

BRIDGING THE EMPLOYABILITY GAP BETWEEN HOTELS AND GRADUATES: THE IMMERSION METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

A challenging, competitive, and continuously changing environment which surrounds the field of hospitality management requires academia to inspire and facilitate student ownership of learning experiences. The orthodoxy of theoretical teaching and learning methodology in our HE systems has created a significant gap in industrial expectation of employing individuals who are creative and work ready. The purpose of the study is to determine the expectations of the industry in regards to what it expects hospitality program graduates to possess. Given the discrepancies that exist between industry expectations, this paper depicts the innovative epistemology of using an Immersion framework which encompasses experiential student-oriented learning in HE as the tool to bridge this gap. The research was devised through an extensive literature review and the industry's expectation of its graduates was polled using a sample of 6 hotels comprising 3 five-star hotels and 3 four-star hotels within the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur. The convenience sampling method was used to gather a general estimation of hotel-employer feedback on their expectations of graduates of the hospitality industry. This paper concludes that HE learning should evolve from the monotonous and rote form of learning to one that is innovatively aligned with industry expectations of graduate performance and a number of key enablers were identified as necessary for HE to be able to embark on the successful application of the Immersion Methodology.

Keywords: *Immersion methodology, experiential learning, employability, higher education, teaching and learning, hospitality management*

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality studies has seen a surge in education circles, moving from a generally TAFE orientation to one of Higher Education (HE). This surge raises interest in the manner in which the hospitality programs are delivered and whether they subscribe to the interests and needs of the industry. Collins (2002), and Raybould and Wilkins (2005) undertook research on the differing job expectations of hospitality graduates and industry personnel. Both studies found that hotels' managers considered a qualification is irrelevant and employers considered new graduates unsuitable for a management role. Some managers even commented that graduates have a patronising "know-it-all" attitude, and lacked resilience when trying to cope with the hectic industry environment (Collins, 2002). In addition, it is common for managers to believe that practical experience is more valuable than a qualification, noting that in New Zealand, a hospitality degree is still poorly recognised, except perhaps for those seeking specialist positions such as sales and marketing, or financial management (Harkison, 2004).

The criticism often levelled at HE is that it exists on a plane that is separate from the realities of the industry and work expectations. This criticism has resulted in a review of the relevance of the hospitality curriculum to ensure that it is consistent with the demands of the industry (Turkson & Riley, 2008). While undoubtedly the curriculum plays a critical role, the delivery method of the said curriculum should also be given equal emphasis. The relevance of the curriculum may be lost if the delivery methodologies are not suitable or address the issues that are of significance to the industry.

In line with these issues, this study has two main objectives. First, it determines the expectations of the industry in regards to what it expects hospitality program graduates to possess, paying particular attention to what practitioners believe the curriculum should emphasise and the attitudes the graduates should have. Second, it sets out the use of the Immersion Methodology as an innovative framework within which a more realistic methodology of education delivery may be practiced, consistent with the demands and expectations of the industry – that is reducing the gap between industry expectations and graduate skills and competencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is a given that hospitality curriculum has the responsibility to meet the expectations of the industry as well as that of academic rigour expected by the institutions of HE (Raybould and Wilkins, 2006). The effective implementation or practice of this would firstly require an understanding of the demands or expectations of the industry and determine how these may be inculcated into the curriculum without compromising academic rigour.

Employer Expectations of Hospitality Graduates

Undeniably, HE institutions have a responsibility to facilitate the transition of graduates into the work environment in a manner that satisfies all stakeholders namely the educational institution itself, the graduates and the employers (Nolan et al., 2010). It is therefore important that a 'fit' between the educational experience offered and the industry expectation is achieved.

The dissatisfaction expressed by hospitality employers include graduate's unrealistic expectations in regards to their careers and the types of roles that they will experience in the industry (Nolan et al., 2010; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006). They expect to be well paid and undertake glamorous assignments without realising the hard work involved in providing services to guests. Other dissatisfactions expressed include that graduates lack a positive attitude towards service, good work ethics, discipline, commitment, a sense of responsibility and respect for authority (Handel, 2003; Hart et al., 2006; Zhang & Wu, 2004). Hart et al. (2006) quoting a respondent said that graduates do not have the right skills to deal with commonplace situations. Zhang and Wu (2004) also pointed out that graduates lack the ability to cope with the pressures of the work environment such as hard work and long hours.

A recurring theme in employer dissatisfaction is the lack of 'soft' skills. Employers found graduates to lack sufficient interpersonal skills which includes customer handling, people or social skills, problem solving skills, team working and importantly communication skills (Hart et al, 2006; Handel, 2003; Littlejohn & Watson, 2004; Nolan et al., 2010). The dissonance between the industry expectations and those of the graduates are likely to result in greater difficulties in attracting and retaining employees in this industry.

The foregoing literature review has identified a litany of dissatisfaction expressed by employers in general and the hospitality in particular and provides an understanding of what employer expectations are. This review also helps us understand the changes or revisions that need to be undertaken so that HE institutions are not only providers of education and knowledge but also act as enablers of graduate employment.

The reality of hospitality employment is not just a mechanical or rote display of the knowledge learned in the classroom, but one that requires employees (and graduates) to be able to use their discretion in managing the context within which they find themselves (Chapman & Lovell, 2006). Literature in general has identified human relations, management and interpersonal competencies as being important (see Baum, 1990; Christou, 2000; Connolly & McGing, 2006; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006). Connolly and McGing's (2006) research indicated that managers rated people and human resource skills (which includes communication, good personality, customer service skills, supervisory and personnel skills) very highly and have a '...strong preference to hire people with strong practical skills and "soft" people management skills'. Tas (1988, in Jauhari, 2006) in his study indicated that competencies necessary for the hospitality industry require a 'soft' skills emphasis namely '*...sensitivity to guest issues...effective oral and written communication, developing positive customer relations and striving to achieve a positive working relationship.*'

It is of interest to note the preponderance of 'soft skills' in skills highly rated by industry practitioners. However, the experience of both industry practitioners and graduates has pointed to some criticisms of the education experience. Much of this criticism is levelled at the mismatch between the education provided and the demands of the industry. This has resulted in graduates who have unrealistic expectations of the industry and employer dissatisfaction (Nolan et al., 2010; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Rimmington, 1999).

The curriculum has often been singled out as the main culprit of this mismatch and researchers have proposed the used of 'informed curriculum' (Bartlett, Upneja & Lubetkin, 1998) and using curriculum that is reflective of industry changes (Nelson & Dopson, 1999). Given the abundance of literature that emphasises the importance of 'soft' skills and competencies, what is then lacking in hospitality education curriculums? There have been concerted efforts to ensure that the curriculum does reflect (as far as it possible given hospitality's

dynamism) the demands of the industry. As Jauhari (2006) posits, the academic institution and the curriculum it offers determine the nature of competence in the hospitality industry. However, it is also crucial for educational institutions to consider the implications of their teaching–learning methodologies as a possible cause of the mismatch. This understanding augmented with a more innovative and applied approach to the delivery of the curriculum augurs well for the bridging of the gap between education and industry.

The traditional teacher-centred and didactic instructions impede the implementation of more student-centred and flexible learning approaches. Coleman et al. (2003 in Alexander, 2007) highlight the need to shift from a ‘...*purely practical skills to a mix of practical, leadership, commercial and transferable skills...*’ The enabler of such a transition is a teaching-learning methodology such as the Immersion Methodology. As Woods and Dennis (2009) pointed out, transferable and employability competencies including non-assessed add-ons better prepare graduates for work. The immersion teaching learning approach augments the traditional teacher-led approaches to ensure a more robust application of the hospitality curriculum for the benefit of its stakeholders.

Thus, the inclusion of the immersion methodology as a framework on which not only a more enriching learning environment may be generated but also as one that responds to the needs of the industry is noteworthy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of the research was to determine and describe the gap of industry expectation in employing hospitality graduates. As such, this study adopted a qualitative, exploratory research approach using unstructured in-depth interviews. This is to allow respondents to think freely and to express their feelings and experiences with respect to the expectation of HE graduate in their hotels and in the hotel industry as a whole.

In order to develop general categories of ideas and themes for discussions, the qualitative data were integrate with progressive comparative analysis (Blaikie, 2000). Data analysis was inductive, and the process held the integrity of individual perceptions, rather than attempting to prove or challenge preconceived theory.

Sampling Strategy

The research targeted senior Human Resource (HR) managers in the hotel sector within Kuala Lumpur city centre. The target response for interview was 10 and the research set out to focus on establishments with at least a four-star rating. The researchers used a convenience sampling strategy and contacted 20 hotels within Kuala Lumpur city centre, which yielded a sampling frame of 6 hotels. 7 hotels rejected the invitation, 4 unable to participate during the period of research and 3 did not respond. Despite of the limitations such as systematic bias and/or generalisation, convenience sampling was used because it allowed the researchers to obtain basic data and trends within the constraint of time and resources. It was also anticipated that with four and five star hotel and the intended target respondents of senior managers, there would be minimal differences in response. It must be noted however that responses from the sample may not be representative of smaller hotels and lodging providers and as such results of this research focus primarily on the types of hotels represented by the sample. The rationale for the selection of five-star and four star hotels within Kuala Lumpur is attributable to the expectation that these organisations are the most likely to absorb a larger number of hospitality graduates.

Data was collected from 6 individual unstructured in-depth interviews with respondents of six hotels in Kuala Lumpur city centre. All respondents were senior managers in Human Resource (HR), responsible for HR planning, recruitment, and training and development. The respondents had an average of 17 years working in the hotel industry. Table 1 provides a summary of the profile of the hotels represented in the sample.

Table 1: Profile of Hotels

	HR#1	HR#2	HR#3	HR#4	HR#5	HR#6
Location	KL centre	KL centre	KL centre	KL centre	KL centre	KL centre
Star rating	5-star	4-star	4-star	5-star	4-star	5-star
Ownership	Intl*	Intl*	Domestic	Intl*	Independent	Franchise
Size (rooms)	473	320	302	426	239	561
Total staff employed (full-time)	76-100	51-75	51-75	76-100	26-50	76-100

*International

FINDINGS

Analysis of the qualitative data identified several hurdles that contributed to the gap of industry expectation and graduates competences who are work ready. Figure 1 illustrates the hurdles to Graduates Employability. These hurdles fell into three broad themes: “*Industry Exposure*”, “*Graduate Attitude*” and “*Soft Skills*”:

- i. *Industry Exposure*. A lack of structured and effective program that provide opportunity for HE students with access to guidance from experienced hotel managers can be hurdles to graduate employability. This is because students have been criticised for having unrealistic expectations of the types of responsibilities they may be given on entering the industry.
- ii. *Graduates’ Attitude*. The values, beliefs, and behaviour of HE students with respect to hotel industry and work itself can all be the causes of employability gap between employers and graduates.
- iii. *Soft Skills*. The skills that hotel managers identified and valued, interpersonal skills, problem solving, and self-management. These competencies regarded as important in hospitality because it is related to customer service and working as part of a team, professionalism and maintaining high ethical standards.

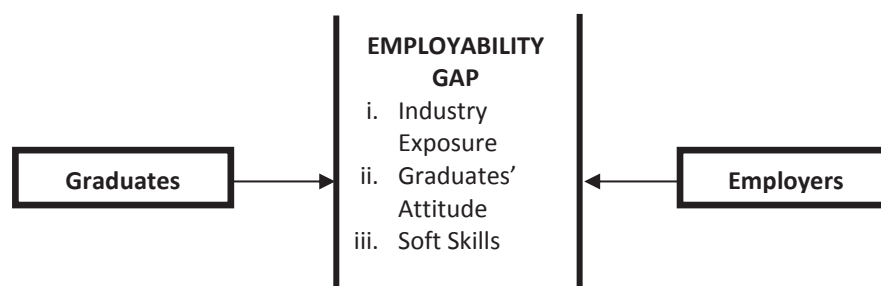


Figure 1: Employability Gap: The Hurdles To Graduates Employability

The discussion identified several key issues relevant to each theme and does not intended for comprehensive discourse:

Industry Exposure

The interviews revealed that upon completion of their HE studies, graduates have well-developed academic skills. Many graduates have completed a period of internship and some claim to have extensive part-time work experience. With this, they have an expectation that industry will allow them to apply the conceptual skills that

have been emphasised in their studies. Graduates often perceive themselves to have already been an “apprentice” for management through a few years of study combined with the associated practical requirement of most hospitality degree or diploma programs. A senior manager with more than 15 years of experience in the hotel industry commented that:

[...] they often experience adjustment difficulties that lead to frustration, disappointment, and uncertainty as to their career choice. Meanwhile, this issue may be worsened by the fact that currently there are relatively few managers in the hotel industry who have experience of tertiary education. They may have a poor understanding of graduate’s capabilities (HR #1).

The comments also pointed out that many graduates have unrealistic expectations of the types of roles that they will experience upon entering the industry. They indicate that significant talent and opportunity may be lost by the industry because these expectations are not being effectively managed. This issue aligned to other findings in the literature, such as Raybould and Wilkins (2005).

This was confirmed by several managers who articulated the view that:

A lot of full-time courses are not placing enough emphasis on exposing students to real work environment. So they are coming out to the industry doing all of the book work but they aren’t grasping the practical parts of the business. I think this is what scares most of the graduates that come into the industry and the reason for such a high dropout rate initially in the first couple of years of graduation (HR #1, 3, 4 & 5).

Despite of the internship provided by most HE institution, the duration of internship does not allow the hotel managers to fully immerse the students to the industry as a whole. As one manager observed:

The normal duration of internship is about three months and normally takes place towards the end of their studies. To allow the students to experience the responsibilities working in the hotel, learn the organisation’s culture and expect them to grasp the feel of the industry within such a short period is not practical (HR #3).

The interviews also revealed that hotel managers tend to face difficulties in supervising and managing fresh graduates. This is because the components of work experience in most hospitality degree and diploma are primarily comprised of operational experiences and rarely do students get any exposure to management activities. Therefore, it complicates the graduates’ realistic preview of the expectations and demands relevant to their career in hotel industry.

It is thus evident that the student exposure to the hotel industry during the studies is crucial in any consideration of employing work ready graduates.

Graduates’ Attitude

Managers reported that getting the right people with the right attitude is one of the main hurdles in the industry. This is because hospitality graduates’ attitudes towards the hotel industry have observed that in general they tend to have a very unfavourable image with not being regarded as a serious and rewarding career option. The hotel industry is also distinguished to have the lowest levels of pay among the hospitality sector.

A manager expressed the view that:

It is very difficult to get people to believe in what we do here, instead of perceiving it as just a job. As a result, the way young graduates behave at work is very much depending on how much they are being paid for (HR #5).

Another admitted that:

We have people who are working here, just don’t want to be here. They don’t see any future career here (HR #1)

The greatest frustration reported by managers was that the young graduates are often unwilling to admit their mistakes and failed to understand the impact of the wrong doings to the organisation as a whole. According to a hotel manager, the graduates tend to take things too lightly and no sense of urgency to resolve the mistake made; but would expect condonement from the managers. For example:

During a cocktail function in a hotel, a newly employed graduate took the leftover wines and got drunk. When confronted by the manager on the next day, the graduate gave reasons like; “nobody mentioned that the staff cannot drink the wines and function nearly ended”. He then casually asked for forgiveness (HR #6).

It is therefore apparent that the graduates’ attitudes should be an important consideration when determining the employability of students in HE.

Soft Skills

There are some sizable gaps regarding competency such as the soft skills were employers are more concern with graduates’ abilities to interact effectively with customers and peers. Most of the competencies identified as important were not operational or technical, but were more generic in nature. During the interviews, strong views were expressed by employers that the emphasis should be placed on developing basic interpersonal skills, problem solving, and self-management skills during the early phases of both HE and work experience. Some managers noted that:

These fresh grads just don’t have the self-confidence and lack of service ethic to socially interact with customers. We have difficulty to get them to talk more with our guest (HR #1).

Another important finding from the interviews pointed out that the graduates’ lack problem solving skills. This was reflected in the statement of a manager:

[...] many just follow through the work processes but never spend time to think of the issue; why we do things this way; how things can be done better and faster (HR #4)

A similar opinion by another manager:

Graduates nowadays lack of ability to think critically and look for details in order to do work effectively and efficiently; what they learn in class, they just repeat it but whether the work is right or wrong, no thought is given (HR #6)

With regards to the managers’ satisfaction with how the HE institution prepared graduates for careers in the industry, the hotel managers managed to identified these of hurdles across the spectrum of employability of graduates. This is somewhat unexpected given the changes that have been made towards improving the curriculum in tertiary education in Malaysia. Hence, the ability to overcome these hurdles is a greater priority for the benefits of the employers, students, HE institutions and the hotel industry as a whole.

DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study identified factors that generated dissatisfaction among employers and the skills that they expect students to possess upon graduation. The respondent feedback centres more on the lack of the soft skills component. Respondents were generally satisfied that the graduates are fairly competent in executing the technical parts of their job but need to improve on skills such as problem solving and communication. Although, the importance and role of the curriculum in hospitality has been repeatedly stressed, there has been little attention given to the teaching-learning methodologies that would deliver the curriculum.

Since there are no ground rules in terms of what is the best approach in teaching-learning methodologies to develop HE graduates, a number of key enablers were identified as necessary for HE to be able to embark on the successful application of the Immersion Methodology. The use of the immersion methodology is aimed at enabling graduates who, during their tenure as students have been challenged from a holistic perspective – trained to ‘contribute to business development and improve the competitiveness and performance of the organisation...and contributing to the “bottom-line” (Connolly and McGing, 2006, p.57)

and ‘going beyond delivering good service’ (Jauhari, 2006, p.129) – in addition to acquiring industry-specific skills. Such a methodology also facilitates the move beyond a narrow and constricting viewpoint of hospitality.

The concept of Immersion at Berjaya UCH is based on the escalation of active learning. The main drivers are knowledge acquisition, skills enhancement and industry readiness, which are embedded in student learning (Arumugam, Choe & George, 2009). The Methodology amalgamates several of the learning approaches discussed above, which are action learning, experiential learning (through exposure to industry practices and expectations) and the conventional ‘chalk and board’ or guided learning methods. The purpose of this methodology is not about enabling students to acquire only the ‘skills du jour’ but ensuring that they develop and retain life skills that have more long term value (Alexander, 2007).

The distinctiveness of the methodology lies in immersing students into the hospitality environment from the moment they step into the campus. This is done via the infrastructure within the campus that reflects real hotel lobbies, hotel rooms, food and beverages laboratories, restaurants, cafes and kitchens. In addition, the teaching-learning pedagogy goes beyond the knowledge-based passive learning and includes applied interactive learning.

This is exemplified in the use of role plays, involvement in projects with industry partners and participation in competitions among others, where students are expected to acquire and use skills such as critical thinking, team-working and communication. The Immersion Methodology leverages on the Berjaya Group’s diversified businesses in the hospitality and tourism industries to make classroom learning become more meaningful and relevant. By accessing real-life experiences through industry-academia leverages, students are more likely to place the theoretical aspects of learning into a business or work context and make sense of what they have studied (Halls, 2005). As Watt and Jones (1993) said “...by putting academic material into a job related and life enhancing formats, quicker connections are realised, firmer applications are understood and a faster rate of learning takes place...”

While these efforts may appear to be common and already in practice, what distinguishes the Immersion Methodology is the manner in which these practices are put together into a coherent whole. It emphasises the transferability of skills which facilitates the learners’ successful entry into an increasingly competitive and demanding workplace. In addition, the ability to leverage on the Berjaya Group’s vast resources for practical sessions, field trips and student placements, part time work opportunities *and* a location which is surrounded by a spectrum of related businesses adds a new dimension where the students live their learning. They are not mere spectators but are participants in their learning process.

CONCLUSION

While data in this study reveal an employability gap between industry and graduates in the hospitality field, close inspection reveals opportunities for both industry and educators. As experience can be gained only through industry, this gap is somewhat outside the domain of academicians, unless experience is traded for study within an educational program, or perhaps included as a mandatory extra in the syllabus. If education institutions genuinely believe they are preparing graduates for management roles in industry, they need to find a way to cultivate the high-quality attributes of personality and initiative, in order to reduce the employability gap between graduates entering to the industry and the employers.

This paper aims to suggest that while understanding the dissatisfaction and expectations of the hospitality industry has resulted in changes to the curriculum, emphasis has to be given to how the curriculum is delivered so as to maximise the returns from a well-designed program. Somehow, HE and hospitality employers need to agree on course content and expectations, to avoid disappointment and disillusionment for both sides which resulted in employability gap. Therefore, examination and improvement of the teaching-learning methodology in hospitality studies, in particular the inclusion of a methodology to enhance graduate readiness for employment is necessary.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Beyond the findings, there are some limitations associated with this study. It is recognised that the sample size of this paper is very modest and efforts should be made to increase the size of the sample in future studies. It is

expected that the findings would be further substantiated using educational institution and graduate feedback on the effectiveness of the Immersion Methodology in hospitality studies. In addition to this, the antecedents of fresh graduates from Generation Y's behaviour and attitude towards a hotel position could be integrated in the study to examine the employability gap.

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