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# Challenges in hospitality management education: Perspectives from the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on qualitative data gathered from educators based in the United Kingdom, this paper examines their perceptions of significant challenges facing contemporary hospitality management education. These include: engaging contemporary students, particularly through new technologies; the growing presence of international students; institutional constraints, resource pressures and the distinctiveness of hospitality management education; ongoing tensions between hospitality's intellectual development and its practice focus; and new course designs, delivery models and partnerships. The study also explores their views on how those are likely to evolve in the future. The findings suggest that many of the key challenges are not unique to the hospitality management area, but they also highlight many pressing concerns specific to this sector. Importantly, the findings help to identify how individuals and institutions are responding to particular challenges in higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

Global financial instability and policy shifts have led to dramatic changes in the funding and management of higher education (Ayikoru, Tribe, & Airey, 2009; Ball, 2012; Cheng, 2016; Dredge et al., 2013). The transformation of the international educational landscape has prompted growing questioning of how higher education (including research) operates in contemporary society more generally. These changes have also driven increasing critical debate on the current state and future prospects for hospitality management education (cf. Fullagar & Wilson, 2012; Lugosi, Lynch, & Morrison, 2009). However, the debate concerning contemporary hospitality management education has thus far been dominated by non-empirical discussion pieces. Whilst these have provided important reference points, they reflect the perspectives of specific authors (cf. Lashley, 2013, 2015; Wood, 2015). Empirical studies reflecting on the state of hospitality management education have provided descriptive overviews of the educational sector in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia (HEFCE, 1998; Jameson, Walmsley, & Ball, 2006; Robinson, Breakey, & Craig-Smith, 2010); or they have focused on specific issues such as the role of practical training facilities (Alexander, 2007; Alexander, Lynch, & Murray, 2009), the performance of hospitality in research assessment exercises (Litteljohn, 2004), and the state of publication in the hospitality field (Rivera & Upchurch, 2008). There is a gap in knowledge regarding academics' views of the state of hospitality management education, particularly in the UK, where the higher education sector has undergone significant changes in the past decade. This paper thus builds on, and contributes to, existing knowledge by examining, in further detail, the perspectives of UK university educators on the current state and future challenges for hospitality management education and, importantly, on how individuals and institutions are choosing to interpret and respond to some of those challenges.

The origin of this paper was an initiative from the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA) who were conducting research into the state of university-level learning and teaching in a wide range of subject disciplines in order to better understand the sector's needs. The HEA used the research to form a national strategy to support higher education pedagogy. This paper focuses on data related to hospitality management education, principally in the UK. However, the findings highlight themes and issues that emerge in other fields and disciplines, and they are also likely to chime with practitioners outside the UK (cf. Bulman, 2015). The findings of this paper can

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thus be used to develop more effective pedagogic practices to address challenges and ensure the sustainability of higher education provision within and beyond the hospitality field.

The paper begins with a short overview of the key literature, which has reflected on the past, present and future prospects for hospitality management education. The paper then introduces the methods before presenting and discussing seven key thematic areas emerging from the data: 1. engaging the contemporary student; 2. international students; 3. the impacts of emerging 'innovative' and 'efficient' course designs; 4. institutional constraints and the intensification of academic work; 5. the position of hospitality management within business schools and faculties; 6. the ongoing tensions between academia and practice, particularly as hospitality seeks to develop as an academic field of enquiry whilst maintaining its professional relevance; and 7. the evolution of teaching in hospitality, with particular reference to new models of delivery and partnerships. The paper concludes by reflecting further on the key challenges identified through the primary research and upon the implications for the sector and its stakeholders.

## 2. Perspectives on hospitality management education

The last two decades has seen an increasing sense of self-awareness and reflection regarding the current state and the future evolution of hospitality (Jameson et al., 2006; Jones, 2004; Lugosi, 2009; Slattery, 2002; Lynch, Germann Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011). Some have adopted an optimistic position on the intellectual development of the field, acknowledging the growing engagement with other disciplines and subject areas, which has enabled hospitality to open up new lines of enquiry and to export knowledge into other disciplines (Lashley, 2008; Lugosi et al., 2009; Morrison and O'Gorman, 2008). In 2002, Morrison and O'Mahony suggested that: 'some management may be challenged, inherited rituals questioned, and breakout from historical mindsets achieved to revitalise the future rather than simply replicate the past' (p. 196). Expanding this line of argument, some academics have argued that hospitality education should not wholly be defined by or reduced to serving the industry (Airey & Tribe, 2000; Lashley, 2013; Lugosi et al., 2009). These perspectives echoed previous recommendations to expand the scope of hospitality management education by integrating wider disciplinary knowledge, for example from food sciences and performing arts (HEFCE, 1998). Arguably, these can be seen as attempts to challenge perceptions that it is a vocational subject and to legitimatise its place in higher education by intellectualising the field. These views contrast with that put forward by Wang, Ayres and Huyton who state that: 'Education in current political thinking, particularly since the 1990s, is about equipping people for work. If education cannot supply job-ready people, then why would governments fund it and why would students choose it? Knowledge for knowledge's sake is an idealistic unaffordable luxury, and higher education must be relevant to the needs of employers' (2009:69).

Whilst employability remains a core driving principle in hospitality courses (cf. Jennings, Cater, Hales, Kensbock, & Hornby, 2015; Stierand & Zizka, 2015; Whitelaw & Wrathall, 2015), academics also recognise that higher education should help develop rounded reflective practitioners who can contribute to a range of societal and professional spheres (Dredge et al., 2012; Morgan, 2004; Morrison & O'Mahony, 2003). As Robinson, Kralj, Brenner and Lee's (2014) work suggests, this has driven the development of hospitality management teaching that seeks to create critical, reflective practitioners. This body of literature highlights that the challenge is to maintain credibility with different stakeholders who have potentially contrasting expectations of how hospitality education and research advances thinking and practice.

Other commentators have been more pessimistic, for example, pointing to the decline of funding for hospitality management in the UK higher education sector, especially in the delivery of practical training (Alexander, 2007; Alexander et al., 2009). The growing cost of providing the practical aspects of education has led to a withdrawal of investment. It could also be argued that the vocational focus of hospitality education has caused further frictions as universities seek to concentrate on higher-prestige, mainstream academic fields in positioning themselves in the global higher education market.

Much of the debate concerning the current state of hospitality education and the challenges regarding teaching and learning in the hospitality field has been based on literature and informed theoretical critique (cf. Lashley, 2013, 2015; Lugosi et al., 2009; Wood, 2015). As noted at the outset, empirical work on the current state of hospitality management education has concentrated on providing a descriptive overview of the landscape of provision rather than the specific challenges faced by academics and institutions in the field (cf. Breakey & Craig-Smith, 2007; Jameson et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2010). There is consequently a gap in knowledge regarding practitioners' viewpoints on some of the key challenges in the provision of hospitality management education. This paper thus attempts to address this gap by examining the experiences and perspectives of frontline academics involved in the management and delivery of hospitality in the UK higher education sector. This is significant for hospitality academics within and beyond the UK because it helps them to understand sectoral and institutional dimensions of constraints being encountered, how those are perceived and how individuals and organisations are responding to them. This in turn can help frontline practitioners and institutional managers re-evaluate their own strategic and tactical decisions regarding hospitality management education provision, which may involve divestment, investment, or the transformation of course content, focus and delivery. Examining disciplinary and institutional challenges in hospitality can also be instructive for tourism and events colleagues, supporting their desires to maintain their position in the (increasingly corporatized) international academic landscape.

## 3. Study methods

### 3.1. Scope and focus

The HEA were explicit in defining the overall scope and focus of the study. The research was conducted in the constructivist tradition (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) – seeking to co-create knowledge between researchers and participants regarding their perceptions of and feelings towards their professional experiences. The study considered six thematic areas: 1. current key resources used in teaching in our subject area; 2. learning and teaching challenges; 3. the future evolution of teaching in the subject area; 4. gaps in current teaching and learning resources; 5. gaps emerging as a result of changes in our sector; and 6. ways in which Professional Associations, Learned Societies and the HEA can support learning and teaching in our field. However, as with all inductive research, within these broad headings, the discussions explored emerging themes that were raised by participants. Moreover, due to word limitations, this paper does not discuss the findings concerning learning and teaching resources that were addressed under the HEA's thematic areas 1, 4, 5 or 6.

### 3.2. Sampling and data collection

Participants for the study were recruited via email through the

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