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The conflict between industry hosts and master's degree students' expectations on students entering the hospitality industry

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This paper reports on a qualitative study that sought to determine Australian industry hosts' expectations and perceptions of hotel management master's degree students on their placement in the industry, and the expectations of students when entering industry placement. The empirical dataset for this qualitative study was collected through student and industry focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews with master's students and managers of hotels in Sydney, Australia. The technique used for analysing the data was progressive comparative analysis, after which a constant comparative methodology was applied. The conclusions outline common themes and issues identified by students and their hosts and highlight a need for educators to better prepare both students and hosts.

Keywords: work integrated learning, industry placements, master's programmes, hospitality, education, hotel

Introduction

Background/Context

Hospitality education focuses on preparing students for management positions in hospitality (Barrows and Bosselman 2000) and is a field of multi-disciplinary study incorporating perspectives of many disciplines; especially those found in the social sciences and in business. Today hospitality education is part of the wider tourism industry, drawing large numbers of domestic and international people into the study of tourism, hospitality and hotel management, and generally committed to professionalising the industry of which it is a part.

While there are literally hundreds of hospitality programmes available today, it is only for the last three decades that hospitality education has been provided at university level. Mostly this has been due to tremendous growth in the Australian hospitality sector since the boom in the 1980s. The need for qualified managers mushroomed during this time and the industry could not produce nearly enough trained managers to serve its own needs (Barrows and Bosselman 2000).

One of the unique characteristics of hospitality management education is its professional orientation. Programmes develop and capitalise upon associations with professionals in the hospitality industry as a means of enhancing student learning and this unique characteristic has a major impact on curriculum design. Many in the industry are currently debating the issue of how best to balance the demands of the hospitality industry for knowledge and skill to run a business versus the critical theoretical and analysis push by academics.

In making a decision to undertake a master's programme in hospitality, students are motivated by a combination of factors of varying importance. It has been identified that for international students considerations include destination, language, affordability, lifestyle, programme, institution and entry requirements. Mostly, however the core motivation prompting study overseas was the prospect of improved career opportunities and future promotion to management positions (Davidson and King 2012). Similarly, Davidson and Tideswell (1998) found that both international and domestic students in Australia identified employment related factors as the most critical factors determining the choice of programme.

Australian graduates generally do well with respect to overall employment outcomes but their performance in the workplace has come under significant scrutiny in recent years with some industries complaining that many graduates lack the necessary practical skills to perform in the early years of transition into employment (Pensiero and McIlveen 2006). Questions have been raised on how well degrees in hospitality prepare students for the work environment (Nolan et al. 2010) and there are some suggestions that graduates are 'overqualified, but under experienced' (Raybould and Wikins 2005, 213). Nolan et al. (2010) articulate that hospitality and tourism management education aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the hospitality industry, yet the industry stakeholders are expressing concern on the fit between the education provided and the needs as expressed by industry. Part of the problem is attributed to the education providers who are accused of poor curriculum design (Raybould and Wilkins 2005).

Anecdotal suggestions are that employers have been resistant to providing employment opportunities to master's students whom they view as lacking practical experience and local knowledge (in the case of international students), while these same students come looking for positions with high expectations that their master's degrees will give them better employment opportunities.

It is against this background that a further investigation was considered worthy to determine what expectations and perceptions exist of hotel management master's students by their hosts, as well as the expectations of those students when entering industry placement.

Literature review

The tertiary sector plays an essential role in supporting and enhancing appropriately skilled and developed human capital in order to assist overcoming the challenges faced by the industry as a whole. As Nolan et al. (2010) state: hospitality and tourism management education aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the hospitality industry, yet industry stakeholders are expressing concern about the fit between the education provided and the needs of the industry. Part of the perceived problem is suggested to be due to poor curriculum design by education providers (Raybould and Wilkins 2005) who focus on building skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal skills, but pay little attention to the skills needed by graduates to work in the industry. Although these skills are important, many have commented that they are only of use later in the graduates' career (Nolan et al. 2010). Skills needed to work at the operational level or entry management level have generally been found to be lacking in hospitality graduates.

It would seem that a formal qualification, as well as the aforementioned skill sets, is essential to the successful entry of any students into the industry. 'The employability of graduating students can be viewed both from the perspective of the employer and of the student. Both groups expect certain skills, attributes, knowledge and understandings to have resulted from the education and training that universities or training colleges provide' (Junek et al. 2009, 121). The most rewarding experience graduates can receive when undertaking internships, work placements or work experience within the industry, is one which encourages the desirable attitudes and values needed to obtain the level of knowledge and skills expected of industry, and gaining of the practical skills and experience that industry finds most advantageous in the early stages of a student's employment.

Experiential learning literature underpins the importance of professional placements in a graduate student's career progression. Employment is an excellent opportunity for the student to develop knowledge and skills and for the employer to assess suitability for long-term future positions. Industry employment allows students to develop their professional skills, define their career objectives, and learn about the different organisations and opportunities available to them. Industry placements in the curriculum bring together the related traditions of practice and research: the first is the tradition of vocational learning and the second the more theoretical work advocating experiential learning. In higher education, work placements offer students the unique opportunity to combine professional experience with their university qualifications. More recently, the terms work-based learning and work-related learning have become well established and understood simply as learning that takes place in the workplace; a placement undertaken by a student as part of their programme of study is one type of work-based learning (Procter 2010).

Industry training or internship forms an important part of many undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes and exemplifies commitment to the scientist-practitioner model. As such, it provides recognition that academic learning needs to be supplemented with applied learning. Although postgraduate students in many cases have identified their vocational preference, work placement provides students with a range of opportunities to explore occupations and their own suitability for their chosen profession (Carless and Prodan 2003).

Business schools that prepare future managers in different disciplines are responsible for closing the gap between skills acquired by its graduates and the skills required by the global markets. Schools offering internship programmes also benefit through increased cooperation between themselves and the businesses participating in the programme. Further, the opportunity exists to augment the curriculum with the practical experience gained by student interns (Ebied 2004).

It has been noted that typical hospitality education provides graduates with a good breadth of knowledge, but not all of the skills required to operate effectively in industry (Johns and McKechnie 1995). Key findings of the *Employer satisfaction with graduate skills* report by DETYA (2000) were that industry most valued the following areas in business graduates: academic achievement in a suitable discipline, time management skills, written business communication skills, oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, team working skills, problem solving skills and comprehension of business processes. However, Walsh and Taylor (2007) state that there is often variance relating to skills requirements across organisations but employment and transferable skills are consistently acknowledged as being crucial (Scott and Revis 2008). Additionally, as Harkison et al. (2011) comment, there is a distinct dichotomy in an industry that appears to place little value on hospitality degrees, and students who value the degree, and associate its completion with more earning capacity and an acceleration in their career prospects.

A challenge faced by many graduates is management expectation. Managers expect new graduates to be equipped with a certain level of operational experience so they can immediately perform in their new roles. This is in conflict with graduate skills, which are largely academic, and graduates may not possess the required operational skills to be able to do their job (Raybould and Wilkins 2005). Managers may fail to see the higher order conceptual and analytical abilities graduates possess from their academic study, and may not implement appropriate strategies to convert such learned themes in a practical sense, into operations.

Success is dictated by industry, and it is the expectations of industry that need to be fulfilled for success to be truly recognised. In order to do this hotel companies' expectations must first be determined. Research in this area suggests that industry values experienced employees over those with a degree, which is in contrast with the general expectation that degrees offer graduates an advantage in their chosen area of work (Jameson and Holden 2000). Although the industry is reliant on good employees, it is not safe to assume that qualified employees are the best recruits, and data on the profiles of senior managers suggest that age, work experience

and gender are also significant influences on career prospects (cited in Harkison et al. 2010). Graduates often perceive that opportunities to use their learned course knowledge are limited, and as a result their academic skills are not being valued in the workplace. This is attributable to them having to gain specific operational knowledge and practical workplace skills to perform in their new role rather than utilising the knowledge gained during their studies (Raybould and Wilkins 2005).

It is the intention of this research to determine industry expectations of hotel management students when they enter their placement in the industry and what graduates expect from their industry placement. Previous research has indicated that students have numerous expectations of their professional life after graduation and on how their work environment and work life will be. Students expect that they will soon achieve a management position but most managers see graduates as inexperienced for such a role and recommend they seek to gain operational skills at the beginning of their work careers (Harkison, Poulston and Kim 2011). Students also expect to work in an environment where employees are understanding and supportive of each other and where people are committed to their jobs, and where the physical surroundings create a good working environment (Waryszak 1999). However, it has been found that the experiences of students at work generally do not meet their expectations. After undergoing a placement, students have been found to be more pessimistic about the industry than those who had not yet gone on a placement (Waryszak 1999). Some students were reportedly hostile about their experiences while some felt that they had been unprepared for conditions in the workplace Frequently, students expressed frustration and disappointment with their experiences during their placements and questioned their significance (Nolan et al. 2010).

The hospitality industry has a reputation for low pay, having too many repetitive tasks, low status in the general community, and little job security (Weaver 2009). However there is evidence that suggests that a high percentage of entrants to the industry do so not with the aim of accumulating money but for personal reasons such as travel opportunities and general job enjoyment prospects (Weaver 2009).

Employers have very definite views on the skills they require of graduates. In one study by Raybould and Wilkins (2005), employers were asked to rank skills in order of importance and the top five skills identified were:
• Dealing effectively with customers' problems
• Working in an ethical and professional manner
• The ability to work effectively and calmly during crisis situations
• The ability to use empathy when dealing with customers and other employees
• The use of listening skills.
• A similar study by Nolan et al. (2010) identified the top five skills as:
• Good customer and client skills
• Teamwork skills
• Working in a professional and ethical manner
• Controlling costs in line with forecast and budgets
• Working well under pressure.
Other skills that have been identified are cultural awareness, flexibility, reliance, financial management competency,

computer skills, language skills, open mindedness, teamwork skills (Nolan et al. 2010, Velo and Mittaz 2006). However, it is generic and transferable skills that are most sought after in the industry, and these fall into the categories of communication, problem solving, information management, teamwork and leadership, self-management, conceptual and analytical skills, adaptability and learning, and interpersonal skills (Raybould and Wilkins 2005).

Project design

By far the most important aspect in the choice of methodology for this research was that it would be useful, and that the activities have a clear practical value from which the researchers could learn and benefit. Researchers were motivated by their general interest in hospitality industry graduates and therefore a methodology grounded in the pragmatic paradigm was adopted. It was further decided that the qualitative research approach would be most suitable as the nature of the study was based on sensory aspects such as how people feel, their reactions, perceptions and understanding (Veal 2006).

The research undertaken for this study used a combination of secondary and primary data collection. Secondary data collection consists of a thorough search of the literature to gain a clear picture on expectations of students entering the hospitality industry, and industry when they accept a student for work placement. Primary data were collected via an in-class focus group activity with 18 students who were about to go on placement. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 12 students who had already received industry placements. All students were aged between 20 and 25, all had specifically chosen to study hotel management, and the group was a mix of nationalities including Australian, Canadian, Russian, Chinese, Nepalese, Indian, Pakistani, and Vietnamese. A separate focus group was organised for hotel managers who had currently or previously agreed to be hosts for the students involved in the study and semi-structured interviews were conducted with these hotel managers. Six hotel managers participated in the focus group and all six were interviewed. All hotel managers were in a senior position (heads of department or general manager) and came from International Hotel groups.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted in an open manner and encouraged honest opinions and the relating of personal experiences. Both the focus group and interview data were analysed via a thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes. Specifically, a comparative methodology was applied (Blaikie 2000, Hayes and Fitzgerald 2006), a methodological technique derived from grounded theory whereby the information that has been gathered is coded into emerging themes (Glasser 1999, Glasser and Strauss 1967, Grbich 1999). The data was progressively revised until it was apparent that no new themes were emerging and the themes were then categorised to form patterns of meaning. Throughout the study the researchers maintained a research journal to facilitate the development of ideas and reflections. To limit the impact of researcher bias, observations were compared with the participants' responses in discussions with the career development managers of the school, and the academic team responsible for teaching in the Master of Hotel management degree.

Project significance

Knowledge gained through this research will assist both academics and career counsellors to better prepare students before they enter industry placement. A better understanding of student perceptions will facilitate a better understanding by both the academic institution for which the researchers work and institutions with similar programmes, and assist and contribute to future curriculum development. The views of the industry is helpful for both curriculum design, student preparation for industry placement, as well as building schools' relationships with its industry partners.

Results and discussion

Focus groups and interviews with students and managers conducted for this study uncovered a number of themes which are presented and discussed below.

Student expectations

Analysis of student interviews, the study journal and the constant comparison technique identified several expectations such as: *To enhance skills and hospitality experience; To be trained and developed and improved; To be treated with respect and to experience a good working environment; To be seen as future employees; To learn leadership skills; To see professionals at work.*

Students generally felt that industry placement was an opportunity to learn the hotel business, and advance both personally and professionally. Discussions with students were predominantly about an opportunity to learn from the experience, to be assisted in this learning by managers, and to be taken seriously as potential hotel professionals. Examples of student statements are: *'My personal expectation as a student is to be provided with an opportunity to learn and grow in a position as well as within myself, whilst doing my job to the utmost of my ability', 'To learn and gain experience and be treated like a real employee, not just a student that is used to do the less attractive jobs', 'Students expect to work in an environment where employees are nice to each other and support each other and where people are committed to their jobs, and where the physical surroundings create a good working environment', 'Students expect that the managers will give them the opportunity to work in all the departments, and that staff and managers are friendly and cooperative and students expect that this training will enhance their knowledge and managerial skills', 'As a master's student I understand that industry will expect us to have a certain level of knowledge and ability to assert ourselves in our given roles. Whilst not all of us will have the experience necessary, as long as we are willing to learn and show our passion for the industry and need for growth, industry will provide the support'.*

Other expectations from students were that industry would teach them the '*right knowledge',* which was found interesting as if academic studies did not do that and somehow the industry would impart this '*knowledge*' to them. However the literature suggests the aim of placement is to enable students to experience the practical implementations of different methods and theories relevant to hotel management, so at least this was possible.

The researchers considered by far the most important discussions with students centred around the working environment and on how they expected to be treated. Discussions gave rise to the fact that students expected to be taken seriously, to be respected, to be part of a team, to enjoy the atmosphere, and to work in a friendly environment. The literature has alluded to the poor pay and remuneration conditions in the hospitality industry, of which the students are very aware. However students are not disturbed by these reports, and have joined the industry for the more social aspects it brings to their working life. Perhaps this is why they place such value on the working environment and friendly atmosphere.

Industry expectations

The discussions with industry partners revealed primarily a positive opinion of students undertaking the degree and that the students generally performed better as they are able to make the connection between theoretical and practical work. The consensus was that the subjects taught are broad, and thus students get a good overview and balance of subjects in general business and specific hotel knowledge. Reflective reviews by managers are exemplified in this statement: *'They [students] had a broad skill base, an understanding of the industry, and hands-on experience and could apply themselves to the situation at hand'.* However the discussions also indicated that the challenge is how to get the master's students to the next level of maturity and experience. This was summarised by the statement: '*The fact that they go out on IP is great but there is a need to actually tailor what they do in IP depending on their previous experience and not approach it as if one size fits all, and pushing responsibility back to the employer'.* Not surprisingly it was discovered that only a few managers actually knew the difference between a master's hotel student and an undergraduate and there were no different expectations of master's students. For many it was clear that they viewed IP as a learning opportunity and that they had no, or very little, additional expectation of master's students. Indeed most made the link between master's and bachelor's level and made it clear they have no preconceived notions or expectations of master's students and did expect them to have similar (low or non-existent) levels of experience in the hospitality and tourism industries. Generally both masters' and undergraduate students were perceived as not yet being skilled enough to undertake supervisory roles but was a general belief that this level of competency would be reached during their actual placement.

The interviews with hotel managers disclosed the practical nature of the hotel business and confirmed the view that graduates needed to have industry experience. To the question '*What do you expect of hotel management graduates',* comments were: *'that they have practical experience', 'that they have an understanding of the diversity and differences between hotel types', 'that they would have an appropriate understanding of the industry and the company they would be working for', 'a suitable personality', ' ability to adapt to the constantly evolving industry', 'work effectively in a team and be passionate and committed to the industry', 'we need problem solvers', 'identify future problems and how to avoid them', 'we expect that already have skills and knowledge, it is very difficult to train from zero, we want people who a job ready', 'when we take people for placement*

they have to be better than the ordinary', 'to come with new ideas, solve problems and implement systems, not just the daily basis to be future leaders', 'achieve projects and to help the business', 'to add value to our business', 'to get productivity from them', 'generally our expectations are to be ready, flexible, have a positive attitude and that the student fits in with our hotel', 'it's about how they treat the customers'.

Three main issues were identified: the first was a general perception that grooming standards of master's degree students were relaxed and in some way this was also reflected in their attitude and in the way that they performed their duties. Although this subjective perception cannot be and was not substantiated by any clear examples, it stood out as a general concern.

The second general perception was essentially that none of the employers thought that having a master's qualification meant that students were ready to walk in to a supervisory role. One industry manager encapsulated the varying views with: *'I have experience with good and bad students; I would expect more of a master's student and until today I didn't know the difference between a master's and bachelor's student. In my department backpackers sometimes have better skills for operations; you can push them to the limits, they are hard workers, whereas the students complain. Respect doesn't come just because you are a master's student, a master doesn't give any recognition in Australia. If you are a hard worker you can move faster. You keep the ones you can rely on even with the 20 hours' restriction. However, they have immigration issues; in some cases they want the job just to get the residency'.* Additionally there was a strong feeling that a six-month placement was not enough: '*For us, the experience is that six months is too short, and while this sounds funny, the students themselves consider it too short because it takes them, let's say, a good three months to settle in – who goes where, what is what, and where do we get ourselves into. Then after, say the first three months, they've settled in, and have their feet on the ground and they know exactly what they can and cannot do – but then, for the second three months, you can see they want to contribute and from that perspective, they are contributing but only for that three-month period and then they're gone. But I do think that as a hotel, you have an opportunity to really assess an individual because they are young dogs; 'is* this *something for me, or maybe is* that *something for me?' And they also start to look around – 'hey, I've seen this in Rooms Division and I like what I see'. Within a 12-month period, you could place people in various other parts of the hotel so their horizon even extends further. We are looking for longevity; if we are investing in someone we want our investment back. By the fifth month of placement they are right where you want them to be, and it's difficult to keep them on board afterwards with the 20 hour student working visa restriction. Six months is not enough.'*

The third issue was that master's degree students have expectations regarding visas and access to work in Australia after their study has been completed but a common issue amongst employers is that that they do not feel these students are generally ready for a managerial role. The problem here (in regards to visas) is that while many employers would be happy to offer a role/position to students that have completed IP with them, often the positions that they are offered (or would otherwise be offered) do not meet the criteria for a 457 visa as required to stay and work in Australia. This was related to the amount of money that someone applying for a 457 visa needs to earn and the fact that most if not all master's degree students are not viewed as being capable as managers upon the completion of their degrees.

Student perceptions
Students, on the other hand, held very different views, with most feeling that industry placement was an opportunity to be introduced to an employer. Observations made by students included: *'I am sure that I would not have such a job in hospitality had I not come through the school', 'I got a lot of help from my school and my practical classes prepared me for the job', 'I got the role through the expo held at the school'.*

The students felt that this opportunity prepared them for future jobs and built their confidence. Some general comments were: *'It really helped me in my learning; I am now far more prepared', 'I feel really confident now to get a job in my country', 'I am prepared now for the recruitment process', 'The school and then the placement helped me to be ready for the future and especially in managing myself', 'Now I have experience it's easy to get a job'.*

Lastly, students felt that this opportunity would help them in the future because they now had connections. This was confirmed by comments such as: *'I got a reference from the manager and I can use that to apply for other jobs with the same group', 'I am staying at this job until the end of my master's and then maybe stay with the chain here or somewhere else'.*

Implications
The results indicated that a formal qualification is beneficial in developing the skills essential for a hotel management career. This is comforting and important for formal hospitality studies in general. The information gathered in this project can be used to formally advise students of the importance of what they are studying, and that the graduate attributes specified for the course are respected and sought after by potential employers. The study has highlighted the importance of balancing operational and business skills for hotel graduates. Hospitality course curricula should focus on developing managerial skills, complimented by the development of operational and personal skills through practical work experience. A structured work placement period is a strongly supported method for developing those skills, although some consideration may need to be given to a longer placement time for master's degree students, especially those with little previous experience in hospitality. This research has highlighted some very specific expectations from students pertaining to the working environment whilst they are on placement, and how they (the students) would like to be treated. For the educators involved prior to industry placement, this finding was of great importance and also highlighted the need to follow up with the students in the early months after their entering such placement. A more frequent monitoring of the students on placement (by phone or email) is an important role for their career development.

The findings of this project have emphasised the need for even further engagement with our industry partners. Discussion of the responsibilities the industry has in assisting students in

the transition from academia to work is very important and must be maintained, and the differences between master's and undergraduate courses and students must be better articulated. For the long-term benefit of those involved, it is essential to continue the debate concerning skills training and education within the hospitality industry.

Limitations

This research is context bound and the findings cannot be generalised. The findings may have comparative value and will add to the building blocks of research into industry and student expectations for the workplace. Further research, with a broader industry involvement, and a larger pool of students over time will be necessary to yield more comprehensive results.

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