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How satisfying is real work? An analysis of student feedback on applied learning in a hospitality degree

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ABSTRACT

Using a case study approach, this study explores hospitality management students' applied culinary and restaurant studies experiences before and after the commercialisation of a training restaurant in a New Zealand school of hospitality. Student feedback is used to examine the impact of commercialisation, and provide an understanding of the benefits and potential problems, particularly how students react in an authentic hospitality environment. The study finds that the acquisition of practical, social, and life skills is highly valued by hospitality students, but commercialisation of a training restaurant can result in the loss of some training opportunities.

1. Introduction

It is common practice to offer management students (particularly hospitality management) practical training in environments similar to those they aspire to manage after graduation. Skills developed in these situations help students understand staff and consumer roles, and provide valuable insights into workplace dynamics and the expectations of supervisors and consumers. These outcomes clearly benefit consumers, businesses and the students themselves.

Using a case study approach, this study analyses and presents feedback from students on a three-year hospitality degree programme in New Zealand. The primary aim was to determine student satisfaction with their compulsory applied food and beverage modules in their first year of study. These modules aimed to help students connect classroom theory to real-world practice in an authentic working environment both as staff members and as supervisors. Over a 12-week semester, students learned operational skills such as basic culinary and service procedures, as well as supervisory skills such as planning, implementing and evaluating different modes of operation to accommodate changing customer demand.

The study's aims were achieved using two objectives: identify themes relating to student satisfaction with practical hospitality training, and determine any influence on student satisfaction levels caused by commercialising a training kitchen.

Students undertook 48 h of training and study over six weeks in the provider's commercial kitchen as chefs, and a further 48 h training as service (waiting) staff. These experiences aimed at developing their operational and personal skills by exposing them to a commercial kitchen and restaurant. Teachers encouraged students to apply theory learned in the classroom, providing opportunities for analysis, evaluation, planning, and team-work.

A point of interest in the case is the commercialisation of the institute's training restaurant in 2010, and the effect of this on student learning and satisfaction. Students completed a written in-class questionnaire evaluating various aspects of each module towards the end of each semester, as well as responding to an annual postal survey soliciting quantitative feedback on the modules

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they had studied that year. This study presents and analyses qualitative data from the in-class questionnaires, as well as their overall satisfaction from the annual postal survey, expressed as a percentage.

While the aim of this study is to analyse feedback on students' practical experiences, given the programme's management focus, this study also reveals the strengths and weaknesses of practical modules and the types of skills learned. This paper therefore not only reports student findings, but also provides for educators and practitioners, a valuable insight into how training providers can best integrate commercial imperatives and student learning opportunities. Consequently, the paper fills a gap in the literature by providing suggestions for enhancing student learning in a commercial training environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Curriculum design

The practical components of hospitality management courses are an important part of student development and education. While hospitality training has long been the domain of trade tertiary sector providers such as polytechnics, many universities and technical institutes now offer an array of hospitality-related qualifications such as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in hospitality management, gastronomy and culinary arts. In such programmes, although hospitality is the main vocational focus, it is also a context for exploring generic concepts, and so acts as a 'social lens' in the classroom (Lashley, Lynch & Morrison, 2007), offering opportunities to learn more than the practical skills specified in the curriculum, using hospitality as a contextual framework. Training restaurants and production kitchens therefore enhance students' learning experiences, and comprise a significant component of students' learning and skills acquisition.

Some scholars recommend designing curricula for hospitality management courses to acknowledge and integrate the needs of stakeholders. This necessitates identifying industry's requirements, emphasising the relationship between educators and practitioners, and realising the synergies available to develop graduates suited to hospitality industry careers (See Lashley, 2011). Students are the third major stakeholder in what Lam and Ching (2007) described as a 'triangular partnership'; hence this study examines their views of their learning experiences. Within this relationship, it is recognised that industry seeks skilled employees, and therefore focuses on the graduate employability, and students, to some extent do the same, showing a strong desire to reach senior management as soon as possible after graduation (Brien, 2015; Harkison, 2004). However, we argue that the ancient Socratic teacher-student relationship must underpin curriculum design, so while student and industry influences on curriculum are important, the academy ultimately has responsibility for learning, and the skills and knowledge to design appropriate curricula with an emphasis on theory and critical thinking and reflection (see Morrison & O'Mahony, 2003).

Hospitality management education began in the 1920s; prior to that, training was carried out in industry internships (Airey & Tribe, 2000). Since then, there has been considerable growth in hospitality courses worldwide, but as Raybould and Wilkins (2006) noted, little change to degree programmes, which generally aim at meeting industry's needs. This inevitably requires some practical understanding of industry, either through training in specific tasks, or through experiencing specific aspects of industry such as restaurant work. This applied focus of hospitality management education has served industry well by providing graduates with the abilities to undertake the duties required in a variety of hospitality operations. The 'commonality of interest among educators, industry and students in the currency of workplace skills' (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006, p. 177) makes the concept of having a practical component in a hospitality management degree therefore particularly relevant. Furthermore, as Harkison, Poulston, and Kim (2011) noted, through educators and industry working together, curricula can be adjusted and developed to meet industry's needs, thereby improving graduates' career prospects. In consideration of this applied focus, largely driven by industry, it is particularly important to ensure students are engaged with the practical aspects of their learning, and do not view these as peripheral or unnecessary.

2.2. Experiential learning

This applied component of a hospitality management degree (incorporating work experience) is often described as 'experiential' or 'active learning'. Active learning creates exposure to and involvement with industry, helping prepare students for work (Sivan, Leung, Woon, & Kember, 2000), and offering enhanced opportunities for skills acquisition.

Connolly and McGing (2006) suggest that whereas most hotel managers prefer practical to analytical skills, we argue that the development of interpersonal skills in a work setting is of equal value. Tas (1988) American (US) study [later replicated in the United Kingdom (UK) by Baum (1990) and in Greece by Christou and Eaton (2000)] emphasised the importance of generic interpersonal skills, noting benefits in the development of good customer and employee relationship skills, motivation, leadership skills and flexibility. Experiential learning therefore is not just concerned with the development of practical skills, but also with management development; indeed, practical experience has been identified as an important aspect of hospitality managers' learning (Li, Gray, Lockwood, & Buhalis, 2013; Wang & Tsai, 2014). However, the historic bias towards training and skills development has drawn criticism from some authors. Airey and Tribe (2000) considered that a more balanced curriculum including social sciences and research activities would produce a more reflective and critical graduate. The debate about the differing responsibilities of universities and technical institutes in terms of the provision of education rather than training is too extensive to visit here, but it is important to note that it continues. However, research generally indicates that a combination of experiential and theoretical development is synergistic and therefore beneficial (Lee & Dickson, 2010). In particular, Gruman, Barrows, and Reavley (2009) found that student learning is more effective when classroom and work-based learning are combined, which can be achieved by undertaking

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