the next stage of analysis, responses were categorized along three main coding dimensions (Table 5): (1) the degree of specificity of career plans, (2) the professional field identified, and

(3) the level of ambition, with particular attention to the positions envisaged in 5- and 10-year time horizons.

Based on the specificity of career plans, three groups can be distinguished. The first includes those with clearly defined plans (e.g., a specified position or concrete career path). The second category comprises general ideas, where the professional direction is evident, but the precise role or goal is not yet fully articulated (e.g., *"I would probably work in tourism*"). The third group consists of respondents who expressed uncertainty or emphasized that they are still searching for the most suitable direction.

With respect to professional fields, most respondents associated themselves with tourism and related sectors (e.g., hospitality, catering, travel organization, event management). In addition, other economic/financial fields were also mentioned–such as marketing, management, and HR–by those envisioning careers linked to tourism but not exclusively confined to it. A third group identified careers in other areas, such as education, culture, or the public sector.

The level of ambition was measured through short- and long-term visions. In the five-year horizon, roles typically mentioned were entry-level or middle-management positions such as assistant, project coordinator, or professional staff. By contrast, in ten years, a clear shift toward leadership positions (e.g., manager, director) and entrepreneurship was observable. Several students mentioned becoming entrepreneurs or senior executives, reflecting a desire for long-term independence and responsibility.

Table 5. Coding Process – Career Plans: Short- and Long-Term Goals

CODE DIMENSION	CODE CATEGORIES	EXAMPLE FROM CODING PROCESS	EXAMPLE CODING
Career plan concretization	Definite plan	**Career plans:** *"I don't know exactly yet, but I am currently gaining experience in my current job. I would like to stay in the field. I imagine myself in the tourism industry in the long term, but not necessarily as a manager. I would rather see myself as an employee."* (#15)	General outline
	General outline		
	Uncertain		Tourism and related fields
	Tourism and related fields		
	Other economic/financial fields		
	Other fields		

Level of ambition (5–10 years)	Employee position (subordinate, non-managerial)	**Ambitions 5/10 years:** "*Assistant / Middle manager or own entrepreneur."* (#15)	Managerial position (executive, manager, leader) / Own business owner
	Managerial position (executive, manager, leader)		
	Own business owner		

The integrated analysis of these three dimensions indicates that most students have well-defined career goals, a strong commitment to tourism, and increasingly ambitious objectives in the long run. At the intersection of these dimensions emerges a group of strategically minded, professionally motivated students who aspire to become significant actors in their chosen fields.

Career Planning Strategies

The purpose of the strategic planning question was to explore what concrete steps students intend to take during their university years to achieve their career goals. The analysis revealed three primary strategic orientations: academic, professional, and labor market, alongside a separate category for respondents without explicit plans (See Table 6).

Academic orientation included strategies primarily focusing on university studies, learning, and subject selection. These involved conscious preparation for classes, choosing specific courses or specializations (e.g., "*I will primarily take the destination management and marketing specialization*"), as well as language learning and obtaining language certificates (e.g., "*I want to take advanced English and French exams").*

Professional orientation encompassed actions aimed at professional development and practical experience. This included internships and student jobs, sometimes with specified workplaces (e.g., "*I would like to complete my internship in a museum*"). Networking appeared prominently as a conscious strategy ("*Building a professional network*"), as did active participation in professional events such as lectures and conferences. Many respondents also emphasized international experience as a goal (e.g., "*I am planning to go abroad for an internship*"), alongside participation in specialized courses or workshops as tools for self-development (e.g., "*Attend additional professional courses"*).

Labor market orientation refers to responses directly related to preparing for employment or entrepreneurial ambitions. Some students expressed a desire to work during their studies (e.g.,

"*I want to start working as soon as possible"),* while others consciously prepared for entrepreneurship, for instance, by saving money ("*Save from my income to start a business"*).

Finally, a separate category comprised students who had not yet developed plans, with their answers reflecting general exploration or uncertainty (e.g., "*I don't know exactly yet," "I haven't thought about it*"). This group also provides insight into the diversity of students and varying levels of preparedness.

Table 6. Coding Process – Career Planning Strategies

PRIMARY CODE	SECONDARY CODE	QUOTATION
Study orientation	Class participation, studying	*"I prepare for classes."*
	Specialization, conscious choice of a track	*"I will primarily choose destination management and marketing specialization."*
	Language learning, studying abroad	*"I would like to study English at a higher education institution abroad."*
Professional orientation	Internships, student jobs	*"I would like to do my internship in a museum."*
	Networking	*"Building a network of contacts."*
	Participation in professional events	*"To attend the best possible professional lectures."*
	Gaining international experience	*"I would like to go abroad for an internship."*
	Special courses, workshops	*"I would like to take part in extra professional courses."*
Labor market orientation	Job search, early employment	*"I would like to start working as soon as possible."*
	Preparing for entrepreneurship	*"I will start my own business in the future."*
Lack of concrete plans	General indecisiveness, uncertainty	*"I don't know exactly yet." / "I haven't thought about it yet."*

Overall, the findings indicate that many students are consciously building multi-layered strategies to achieve their career goals: academic progress, professional development through practical experience, and positioning in the labor market, including entrepreneurship. Students

approach career-building proactively and purposefully, albeit from different starting points and with varying levels of certainty, reinforcing earlier results concerning motivations and career goals.

Discussion

This study highlighted that students' motivations are complex and multifaceted, closely tied to personal interests, early experiences, and future career plans. Career choice is primarily driven by interest in travel, cultures, and the professional opportunities offered by hospitality and tourism. Most students regard tourism and hospitality as a diverse and flexible career path that allows entry into multiple areas, such as hospitality management, event planning, or entrepreneurship.

Regarding career visions, it is evident that many students already have ideas about their future at the beginning of their studies, mainly related to tourism. While short-term plans are often still in formation, long-term goals increasingly include leadership or ownership roles, signaling strong ambition and professional commitment. Strategic planning analysis confirmed that students consciously construct their careers: academic pursuits (e.g., specialization, language development), professional goals (e.g., internships, international experiences), and labor market strategies (e.g., early employment, entrepreneurship) all appear.

Short- and long-term career visions also reinforce the alignment of career goals and motivations. In five years, students most often see themselves in employee, middle-management, or internship roles, while in ten years, entrepreneurship, company leadership, or senior management positions dominate. This pattern suggests strong long-term professional commitment and early recognition that conscious planning, development, and experience are prerequisites for success. The university's role in this process is crucial: responses reveal that students primarily expect support in gaining practical experience, networking, language, and professional development, as well as orientation opportunities.

4.1.3. Summary of Research Phase I

RQ1.1: What motivations and perceptions do young professionals hold toward the tourism and hospitality sector?

The findings indicate that students generally hold a favorable view of professions related to tourism. Most participants described the sector as exciting, diverse, and people-oriented. At the same time, they expressed concerns about the lack of social prestige and uncertainty regarding

long-term commitment, which primarily stem from the limited flexibility of the profession, low wages, and negative experiences with working conditions.

Experiences gained in the immediate environment–within the family or through acquaintances–play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward the profession. When students had previously encountered positive examples of individuals working in the sector, their interest in tourism was strengthened.

RQ1.2: Which factors shape the sector's image in either a positive or negative way?

Focus group interviews revealed that students typically form a complex and ambivalent picture of the tourism and hospitality sector as a work environment. On the positive side, participants highlighted the sector's dynamism, diversity, and the opportunities for intensive interaction with people. They also valued language use, intercultural settings, and the potential for travel and international careers. Another motivating factor was the possibility of directly shaping guest experiences, which provides emotional reinforcement during work.

Conversely, negative experiences and structural challenges were also prominent in the responses. The most common concerns included long and unpredictable working hours, physical strain, seasonal employment, and low pay. Several participants pointed to the profession's low social recognition and the fact that jobs in the sector often does not provide financial stability. Criticism was also directed at the gap between formal education and professional practice, which hinders a smooth transition into careers.

RQ1.3: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected young professionals' career plans?

The results show that the impact of the COVID–19 pandemic varied among early-career professionals. Students who were firmly committed to the sector remained firm in their career goals, while those who had already been uncertain experienced heightened doubt. As a consequence of the pandemic, many students are now striving for multiple career options and considering alternative career paths, which has weakened their exclusive commitment to the industry.

RQ1.4: What factors motivate students to choose a degree in tourism and hospitality?

The findings highlight that students' decisions to pursue this degree were primarily shaped by their environment–particularly the experiences of family members and close acquaintances–as well as early-life experiences. Another recurring theme was the assumption of person–profession fit, which provided a strong motivational basis and exerted a positive long-term

effect on career planning. Choosing tourism and hospitality as a field of study was often seen as a form of self-affirming exploration.

RQ1.5: What short- and long-term career goals do first-year tourism and hospitality students articulate?

The responses show that career planning is already a clear priority during the early stages of university studies. Long-term goals often included attaining middle or senior management positions or starting one's own business, usually within the sector. While most students envisioned their future in the domestic labor market, many also considered international work opportunities, including working abroad or even long-term relocation.

Students frequently expressed a desire for rapid career progression. Although some remained open to other fields, the intention to pursue a career in tourism and hospitality was generally firm. However, doubts about the industry's capacity and stability were also raised, particularly in light of previous negative experiences.

While experiential learning, internships, and mentoring were not the primary focus of this research phase, students' responses repeatedly referred to a strong demand for such opportunities. Practical learning, networking, and direct exposure to the industry were all considered essential for achieving career goals. These findings foreshadow the detailed analysis of experiential learning and mentoring presented in the second research phase.

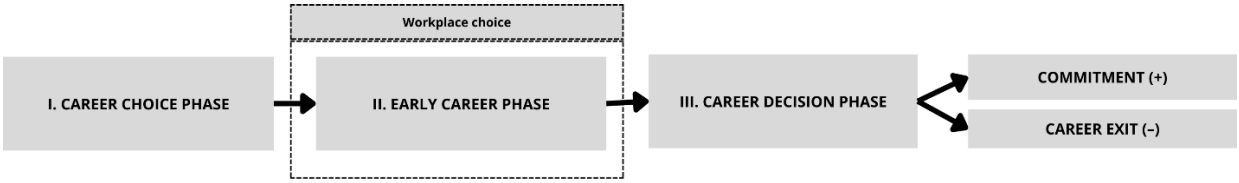
4.2. Phase II: The Role of Experiences in Career Decisions

The aim of the second research phase was to explore in greater depth the types of experiences, touchpoints, and critical turning points that influence early-career professionals' career decisions.

To achieve this, the research was structured along two distinct focal points. The third research stage focused on the experiences of university students currently enrolled in tourism and hospitality programs, examined through focus group interviews. This method created an opportunity to capture students' perspectives in an authentic way, allowing for the exploration of fresh experiences, expectations, and the process through which commitment to the profession begins to take shape. The research question here was directed toward identifying which

learning, work-related, and professional community experiences are most decisive in shaping career decisions.

Figure 9. Career Path – Early Career Phase



The second part of this phase, constituting the fourth research stage, investigated more deeply the role of professional experiences. The focus here was on experience-based professional engagements, which provide opportunities for reinforcing commitment, fostering sectoral embeddedness, and effectively supporting career decisions. Special attention was paid to those experiences–whether positive or critical–that shape young professionals' identity, sense of commitment, and career plans, particularly as influenced by participation in a professional mentoring program.

4.2.1. Stage 3: Presenting the Experiences Influencing Career Decisions

Description of the Study

The primary aim of the third research phase was to identify the formative experiences that significantly shape the career decisions of students and early-career professionals in the tourism and hospitality sector. Building on the findings of the earlier phases, four distinct periods were identified, during which different experiences influence individuals' decision-making processes.

These four periods are defined as follows:

1. **Youth experiences**, which contribute to the early emergence of interest in the field;
2. **Learning experiences** encountered during university education;
3. **Work experiences**, gained through internships and part-time jobs alongside higher education;
4. **Professional experiences**, which increasingly shape individual career decisions over time.

Naturally, these periods often overlap, and in line with the theories of Super and Savickas, this dissertation does not conceptualize career decision-making as a one-time event marking the

endpoint of career choice. Instead, it adopts the perspective that this decision point can recur cyclically, requiring individuals to reaffirm their professional commitment multiple times throughout their career path.

The focus of this phase is therefore the mapping of experiences within these periods, with particular attention to the decisive positive and negative encounters that may either facilitate or hinder the commitment of young professionals to the tourism and hospitality industry.

In this phase, the following sub-research question was formulated:

> **RQ2.1: What formative experiences do young professionals encounter that influence their career decisions?**

The methodological background of this phase was based on **focus group interviews**. Building on the results of earlier studies, this stage placed a deeper analytical emphasis on the experiences that influence university students' career decisions within the tourism and hospitality sector.

Altogether, **11 students** participated in the focus group discussions, representing both Hungarian and international students enrolled in tourism and hospitality programs at Budapest Business University (BGE). The first focus group was conducted in **November 2024**, involving four students from English-language programs. Among them, one was studying abroad within the Pannónia Program, while two were international students completing their semester in Budapest through the Erasmus program. Subsequently, in **February 2025**, an additional focus group was conducted with students from the Hungarian-language tourism and hospitality program at BBU. The aim of this second session was to validate the initial findings and to uncover further details.

The interview protocol was designed by adapting and expanding the questions used in focus group research conducted in **2021**. The first part of the questionnaire (see Appendix 6) focused on exploring the **motivations behind choosing the sector**, thereby situating the discussion within the broader research context, while the subsequent questions emphasized the **role of formative experiences**.

The focus group interviews provided valuable opportunities to gain deeper insights into students' **personal experiences, attitudes, and perceptions**, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping their career decisions. More specifically, they revealed

which types of experiences contribute to reinforcing–or undermining–their commitment to the tourism and hospitality sector.

Table 7. Description of the Study Participants

ID	GENDER	AGE	UNIVER-SITY	PROGRAM	YEAR OF STUDY	NATIONALITY
#01	female	23	BBU	BSc in Tourism and Hospitality – Health, Sport and Ecotourism Specialization	4	Hungarian
#02	female	21	BBU	BSc in Tourism and Hospitality – Travel and Event Organization Specialization	2	Hungarian
#03	female	24	BBU	BSc in Tourism and Hospitality – Travel and Event Organization Specialization	2	Hungarian
#04	female	24	BBU	BSc in Tourism and Hospitality – Destination Management and Marketing Specialization	4	Hungarian
#05	female	20	BBU	BSc in Tourism and Hospitality – Travel and Event Organization Specialization	2	Hungarian
#06	male	22	CUB	BSc in Business and Management – Tourism Specialization	2	Hungarian
#07	male	22	BBU	BSc in Commerce and Marketing – Tourism Specialization (English-taught program)	2	Hungarian
#08	male	22	BBU	BSc in Tourism and Hospitality	3	Hungarian
#09	female	22	BBU	BSc in Tourism and Hospitality	3	Hungarian
#10	female	20	IUT de Laon – BBU	BSc in Marketing and Sales – Tourism and Hospitality (Erasmus)	2	French
#11	male	20	IUT de Laon – BBU	BSc in Technological University Studies – Marketing and Sales (Erasmus, Tourism and Hospitality)	3	French

Coding

During the analysis, the transcripts of the focus group interviews were repeatedly reviewed in order to identify recurring **motifs, themes, and key expressions**. As a first step, **open codes** were generated that reflected the ideas articulated by the participants as accurately as possible. Through a comparative analysis of these open (secondary) codes, similar contents were clustered and subsequently developed into **axial codes (primary categories)**, which

encompassed broader conceptual domains. These categories reflected the **logical structure of formative experiences influencing career decisions**, thereby supporting the coherent presentation of the results. This structured, step-by-step coding process enabled the **reliable identification of key themes and interrelations** within the participants' narratives.

Table 8. Coding Process - Career Decision-Influencing Experiences

PRIMARY CODE	SECONDARY CODE	DESCRIPTION
Career Choice Motivation	Family background	Influence of family or family business on career choice
	Childhood travel experiences	Childhood travels or related experiences as formative influences
	Personality–profession fit	Alignment of personality traits with professional characteristics
Learning Experiences	Role of lecturers	Impact of positive or negative lecturer attitudes
	Practice-oriented training	Influence of practice-based education or project work
Work Experiences	Inspirational university programs	Impact of competitions or external professional experiences
	Internship experiences	Positive or negative experiences during internships
	Job-specific workplace experiences	Confrontation with job-specific challenges, connections to professional communities
Professional Community Experiences	Participation in mentoring programs	Personal development through supportive mentoring relationships
	Demonstrator tasks and opportunities	Work performed in academic or professional communities
	Student organization / professional association experiences	Industry development through community-based experiences
Destabilizing Factors	Impact of crises (disruptions)	Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on career planning
	Constant sectoral instability	Insecurity and rapid changes within the sector
	Work environment challenges (stressful conditions)	Difficulties such as demanding workplace environments, leadership problems
Reinforcing Factors	Compulsory internship frameworks	Positive reinforcement through structured internship requirements
	Practice-oriented experiences	Company involvement in education, dual training programs
	Genuine connection opportunities within the profession	Concrete positions, personal development, and mentoring programs

Findings

As illustrated in the previous table, the participants' responses clearly reveal distinct experiential phases that played a decisive role in shaping their career-related decisions.

Career choice motivations

Family influences and early experiences emerged as particularly significant during the career choice process: several participants had already been exposed to the world of tourism and hospitality in childhood through parents, family businesses, or shared travel experiences, all of which carried identity-shaping effects. One respondent, for instance, recalled gaining early insights into the profession through their mother, which later became pivotal, while others highlighted formative family travel experiences.

> *"We traveled a lot as a family, and those experiences were decisive for me; I imagined myself working in that world one day." – #03*

In addition, person–profession fit also appeared as a key factor: many participants felt that tourism and hospitality was particularly suited for individuals who are open, enjoy working with people, and thrive in dynamic environments. The aspiration for international opportunities and a global working environment was also emphasized, as many perceived the sector as offering flexibility and the potential for cross-border career development. One participant even remarked that they could not imagine themselves working in any other field.

> *"I felt that tourism suited my personality... I don't even know if I could do anything else." – #01*

Learning experiences

According to participants, even secondary-level vocational education was already shaped by experiences that influenced their subsequent study choices and career aspirations. Hotel visits, professional programs, competitions, and study trips reinforced their interest in the chosen field at this early stage.

During university studies, experiences were strongly influenced by the personality and attitudes of instructors and by the practice-oriented nature of courses. Positive, inspiring teaching approaches and applied courses served as motivators, whereas purely theoretical instruction that lacked real-world professional grounding proved disappointing for several students. A French participant, for example, emphasized that in their home country, instructors often come

directly from the profession and share real market examples, which helps students better understand how the industry operates.

> *"In France, we get closer to the instructors; it's easier to form personal relationships, and they mentor us. Since many come directly from the industry, they share their real-world experiences during classes, which helps us better grasp how the sector works." – #11*

Feedback also highlighted the importance of the quality of internship programs and university–industry collaborations. Some respondents expressed frustration that these were often limited to administrative tasks and did not provide genuine professional challenges or career advancement. At the same time, many stressed the importance of interactive professional forums, workshops, and direct engagement with industry actors.

> *"It would be great if there were interactive forums and workshops where universities, professional associations, and businesses could meet, and where we, young people, could actively participate." – #04*

These experiences underscore that the richness of learning opportunities, the strength of professional connections, and access to authentic industry contexts play a crucial role in shaping students' career outlooks. Programs and events where students can directly collaborate with recognized professionals serve as strong motivators and influence their long-term commitment to the field.

Workplace experiences

The findings also demonstrate that internships and initial work placements are particularly influential in students' career planning, often decisively shaping later career choices. Since many students work while studying, learning and work experiences are frequently intertwined. The quality of internship experiences, therefore, becomes critical: positive encounters can reinforce commitment to the profession, while negative ones may readily lead to career exit.

Several participants reported insufficient support during internships, inadequate onboarding, or being left alone with significant responsibilities due to excessive workloads–leading to uncertainty and frustration. One student shared:

> *"During my hotel internship, I didn't receive proper training, and I was often left alone at the reception before I had even completed my training. My responsibilities weren't clear, and if I made mistakes, they were dissatisfied." – #08*

Conversely, a supportive work environment, an inclusive team, and continuous feedback can significantly strengthen professional commitment. As one participant noted:

> *"I was lucky to end up in a place where they truly helped me with everything, but it also required me to be willing to learn and integrate." – #01*

These insights clearly underline that the quality of early work experiences is of fundamental importance: internships are not merely a formal requirement but represent one of the most sensitive turning points in shaping future career commitment.

Professional Community Experiences

The research highlighted that the early career stage presents numerous challenges, particularly regarding profession-specific difficulties and integration into professional communities. Although during university studies there are typically few opportunities for genuine professional embeddedness, responses revealed that activities such as working as a demonstrator, attending workshops, and building closer relationships with lecturers could foster stronger connections. Some participants regarded such opportunities at university as crucial first steps toward the profession, while others felt the absence of this kind of community experience in their workplaces.

Particularly striking was the finding that mentoring experiences and active participation in professional events could mitigate uncertainties associated with early career transitions. Several participants emphasized that joining a mentoring program or attending professional events had significantly influenced their motivation and perception of the profession, as such occasions allowed them to meet leading figures in the field, thereby reinforcing authenticity and long-term commitment. At the same time, another perspective emerged, namely that balancing employment with university obligations left many students with little energy to attend such programs–especially as, in their view, the labor market primarily values practical experience and language skills.

> *"As part of a mentoring program, we had the opportunity to work at the Tourism Gala. For me, this was a fantastic experience, as everyone who plays a defining role in the industry was present. It was truly inspiring to see how approachable the leaders of the profession were."* – #02

The narratives also indicated that the workplace environment–particularly when characterized by youthful and dynamic teams–significantly shaped positive attitudes toward the profession.

Conversely, toxic organizational cultures, incompetent leaders, or constant stress frequently led to job-hopping and disillusionment with the industry.

> *"In my career so far, I have not met a leader I would want to work with again. That's why I kept changing jobs so often."* – #09

International work experience was also described as formative, as it enabled direct comparison between domestic and international workplace cultures. In many cases, participants highlighted the openness and supportive attitudes of foreign workplaces as positive examples.

> *"I worked in a restaurant in Germany for a month. Compared to my experiences at home, I realized that people there were much more open and helpful toward beginners. Helping was not seen as a burden but as a natural attitude."* – #03

Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of opportunities for connecting with professional communities, supportive work environments, and the experiences gained through mentoring programs and professional events in shaping young people's confidence and long-term commitment to the tourism and hospitality sector.

Discouraging Factors

The focus group discussions clearly revealed that a range of negative or uncertain experiences strongly shaped students' career-related decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, introduced new considerations into career planning: the uncertainties led many participants to emphasize the importance of "standing on solid ground" in the future, even preparing for alternative professional pathways.

Experiences during internships and early employment were also pivotal in shaping attitudes toward the profession. Several participants reported feeling exploited as interns, receiving only a fraction of the pay they later earned as employees for the same work. These negative experiences were compounded when existing colleagues–often motivated by fear of losing their positions–were reluctant to provide support, depriving newcomers of the encouraging, growth-oriented environment they expected.

> *"Often, they don't help because they're afraid of losing their jobs… It's rare to find a workplace where people genuinely want you to grow."* – #04

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that such experiences did not necessarily result in immediate intentions to leave the field. Instead, they reinforced the perception that tourism and hospitality inevitably involve a degree of vulnerability, prompting young people to engage in multi-

directional career planning to prepare for potential crises. At the same time, many stressed that positive role models, success stories, and inspiring professional feedback could offset negative experiences. Others emphasized that companies have a responsibility to offer internships and professional programs that demonstrate authentic career pathways and success stories, thereby making not only the sector but also responsible, sustainable tourism more attractive to young people.

> *"Companies could provide internship programs that help students better understand the significance of tourism and the opportunities within the field. It would be important to showcase career pathways with success stories and the experiences of young professionals–this could also promote responsible tourism, attracting environmentally conscious youth to the sector."* – #10

Overall, these findings reveal that while uncertainties and negative workplace experiences weakened trust in the profession, students responded by planning their careers more consciously and flexibly, often mapping out alternative paths within tourism itself.

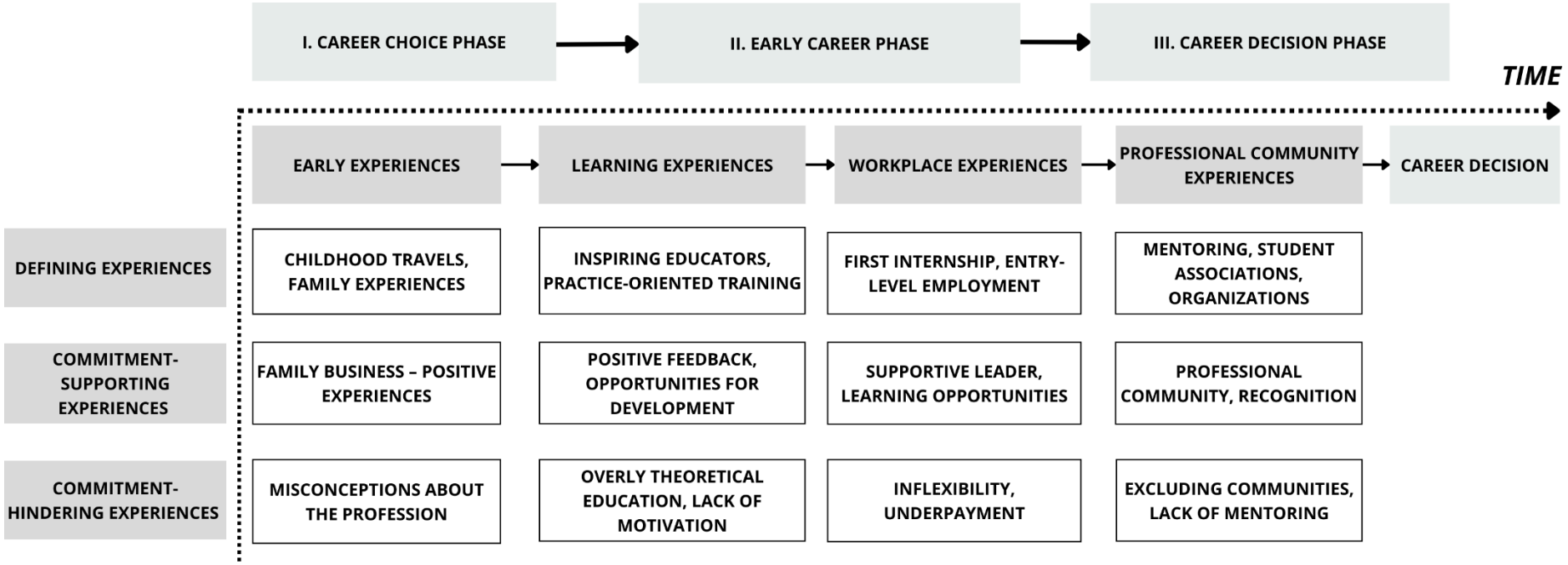
> *"COVID-19 scared me too… afterwards there weren't many event planners being hired… but I think this is a broad field, and if anything happens, there will always be opportunities elsewhere."* – #05

Reinforcing Factors

The focus groups also produced a number of constructive, forward-looking proposals, with participants formulating specific professional recommendations to enhance early-career commitment. They highlighted the importance of introducing flexible work opportunities alongside university studies–such as 15-hour-per-week positions. Participants also advocated for stricter quality assurance and restructuring of internship programs: instead of administrative tasks, students expect meaningful professional experience that can serve as a foundation for their careers. Expanding international opportunities–particularly internships abroad in German-speaking countries, similar to Erasmus or the Pannonia program–was also emphasized.

Participants further expressed interest in study competitions, projects, and workshops that establish direct connections between students and industry stakeholders. The involvement of credible role models–such as alumni and industry professionals–was regarded as valuable even at the secondary school level, particularly through sharing career stories and personal experiences.

Figure 10. Summary of the Results of the 3rd Stage



Discussion

As the research progressed and deeper layers of data emerged, a career timeline and a system of experiential dimensions became increasingly evident–structuring the ways in which students' career choices and decisions are shaped. The analysis identified four key types and phases of experiences (Figure 10):

1. **Early experiences**, which lay the foundations of initial professional interest and attitudes;
2. **Learning experiences**, linked to educational settings and professional socialization;
3. **Workplace experiences**, marking the first real encounters with the profession;
4. **Professional community experiences**, which foster long-term commitment and identity formation.

The third phase of the research thus revealed that while different experience types and phases carry varying levels of influence, they are closely interconnected, collectively contributing to either the reinforcement–or, in some cases, the erosion–of young professionals' commitment to the tourism and hospitality sector.

4.2.2. Stage 4: The Role of Mentoring Experiences in Early-Career Development

Description of the Study

The findings of the previous research stages revealed that while learning and employment-related experiences often left gaps or negative impressions among students, professional community experiences–particularly authentic and inspiring personal connections–consistently played a crucial role in career choice, educational pathways, and early career transitions. Whether through encounters with instructors, first meetings with industry professionals, later colleagues, supervisors, or mentors, these relationships reappeared as formative experiences in the participants' narratives.

Mentorship theories (e.g., Scerri et al., 2020; Clutterbuck, 2004), alongside experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), support the notion that frameworks built on personal experiences, reflection, and community learning are particularly suitable for fostering professional development and commitment. Mentors and role models had already emerged in earlier stages of this research as key figures in guiding and supporting career trajectories.

Building on these results, the next stage of the research focused explicitly on an experiential professional mentoring program (*protégé. talent lab*) as one of the most appropriate spaces for experiential learning. The program is distinctive in that it enters the career trajectory at the boundary between study and employment, establishing a professional community that offers opportunities for both development and redirection, beyond personal connections.

In line with developments in mentoring literature, the research not only examined the program as a whole but also analyzed its individual stages through the lens of experiential learning. Specific attention was given to personal experiences (e.g., inspiring encounters, career-signaling conversations), community connections (e.g., role models, belonging to a professional community), and the identification of critical points that strongly influence early-career commitment during the mentoring cycle.

This led to the following research question:

RQ2.2: What individual and community experiences contribute to young professionals' sectoral embeddedness through the experiential learning processes of a mentoring program?

The purpose of this research was to explore how an experiential professional mentoring program can contribute to strengthening early-career professionals' commitment and professional identity in the tourism and hospitality sector. The theoretical foundation was provided by Clutterbuck's (2004) five-stage mentoring framework, which I complemented with approaches emphasizing the role of individual and community experiences. The research placed particular emphasis on how these experiences affect participants' career decisions, professional embeddedness, and long-term commitment.

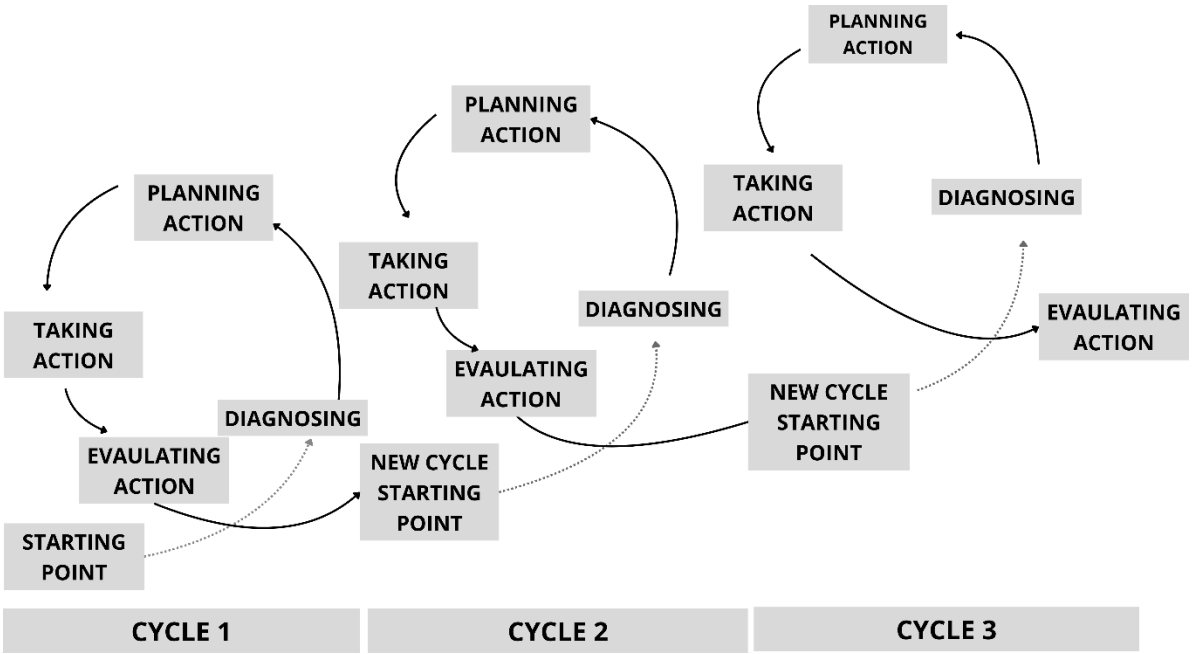
The methodological framework was participatory action research, a research attitude that emphasizes social embeddedness, practical applicability, and collective learning. Its aim is for the researcher to collaboratively interpret and shape reality with members of the studied community. The researcher is not merely an observer but also an active participant in shaping the processes (Baum et al., 2006; O'Leary and Coghlan, 2022).

My role within the action research was dual: as the leader of the mentoring program, I organized, coordinated, and developed the processes; as a researcher, I regularly reflected on these experiences and the feedback emerging from them. The literature conceptualizes this dual role through the parallel of the "core action project" and the "thesis action project": one

representing the program's practical implementation, the other serving as its research framework and reflective dimension (O'Leary & Coghlan, 2022).

The approach applied was insider action research, in which the researcher is an internal actor, actively shaping processes rather than studying them from outside. This allows for real-time reflection, feedback, and intervention. My research identity was thus not that of an external observer but that of an equal participant and initiator, who continuously reshaped the framework based on program experiences. Beyond its core activities, the mentoring program functioned as a communal learning space, where feedback was integrated into development processes–thus the program itself evolved continuously (Figure 11). This spiral cycle of *diagnosis – planning – action – reflection* reflects the essence of action research (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).

Figure 11. The action research process



Source: Adapted from Coghlan & Brannick (2014)

The outcome of this research is not abstract theoretical knowledge but practice-based, co-created insight that was shaped through the active participation of mentees, mentors, and organizers. The intervention can thus be understood as a process in which participants both experience and shape the directions of development. In this perspective, the research itself becomes an act of community-building and value creation – echoing Baum (2006) and Holland (2018), who highlight the potential of action research to foster learning and dialogue.

The scientific validity of this methodological approach rests on participation, reflexivity, practical utility, and goal-oriented intervention (O'Leary and Coghlan, 2022). Along these

criteria, the mentoring program served not only as a subject of study but also as a shared space for action in which the future professional community could take shape. The protégé. mentoring program thus functioned simultaneously as a research setting, a community-building field, and a reflective learning laboratory.

My aim throughout the action research process was to explore and describe a mentoring practice grounded in robust theoretical frameworks while emphasizing the sharing of experiences and the construction of professional communities. A further objective was to present a "best practice" example of experiential learning, highlighting both the well-functioning and the improvable elements observed during the mentoring process, while also responding to key questions about mentoring and identifying the benefits for both students and mentors (Sipe & Testa, 2020).

Accordingly, the research focused on a real-world mentoring program that proved ideal for several reasons: at least five completed program cycles were available for analysis, enabling a deeper understanding; industry professionals participated as mentors; and the mentoring process itself was intensive, centered on personalized collaboration between mentor and mentee, indirectly bridging the university and labor market contexts. Moreover, the protégé. talent lab operates independently of any single company or organization, allowing the program to focus squarely on personal career mentoring without corporate or commercial interests. This independence, together with its iterative emphasis on feedback and continuous improvement, makes the program particularly suitable as a case study for illustrating the dynamics of effective, experience-based mentoring.

The research also involved the analysis of feedback questionnaires completed by mentees, which provided insight into how the program specifically supported participants, what touchpoints and critical moments it addressed, and what further challenges it might help resolve in relation to career orientation, commitment, and decision-making.

The Program Under Study

The protégé mentoring program was inaugurated in September 2021 with the aim of connecting emerging professionals with seasoned experts in the tourism and hospitality sectors. This initiative seeks to cultivate a thriving and sustainable professional community, benefiting both the newcomers entering the labor market and the experienced individuals who share their knowledge and insights. Its foundation rests on personalized guidance, storytelling, and the direct transfer of experience, whereby recognized professional mentors support young people

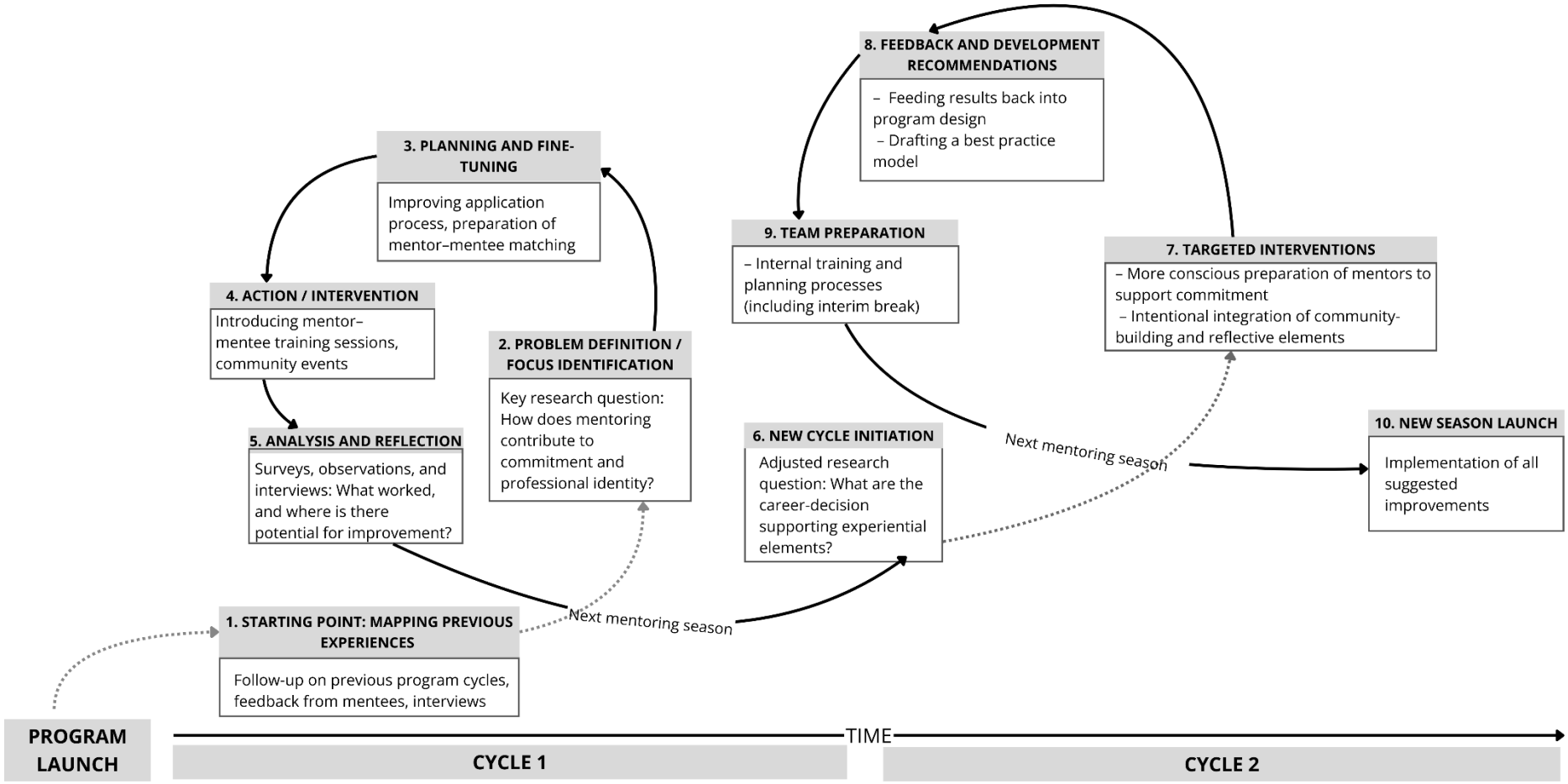
in conscious, self-awareness-based career planning. The mentees are typically final-year students or recent graduates facing career-entry decisions, who seek professional guidance, networking opportunities, and a supportive community for their career development *(www.protege-talentlab.com, 2025).*

From the perspective of its organizers, the program plays a crucial role in shaping the sector's future, as it facilitates dialogue across generations, aligns labor market supply and demand, and helps secure a steady talent pipeline. Typically, mentees meet their mentors 4–8 times per program cycle, with optional additions such as mock interviews, participation in professional events, company visits, job shadowing, or even collaborative projects, depending on individual goals. Beyond one-to-one mentoring, the program also regularly organizes professional workshops, company and hotel visits, and community events to foster networking and the emergence of shared professional experiences. By the program's conclusion, mentees become part of a trusted professional community that they can turn to long-term for advice and support. The high quality and recognition of the program are underscored by awards and professional accolades, which further justify its selection as a research case.

The program itself functions as a continuously evolving organization, shaped iteratively by the feedback of mentors and mentees, adapting to labor market needs and generational expectations. A defining characteristic is its voluntary organization and its focus not on business goals but on personal career development, career orientation, and community building. The duration, design, and development areas of the program are summarized in the following figure.

By July 2025, six program cycles had been completed, providing ample opportunity to study the initiative's impact. Throughout the action research, I employed a reflective approach that included the analysis of focus groups, in-depth interviews, surveys, evaluations, and narrative reports (Jennings et al., 2010). The first focus group was conducted in autumn 2021, and the second was in May 2022, involving participants who were either actively engaged in the program or had just applied. These discussions allowed me to map students' motivations for joining the mentoring program, as well as their assessments and feedback on the program experience.

Figure 12. The Steps of the Action Research Process



Source: Adopted from Coghlan & Brannick (2014), Author's own compilation

Table 9. Development of the mentoring program under study

SEASON	TIMEFRAME	NUMBER OF MENTORS	NUMBER OF MENTEES	KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PROGRAM'S CONCEPTUALIZATION
SEASON 1	September 2021 – January 2022	10	17	The initial launch of the program focused on tourism and hospitality students.
SEASON 2	March 2022 – June 2022	20	20	The target group was expanded to include students from disciplines beyond tourism, with the aim of strengthening cross-sectoral awareness. Outstanding mentor–mentee pairs were recognized with awards. The alumni network was launched.
SEASON 3	September 2022 – January 2023	30	30	Professional workshops and group mentoring sessions were introduced to complement individual mentoring, covering areas such as tourism marketing, event planning, etc. A mentor training program was also launched.
SEASON 4	March 2023 – June 2023	30	30	Applications were made strictly for career-development mentoring. A regional edition at Lake Balaton was introduced: a workshop series and mini-mentoring program to promote tourism careers among local youth.
SEASON 5	September 2023 – January 2024	28	28	General entrepreneurship and leadership development tracks were added.
DEVELOPMENT PHASE	*Spring – Summer 2024*	–	–	*Instead of the mentoring program, alumni community-building initiatives came to the forefront. Reflection and feedback loops were strengthened.*
SEASON 6	October 2024 – June 2025	20	20	The duration of the program was extended. Development-focused selection criteria were introduced. A more selective mentor list was developed, based on competencies. The program model became fee-based with scholarship options. New soft-skill modules (e.g., financial literacy) were launched.

After each meeting, mentees also submitted feedback via Google Forms, focusing particularly on their experiences within the program and the effects on their professional development. In accordance with the data protection statement, these textual responses were processed anonymously, allowing for the evaluation of how participants assessed the program and their mentors, and how mentoring contributed to their career progression.

Table 10. Summary of the analyzed textual data

PROGRAM SEASON	NUMBER OF MENTEES	NUMBER OF RECORDED MEETINGS	NUMBER OF FINAL EVALUATIONS ANALYZED
1	17	44	15
2	20	56	17
3	30	92	19
4	30	102	19
5	28	128	19
6	20	90	15
TOTAL	**145**	**512**	**104**

Findings

Based on the feedback of participants in the mentoring program, several key types of experiences and turning points emerged that shaped the course of the mentoring process. The following summary table presents the mentees' experiences in a structured way, organized by the different stages of the program. It highlights the positive individual and community-related experiences, the critical points associated with each phase, as well as the specific characteristics of the alumni stage after the program's conclusion, thus expanding on the frameworks of (Abegunde and Park, 2022; Clutterbuck, 2004; Mullen, 2011; Mullen and Fletcher, 2012) (Table 11).

Table 11. Representation of the Mentee Experience Path

STAGE	0. REFLECTION	1. INITIATION	2. GOAL SETTING	3. CULTIVATION	4. EVALUATION	+ ALUMNI COMMUNITY
TOUCHPOINTS	First encounter with the mentoring program opportunity	Mentor–mentee introduction (speed-dating interviews)	First one-to-one meeting with the mentor, mediated by organizers	At least one monthly meeting, individual consultations, company visits, and professional events	Final event, feedback session	Community events and the option to rejoin or volunteer
COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES (+)	Alumni recommendations Participation in the open day/event	First impressions after meeting mentors	Training sessions Getting to know the mentor's workplace, daily routine, and colleagues	Collaboration for common goals Shadowing	Evaluation of achieved goals Network-building and identification of future collaboration opportunities	Networking opportunities through professional events and relationships gained in the program
INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES (+)	Experience of the information acquisition process	Motivation and excitement Feeling of control through selection based on preference and perceived affinity	Formulating personalized goals Career-focused orientation Growth in self-confidence Increased career awareness	Practical, career-focused guidance Presence of an authentic role model	Recognition of individual development Feedback provided and received	Celebration of professional achievements through connections built in the program
CRITICAL POINTS (0/–)	Early rejection when joining the program	Lack of chemistry: motivational differences, difficulties in pairing	Failure to set goals Lack of mentor–mentee commitment Scheduling difficulties at the beginning	Difficulties in scheduling Time/resource overload Unrealistic expectations Inadequate mentor style	Disappearance of mentor/mentee Lack of formal closure Lack of feedback	Failed attempts at professional integration Negative workplace experiences

0. Reflection / Building Rapport

Participation in a mentoring program does not begin with the first official meeting but rather in an earlier, often less visible phase: the moment when students or young professionals first encounter the idea of joining the program. This is referred to in the research as the *"reflection"* stage – the period of internal preparation and consideration prior to formal entry. Although not formally part of the program, this stage lays the groundwork for commitment and strongly influences how later experiences are perceived.

In this phase, participants first hear about the program's existence through alumni recommendations, open days, community events, or a university newsletter. These initial points of contact are still informal, but they can spark curiosity, foster identification, or even provoke skepticism.

For most, the act of applying itself represented an exciting experience: their motivation centered on gaining practical knowledge, building professional connections, and exploring their interests more concretely. The community dimension also began to take shape here: many noted that alumni recommendations, personal stories, or an inspiring presentation were what ultimately prompted them to apply. This illustrates how the professional community already functions as a reference point even before participation.

Applicants often engaged in information-seeking behaviors – browsing the program website, checking social media posts, or rewatching interviews. Many perceived this process as a positive experience: the possibility of mentorship evoked excitement, hope, and preliminary commitment. In many cases, this anticipation already laid the foundation for their later motivation.

> *"I applied to the program because I thought it would be good for networking and events, but also because I wanted to discover which part of the industry interests me most."* – Mentee, 2nd Program.

At this stage, one of the earliest but emotionally sensitive critical points can also appear: the experience of early rejection. Some applicants expressed interest and applied but were not admitted – due to oversubscription or misalignment of profiles. This experience could be discouraging and may deter individuals from pursuing future mentoring opportunities, especially if there was inadequate communication or feedback.

1. Initiation

This stage is marked by the mentees' first personal encounter with mentors, often during a "speed-dating" type of event. The sense of rapport, professional inspiration, and immediacy of these interactions were described as exciting and affirming, reinforcing participants' commitment to the program.

During this stage, mentees articulated their professional motivations and often expressed enthusiasm toward the potential mentoring relationship. Key experiences included the awakening of genuine professional interest in building relationships and the opportunity to select a mentor based on personal preferences, which enhanced their sense of autonomy and engagement.

The first encounter with mentors functioned simultaneously as an individual and community experience: participants engaged directly with mentors while also observing how their peers interacted with the same individuals. This dynamic fostered mutual inspiration, comparison, and connection-building, shaping not only individual impressions but also the group's collective perception of the program.

At the same time, challenges arose when mentees were not matched with their preferred mentors. This was particularly difficult for those who had firmly attached to their initial impressions, and it was often experienced as disappointment if they could not collaborate with their chosen mentor. In such cases, reduced motivation and weakened engagement were reported, with the absence of initial chemistry sometimes leading to higher dropout rates later on.

2. Goal setting

Through the facilitation of program organizers, mentor–mentee pairs were officially matched. Their first formal meeting represented a critical turning point in shaping the mentoring journey. This was the moment when the goals of the mentoring process were jointly defined, which subsequently directed the focus of later meetings.

Mentees typically formulate personalized goals at this stage, often oriented toward addressing career-related gaps, developing specific skills, or clarifying their professional trajectory. This phase was frequently associated with increased self-confidence, greater awareness, and a more proactive mindset – all of which laid the groundwork for the subsequent mentoring experiences.

> *"I developed a lot during the program – I became much more open and confident. I take on opportunities more boldly, ones that I know will benefit me, and I now concentrate on my career with much greater awareness."* – Mentee, 5th Program.

Beyond the one-to-one relationship, participants also engaged in group workshops, shared events, and opportunities to visit mentors' workplaces and meet their colleagues. These experiences expanded their professional horizons and reinforced their identification with the sector at a community level.

The clarity of goal setting proved to be a decisive factor in the success of mentoring. Lack of structured or realistic goals, differing levels of commitment, or mismatched mentoring styles (e.g., overly directive or self-centered approaches) could lead to frustration and even dropout. In addition, early challenges frequently included scheduling difficulties and excessively high expectations on the part of mentees.

> *"There were attempts, but I never felt that my mentor really followed through on the things they had promised."* – Mentee, 5th Program

3. Cultivation / Progression

During the active phase of the mentoring process, mentors and mentees typically meet on a monthly basis. These meetings were practice-oriented, including personal consultations, company visits, professional events, shadowing opportunities, and preparation for specific career situations.

For the mentees, it was vital that their mentors treated them as equal partners – not merely as protégés, but as conscious, growth-oriented professional peers. They received practical advice and validation that supported their career planning. A key experience was when the mentor appeared as an authentic, credible professional role model.

> *"I would have appreciated more feedback, but overall, I was satisfied with the quality and the support I received from my mentor."* – Program 4

Collaboration toward a shared goal – primarily through shadowing or project work – as well as the additional events organized by the program, strengthened the sense of belonging to a professional community.

The most common challenges were scheduling difficulties and time or resource overload. Dissatisfaction arose when mentees felt they did not receive personalized attention or when mentors prioritized their own perspectives too strongly.

4. Ending and Evaluating the Mentoring Process

The closing stage of the program, often called Separation or Winding down, aimed to evaluate the outcomes achieved and formally conclude the relationship, frequently serving as the foundation for future professional ties. At the final events and feedback sessions, participants had the opportunity to summarize their experiences and lay the groundwork for continued collaboration.

The majority of former mentees confirmed that the program supported their personal development, increased their professional confidence, and strengthened their career awareness. Receiving and providing feedback, as well as reevaluating their own career path, were highlighted as essential experiences.

> *"I feel I am starting to find my place in the profession, able to recognize my value in tourism and leverage my strengths."* – Mentee, Program 6

The relationships built during the program offered many mentees opportunities for networking and further cooperation, while also reinforcing the collective spirit of tourism and related industries. Those who approached the program most positively were typically mentees who consciously prepared for meetings, actively participated in events, and remained open to building new professional relationships.

> *"The program gave me the chance to be part of a professional community in the field I truly love."* – Mentee, Program 5

Negative experiences occurred when either mentor or mentee withdrew prematurely, or when the process ended without formal closure. The lack of feedback and scheduling issues reduced the effectiveness of the evaluation phase. Several participants suggested placing greater emphasis on closure and preparation for this stage.

5. Redefinition / Moving On

To understand the longer-term impact of mentoring programs, it is essential to examine the role of the alumni community. Young professionals who had previously completed the program often returned to community events, where they could expand their networks and support new mentees by sharing their experiences. Alumni events – such as professional workshops and networking evenings – provided excellent opportunities to remain active members of the professional community and build long-term value.

> *"It meant a lot to me that, even a year after the program, I was invited to an event where I could meet new people and new opportunities opened up for me."* – Alumni.

The positive aspects included the sense of belonging to a cohesive community and the realization that connections did not “end” after the program. The ongoing contact with role models had an inspiring effect on former participants. However, some noted that reintegration into the profession was not always seamless, and that negative workplace experiences or burnout could undermine earlier commitment.

Thus, the success of alumni engagement depends significantly on the experiences participants have in their first professional years after the program. For this reason, it is essential to organize community events that build not only on nostalgic experiences but also provide fresh professional inspiration and opportunities for reintegration into the program.

Overall, participants emphasized career development, expansion of professional networks, and strengthened personal motivation as the most critical outcomes. The foundation of successful mentor–mentee relationships lies in mutual commitment, clearly defined goals, and honest, regular communication. For future program development, it proved essential to consider the individual needs of both mentors and mentees – particularly in terms of adequate preparation and support for mentors.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore how an experience-based mentoring program supports early-career professionals’ commitment to and integration within the tourism and hospitality sector. Beyond mapping the program’s impacts, the research also tracked its developmental trajectory within the framework of a continuously evolving program shaped by participants’ feedback. In line with the participatory action research approach, the researcher was herself an active actor in the process, making the study both an investigation and a reflexive intervention.

Following the logic of action research, each program cycle was followed by reflection and intervention: feedback from mentors and mentees informed fine-tuning, targeted modifications, and the introduction of new elements. The first four programs provided a learning foundation, while the fifth cycle already featured consciously introduced elements such as alumni community-building activities, mentee skill-development, and team-building workshops, and structured mentor training. This iterative developmental process reached maturity in the sixth program, where the concept of mentoring advanced to a new level: the duration was extended, competency-based mentor–mentee matching was introduced, and new, targeted training modules were added. Each program thus represented the launch of a new cycle, in which the

analysis–planning–intervention–reflection sequence was repeated, creating an evolving developmental trajectory.

The findings align with the literature, which emphasizes that early-career professionals are most strongly motivated to participate in mentoring programs by career-building opportunities, professional networking, and supportive encouragement that strengthens motivation (Scerri et al., 2020). These factors become particularly crucial in a labor market environment characterized by uncertainty and rapidly shifting expectations.

To further enhance program success, it is vital to apply the concept of *experience journey mapping* in the evaluation of processes. Building on service design principles, this perspective underscores that experiences can be intentionally designed. The closer students are integrated into the everyday life of their mentors, the greater the likelihood of their successful embedding within the profession.

5.1.1. Summary of Research Phase II

The analysis of the studies conducted in the second research phase revealed that the influence of experiences on career decision-making does not occur in isolation, but rather unfolds along a continuous and interrelated chain of experiences.

RQ2.1. What formative experiences do young professionals encounter that influence their career decisions?

In the life course of young people, the career choice stage is often shaped by childhood and adolescent inspirations, family patterns, and early travel experiences. During the study period, the quality of education, the learning process supported by credible instructors, and practical training opportunities play a decisive role in shaping their relationship with the profession. These are followed by initial workplace experiences, which act as critical rites of passage: the positive or negative encounters during internships and early employment often determine whether young employees consolidate their commitment to their chosen field or, conversely, become distanced from the sector.

RQ2.2. What individual and community experiences contribute to young professionals' sectoral embeddedness through the experiential learning processes of a mentoring program?

Findings from my action research confirm that mentoring programs indeed support early-career professionals in becoming more committed to the profession. A sense of community belonging is fostered through the creation of individual and collective experiences, including professional events, workshops, and team-building activities. At its highest level, this form of engagement can generate the perception of working together toward a shared goal within a high-quality professional community–one that participants may later wish to rejoin as organizers, volunteers, or even financial supporters.

5.2. Phase III: Career Decision

In the previous research phases, I examined the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of the tourism and hospitality sector and reinforce young professionals' embeddedness in the field. The aim of the third research phase was to explore in depth the positive and critical experiences and factors that influence professionals working in tourism and hospitality either toward long-term commitment or, conversely, toward exiting the profession.

5.2.1. Stage 5: Identifying Experiences Leading to Commitment or Career Exit

Description of the Study

The aim of the fifth research stage was to uncover which key experiences, organizational encounters, and socialization turning points shaped long-term career decisions of professionals working in the tourism and hospitality sector–whether guiding them toward sustained commitment to the industry or, conversely, toward conscious career exit.

RQ3.1: What positive experiences contribute to the development of commitment?

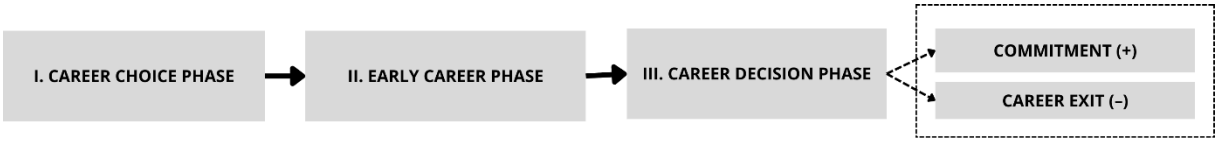
RQ3.2: What negative experiences lead individuals to exit the sector?

To this end, I conducted in-depth interviews with professionals possessing several years of experience–often in managerial roles–who had developed their professional identities along different career trajectories: some remained committed to the sector, while others deliberately transitioned to another field.

The retrospective interviews provided an opportunity to interpret experiences within temporal contexts and theoretical frameworks, following the narrative logic of career development. Analyzing these accounts allowed for the identification of individual and organizational factors

that may either foster or undermine professional embeddedness, with particular attention to the quality of work experiences, community connections, and learning opportunities.

Figure 13. Career Path – Career Choice Phase - Commitment or Career Exit



This research phase also provided an opportunity to compare the findings with students' experiences, thereby contributing to a more longitudinal, life-course-oriented approach to examining career commitment and professional orientation. In this way, the participants' narratives encompassed a complete professional "journey," enabling the interpretation of career decisions within the broader dynamics of the life course–consistent with narrative and life-span approaches in career theory.

RQ3: What formative experiences lead to either commitment or career exit in tourism and hospitality?

A total of 11 expert in-depth interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2025. All interviewees were professionals who had either entered the tourism and hospitality sector (or related fields) as early-career entrants, completed mandatory internships as part of their higher education programs in the sector, or transitioned into tourism and hospitality from other industries where they subsequently established their careers. The interviews specifically addressed issues related to commitment and career exit (see Appendix 7).

Table 12. Profile of Interview Participants

COMMITTED TO THE SECTOR

ID	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	EXPERIENCE IN THE T&H SECTOR	PREVIOUS PROFESSIONAL FIELD (IF APPLICABLE)	PROFESSIONAL FIELD IN 2025
#01	Male	40–50	Diplomacy, Marketing	5+ years	Commerce	Aviation – Marketing & Communication
#02	Female	40–50	Tourism, Marketing	25+ years	Tourism – Communication	Hospitality and Event Management – PR
#03	Female	20–30	International Hospitality & Tourism (BA), Event Management specialization	8+ years	B2B Event Management	Tourism PR
#04	Female	50+	Theology, Communication	–	Communication	Travel Organization
#05	Female	30–40	Tourism & Hospitality, Travel and Hotel Management	8+ years	–	Marketing & PR (Hotel)

CAREER EXITERS

ID	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	EXPERIENCE IN THE T&H SECTOR	REASON FOR EXITING	PROFESSIONAL FIELD	PROFESSIONAL FIELD IN 2025
#06	Female	50+	Communication	20+ years	Toxic work environment & leadership	IT – Marketing	IT – Marketing and Events
#07	Male	20–30	Tourism	3–5 years	Job loss due to COVID-19	Marketing Communication	Hospitality, Event Management
#08	Male	20–30	Media Communication	3–5 years	Better career prospects	Marketing	Marketing (own business)
#09	Female	30–40	Economics	10+ years	Job loss due to COVID-19	Banking Sector	Banking sector + short-term property rental (self-employed)
#10	Female	20–30	Tourism	≤1 year	Lack of opportunities during COVID-19	HR	Marketing (international start-up)
#11	Male	30–40	Economics	10+ years	Better career prospects	Startup sales	Startup sales

In the course of the qualitative data analysis, my aim was to uncover which experiences and encounters play a role in tourism professionals' career commitment and career exit decisions. I applied inductive and thematic coding methods, which enabled the interpretation of the narratives along recurring themes and meaning structures.

The transcripts of the semi-structured in-depth interviews were fully transcribed, and in the first stage of analysis, I identified those segments that related to formative professional experiences (e.g., first workplace encounters, crisis situations, or meeting a mentor). These experiences were

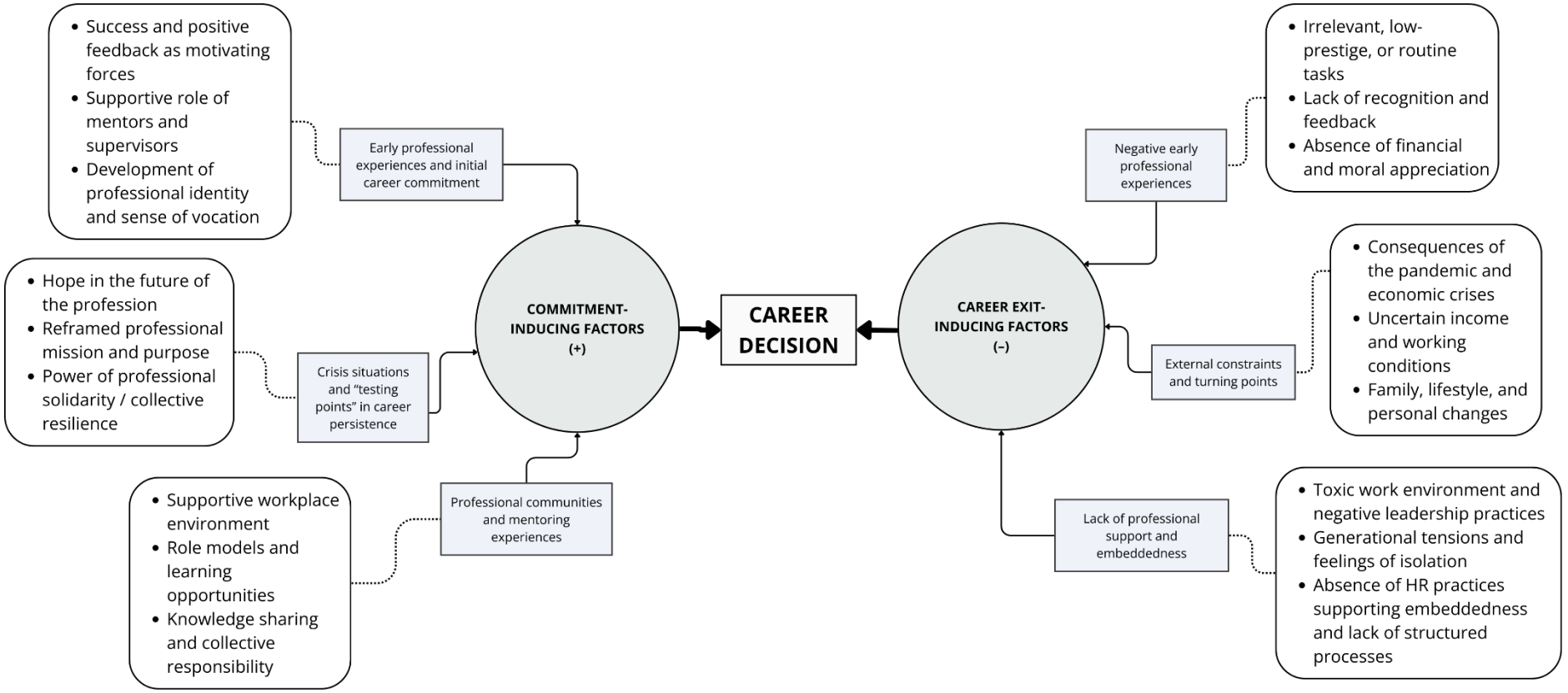
then grouped into thematic categories and examined in terms of their reinforcing, sustaining, or weakening effect on professional commitment.

The interviewees included both young professionals who remained committed to the field long-term and those who left tourism and hospitality, which allowed for a contrastive comparison. Based on their narratives, three dominant coding categories emerged as influencing factors in career decisions:

1. **First professional experiences** – formative encounters in the immediate post-graduation period that either confirmed or questioned the career choice.
2. **Experiences of crisis situations** – particularly those associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on professional commitment.
3. **Workplace and professional community experiences** – including mentoring, managerial support, and professional networks, and their role in sustaining or undermining sectoral engagement.

The analysis focused both on the substantive aspects of these experiences and on the participants' subjective meaning-making, paying particular attention to how individual events were integrated into their self-concepts and career narratives. The coding process was therefore interpretive in nature, consistent with the approach of narrative career research.

Figure 14. Factors Inducing Commitment or Career Exit



Experiences Supporting Commitment

To complement the career pathways of students and early-career professionals presented in earlier chapters, this section introduces retrospective narratives of committed tourism professionals who remained in the field long term and reflected on the development of their professional identity through their own experiences. Based on the in-depth interviews, three key domains emerged where formative experiences play a decisive role: the period immediately following career entry, responses to crisis situations (e.g., COVID-19), and professional community/mentoring experiences.

Early Professional Experiences and Initial Commitment

Post-graduation work experiences play a decisive role in shaping professional commitment. The findings indicate that for early-career professionals, commitment is not formed as the result of pre-planned decisions but emerges through experiences at work and their subsequent interpretations. Three recurring types of formative experiences were identified: success and positive feedback, supportive managerial or mentoring relationships, and the sense of professional belonging.

Commitment often begins with emotionally charged feedback that affirms professional competence and the social value of one's work. Interviewees highlighted how their first professional achievements and recognitions significantly strengthened their sense of professional identity.

> *"When, as a beginner, I was able to organize the program of an international fam trip and guests kept sending thank-you notes, I felt that in this profession we can truly create meaningful experiences for others."* – #02

These experiences align with Savickas' (2012) narrative career theory, which posits that career identity is constructed through experiences and the stories people tell about them. The contribution of this research is that the initial stages of professional commitment are often not consciously planned but emerge through emotionally significant situations.

> *"During my studies, I thought I would not remain in hospitality, but my internship in Barcelona was such a positive experience–both professionally and in terms of community–that it convinced me to continue along this path."* – #05

A recurring theme in the interviews was the presence of supportive managers or mentors, who provided security, opportunities for development, and guidance during the initial stage. Such feedback often marked the first milestone in participants' professional identity formation.

> *"My mentor did not advise me to continue with my research. Thanks to that, I switched to communication, and through practical experience, I first realized that tourism was truly my world."* – #04

The role of mentoring and managerial support resonates with Kram's (1985) and Ashforth et al.'s (2007) perspectives, which emphasize the central role of interpersonal relationships in professional socialization. However, this research also highlights that these relationships are not only spaces for learning but may also function as turning points in fostering professional commitment.

Finally, several respondents described experiences where they felt that their values, personality, and working style aligned with the professional environment of tourism. They identified this sense of professional belonging as one of the most important reasons for staying in the field.

> *"Through working with my mentor, I found my place, because at a young age, I was not yet mature enough to know myself and make good decisions."* – #04

This type of experience, characterized by a sense of professional homecoming and the emergence of vocational calling, does not stem from conscious career identification alone but gradually develops through work experience.

Overcoming Crises and Sustaining Commitment

A particularly relevant aspect of professional commitment is understanding the experiences that led professionals to remain in the field even during periods of uncertainty about its future. The study focused primarily on the early 2020s crisis, which had a profound impact on the tourism and hospitality sector. Respondents' narratives revealed three main types of experiences that contributed to sustaining commitment: faith in the future of the profession, a redefined sense of professional mission, and the resilience provided by collective professional solidarity.

> *"Living in Denmark during COVID, I still saw that people longed for encounters. This reassured me that tourism is eternal."* – #03

Several participants emphasized that the crisis strengthened their belief in the enduring value of tourism. They highlighted the permanence of human needs for travel and interpersonal

connection, regardless of temporary restrictions. Observations and guest feedback reinforced the view that demand for tourism, though temporarily disrupted, persists in the long term.

> *"Our airline never stopped operating for a single day. It was rewarding to be part of a caring company that brought people home, to their families, to rest–precisely when they needed it most."* – #01

These experiences align with Savickas' career construction theory, emphasizing that career resilience is shaped not only by personal dedication but also by a sense of identity rooted in the broader societal significance of the profession.

Another recurring theme was that the crisis led respondents to reconsider their role within the sector, which reinforced their sense of professional mission. Many described that despite the challenges, they continued to contribute meaningful, even necessary, professional activities that provided support, hope, or connection for others.

> *"I was invited to co-host an online tourism program during COVID with excellent colleagues, supporting the profession and inspiring those eager to travel. This confirmed for me that I cannot detach myself from this beautiful, albeit difficult, profession."* – #04

> *"My team and I were genuinely energized by how we could implement increasingly significant and successful events in the online space."* – #02

These accounts resonate with the Social Cognitive Career Theory, suggesting that resilience in career identity is reinforced through the reinterpretation of professional activity and the reaffirmation of internal meaning frameworks. Rather than passively enduring events, respondents actively sought to create value, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy, deepening their attachment to the profession, and generating further success experiences.

Finally, several narratives highlighted the retaining power of professional communities: the experience of mutual support during difficult times, the search for alternative solutions together, and the strengthening of professional solidarity.

> *"During COVID, my primary experience was the sense of professional cohesion. The way dedicated tourism professionals worked and thought together about how to survive this period while also contributing something of value."* – #02

The significance of community experiences resonates with theories of embeddedness and commitment (Mitchell et al., 2001; Meyer & Allen, 1991) and with perspectives on communities of practice as identity-shaping contexts (Wenger, 1998). Beyond individual dedication, participation in professional communities plays a pivotal role in sustaining young professionals' vision of a future within the sector, even after a crisis.

Professional Communities and Mentoring Experiences

Among the factors that shaped long-term commitment, interviewees placed particular emphasis on experiences related to belonging to professional communities, supportive workplace environments, and mentoring practices. These experiences primarily reinforced professional identity, while also serving as emotional and motivational foundations for long-term career retention.

A key condition for professional commitment is the presence of a supportive workplace environment, especially during the early stages of a career. The responses revealed that leaders' personal and professional attitudes, developmental feedback, and a climate of trust all contributed significantly to young professionals' emotional engagement and retention. As one participant expressed:

> *"My current manager supports me both personally and professionally – this means a great deal in making me even more committed."* – #03

This finding aligns with Allen and Meyer's (1990) model of affective commitment, which posits that emotional attachment, organizational identification, and perceived support are central to the development of loyalty.

Several participants also emphasized that throughout their careers, they consistently had the opportunity to work alongside professionals from whom they could learn. These role models– whether formal mentors or inspiring colleagues–served as sources of guidance in acquiring professional norms, values, and behaviors over time.

> *"I always had someone to learn from. That is why I find it important to give back what I once received."* – #02

This reflection corresponds with Kram's (1985) classic mentoring model, which distinguishes between career-related support and psychosocial support, the latter being particularly significant in the formation of professional identity.

A deeper, identity-level dimension of commitment emerged in the motivation to share knowledge and engage in teaching or mentoring. This form of community commitment extends beyond individual career advancement and represents a value-driven engagement based on responsibility for the future of the profession.

This approach resonates with the notion of **community embeddedness** (Mitchell et al., 2001), which suggests that professional retention is influenced not only by individual satisfaction but also by the depth and significance of community ties. Emotional connections to professional communities, intergenerational learning, and networks organized around shared values can sustain long-term commitment–even in times of crisis.

Based on the interviews, the long-term commitment of professionals in the sector was shaped by both individual and collective experiences. In the early stages, the presence of supportive leaders and mentors, coupled with success reinforced by positive feedback, played a decisive role in fostering professional identification. Crisis situations–particularly during COVID-19–tested sectoral loyalty, yet for several participants, community solidarity, renewed belief in the future of the profession, and a redefined sense of mission encouraged continued engagement. Belonging to professional communities, developing under the guidance of role models, and experiencing the opportunity to give back knowledge all contributed to staying in the profession, reinforcing participants' professional identity and value-driven commitment.

The findings underscore that long-term commitment is not the result of a single decision but rather an incremental process of lived experiences. Personal achievements, responses to crisis, and the support of professional communities and mentors together shape the pathways of professional retention. The interview excerpts confirm that for those working in tourism and hospitality, professional identity is experienced as a calling, nurtured by value creation and human connections.

Career Change–Inducing Experiences

At the outset, interviewees elaborated on the factors that initially motivated them to pursue careers linked to the tourism and hospitality sector. In line with previous research, the primary drivers included passion and a sense of vocation, as well as the influence of parents or family businesses, which inspired an early interest in tourism.

However, the second part of the interviews made it clear that leaving the profession was not due to a lack of initial motivation but was primarily triggered by subsequent negative experiences. The reflections of those who exited the field frequently revealed pivotal turning

points that undermined their initial commitment and, in the long run, led to disengagement from the sector. These experiences stemmed from both personal and collective shortcomings, disappointments, and conflicts.

Based on the qualitative data, three main code categories emerged as the key experiences leading to career exit:

1. **Negative first professional experiences**
2. **Crisis situations and external societal pressures**
3. **Lack of professional support and organizational embeddedness**

The following sections present the types of experiences that contributed to leaving the sector along these three dimensions.

Negative First Professional Experiences

The in-depth interviews revealed that career exit often stemmed not from a lack of initial motivation, but from the negative character of the first professional experiences following graduation. The mandatory internship, in particular, emerged as a decisive factor, as it often represented students' first real encounter with the workplace. According to participants, this period was not only about gaining practical experience but also deeply influenced their overall attitude toward the sector.

Several respondents noted that they lacked institutional and organizational support during their internships. They did not receive adequate guidance or opportunities for professional development and were often assigned tasks unrelated to their studies or intended career path. As a result, the internship was perceived less as an inspiring learning opportunity and more as a disappointing experience. As one respondent expressed:

> *"Unfortunately, I didn't feel that I could truly develop. I wanted a job where I could think and use my brain, but after a while, I noticed that I was getting bored and felt myself deteriorating." – #10*

Material and social recognition of work also emerged as a critical factor. Many lamented that entry-level positions in the sector did not provide sufficient livelihood, especially for those with higher education degrees. This often led to the realization that other industries offered more stable and predictable income. The discrepancy between expectations and reality played a key role in career exit decisions.

Perceived differences in prestige within the industry were also a recurring theme. Hospitality, as one of the most physically demanding branches of tourism, was often described as having lower social recognition. One respondent explained:

> *"In the past, being a waiter was a respectable occupation. Nowadays, it is looked down upon, and in recent years, a workforce has entered the industry that has really diluted its quality." – #09*

These accounts underline that the quality of first professional experiences, the social perception of specific roles, and the intellectual challenges of the work all significantly influence whether young professionals commit to the sector–or turn away from it. Following negative experiences, many sought out industries that better matched their competencies, offered greater intellectual stimulation, and provided more sustainable financial prospects.

External Pressures and Life Transitions

Analysis of the interview excerpts showed that career change was not always the outcome of a conscious, long-term decision but often the result of external pressures or abrupt life changes. Such turning points–including the global pandemic, economic crises, or changes in personal life–exerted a powerful influence on individual career trajectories.

Several participants reported being forced to leave the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Job losses, partial or complete organizational closures, and the resulting financial insecurity pushed many to explore opportunities outside tourism. This was particularly decisive when compensation was disproportionate to the qualifications and workload required. As one respondent described:

> *"I saw the pandemic as partly a constraint, but also as an opportunity. They would have kept me on, but for a salary I could not live on, so I resigned and started seeking work in another sector." – #07*

Economic instability was frequently intertwined with changing lifestyle needs, which also played a decisive role in career modification. Many highlighted that the working patterns typical in tourism and hospitality–such as night shifts or weekend work–were incompatible with family-centered, predictable lifestyles. The reflective atmosphere of the pandemic, combined with shifting priorities, often led to a career change:

> *"They would have kept me on during COVID-19, and I didn't even mind the idea of delivering food. But I thought, my little son is waiting at home; I wanted an end to the*

night shifts, the twelve-hour days, the grey work… I felt it was time to make a change." – #09

These life-course transitions can be well interpreted through Super's (1990) life-span model, which emphasizes that career development is not a linear process but requires continuous adaptation and re-planning according to one's life stage, roles, and values. For many participants, decisions to leave–especially in the "maintenance" or "re-evaluation" stages–were motivated by the need to reconcile professional roles with other life roles (e.g., parent, caregiver, partner). In this sense, exiting the current role was not necessarily equivalent to breaking with the sector but was better understood as an adaptive response to changing life circumstances.

Thus, career decisions often reflected complex life-course considerations, with career exit from tourism and hospitality interpreted less as rejection of the field and more as life re-orientation.

Lack of Support and Organizational Embeddedness

Interview narratives also highlighted that disengagement often stemmed from a lack of organizational support and a sense of belonging. The quality of the work environment–especially during the first years–proved to be a crucial determinant of retention in the sector. Participants who reported negative workplace experiences frequently cited the absence of organizational support, poor leadership practices, or conflict-ridden work environments as primary drivers of their exit decisions:

"It was often said that every worker is replaceable…" – #09

These accounts align with the concept of organizational embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001), which emphasizes three dimensions of employee retention: links, fit, and sacrifice. When any of these dimensions weaken–such as when no supportive community exists, professional identity is not validated, or individuals feel they lose nothing by leaving–organizational commitment and retention are significantly undermined.

Generational tensions also surfaced as a notable issue. Older employees often felt sidelined, particularly in light of the younger generation's faster advancement and lower wage demands. Dysfunctional leadership practices and a lack of digital competence among managers further contributed to frustration among experienced workers:

> *"What first made me consider changing careers was not so much the lack of professional development, but the fact that leaders who either lacked expertise or refused to accept the challenges of the digital age were promoted. This dictatorial leadership style was unacceptable to me, and I could not identify with it." – #07*

The interviews revealed that many tourism and hospitality organizations lacked structured, people-centered HR practices such as transparent onboarding, regular feedback culture, talent management, or meaningful career planning. This presented a distinct challenge for young professionals and individuals preparing to start families, as they sought secure and nurturing environments conducive to long-term career growth.

Respondents also cited factors affecting their physical and mental well-being–including excessive workloads, lack of work–life balance, and non-transparent wage structures–as reasons for leaving. In many cases, the absence of values-based leadership and community support was sufficient for employees, despite initial commitment, to decide to exit.

At the same time, several participants noted that well-functioning professional communities and mentorship programs could have offset these negative experiences. This reinforces the conclusion that concrete organizational experiences often determine whether employees remain in the profession or choose to leave.

Discussion

The findings of the qualitative interviews clearly demonstrate that long-term retention or career exit in the tourism and hospitality sector is primarily shaped by experiential, subjective factors. For committed professionals, early successes, the presence of supportive supervisors and mentors, and a sense of belonging to professional communities all contributed to positive identity formation. In contrast, the narratives of those who left the sector frequently highlighted negative initial experiences, forced reactions to crises, and a lack of workplace support or advancement opportunities.

Looking back, most interviewees still expressed positive emotional attachment to the profession, with many referring to tourism and hospitality as the source of their passion. Career transitions, however, often led to the discovery of new professional pathways that offered greater financial stability and a more predictable lifestyle. Although several participants

remained partially connected to the sector–and a few even re-engaged with it to some extent (Table 12) –confidence in the long-term stability of the profession was shaken, and few considered a full return to be realistic.

The degree of professional embeddedness extends beyond individual motivations and is shaped by the interactions and feedback employees encounter throughout their career trajectories. The study highlighted that employee commitment and loyalty to the sector are the result of a multi-stage experiential process in which professional relationships, leadership attitudes, and workplace culture play pivotal roles.

5.2.2. Summary of Research Phase III

RQ3.1: What positive experiences contribute to the development of commitment?

The results highlight the pivotal role of supervisors and professional networks in strengthening commitment and fostering workplace embeddedness. These are often influenced by elements such as professional community experiences, mentoring programs, and the quality of the work environment. Their combined effect ultimately lays the foundation for the degree of sectoral embeddedness achieved later in one's career.

RQ3.2: What negative experiences lead individuals to exit the sector?

The findings of the final research phase confirm that individuals' relationship with the tourism and hospitality sector evolves dynamically across different stages of their career trajectory. Several critical factors were identified, which–primarily through the deterioration of work-related experiences–substantially contribute to career exit within the sector. While such factors may also appear in other industries, their simultaneous occurrence, combined with the specific characteristics of the field–such as seasonal employment, emotionally intensive work environments, wage disparities, and the lack of work–life balance–makes tourism and hospitality particularly vulnerable to the outflow of young professionals.

To enhance the sector's long-term capacity for employee retention, consciously designed experiences, support mechanisms, and information channels play a critical role. These not only assist employees in making informed career decisions but also allow continuous redefinition of professional identity.

6. CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this dissertation was to explore the formative experiences, connections, and learning processes that support young people's professional orientation, commitment, and long-term embeddedness in the tourism and hospitality sector, with particular emphasis on the role of experience design.

6.1. Answers to the Research Questions

The dissertation examined professional commitment to the tourism and hospitality sector through three main research questions, with particular emphasis on the formative experiences that shape career decisions. The qualitative approach–including expert interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory action research–allowed for an in-depth exploration of both student and early-career perspectives. The following section summarizes the answers to the research questions.

RQ1: What factors and underlying needs shape university students' motivations for career choice in the tourism and hospitality sector?

Students' career choice motivations are influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including perceived career opportunities within the sector, expectations about working conditions, opportunities for learning and development, and the level of social prestige associated with the profession. In addition, expected income and the sector's experiential dimensions (e.g., travel, cultural diversity, guest experience) play a decisive role. Ultimately, the attractiveness of the sector depends on the extent to which young people perceive opportunities for personal fulfillment, career development, and experiential professional growth.

RQ2: What key experiences influence career decisions of young professionals entering the tourism and hospitality sector?

A range of experiences tied to the study period and initial work placements strongly shape career decisions. Key categories include positive learning experiences, impressions from internships, professional mentoring, and participation in industry-related events and professional communities. These experiences provide up-to-date, relevant knowledge, while

also supporting the development of professional identity and emotional attachment to the sector. Both individual and community-based experiences proved highly significant, as they reinforce commitment and foster sectoral embeddedness.

RQ3: What decisive experiences lead to either commitment or career exit in tourism and hospitality?

Career commitment is primarily shaped by experiences that provide reinforcement, support, and positive feedback, particularly in the early career stages. Professional recognition, supportive supervisors and mentors, and the availability of growth opportunities all contribute to career persistence. Conversely, negative experiences–such as disorganization, exploitation, low prestige, or a sense of abandonment–significantly increase the likelihood of career exit. The findings underline that mentoring and community integration programs can play a crucial role in sustaining commitment, especially when they emphasize reflective feedback and active engagement.

The research altogether demonstrates that career decisions and professional commitment in the tourism and hospitality sector are not isolated, one-off choices but the outcome of a longer process shaped by chains of experiences. The conscious design of these experiences–across educational, workplace, and community contexts–emerges as a key tool for strengthening long-term attachment to the profession.

6.2. Theoretical implications

The scholarly contribution of this dissertation rests on three main theoretical pillars: career theories, sectoral applications of organizational theories, and experience design. Rather than treating these frameworks in isolation, the research synthesizes them into an integrated, layered model that offers a new perspective on how young professionals' attachment to the tourism and hospitality sector can be understood.

5.2.1 Contribution to Career Theories

The study extends career theories by incorporating an experience-based perspective as an interpretive framework. Career development is shown to be shaped not only by internal preferences and social influences but also by a chain of experiences that, through reflection, become navigable and transformative.

The dissertation engages with several key theoretical traditions in the context of tourism and hospitality:

- **Super's Life-Span Theory**: Career stages are examined not only through developmental norms but also through the experiences and reflections that shape them, thereby highlighting the central role of lived experiences in career trajectories.
- **Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)**: The study situates self-efficacy, environmental supports, and learning experiences within the context of professional encounters and mentoring, adding depth to SCCT by emphasizing the formative role of experiential learning.
- **Savickas' Narrative Career Construction Theory**: Retrospective interviews present career identity as a narrative, where meaning-making unfolds through lived experiences, reinforcing the experiential dimension of career construction.
- **Kulcsár et al.'s Career Decision-Making Difficulties**: The dissertation examines how experiences such as peer feedback or practical engagement help reduce career-choice uncertainty and strengthen decision-making competence.

Through this integration, career development and career choice are reinterpreted not merely as individual decisions or organizational effects but as complex, experience-driven, socially embedded processes. This contributes to the emerging international body of interdisciplinary career development models, which remain underrepresented in tourism and hospitality research.

The empirical design covers multiple life stages: (1) motivations for study program choice (student survey), (2) career planning strategies (focus groups), and (3) retrospective interpretations of professional orientation (interviews with both stayers and leavers). This approach goes beyond a single snapshot, instead mapping the entire career journey and the experiential turning points that underpin career choices.

5.2.2. Contribution to Organizational Theories – Sectoral Applications

The research adapts organizational theories to the sectoral level, identifying experience-driven patterns of embedding that extend beyond individual workplaces. This reframes long-term career persistence as an outcome shaped by sectoral culture and professional communities.

- **Sectoral Attractiveness**: Beyond macro-level image factors, the study emphasizes experiential entry points such as internships, relationships with supervisors, and first job experiences, all of which critically influence attitudes toward the profession.
- **Sectoral Embeddedness**: Attention is directed toward experience-based elements–professional communities, sectoral norms, and identity formation–that reinforce belonging and professional integration beyond organizational boundaries.
- **Sectoral Commitment**: Findings show that meaningful tasks, learning opportunities, and career prospects foster loyalty not only to organizations but to the sector as a whole.

By linking career development to organizational and sectoral cultures and their socialization processes, the dissertation advances organizational theory applications within tourism and hospitality, with a focus on experiential career support.

5.2.3. Contribution to Experience Design Theory

The dissertation reinterprets the concept of experience design, extending it to the processes of career development and professional socialization. It introduces the idea that a career pathway can be conceived as a consciously designed sequence of experiences that strategically shape commitment, retention, and professional identity.

Three dimensions of experience design are highlighted:

- **Learning Experiences**: Learning is understood as a holistic process where practice, reflection, mentoring, and interactions transform knowledge into embedded professional competence.
- **Employee Experiences**: Particular emphasis is placed on entry-level experiences such as internships, onboarding, and first supervisor relationships, which significantly influence long-term attachment to the sector.
- **Professional Experiences**: Recognition, feedback, and belonging to professional communities emerge as critical identity-shaping events that consolidate commitment to the sector.

This perspective broadens the traditional client-side interpretation of experience design by situating it within the domain of professional development. Mentoring, community involvement, and early successes are conceptualized as turning points that shape young professionals' career trajectories.

5.2.4. An Integrated Model – Synthesizing the Three Pillars

The dissertation proposes an integrated interpretive framework that synthesizes career theories, sectoral organizational theories, and experience design (Figure 15). This model both applies and redefines these frameworks, uncovering deeper mechanisms that shape young professionals' career pathways.

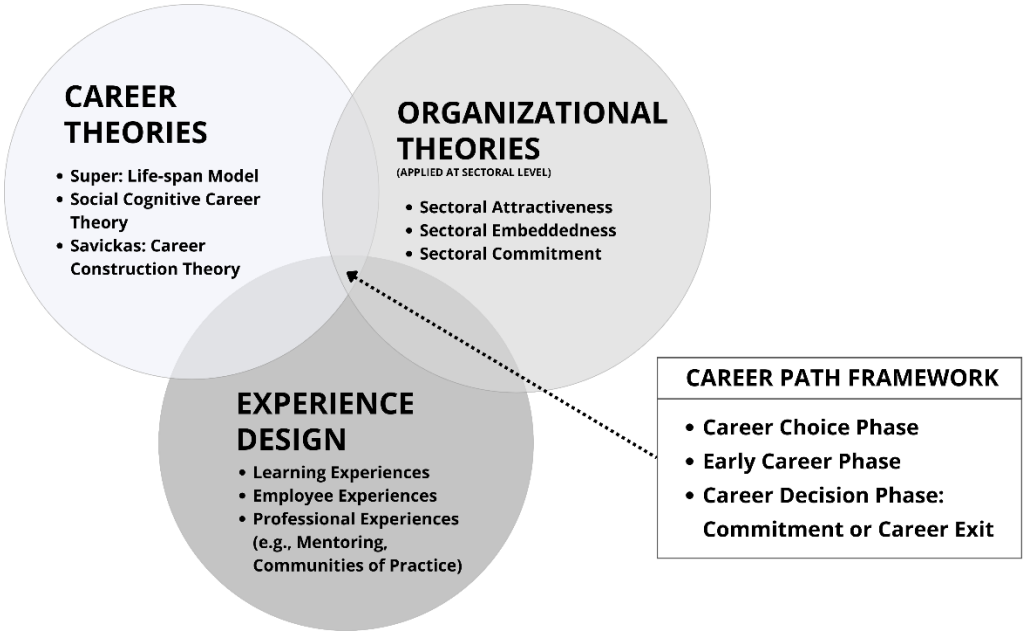
The model combines:

- the developmental, narrative, and decision-making logics of career theories (Super, Savickas, SCCT, Kulcsár et al.),
- the contextual and community-based structures of organizational theories at the sectoral level (attractiveness, embeddedness, commitment), and
- the practical and strategic dimensions of experience design (learning, employee, and professional experiences).

This interdisciplinary approach frames career choice, early career entry, and long-term commitment as a continuous chain of experiences shaped by social connections, learning opportunities, and reflexive narratives. The results outline an **experience-based career path**, in which each stage–career choice, career entry, commitment, or career transition–is defined by distinctive experiential types that influence sectoral attachment, professional identity, and career direction.

Beyond offering a novel theoretical perspective, the model provides practical insights for human resource development and retention strategies in tourism and hospitality. The lens of experience design proves particularly valuable in structuring professional communities, onboarding processes, and mentoring initiatives to strengthen sectoral commitment and reduce workforce attrition.

Figure 15. Integrated Career Decision-Making Experience Model



6.3. Managerial implications

The findings of this dissertation carry significant practical relevance for career development, professional socialization, and experience design. Following the presentation of the theoretical framework, it is essential to summarize those practical conclusions **that can be directly applied in education, HR, and employer branding.** One of the most significant contributions of this research lies in its practical orientation: the results provide concrete guidance for experience-path design, career orientation, and fostering connections with professional communities.

The dissertation focused on mapping the formative experiences of career trajectories across three key dimensions: learning experiences, employee experiences, and professional/mentoring experiences. The analysis of learning experiences highlighted students' motivations for career choice and perceptions of the tourism sector. Employee experiences revealed the decisive early work-related factors shaping career commitment. Finally, the exploration of professional and mentoring experiences demonstrated how an experience-based mentoring program contributes to sectoral embeddedness and the development of professional identity.

The qualitative data yielded the concept of an *experience-based career cycle*, underscoring that long-term commitment to the sector and the retention of young professionals can be supported

through strategically designed intervention points. The following managerial recommendations offer guidance for educational, organizational, and industry stakeholders who can influence the career paths of the future workforce.

6.3.1. Experience Design as a Commitment Building Strategy

The findings confirm that young professionals' career orientation and long-term commitment are not purely cognitive decisions but are shaped by complex, experience-driven processes. Accordingly, career support should adopt the lens of experience design–a perspective traditionally applied in consumer or employee experience research, but increasingly recognized in learning and professional socialization as well.

The research demonstrates that experiences act as structuring forces that may strengthen or weaken professional attachment. Therefore, throughout different phases of career development–from initial choice through entry into the labor market and toward long-term identity formation–it is necessary to apply a conscious, experience-based approach.

Three Key Areas of Practical Implications

a) Identifying and Designing Career Experience Points

The first step in an experience-design approach to career support is to identify formative "experience points" along the career trajectory. These are not limited to formal milestones (e.g., graduation, first job) but also include personal encounters, feedback, and moments of recognition that leave a lasting impact. Supporting reflection on these experience points enables more intentional and authentic career development.

b) Addressing Career-Influencing Experiences Multidimensionally

The results highlight that different stages of career development rely on distinct types of experiences:

- **Learning experiences**: critical in the stage of career choice, where experiential forms of learning (e.g., simulations, applied projects) increase interest in the profession and strengthen self-efficacy.
- **Employee experiences**: decisive during labor market entry, with early feedback, supportive environments, and growth opportunities shaping long-term commitment.
- **Professional experiences**: central for sustained engagement, including recognition, mentorship, and a sense of belonging to professional communities.

Although these experiences often occur outside formal education, they exert a strong career-shaping influence. Consequently, their intentional design and monitoring should be a priority.

c) Embedding an Experience-Based Perspective in Career-Support Programs

Career decision-support systems–such as mentoring programs, internships, student jobs, or career counseling–rarely approach their mission from an experience-design perspective. Yet the research suggests that enhancing these programs' experiential density, emotional engagement, and opportunities for reflection would significantly strengthen their effectiveness.

In this regard, career support should not be limited to knowledge transfer but should also function as a space for identity construction–especially in sectors like tourism and hospitality, where emotional labor and burnout risks are high.

The managerial implications of this dissertation thus **reposition experience design beyond a marketing tool, proposing it as a structuring principle for career development and professional socialization.** Sectoral embeddedness among young professionals cannot be achieved solely through training or financial incentives; it also requires the conscious design of the career experience structure. Integrating this perspective could mark a significant step in renewing human resource strategies in tourism and hospitality.

6.3.2. Recommendations for Educators: Experience-Focused Teaching

The findings of this dissertation highlight that young people's professional orientation and long-term commitment to tourism and hospitality are closely linked to the quality and type of learning experiences they encounter within the formal education system. The research suggests that the educational process–particularly at the secondary and higher education levels–should be seen as more than the transmission of knowledge. It also functions as an experiential space of professional socialization, which significantly shapes students' attachment to the profession.

Traditional, predominantly theory-based teaching methods are insufficient to provide students with meaningful, identity-shaping experiences. Instead, an experience-based educational model co-created with industry stakeholders is required–one that integrates practical training, collaborative learning, and authentic connections with industry actors. Equally important is the opportunity for students to engage in parallel employment during their studies.

Three Key Areas of Practical Implications

a) Creating Opportunities for Early Professional Engagement

The study confirms that attachment to the profession begins to form as early as secondary school, through both positive and negative experiences. **Pre-career experiences** strongly influence career choice, making it essential to provide personality-based career guidance tools (e.g., aptitude tests, orientation days) and targeted open days (Teng, 2008).

Thus, early experiential encounters with the industry should be consciously encouraged, for example:

- Thematic experience days or career-orientation programs for high school students;
- Outreach campaigns targeting youth via social media;
- Involvement of industry actors in secondary education, either occasionally or regularly.
- Such early engagement allows students to develop an emotional and experiential connection to the profession at the earliest stages of their career path.

b) Rethinking the Quality of Internship Programs

Both students and professionals emphasized that internships are often decisive for either reinforcing commitment to, or discouraging continuation in, the profession. However, current internship systems usually fail to provide genuine learning experiences, functioning instead as administrative obligations.

Recommended measures include:

- Quality assessment of internship placements and selection based on their mentoring capacity;
- Clear learning objectives, feedback mechanisms, and reflection tools integrated into internships (e.g., journals, interviews, reports);
- Institutional collection and analysis of student evaluations of internship experiences.

c) Strengthening Collaboration with Industry Stakeholders

One of the **key elements of professional embeddedness** is ensuring that students interact with real industry representatives during their studies. Educational institutions should therefore involve practitioners directly in curriculum development, ensuring that training content is current, relevant, and marketable. Guest lecturers, mentors, and supervisors can act as ambassadors within the academic sphere (Lin et al., 2018). Their presence, narratives, and

examples provide students with authentic insights, making it easier for them to connect with the profession.

While guest lectures are already a common practice in many institutions, the format requires further development. Rather than limiting involvement to one-off guest lectures, more structured, ongoing partnerships should be established between industry and academia.

Proposed initiatives include:

- Regular guest engagement through joint projects or mentoring schemes;
- Co-designed modules with industry partners (e.g., blended "learn from an expert" courses);
- Joint events, conferences, study tours, and competitions where students can participate as equal partners instead of having them separated as a visiting outsider group.

This collaboration fosters two-way learning: students gain insights from industry professionals, while the industry benefits from feedback regarding the expectations of future generations. Such an exchange is particularly vital in preparing for generational transitions.

In sum, rethinking education focusing on experiential learning is fundamental for strengthening professional commitment and sectoral embeddedness. Traditional educational models must be transformed into environments that provide authentic experiences, opportunities for connection, and professional self-reflection. Achieving this requires sustained collaboration between academic institutions and industry actors, shared responsibility, and a design-oriented mindset toward experiential learning.

6.3.3. The Role of Professional Communities in Supporting Embeddedness

The findings of this dissertation clearly demonstrate that engagement with professional communities–particularly during university studies–significantly impacts young people's career orientation, identity formation, and sectoral embeddedness. Collective learning, intergenerational knowledge exchange, and interpersonal connections generate experiential outcomes that contribute to developing long-term commitment to the sector. The role of professional communities can be analyzed along three dimensions: identity formation, the involvement of institutionalized organizations, and the integrative potential of mentoring programs as one of the most effective forms of knowledge transfer.

a) The Identity-Shaping Role of Community Experiences

Early and supportive connections to professional communities enable students to find **meaning and self-identity** within their chosen profession. University years provide opportunities–through internships, collaborative projects, or competitions–for students to experience their professional roles in cooperation. These connections reinforce sectoral attachment both emotionally and cognitively and contribute to the development of professional identity (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Gannon & Maher, 2012).

Through community experiences, young people encounter role models, narratives, and practices capable of creating emotional attachment to the profession. Collective learning and knowledge exchange foster a shared language and value system, strengthening the sense of belonging to the professional community (Scerri et al., 2020). Respondents repeatedly highlighted formative shared experiences–such as competitions, conferences, or teamwork–that allowed them to experience the professional dimension of tourism and hospitality "from the inside."

b) The Deliberate Involvement of Professional Organizations in Community Integration

The tourism and hospitality sector is characterized by strong ecosystems where actors such as hotels, travel agencies, event organizers, and tour guides collaborate closely (Michalkó, 2016). Nevertheless, the role of professional organizations–such as associations, chambers, advocacy groups, or professional forums–in education and youth integration often remains unstructured or unsystematic.

A more deliberate **involvement of these organizations** would offer multiple advantages: increasing the visibility and attractiveness of the sector, supporting young professionals' development, and broadening their social capital (Horváth and Kenesei, 2025). Organizations could play an active role in career orientation events, curriculum development, mentoring, and internship programs. Furthermore, students could be involved in organizational work as junior members during their studies, thus gaining early socialization experiences.

The research provides several examples of students who, having engaged with professional organizations during their studies, reported stronger professional identities and long-term commitment. Such integration, however, presupposes openness on the part of organizations toward younger generations and a willingness to co-create the profession's future.

c) Mentoring Programs as Arenas of Community Embeddedness

Mentoring programs are pivotal in supporting young professionals' community embeddedness, particularly when built on experiential and community-oriented approaches.

Through mentoring, early-career professionals connect to sectoral culture via real-life experiences and examples (Deale et al., 2020; Sipe & Testa, 2020).

These programs can also be understood as community spaces where mentor–mentee relationships develop and micro-communities emerge. According to this research, such supportive environments foster commitment, professional vision, and a sense of a realistic sector. Mentors act as mediators between the individual and sectoral norms, facilitating integration and long-term retention in the profession (Črnjar & Hrgović, 2016; Horváth & Kenesei, 2025). For this, reflective program management, active participant engagement, and regular evaluation of mentoring are essential.

However, it is essential to emphasize that these programs primarily target higher education students and therefore do not provide a direct solution to the sector's overall labor shortage–particularly not in physical or vocationally intensive roles. At these levels, alternative solutions, such as structured traineeship programs, may be more relevant, as they offer guided, experiential opportunities for a positive first encounter with the profession.

6.3.4. Communicating Long-Term Perspectives and Value Propositions

a) Presenting a Vision and Career Pathways

The long-term attractiveness of the tourism and hospitality sector depends heavily on whether young professionals perceive a clear**, inspiring vision and realistic career pathways within the industry.** The findings of this dissertation confirm that many students and early-career professionals lack sufficient information about potential career trajectories, advancement opportunities, and the long-term prospects that the sector can offer.

Providing structured, transparent career maps–illustrating both horizontal and vertical mobility–may help counteract the perception of tourism jobs as unstable or short-term. Narratives of successful professionals, especially those who started in entry-level positions and later advanced to leadership or specialized expert roles, can provide powerful examples for young professionals. Such role models make visible how professional success and long-term personal growth are achievable within the sector.

b) Promising Experiential Learning and Professional Development

The integration of experiential learning into education and workplace practices can strengthen students' and early professionals' sense of development and belonging. Internships, mentoring

programs, and project-based collaborations create tangible opportunities to acquire practical knowledge, develop transferable skills, and establish early networks that later support professional embeddedness.

The research findings emphasize that **professional development opportunities** must be communicated not only as skill-building activities but also as personally meaningful experiences. When individuals feel that the profession allows them to continuously learn, contribute creatively, and experience professional fulfillment, they are more likely to remain committed to the sector in the long run.

c) A New Narrative and Value-Based Communication to Enhance Attractiveness

The sector's image often suffers from stereotypes–such as low wages, high workload, and limited prestige–that discourage many talented young people from considering a career in tourism and hospitality. Addressing this requires the consistent communication of a new narrative that emphasizes the industry's broader values: cultural mediation, creating memorable experiences, and contributing to people's well-being.

Value-based communication should highlight not only financial benefits but also the profession's meaningful and socially significant dimensions. By framing the sector as a space where individuals can connect cultures, foster sustainability, and shape unique human experiences, tourism and hospitality can position itself as a calling rather than simply a job.

This new narrative must be shared across educational institutions, employers, and professional organizations to create coherence and credibility. Authentic communication, based on real examples and genuine values, is critical for building trust and motivating young professionals to join–and remain within–the sector.

6.4. Key Findings of the Research

The research highlights that professional commitment in the tourism and hospitality sector extends beyond individual motivations or structural conditions. It is shaped to a much greater extent by learning and community experiences that, across the different stages of career development, influence early-career professionals' identity, professional self-concept, and connection to the sector. At the core of this dissertation lies the recognition that retaining and

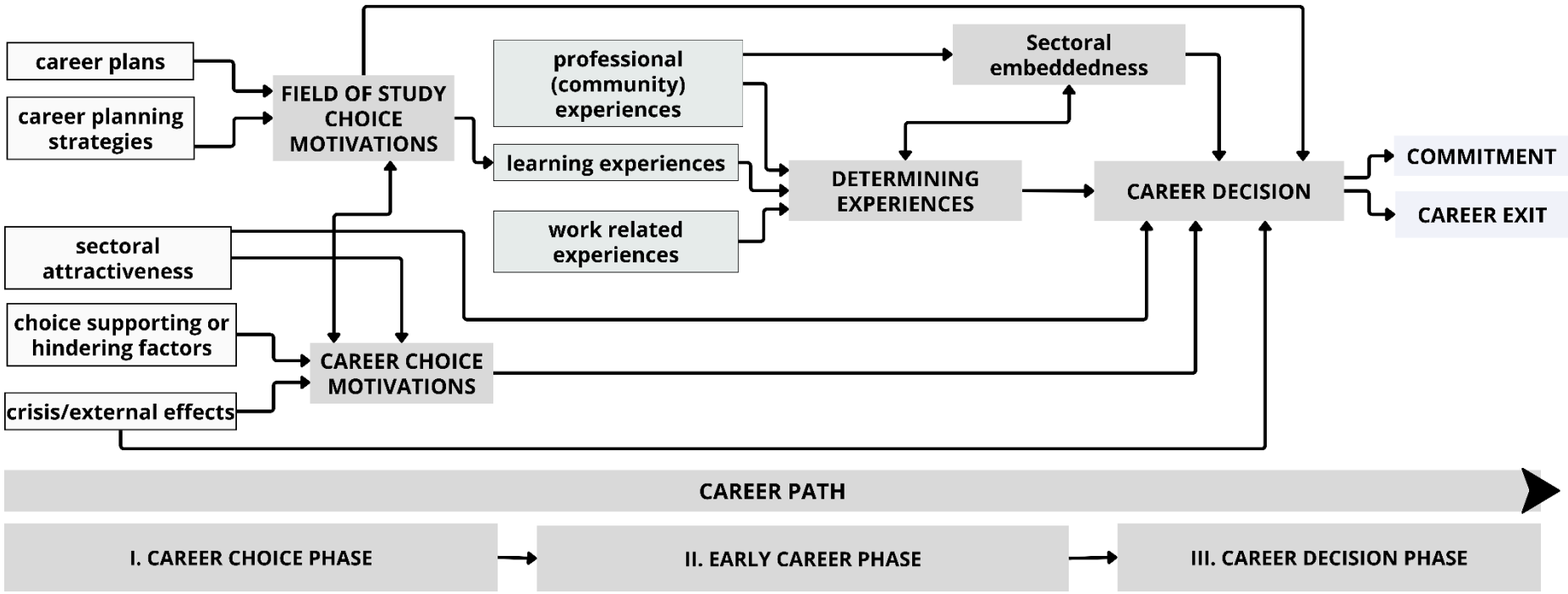
inspiring young professionals depends not only on systemic reforms but also on how the profession can be made livable, inclusive, and meaningfully adaptable for them.

This dissertation **reinterprets career development processes by incorporating experiential learning, mentoring, and professional communities into the theoretical framework of sectoral embeddedness.** At the same time, it offers practical insights into how an experience-based and value-driven ecosystem can be created–one that not only generates workplaces but also functions as a professional talent laboratory for the younger generation.

Mentoring programs, intentional inclusion of professional associations, and consistent, genuine communication of vision and value propositions may be key factors in shaping an industry that can not only survive but also thrive in a changing world. In this way, the dissertation contributes to the rethinking of educational, organizational, and career development processes, while also fostering an intergenerational dialogue that can support the sustainable renewal of tourism and hospitality in the long term.

The final message of the research is that an **experience-based approach is not merely a trend, but a tool:** it enables the profession to redefine its own vision of the future and to create spaces in which young people do not become lost, but instead find themselves.

Figure 16. Summary of Research Results



7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

First, the sample does not fully represent the entire population of tourism and hospitality students and early-career professionals in Hungary. Although students from multiple higher education institutions participated, the research did not aim to provide a detailed comparison of institutional specificities – such as the organization of internships, the level of academic support, or the functioning of alumni networks. These differences, however, may have influenced the ways and intensity with which respondents related to the sector.

Second, given the qualitative methodology, the inductive content analysis inevitably involved a degree of subjective interpretation. Moreover, the depth and richness of responses varied across individuals, meaning that not all data offered equally detailed analytical insights. As is characteristic of qualitative results, the findings are primarily interpretive in nature and should therefore be treated with caution; they are not intended to yield universally generalizable conclusions across all contexts.

Regarding the **action research,** it is essential to emphasize the researcher's active involvement as a key aspect of this methodological approach. In this sense, subjectivity should not be regarded as a flaw but rather as an essential feature: committed participation constitutes a key to both understanding and change, allowing for deeper and more authentic insights to emerge.

A **temporal limitation** of the study lies in the fact that data collection took place during specific periods, albeit at repeated intervals. As such, the prevailing economic and social circumstances – for instance, the long-term effects of COVID-19 or the current labor market situation of the tourism and hospitality sector – may have influenced participants' perceptions. Since the research was not designed as a longitudinal study, it cannot capture the long-term evolution of career paths or motivations, although the multi-wave data collection conducted between 2022 and 2025 partially mitigated this limitation.

Participation was voluntary, which may have introduced bias, as it can be assumed that primarily the more motivated and socially engaged students and young professionals chose to take part. In some cases, incentives offered in exchange for participation (e.g., bonus points, small gifts) may also have affected willingness to respond. Moreover, responses may at times reflect socially desirable or idealized elements – such as the overemphasis of career goals and motivations.

Another limitation is that the research primarily focuses on the experiences of Hungarian students and young professionals, and therefore does not in itself allow for systematic international comparison, even though reflections on foreign experiences appeared throughout the data. For future research, it would be valuable to include young people studying or working in the tourism and hospitality sectors of other countries, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions of sectoral commitment.

Finally, it is important to note that the experience-based approach necessarily relies on subjective interpretation: the same experience can have different effects on different individuals. Accordingly, the types of experiences and their impacts presented in this study should be regarded more as interpretive patterns than as universally generalizable rules.

7.2. Future research

The results of this dissertation identify several promising directions for further investigation into the career-related experiences and decisions of students and early-career professionals in the tourism and hospitality sector.

In the future, **longitudinal research designs** would be particularly valuable, tracking students' career trajectories over years or even decades. Such studies could reveal how key experiences–such as educational influences, community involvement, or international exposure–shape professional identity and sectoral commitment over time, and how career shocks may alter these pathways (Akkermans et al., 2018).

While preserving the richness of qualitative inquiry, it would also be worthwhile to incorporate **quantitative elements,** particularly in measuring different forms of commitment (affective, normative, calculative). Surveys and statistical analyses could provide more nuanced insights into how these dimensions are related to experiential learning, psychological factors, or career

planning strategies, thereby responding to the research agenda outlined in talent management studies (Kravariti et al., 2022).

Although this study included students from multiple higher education institutions**, cross-institutional comparisons** were beyond its scope. Future research should explore how institutional practices–such as internship models, alumni networks, or faculty mentoring–support students' professional embeddedness. Such perspectives align with broader calls for tourism workforce research that identifies contextual and structural differences across education systems (Baum et al., 2016). Additionally, regional comparisons (e.g., capital city, rural, lakeside, or cross-border contexts) could further refine our understanding of motivational patterns.

Mentoring experiences and connections to professional communities appear to significantly influence career pathways. Future research could examine the features of **different types of mentoring** programs–alumni, peer, or entrepreneurship-focused–and evaluate the impact of professional organizations' youth-oriented initiatives. These inquiries resonate with the mentoring literature on developing tomorrow's talent (Gannon and Maher, 2012). Particularly compelling is the study of "boundary spanner" mentors, who bring knowledge and networks from outside the sector, opening new pathways and bridging industries.

The rise of **portfolio careers among young people**, who deliberately plan careers across sectors and roles, also deserves closer attention. Exploring flexible, skills-based career trajectories could shed new light on career identity, alternative pathways, and cross-sector mobility. Relatedly, the dynamics of employer branding in tourism should be examined from the perspective of employees' willingness to join and remain with organizations (Ronda et al., 2018).

Digitalization has introduced new dimensions to career development. Future research may investigate how students use digital tools such as LinkedIn, TikTok, or AI platforms like ChatGPT for information, inspiration, and self-reflection. Similarly, digital self-assessment tools and career profiling apps warrant critical examination regarding their validity, biases, and reflective potential. These digital influences can also intersect with young people's brand relationships, echoing insights from consumer–brand relationship theory (Ercik and Kardaş, 2024).

Technological transformation is reshaping the tourism and hospitality workforce. With the increasing presence of artificial intelligence, research should explore which roles may become

automated and which will continue to rely on human interaction and emotional intelligence. This not only redefines skill development strategies but also necessitates a rethinking of occupational structures in the sector.

Ensuring a **pipeline for low-prestige jobs** is becoming increasingly urgent. Research shows that such positions are often unattractive not only to highly educated youth but also to disadvantaged groups, leading to reliance on migrant labor. This raises ethical and social challenges related to migration, fair employment, and education systems, while also linking to the potential of tourism as a force for reconciliation and social transformation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003).

Finally, **international comparisons** could open up new perspectives. Investigating the motivations, career decision-making processes, and community engagement of tourism students in other countries–particularly in the context of programs such as Erasmus or the Hungarian Pannónia Scholarship–could deepen our understanding of cultural differences and the role of education systems.

Future research directions can thus contribute both to a deeper theoretical understanding of career processes in tourism and hospitality and to the development of practical strategies for educational institutions, employers, and professional communities to engage, support, and retain the workforce of tomorrow.

Throughout this research, I had the opportunity to gain insight into the stories and lived experiences of many young professionals at the beginning of their careers. It reaffirmed my belief that tourism and hospitality is not only a field of beautiful and diverse professions, but a boundless world of opportunities – offering young people a vibrant community, a space to dream big, and a chance to shape a career that truly fits their personality and aspirations. This industry welcomes them with open arms – even if the path requires perseverance. Those who dare, win. Those who keep learning go far.

Some are still searching for the path, others have already stepped onto it, and there are those who are just now knocking at the door.

As a closing reflection to this dissertation, I chose a literary quote that captures this situation with subtle irony. In the *slightly adapted* words of Agatha Christie's Poirot:

“The ‘younger generation is knocking on the door.’ And ma foi! They are so busy knocking that they do not notice that the door is open.”

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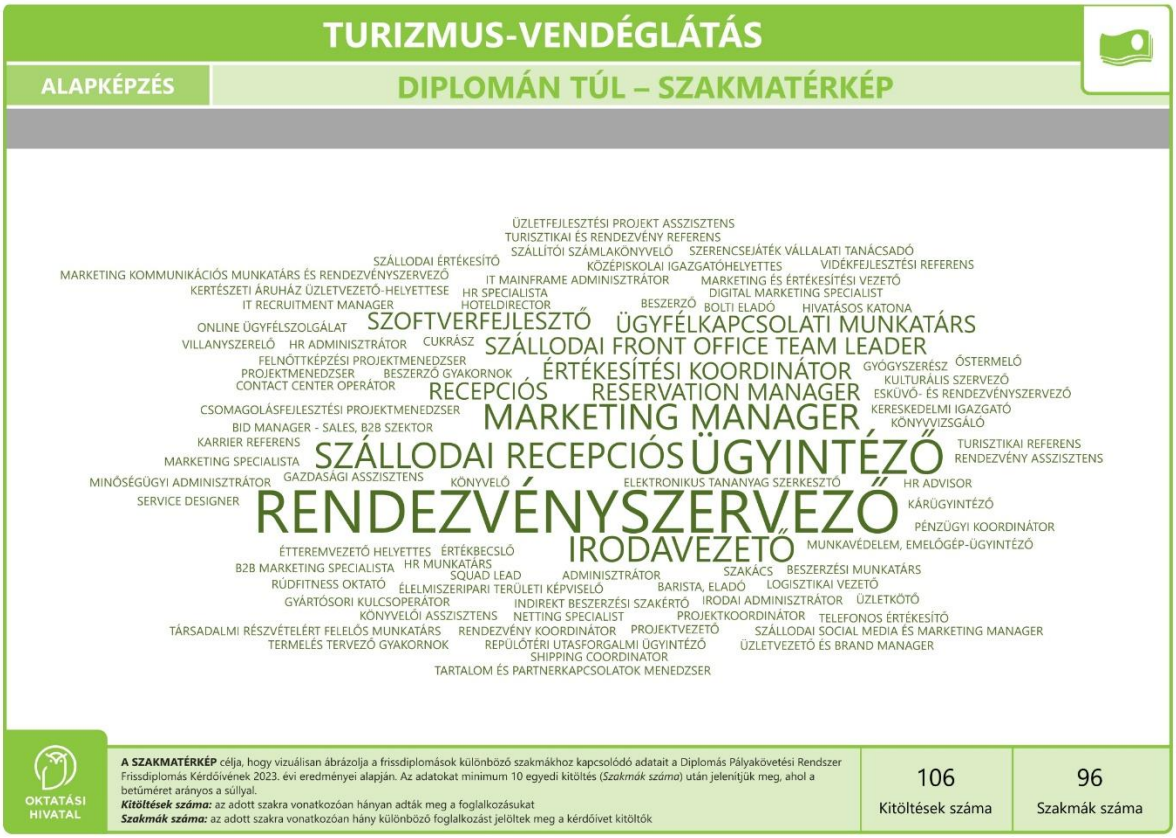
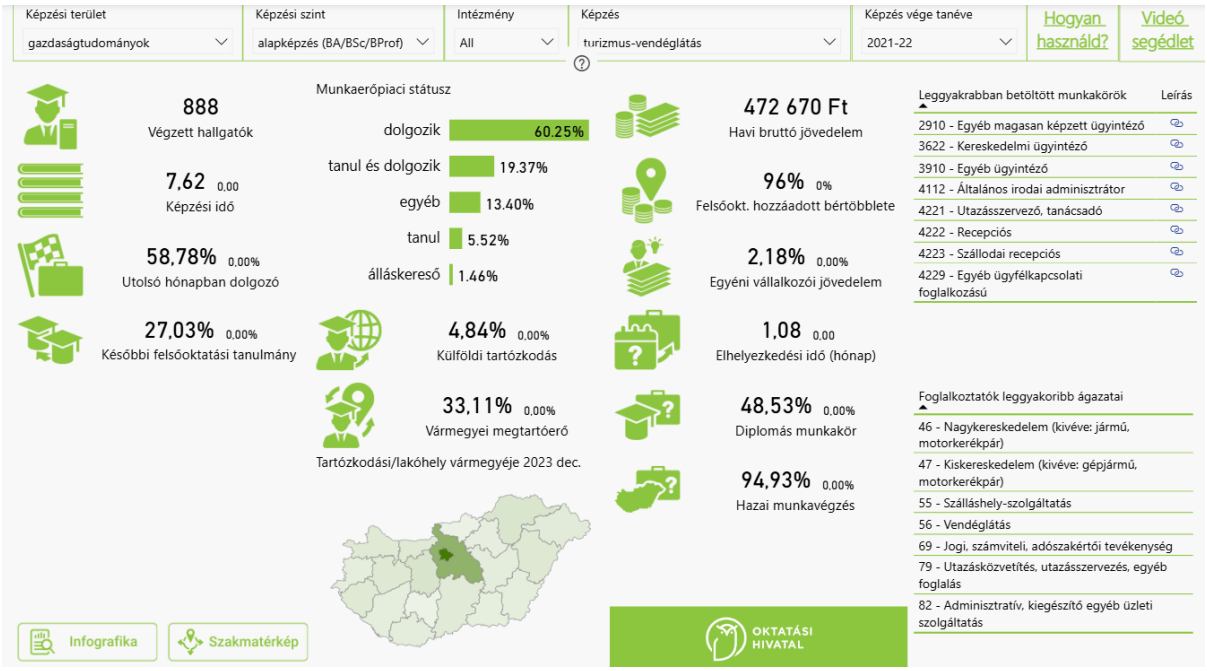
Appendix

Appendix 1. Career Map of Tourism and Hospitality Professions (Hungarian)



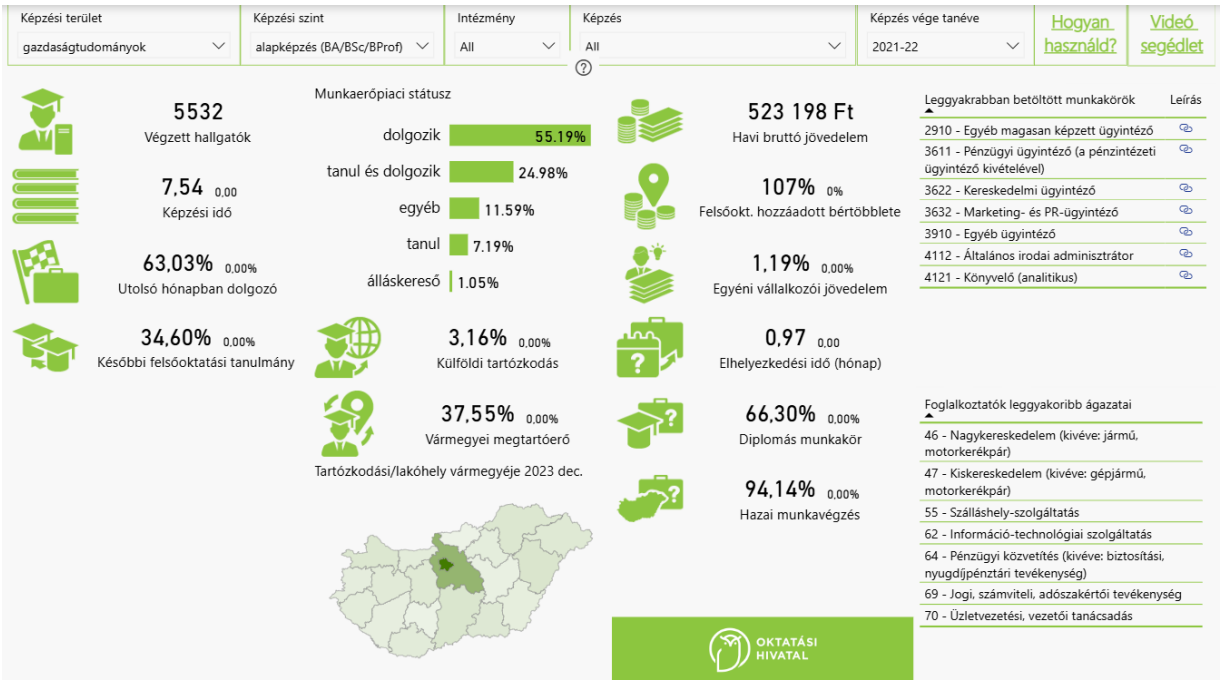
Source: Educational Authority (diplomantul.hu), 2025

Appendix 2. Labor Market Outcomes Graduates (BA/BSc) in Hungary (Hungarian)



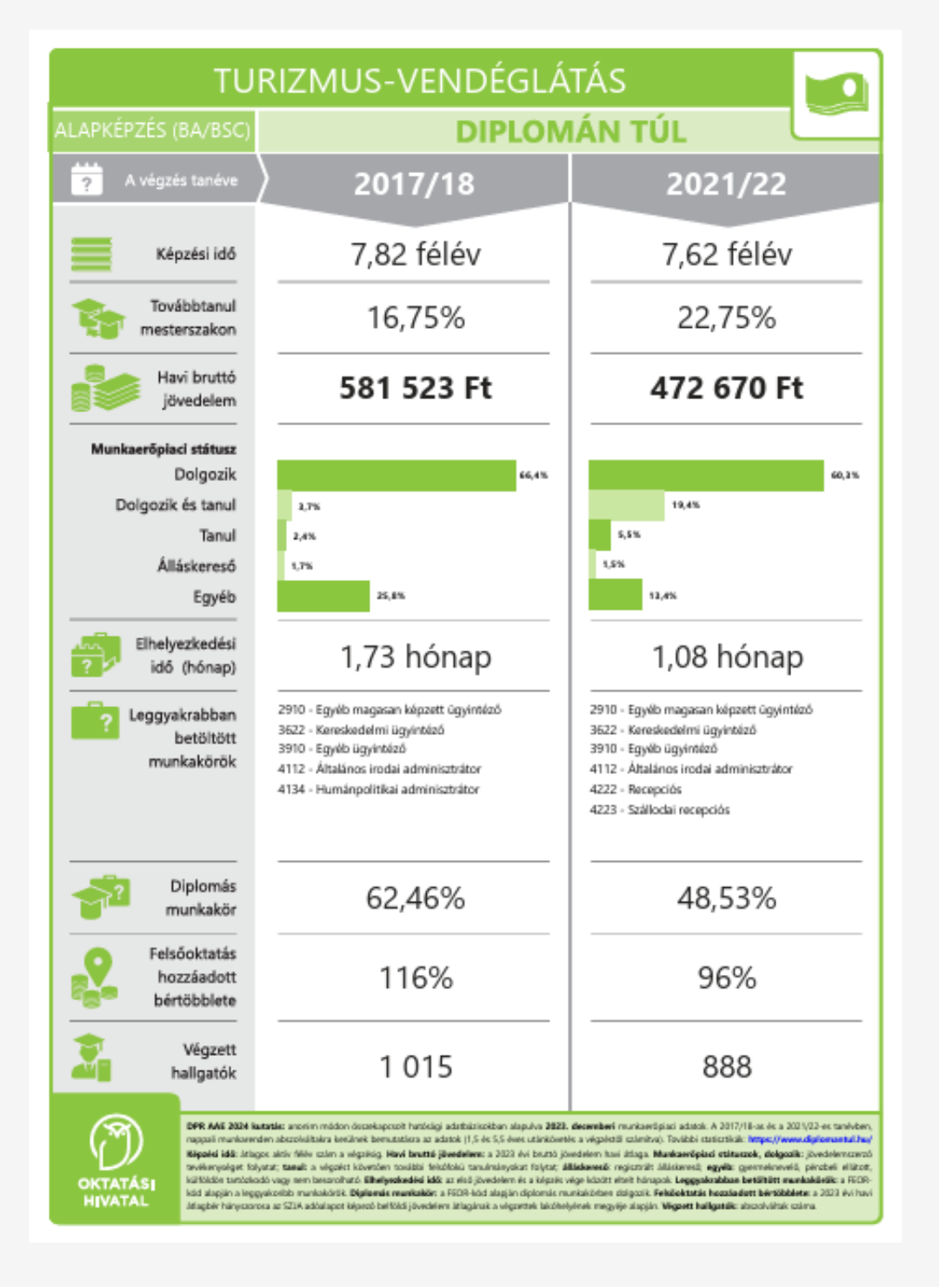
Source: Educational Authority (diplomantul.hu), 2025

Appendix 3. Labor Market Outcomes of Tourism and Hospitality Graduates (BA/BSc) in Hungary (Hungarian)



Source: Educational Authority (diplomantul.hu), 2025

Appendix 4. Labor Market Outcomes of Tourism and Hospitality Graduates (BA/BSc) in Hungary: Comparison of 2017/18 and 2021/22 (Hungarian)



Source: Educational Authority (diplomantul.hu), 2025

Appendix 5: Career Choice Motivations – Interview Questions

- What general perceptions do young people hold about the tourism and hospitality sector, and what advantages or disadvantages do entry-level employees identify regarding employment in this industry?
- What motivational factors influence graduates' intentions to pursue employment in tourism or hospitality?
- How do young people perceive the role of personality–profession fit in their career choice?
- What changes did the Covid-19 pandemic bring to students' career plans, and what new challenges or opportunities did they identify as a result?
- How do young professionals evaluate the role and quality of tourism and hospitality education?
- What recommendations do young people formulate to facilitate successful career entry in the tourism and hospitality sector?

Appendix 6: Career-Influencing Experiences – Interview Questions

Industry Attractiveness

- What attracted you to tourism and hospitality, and what advantages or disadvantages do you perceive in working in this industry?
- Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence your decision? What were your main motivations for choosing this career (e.g., salary, opportunities for development, travel, profession–personality fit)?

Formative Experiences

- What childhood experiences are connected to tourism or hospitality?
- What significant experiences did you gain during your studies, employment (e.g., internships), or professional community involvement (mentoring, participation in student organizations), including both positive and negative ones?

Role of Professional Communities (Embeddedness)

- How do you evaluate the role of professional communities in your career? To what extent do you feel that your personal and professional identity aligns with these communities, and how do you experience this process of embedding?

Factors Supporting or Hindering Commitment

- Do you envision a long-term career in tourism and hospitality? What factors influence this decision?

- Which factors have so far supported or hindered your commitment to the profession?
- How could young people be more effectively involved in shaping the future of tourism and hospitality? What methods could better support their career planning?

Appendix 7: Experiences Leading to Commitment or Career Change – Interview Questions

Reasons for Commitment

- What was the defining early-career or entry-level experience that made you decide to stay in tourism?
- Did you have any experiences during COVID-19 that reinforced your decision to remain in the profession?
- Have you had workplace or professional community experiences (e.g., mentoring, strong team, professional support) that deepened your commitment over the years?

Reasons for Career Change

- What factors and experiences contributed to your decision to leave the profession?
- Were there specific critical points or turning points that influenced this choice?
- What could have prevented your career change?

Glossary of Key Terms

Career Theories

- **Career Decision-Making:** The process by which individuals choose and re-choose professional paths, often influenced by motivations, experiences, and external factors.
- **Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory:** A developmental career theory emphasizing life roles and stages across the entire lifespan.
- **Career Construction Theory (Savickas):** A narrative approach focusing on how individuals construct meaning and identity through career-related experiences.
- **Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT):** Explains career choice and development through self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual influences.
- **Career Indecision Taxonomy (Kulcsár et al.):** Framework identifying types and causes of career indecision (e.g., lack of information, external conflicts).

Organizational Perspectives

- **Organizational Commitment:** A psychological attachment to the organization or sector, traditionally categorized as:

    - **Affective Commitment:** Emotional attachment and identification.
    - **Continuance Commitment:** Staying due to perceived costs of leaving.
    - **Normative Commitment:** Staying due to moral obligation or duty.
- **Job Embeddedness:** The extent to which individuals feel tied to their job and sector, determined by:
    - **Fit:** Congruence between personal values and workplace culture.
    - **Links:** Connections with colleagues and professional networks.
    - **Sacrifice:** Perceived costs of leaving the job or sector.
- **Sectoral Embeddedness:** Extension of organizational embeddedness to the industry level; describes how professionals are retained within an entire sector (tourism & hospitality).

Experience Design and Experiential Learning

- **Experience Design:** The structured planning of "touchpoints" to shape user (customer or employee) experiences, adapted here to career pathways.
- **Employee Experience:** The holistic perception of work-related experiences across the employee journey (recruitment, onboarding, learning, community).
- **Learning Experience (Kolb, Dewey):** A cyclical process of learning through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation.
- **Work-Integrated Learning (WIL):** Learning approach combining academic study with real-world professional practice.
- **Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger):** Groups where learning and professional identity are fostered through participation and shared practices.

Mentoring and Career Support

- **Mentoring Program:** A structured developmental relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee to support career growth.
- **Experiential Density in Mentoring:** The degree to which mentoring includes impactful, reflective, and emotionally engaging experiences.
- **Career Support Programs:** Initiatives such as mentoring, internships, career counseling, and workshops that help guide professional development.

Tourism and Hospitality Context

- **Tourism and Hospitality Sector (T&H):** A service-oriented industry encompassing travel, accommodation, food and beverage, events, and leisure services. Characterized by international diversity, emotional labor, seasonality, and high employee turnover. It is both labor-intensive and experience-driven, making human capital a central asset.
- **Sectoral Attractiveness:** The perceived appeal of tourism and hospitality careers is shaped by working conditions, prestige, flexibility, and career prospects.

- **Reputation and Image of the Sector:** Social perceptions of tourism and hospitality work (positive: international, diverse, socially meaningful; negative: low pay, instability, burnout).

Research Methodology

- **Qualitative Methods:** Methods used in this dissertation include focus group interviews, narrative interviews, and content analysis.
- **Action Research (AR):** A participatory, iterative research approach integrating diagnosis, intervention, and reflection to improve practice.
- **Action Research Cycle:** Phases of diagnosing, planning, acting, evaluating, and feeding back into the next cycle.
- **Thematic Coding:** Analytical process of identifying recurring themes, codes, and categories from qualitative data.

Key Concepts in Findings

- **Career Path:** The trajectory of an individual's professional life, including education, entry-level positions, early career decisions, and potential transitions. A career path is shaped by both formative experiences and external influences such as mentoring, workplace conditions, and sectoral opportunities.
- **Career Path Crossroads:** Critical decision points at which individuals decide whether to remain in or exit the tourism and hospitality sector, often following significant positive or negative experiences.
- **Young Professionals:** Individuals at the early stages of their career, typically university students, recent graduates, or employees with limited work experience. In this dissertation, the term refers to those navigating entry into the tourism and hospitality labor market, often balancing aspirations with sectoral realities.
- **Formative Experiences:** Experiences that significantly shape career choices, identity, and commitment.
- **Career Shocks (Akkermans et al., 2018):** Unexpected events that influence career paths, such as crises or structural changes.
- **Crisis Experiences:** Situations like the COVID-19 pandemic that reshaped career opportunities and sectoral perceptions.
- **Professional Identity Formation:** The ongoing process through which individuals define themselves in relation to their profession and sector.
- **Commitment Drivers:** Positive formative experiences, supportive mentors, and community belonging that reinforce sectoral loyalty.
- **Career Exit Drivers:** Negative first experiences, lack of recognition, financial insecurity, or toxic work environments that push individuals out.

Published Work of the Author

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