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## Academic Papers

# Hospitality education in China: A student career-oriented perspective



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## ABSTRACT

Hospitality and tourism management programmes are one of the rapidly developing subject areas in Chinese universities. With the rapid growth of the hospitality industry, increasing numbers of high-ranking research-based universities are now offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in hospitality management. However, hospitality education development is a typical example of the imbalance between supply and demand of hospitality graduates from Chinese universities. Using a case from South China University of Technology, this paper first analyses current hospitality programmes in China, and then makes suggestions for solving current problems and addressing future development of hospitality education in China.

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## 1. Introduction

After China adopted the reform and opening-up policy in late 1978, the hospitality industry began to develop, and the rapid growth has paralleled that of China's economy. National Tourism Administration (2012) reported that the number of international visitors to China reached 27 million in 2011, which was an increase of nearly 4 per cent from 2010. As reported by *Xinhua English News* in 2010, Taleb Rifai, secretary general of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), predicted that China to become world's top tourist destination by (2015) ("China," 2010). The excellent prospects for tourism development in China indicate an increasing demand for qualified hospitality employees, and particularly from hospitality higher education programmes.

In the past thirty years, the increasing demand from the hospitality industry has led to the rapid development of hospitality higher education in China. Apart from general colleges and teaching universities, many traditional research-based top-tier universities are offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in hospitality management. Although rapid growth in hospitality education has developed pools of hospitality graduates every year, in an effort to meet the high demand from the expanding hospitality industry in China (Lam & Xiao, 2000), both educators and industry leaders are facing a "disequilibrium of supply and demand" problem (Wu, 2004, p. 22). They have recognised that increasing numbers of hospitality management graduates from high-ranking universities are available, but few graduates are dedicated to the industry and committed to their jobs (Song and Wang, 2008). Consequently, industry leaders in China have shown less interest in recruiting graduates from top research-focused universities (Zeng and Peng, 2008).

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In fact, both the academy and industry bear responsibility in the phenomenon of the supply and demand disequilibrium that Wu (2004) has explored. This study has found that new graduates and industry managers have different perceptions about career expectations. Students view their degrees as having higher value than do the industry managers, and students have a strong belief in the impact holding a degree will have on their future careers (Harkison, Poulston, & Kim, 2011). Industry manager, however, sometimes view graduates as “over qualified but under experienced” (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005, p. 211). Typically, the cause for this phenomenon in Chinese hospitality education can be traced to the fact that courses offerings at the state-owned universities are modelled on educational programmes formulated by the Ministry of Education. As a result, a significant gap exists between academic requirements and industry expectations.

A review of the literature reveals a well-established body of research examining the skills that graduates need for positions in hospitality management in countries other than China (Chung, 2000; Gilbert & Guerrier, 1997; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Tas, LaBrecque, & Clayton, 1996; and Umbriet, 1993). However, few studies have examined the essential skills that are expected by the hospitality industry in China. Zhang (2005) surveyed senior managers from several luxury hotels in Beijing, including the Shangri-La Hotel and the Kempinski Hotel Beijing, asking them, from industry point of view, what essential competencies the hospitality graduates should have. Survey results indicated that managers regard effective communication skills, positive attitude, ability to maintain professional and ethical standards in the work environment, leadership, and international scope to be essential traits of qualified hospitality professionals. Kong and Baum (2006) also received a similar response to their study on skills and work in the hospitality sector, for which they took hotel front office employees in China as the case. Their results indicated that the hospitality industry in China has a high demand for qualified personnel, but industry management is not confident about graduates from top-ranked universities. Managers reported that hospitality graduates from the elite universities have high expectations for a good salary, quick promotion, fewer working hours, and better working conditions (Zhang & Wu, 2004). Due to the existing design of the hospitality education curriculum, however, these students—despite their expectations—are not fully qualified to be promoted to management positions because they lack essential practical skills, and do not have a positive attitude toward service. As well, the managers note their perception that students from the top-ranked universities tend to be deficient in motivation and a strong moral code (Zhang & Wu, 2004; Yu, 2005).

In contrast, hospitality graduates have a negative view their future careers in the hospitality industry. Supporting this finding, Jiang and Tribe (2009) reported that the attitude of Chinese students toward tourism-related jobs is that of “short lived professions” (p. 4). Students reported that tourism jobs are unstable, have a lower professional reputation, and offer low pay for long work hours. In their 2007 study, Lu and Zhou (2007) found that most tourism and hospitality graduates from top-tier universities in China had no intention in working in the industry. Surveying 100 hospitality students at three top-tier research universities in Nanjing, determined that 33% of respondents rated hotel positions as their least desirable job. Similar research outcomes were reported even earlier by Song (2000), who discovered that in 2000, only 23% of hospitality graduates from a top-tier university in Guangzhou accepted a hotel job offer.

In response to this disconnection between academic preparation and practice, Harris and Zhao (2004) discuss ways to reduce the gap between industry and academia, noting the need for continuing discussions about curriculum, students, facilities, and faculty. Similarly, Zhang and Wu (2004) also express concern, stating that “one of the major challenges is the expectations gap between education and industry” (p. 427). Another researcher who focuses on the Chinese hospitality education system is Cheuk (2005), who pointedly articulates his conclusion that the current system makes little positive contribution to the development of hospitality and tourism professionals. He feels that the tourism discipline is not respected in the current educational system, and that faculty do not have the essential experience or industry connexions needed to effectively educate students. Further, he suggests that higher education institutes with tourism and hospitality programme in China should strengthen cooperation with the industry, in order to closely link production, learning, and research.

The hospitality industry, as one of the most internationalised industries in China, has continued in a cycle of development for many years, so that the knowledge expectations for hospitality graduates have also continued to increase. In response, hospitality educators have recently begun to explore alternative ways to achieve better hospitality education in China, through evaluation of current programmes and through a process of intensive curriculum review (Payne, 1998; Westlake & Cooper, 1998). Zhang and Wu (2004) not only emphasise the need to evaluate the current curriculum, but urge the development of a market-oriented curriculum for China’s tourism and hospitality educational system. They are direct in their statement that the “current state of tourism education is not meeting the industry’s expectation. Industry executives and managers are not satisfied with graduate performance.... The current curriculum is outdated; it needs to be updated in line with industry expectations” (p. 428).

With such definitive recognition of the problems of China’s hospitality educational system, it is reasonable to conclude that the provision for hospitality education in China does not fully meet the current needs of the industry. If the gap between industry and academia remains the same, and if there are no changes to the existing curriculum, in the near future the hospitality industry will face even more critical issues in recruiting qualified human resources. This paper will first analyse the current situation in China’s hospitality education system. From those understandings, our task is to develop suggestions for future development of the Chinese hospitality education system. To do this, we will use the distinctive case of the specially designed Shangri-La Programme at South China University of Technology (hereafter, SCUT).

## 2. Current hospitality education in China: development and problems

Hospitality education was established at university level shortly after China’s opening-up policy in 1978 and it has developed along with the rapid growth of China’s tourism industry. The first diploma-issuing college specialised in

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