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Students' perceptions of quality and satisfaction with virtual field trips of hotels

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines hotel management students' perceptions of the quality aspects of a Virtual Field Trip (VFT) technology based learning and teaching tool, and its effect on their satisfaction. With the help of an online VFT tool, students were familiarized with the theoretical concepts of hotel operations, and then exposed to the insights of the actual operations of two hotels. To assess satisfaction, 182 undergraduate students in a large public university in Australia responded to a self-administered questionnaire. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, principle component factor analysis and multiple regression techniques. The results suggest that there are three factors of quality promoting students' satisfaction, however, the factor of 'system quality' was found to be the most important predictor for satisfaction when using the technology based learning and teaching tool. Further analysis revealed that international students' satisfaction with the factor of 'content quality' was higher than domestic students.

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1. Introduction

The delivery of quality education and assurance of students' satisfaction with learning experiences has become an important factor among educators (Kember & Ginns, 2012). Researchers argue that satisfied students are more likely to engage in further education and spread positive word of mouth (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010). Monitoring students' satisfaction and acting on their feedback can promote innovative teaching and learning practice (Arbaugh, 2014; Rienties, Li, & Marsh, 2015). Moreover, education research related to students learning experience offers on opportunity to promote a kind of teaching and research nexus that can also improve educators understanding of the learning and teaching phenomena (Baldwin, 2005). For instance, the use of innovative technology based teaching tools in specific courses can promote students reasoning skills and advancing learning through continuous improvements and filling the learning gaps (Winberg & Hedman, 2008).

Busby and Gibson (2010) and other researchers (e.g. Alexander, 2007; Dutton & Farbrother, 2005) point out that in hospitality education particularly the existence of both theoretical and applied aspects is vital for improving students' learning experiences and maximizing their satisfaction. This is also evident from the hospitality industry perspective, where senior managers prioritize job readiness as the key ingredient for graduates joining the hospitality industry (Phelan & Mills, 2010; Tews, Stafford, & Tracey, 2011; Wang, Ayres, & Huyton, 2009). The success of hospitality businesses is dependent upon how well its future managers are exposed to real life functioning and operations. Researchers argue that missing the applied aspects in hospitality curricula not only ill prepares graduates but can also result in students' dissatisfaction and may affect their future career (Busby & Gibson, 2010; Jenkins & Walker, 1994).

The rapid growth and expansion of the global tourism and hospitality industry has fueled the demand for hotel management degree programs all over the world. However, due to the high costs of applying practical components and lack of government funding, educational institutions are forced to be cost effective when delivering hospitality education, which has led to large class sizes (Alexander, 2007; Dutton & Farbrother, 2005). As a result, the presence of practical aspects, such as on campus training laboratories, work integrated experience and inclusion of physical field trips in curriculums, is in decline (Craig-Smith & Ruhanen, 2006).

To overcome the problem of financial, logistical and time constraints, students may alternatively be exposed to the real work environment through virtual field trips (VFT). These have become popular learning and teaching tools among schools and tertiary institutions (e.g., teaching of geosciences, history and engineering),

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and to some extent started to appear in hospitality and tourism education. A team of hospitality academics and practitioners from an Australian university developed a VFT website and used it in teaching undergraduate hotel management students. The VFT website included interviews with key senior managers of hotels. It also displayed food and beverage operations (e.g., design and layout, still images, videos and reflection of management practices). The course content and the features of the VFT were carefully aligned and all the assessment tasks were designed to promote authentic learning. Moreover, student-centered learning was also promoted as students searched for new knowledge through the VFT, facilitating their own understanding in terms of what they learnt, when they learnt and how they learnt (Hannafin, Hall, & Hill, 1994). In view of that, this study attempts to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the role of the hotels VFT in strengthening students' satisfaction levels when embedded in a food and beverage management course, a core within the Bachelor of Hotel Management degree. More specifically, the following three objectives of this study are identified:

1. Examine how many dimensions of quality exist in the VFT of hotels as applied to food and beverage management courses.
2. Recognize which dimension of the VFT is most important in affecting students' satisfaction as applied to food and beverage management courses.

Due to a large number of international students seeking education in universities in Australia and making significant contribution towards universities funding, it makes them a valuable stakeholder. Hence, it is also important to examine if there are any difference between domestic and international students' views.

3. Assess if domestic and international students perceptions differ on quality dimensions and satisfaction of VFT of hotels as applied to food and beverage management courses.

2. Literature review

2.1. Role of technology in education

In the twenty first century we are experiencing an increased number of students entering into university education, availability of advanced technology at more affordable prices and faster internet connections, and use of varied delivery modes of education (i.e., face to face, blended and on-line learning) (Sandars, Patel, Goh, Kokatailo, & Lafferty, 2015). Even though it is tempting to embrace the latest technology in teaching hospitality management, the designer of education programs needs to ensure that the essence of the context is not over-powered by the technology. In other words, the use of technology must have specific purposes such as exposing students to the real workings of hotels to provide authentic learning experiences, promote accessibility of information in a flexible manner, and with improved learning outcomes (Wong, Greenhalgh, & Pawson, 2010).

While there is some evidence of technology and education related research, considerable work is needed to better understand the effects of technology on students deep learning rather than surface learning (Wong et al., 2010). The ultimate goal of technology assisted education is to prepare the future workforce that can effectively solve business problems in a more innovative manner. Indeed, there are several educational theories that can help develop and design enriched learning through an effective blend of technology, and learning and teaching activities. Next a brief discussion of the three key education technology theories is presented.

First, situated cognition theory suggests that effective learning occurs when presented in an appropriate context reflecting the real world and the learner is motivated to take their own responsibility to learn. Certainly, technology can help emulate the real world in the teaching environment (Durning & Artino, 2011). Second, distributive cognition theory suggests that learners exposed to a new situation are asked to solve a problem by applying their existing knowledge and skills. This requires a series of actions such as analysis, comprehension, communication, collaboration, problem solving and making decisions (Honey, Mandinach, & McMillan, 2003). Third, normative theory highlights the significance of education facilitators and the learner's persistent ability to reflect on learning experiences over time to master the intended outcome of learning (Phenix, 1963). Indeed, the use of e-portfolio and discussion boards adequately supports this theory.

While the integration of technology is providing humans better control over their life, similarly in the education sphere there is potential to provide university students with authentic, real life experiences and instil high level of competencies. Thus, the above three theories outlined can furnish an environment for effective learning.

2.2. Hospitality education and international students

Due to strong emphasis on practical knowledge and skills in hospitality education, the reality of context is extremely important (Busby & Gibson, 2010). Applied components, such as work integrated learning experience and field visits should be an integral part of hospitality courses (Busby & Gibson, 2010). However, declining practical facilities, as a result of economic pressures, make it harder to retain these components (King & Craig-Smith, 2010).

Particularly, in Australia over the past decade the government funding to universities has been declining and to cover the shortfall universities aggressively market to international students (McPhee, 2014). As a result, a large number of international students have been seeking education in Australia and contributing to university income (Ruby, 2009). Although international student numbers are increasing and university fees are rising, the aspects of industry experience, work integrated learning and the presence of practical laboratory work from the higher education curriculum, specifically in the tourism and hospitality field, has been eliminated to reduce costs. In addition, the increase in class sizes and tighter timetabling makes it more challenging to have field visits to hotels and restaurants as part of learning activities, which further prevents students from gaining valuable insight into live hotel food and beverage operations. However, more recently employability of domestic and international students has reappeared on the Australian government's agenda and universities are encouraged to take positive measures to develop the employability skills of all students, so that they can effectively compete for relevant hospitality management positions in Australia and international job markets (Australian Government, 2015).

It is evident from the research that particularly international students in Australia struggle to secure worthwhile work experience in their chosen discipline. This may be due to cultural differences, poor communication skills and lack of experience and personal contacts (Blackmore, Gribble, & Raimi, 2015), which means they miss out in obtaining valuable initial work experience, and face further difficulty in securing suitable jobs upon graduation (AEI, 2012; Bennet, 2011). Therefore, educators need to build real work practices into the curriculum. This calls for innovative ways of presenting practical components in hospitality education. A VFT offers convenience and active approach which exposes students to real-world learning experiences, enables a richer and more authentic understanding to build upon theoretical knowledge

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