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Critical perspectives

## Enhancing hospitality student learning through the use of a business simulation

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines hotel management students' expectations of and satisfaction with the use of the Hotel Operations Tactics and Strategy (HOTS) simulation as a learning tool. Hospitality courses must be relevant to industry, and relevance is increasingly achieved through innovative learning methods. Computer-based simulations have been found to bridge the gap between didactically presented information and experiential learning. Two online surveys were conducted with a final sample of 104 paired responses analyzed using importance–performance analysis (IPA). Results showed that students have high expectations with regard to learning from the simulation and that IPA identifies areas on which educators should focus to develop student learning.

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### 1. Introduction

Many business schools have recognized the need to make courses relevant to students' future employment by incorporating industry skills and knowledge. Problem-solving skills in particular are essential for future leadership (Hermens & Clarke, 2009), and soft skills such as team building are also viewed as important to graduates' employment (Daud, Abidin, & Sapuan, 2011). Increasingly, business schools develop these skills through the design and implementation of innovative learning methods and pedagogy (Moratis, Hoff, & Reul, 2006) that are often integrated into capstone courses. A capstone course is frequently based on problem solving, where students are presented with a problem and must employ their knowledge, experience, and abilities to plan and research various solutions and apply a solution to the problem (Moore, 2006). Both the hospitality industry and hospitality higher education stress the importance of integrating knowing and doing, critical reflection and debate, individual and cooperative learning, critical inquiry and independent thinking (Otting, Zwaal, & Gijsselaers, 2009).

Innovative learning methods have moved away from traditional didactic model of instruction to a learner-centered model that places the learner in a more active role (Garris, Ahlers, & Driskell, 2002). This focus represents a shift away from the “learning by listening” model of instruction to one in which students learn by doing. Experiential learning theory has been described as having a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior (Kolb, 1984). Key issues for learning in the 21st century highlight the pedagogic shift from the mastery of content to mastery of process (O'Hara, 2007). Given the rapidly changing environment in which individuals work and live, education must become inquiry-focused and problem-embracing, with knowledge and learning derived from attempts to solve real

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problems (O'Hara, 2007). This emphasis underlines the importance of the development of hospitality students' problem-solving skills and process through the use of learning tools such as simulations.

Simulations, experiential learning, and case studies are recognized to develop key competencies for hotel management students (Ineson, Rhoden, & Alexieva, 2011). Especially the use of simulation applications has grown significantly over the last 20 years owing to computer-assisted learning, which enhances students' general problem-solving ability through the support provided by technology (Douglas, Miller, Kwansa, & Cummings, 2007; Mitchell, 2004). This study has evaluated student expectations of learning from a simulation and their satisfaction with their perceived learning in terms of the enhancement of their learning and skill development.

## 2. Simulations

Computer-based business simulations bridge the gap between didactic information and experiential learning, and assist in achieving the desired learning outcomes such as analysis and evaluation (Ineson, Jung, Hains, & Kim, 2013). Simulations are effective teaching methods that supplement lecture-based learning in the classroom as they enhance student engagement and make students active participants in the learning process (Singh, Mangalaraj, & Taneja, 2010). In addition, simulation technology is beneficial in meeting student needs, particularly given the evolving needs of the current generation of students (Drayer & Rascher, 2010).

A simulation is a specified sequence of "real-life" activities designed to convey lessons to the participants on the properties of a real-world situation (Lane, 1995). A simulation attempts to duplicate the features, appearance, and characteristics of a real system (Render, Stair, & Hanna, 2006) without presenting the risk of real failure. Computer-based business simulations have the characteristics of simulation games within a competitive environment, and present situations in which decisions are input into a simulation that produces management outcomes (Vos, & Brennan, 2010).

Although simulation applications have grown significantly in the last two decades, limited research has examined simulations within hospitality education. Importantly, much of this research is descriptive (e.g. Edelheim, & Ueda, 2007; Pederson, & Pederson, 1993), and includes, for example, discussion of a case study of a simulation (e.g. Andrew, Lambert, & Lambert, 1986; Thompson, & Verma, 2003) or a review of the use of simulations (e.g. Feinstein, & Parks, 2002). Empirical findings are few. However, a survey study revealed that the Hotel Operations Tactics and Strategy (HOTS) simulation provided a satisfying and hands-on learning experience for students both individually and within a group, thus serving as an effective alternative method of instruction to develop critical thinking ability (Martin, & McEvoy, 2003). Similarly, investigators found that students enjoyed using the simulation and while they considered it challenging to use, they considered it to be useful for the development of decision-making, general management, and problem-identification skills (Douglas et al., 2007).

More recently, research on hospitality students focused solely on prior knowledge using HOTS and its impact on self-efficacy and found students perception of prior knowledge had a positive effect (Ineson et al., 2013). Moreover, a study of students' perceptions of learning found that students felt a simulation to be an effective method for developing their decision-making abilities, offered an enhanced learning experience, and resulted in greater satisfaction with the course (Pratt, & Hahn, 2015). This limited research in hospitality education indicates that simulations and their impact on student learning warrant further investigation.

## 3. Satisfaction

Students' opinions and perceptions of their education are important to the development of hospitality education programs, as students evaluate the relevance of courses to their learning and future career. In addition, an understanding of student satisfaction is necessary to meet the increased demands of students (Elliott, & Shin, 2002). Student satisfaction has been defined as the emotional or cognitive response or reaction to the learning experience (Smimou, & Dahl, 2012) and is considered to be a complex and multifaceted construct (Elliott et al., 2002; Leckey, & Neill, 2001). Student satisfaction has been found to be related to student performance (Oja, 2011), students' perceived learning (Chaparro-Peláez, Iglesias-Pradas, Pascual-Miguel, & Hernández-García, 2013; Ocker, & Yaverbaum, 2001), and students' motivation (Elliott et al., 2002), and is a vital factor in student success in e-learning and online learning (Teo, & Wong, 2013). Prior research has clearly linked students' attitudes to student performance and satisfaction in a course and has shown a strong relationship between satisfaction and perceived learning (Chaparro-Peláez et al., 2013) and to successful academic outcomes.

Importance performance analysis (IPA) models customer satisfaction as a function of importance and performance of different product or service attributes (Martilla, & James, 1977; Sever, 2015). The IPA model identifies the service attributes that are important to customers and that have the strongest impact on customer satisfaction. IPA has been used to measure customer satisfaction across various industries, including finance (Charaf, & Rahmouni, 2014), health services (Goncalves, Pinto, Batista, Pereira, & Ambrosano, 2014), museums (Lin, 2009), tourism (Sever, 2015; Ziegler, Dearden, & Rollins, 2012) and hotels (Beldona, & Cobanoglu, 2007; Cvelbar, & Dwyer, 2013). While research has examined students' satisfaction in education (e.g. Malik, Hassan, & Iqbal, 2012; Nale, Rauch, Wathen, & Barr, 2000; O'Neill, & Palmer, 2004; Pike, & Larkin, 2010), these studies have focused on a range of issues with overall education and university life. None of these studies

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