

## HOW FAR CAN YOUR MASTER'S DEGREE TAKE YOU? PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES OF 4-STAR AND 5-STAR HOTELS IN KUALA LUMPUR TOWARDS RECRUITING AND SELECTING MASTER'S FRESH GRADUATE (IN HOSPITALITY) TO ASSUME A SUPERVISORY POSITION

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to explore and understand the preferences and perceptions of four-star and five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur towards recruiting and selecting Master's level fresh graduate in hospitality to assume an entry-level management position. The Malaysian hotel industry phenomenon has been perceived as an industry whereby an individual's work experience is much prioritized than academic qualification. Therefore, creating a gap where there will be more fresh graduates in hospitality faced with employment opportunities, albeit shortage of manpower in the industry. Findings suggest that hotel recruiters believe that Master's graduates acquire good cognitive and interpersonal skills upon graduation. However, there is a negative perception that they lack the experience required to be a supervisor. Hotel recruiters emphasize more on individual's personality and attitude rather than the academic qualifications obtained.*

*Keywords: Master's degree, hospitality, recruitment and selection, education, supervisors, Kuala Lumpur, hotels.*

### INTRODUCTION

The hospitality profession is among the oldest of the humane profession, based on making a guest feel welcome and comfortable and that the human resource component in the hotel industry will always be vital (Barrows et. al., 2012), because as Richardson and Butler (2010) mention that most interactions are in the form of face-to-face causing the standards of service provided to be of paramount. He further states that having an employee who is enthusiastic, committed and skilful is vital for success. Therefore, each employee, directly or indirectly, affects the quality of service delivered.

The phenomenon of the hotel industry in the Malaysian context has been perceived as an industry whereby relevant work experience of an individual is much prioritized and sought after than academic qualification. On the other hand, the education landscape in Malaysia has been increasingly competitive with growing concerns regarding the accountability, credibility and effectiveness of hospitality management courses, alongside individuals who are aiming to obtain higher and more prestigious paper qualification to ensure better employment opportunities (Nair and Whitelaw, 2008). Therefore, creating a gap in which there will be more fresh graduates in hospitality faced with employment opportunities, albeit shortage of manpower in the industry. With the growing importance

placed on recruiting and selecting an employee with the best match to an organization's culture, hence the question now is 'what is the value of a Master's degree in hospitality management?'

As for the researcher's knowledge, this study is the first of its own whereby it aims to explore and understand the preferences and perceptions of four- and five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur towards recruiting and selecting Master's level fresh graduate (in hospitality) to assume an entry-level management position-supervisor. Hence the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To explore the relevance of obtaining a Master's degree (in hospitality) that is applicable in real life working scenario.
2. To explore the criteria Malaysian hotel recruiters look for in a Master's degree fresh graduate.
3. To understand the perception and preference of Malaysian hotel recruiters in employing a Master's degree fresh graduate in hospitality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Master's Degree in Hospitality Management**

The three stakeholders in the tourism higher education consist of the student, the academia, and the industry. It is vital to understand the importance of this relationship and the implications that may befall as hospitality management educators have a role to bridge the gap between what is required by the industry and what knowledge and skills are being transferred (Busby, 2005). Hospitality management courses are designed based on combining vocational aspect of hotel management with concepts and theories of business education.

The Master's degree serves two noble functions, namely (1) to provide a thorough academic education that encourages the growth of an individual's intellect; and (2) to provide individuals with a set of factual, declarative knowledge, competencies and skills that will enhance the likelihood of success and overall employability in the industry (Tribe, 2005). The central issue of the program quality in a Master's level education is the search for a common body of knowledge. Scholars (Chand, 2008; Lewis, 1993) believe that there is a requirement to include various subjects in its curricula. However, these claims are yet to be empirically tested. Km and Sharma (2011) argued the inability of academia in adapting to the rapidly changing industry it serves. To date, there is an absence of a real consensus about the nature of the curriculum in Master's level education in hospitality and tourism as compared to other disciplines such as finance, business management or even education (Lee et. al., 2004; Zehrer and Mossenlechner, 2008). The extreme variations, the lack of standardization, and inconsistency of the hospitality management curricula are among these different institutions occur not just in Malaysia, but also in other parts of the world such as America (Johanson, 2006), Bulgaria (Ineson et. al., 2011), Hong Kong (Cheung et. al., 2010), Indonesia (Ernawati, 2002), Austria (Zehrer and Mossenlechner, 2008); Korea (Lee et. al., 2004), Australia (King et. al., 2003), and India (Km and Sharma, 2011).

Tews and Hoof (2011) highlighted the gradual growth in the number of hospitality management courses offered emphasizing the importance of matching the curricula with industry needs because diverse views between educators and recruiters on the relevance of graduates in meeting the needs of hotel recruiters have been identified (Chand, 2008; Umbreit, 1992). Hence, this has led to a greater challenge faced by hotel recruiters, particularly in recruiting and selecting the ideal hospitality graduate for an entry-level managerial position, due to the high costs involved in recruitment (Collins, 2007; Kusluvan et. al., 2010; Tesone and Ricci, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that graduate schools judge on a regular basis, the relevance of their programs in fitting the needs of students, academia and industry as recruiters valued competencies such as analytical and process-oriented, knowledge in literature and upcoming trends, conceptual thinking, interpersonal skills, and the level of maturity and experience. The mentioned competencies are factors that distinguish a Master's level graduate from a Bachelor's level graduate (Lee et. al., 2004).

Lately, in Malaysia, individuals are aiming to obtain higher and more prestigious academic qualification to ensure better employment opportunities highlighting the need for both current and potential employee in the hotel industry to obtain a Master's degree (Johanson, 2006; Kim, 2011). Therefore there may be a growing trend for individuals to pursue their Master's degree immediately after the completion of their bachelor's degree. These said individuals who obtained their Master's degree are known as fresh graduates who have no real-life work experience in a hotel besides successfully underwent their internship during the course of study. Henceforth otherwise stated, to avoid confusion, the term graduate will be used to describe Master's level fresh graduate.

### **Generation Y Becoming Supervisor**

Individuals who are currently in colleges and entering the workforce are predominantly Generation Y and one of the issues hotel recruiters are currently facing is to understand this fastest growing segment of the workforce (Richardson and Butler, 2012).

Li and Wang (2010) state that supervisors are the lowest ranking management position, also known as entry-level management position and this position often constitutes the first step on the management ladder allowing hotel employees to hold their first managerial position. Upon graduation, most graduates believed they were qualified for a managerial-level position such as a supervisor rather than an hourly operational position (Lolli, 2013; Sciarini, 1997). However, Josiam et. al. (2010) commented that Gen Ys are less keen in progressing to a leadership role for the reason that they prioritize a healthy balance between work and non-work activities. In the Asian context, the purpose an individual pursuing a Master's degree in hospitality management is due to personal growth, the potential to receive a higher remuneration, and the likelihood for assuming an entry-level management position (Jaykumar et. al., 2014; Lee et. al., 2004). Therefore it is safe to assume that the graduates perceive themselves of having the ability to begin their career in the hotel industry as an entry-level management position as much resources have been invested into and during their course of study.

Although graduates who obtained a degree are better off than those who did not, the academic qualification obtained does not entitle graduates to enter the industry as an entry-level management position as they lack experience and supervisory skills. The lacked experience is (1) lack of leadership experience in effectively dealing with line-level

subordinates, (2) being uncomfortable in dealing with confrontational situations with subordinates, (3) lacking experience in dealing with a workforce that is diverse and (4) the inability to provide meaningful feedback to both superiors and subordinates (Harkison et. al., 2011; Km and Sharma, 2011). English et. al. (2007) stated that for a leader to be successful, it is crucial for him/her to possess good interpersonal communication skills especially in an industry whereby communicating and leading throughout different generations, ethnicities and educational backgrounds are inevitable.

Hence the 'supervisor' position is selected for this study as an entry-level management position for graduates in hospitality because as mentioned previously, graduates of a Master's degree would have the intellectual and certain degree of interpersonal capability in contributing towards the growth of the organization. Though many hotel recruiters still prefer to select an experienced candidate to assume the supervisory position knowing that Gen Ys possess knowledge on their area of specialization, therefore, the question posed is whether hospitality management institutions are producing qualified graduates to assume a supervisory position? Or it is plainly the perceptions of hotel recruiters towards selecting these fresh graduates in assuming the said position.

### **Factors Influencing Hotel Recruiters' Hiring Decision Model**

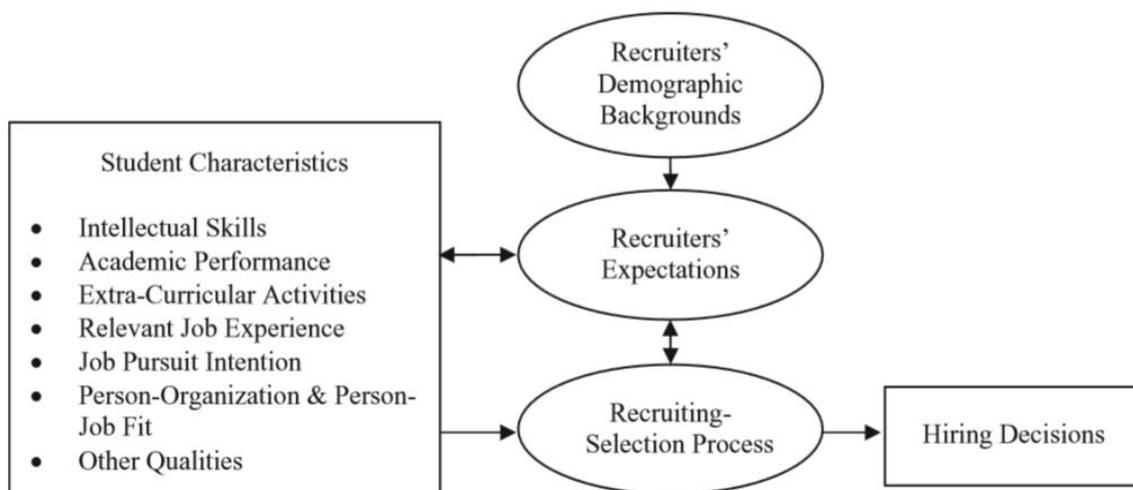
In the Malaysian context, hotel recruiters recruit entry-level positions through methods such as referral programs, media- both digital and print, and through hospitality management institutions while students are in pursuance of their internship (Lahap et. al., 2014). However, the position offered is not one of a supervisory level but of a rank-and-file position. This means, for a supervisory level position, hotel recruiters prefer to recruit an individual with supervisory experience of at least one year in the relevant field. The rationale behind such decision by hotel recruiters is comprehensible due to the qualities of graduates and the competencies they acquire as mentioned earlier. This is supported by the findings of Nurita et. al. (2004) who indicated that graduates generally lack of soft skills although well-trained in their area of specialization; Kim (2011) further indicates that there are significant number of graduates that lacks the right attitude and these shortcomings can possibly lead to unemployment for graduates. There is little research conducted and a few literatures available in relation to the perception and preference in selecting college fresh graduate with a Master's degree in hospitality management to assume a supervisory level position in four and five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur, therefore this study seeks to explore and provide an understanding to the objectives set prior.

The model developed by Kwok et. al. (2011) – Factors Influencing Hospitality Recruiters' Hiring Decisions (FIHRHD) Model will be used as a framework for this research. The FIHRHD Model (figure 1) takes into consideration a variety of factors that influence hotel recruiter's decision in the hiring process of college graduates. The factors include (i) student characteristics, (ii) recruiting-selection process, (iii) recruiters' demographic backgrounds and (iv) expectations of hotel recruiters. Kwok et. al. (2011) explain that the main criteria hotel recruiters would consider before making a job offer is student characteristics that consist of (a) student's intellectual skills, (b) academic performance, (c) extra-curricular activities, (d) relevant job experience, (e) job pursuit intention, (f) person-organization and person-job fit and (g) other qualities, as there may be qualities hotel recruiters look for in college graduates that could not be identified in this

research. This model has been applied in both the works of Kwok et. al. (2011; 2012), that used qualitative and quantitative methods respectively.

There is a disadvantage of applying the FIHRHD Model in this study as it is a relatively new model and not many scholars have adopted it for their research. Some scholars such as Chan and Coleman (2004); Chand, (2008); Km and Sharma, (2011); Kim, (2011); and Tse, (2012) conducted their research based on specific attributes a college graduate should possess such as professionalism, leadership and communication skills. Further to that, works of other scholars focused on the effects of a specific recruitment activity and/or the competencies a hotel recruiter seeks in a college graduate (Breugh and Starke, 2000; Li and Wang, 2010). Besides focusing on the recruitment activity and/or the attributes of a college graduate such as curricular activities, relevant job experience and academic qualification, this model categorizes those attributes in a broader category and takes into consideration other aspects such as the recruiting-selection process, recruiter's expectation and demographics. The expectations and demographic backgrounds of hotel recruiters' are the intervening constructs which may influence the recruiting-selection process and hiring decisions (Kwok et. al., 2012).

This model could provide the researcher a more unbiased understanding in exploring the perception of hotel managers in recruiting Master's level fresh graduate to assume a specific position. The model is suitable for initial studies as this study presents itself as the first of its kind specifically targeting at hotel managers in KL. Therefore with relatively little attention that is focused on the recruiting process in relation to the hotel recruiter's perception and preference over employing college graduates, this FIHRHD Model, together with its advantages and practicality of use, serves as a guide for the qualitative inquiry of this research to understand the perception and preference of hotel recruiters and the motivating factor of their action(s).



(Source: Kwok et. al., 2011)

**Figure 1: Factors Influencing Hospitality Recruiters' Hiring Decisions Model**

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This research is based on an exploratory design with semi-structured interview method by applying the FIHRHD Model as a guide to form the questions, data collection and data analysis by taking into consideration hotel manager's demographic background such as academic qualification, gender, years of experience in the industry alongside with their perception towards hospitality fresh graduates. Semi-structured interview method was chosen because (i) multiple realities can be determined and detailed information can be elicited, (ii) queries can be clarified and interview probes can be altered according to the participant's responses, and (iii) verbal and non-verbal cues can be recorded for data analysis (Jennings, 2010).

### **Research Sample**

Purposeful sampling (Saldana, 2009) is adopted because the researcher believes that the sample selected is able to provide meaningful insights towards the research questions and the central phenomenon of this study. By reason of theoretical saturation, 11 participants were gathered, representing senior managers from the hotel's Human Resources and Operations Department who have the authority and influence over recruitment. The reason for such purposive selection enables the researcher to understand, not just a single department but on a broader spectrum, the similarities and/or differences in the perceptions of managers from the said departments.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected from primary sources such as the combination of notes of the semi-structured interviews, observations of participants during the interviews and audiotapes consisting the recording of the interviews. Secondary data was also collected from sources such as journals and other relevant publications.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher applied the six steps for data analysis suggested by Creswell (2014), where at first all data were organized and prepared for analysis, followed by all transcripts were read thoroughly several times and after which general statements were produced. Data coding was carried out alongside the data collection process rather than waiting for the completion of all the interviews to ensure that the questions were reliable. The researcher conducted a two-cycle coding method in data analysis to generate the themes. In Vivo coding, the first cycle of data analysis, extracts words or short phrases from the actual language used by the participants as this allows us to preserve the meanings of their views offering a perspective that contributes towards understanding the phenomenon. The researcher then applied Theming the Data coding method as the second-cycle of data analysis to filter the codes generated and generalize them into themes (Saldana, 2009).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Findings is presented according to each of the research objectives set prior and each theme will have a subheading to justify that the themes provide an understanding for each research objective. The researcher, otherwise stated, will report findings of this study according to two main categories namely participants from the operations (OP) departments and human resources (HR) department.

### **1. The relevance of obtaining a Master's degree (hospitality) that is applicable in real life working scenario**

#### **1.1 The Big Divide**

Participants with Master's degree encourage individuals to pursue a Master's whereas participants without, discourages. Further to that, the latter question the relevance of the Master's degree in hospitality as they believe that in the Malaysian context, a Bachelor's degree is sufficient to progress to the executive office – General Manager. However, participants with Master's degree value the degree because they develop skills and competencies while pursuing the degree and allow them to have a broader perspective towards carrying out the responsibilities they have and add value to the organization by integrating new ideas and concepts into their work.

#### **1.2 Lacks 'A Dose of Reality'**

OP and HR participants perceive that the Master's degree curriculum lacks the practical aspect. They concurred that students are equipped with academic knowledge and technical skills, however, lack of interpersonal and intangible skills. The way hospitality institutions conduct their classes do not contribute to the development of the said skills and are producing graduates who are not meeting the needs of the industry, eventually causing graduates to have unrealistic expectations that they are capable to assume an entry-level managerial position.

#### **1.3 Pursuing Master's Degree**

Words such as 'theoretical knowledge', 'understand', 'experience' and 'relate better' are used by OP and HR participants to emphasize that an individual should pursue a Master's degree after gaining some real-life work experience upon completion of the Bachelor's degree. Otherwise, an individual will only accumulate theoretical knowledge of a subject matter "blindly" without the ability to analyze critically, recommend constructively and contribute practically. Hence in the view of the participants, it will be much more beneficial to the individual in harnessing knowledge as he/she is able to understand better and relate real-life work experience to what is learnt in the Master's degree and vice versa.

## **1.4 Knowledge Transfer**

OP and HR participants mentioned that there is no systematic transfer of knowledge from higher management to employees of the hotel and some managers can be rather reserved in sharing their vast knowledge and experience in managing hotels. Therefore, to ensure that up-to-date knowledge are properly transferred, participants strongly believe that individuals who have a Master's degree plus at least 15 years of work experience should consider venturing into education so that students are able to learn from textbooks and also the experiences shared by these managers to have a more holistic knowledge of hospitality management. The other reason why participants suggested the above is also to give way to young hoteliers as they believe young hoteliers are more dynamic, vibrant and adaptable.

## **2. The criteria Malaysian hotel recruiters look for in a Master's degree fresh graduate**

### **2.1 Similar Attributes Expected**

OP and HR participants have similar expectations towards the attributes that a Master's fresh graduate should possess upon graduation. English is much emphasized by participants, as they perceive that fresh graduates should be able to have a good command of the said language to be able to communicate with both guests and colleagues. The expected attributes can be summarized into five main categories namely (1) interpersonal skill, (2) knowledge, (3) attitude, (4) intellectual capability, and (5) passion.

### **2.2 Intellectual Capability**

The term intellectual capability covers all aspects of cognitive skills. According to both OP and HR participants, they noted that this main variation distinguishes a graduate of a Master's degree from a Bachelor's degree. Therefore, participants perceive that these fresh graduates should be different as they have high levels of intellectual capability. However, the Master's degree per se does not guarantee that individuals will also have the desired attitude for work and the ability to apply it to their work. In simple terms, participants perceive that a Master's fresh graduate is different because they should be able to demonstrate and incorporate their intellectual capabilities into the work they do.

### **2.3 Applying Theory into Practical**

OP and HR participants prefer Master's fresh graduates who can contribute to the organization they work in by applying the lessons learnt whilst pursuing their degree. Participants do not really stereotype by having a preferred institution when it comes to employing fresh graduates, hence, it is up to the individual to demonstrate his/her ability that as graduates, he/she can contribute and add value to the organization. To the participants, these fresh graduates' ability to perform by applying what they have learnt is of importance allowing graduates to progress in his/her career faster otherwise they are no different from an employee who has no tertiary education.

### **3. The perception and preference of Malaysian hotel recruiters in employing a Master's fresh graduate in hospitality**

#### **3.1 Negative perceptions towards master's fresh graduates**

OP and HR participants likely have negative perceptions towards Master's fresh graduate as the latter expects to join a hotel immediately as a manager instead of an entry-level operational employee. Participants perceive that the purpose of the said graduate pursues a Master's degree is not so much for personal growth but instead for strata – to demand higher salary, better position and to be more qualified. There is no doubt that participants perceive themselves as highly educated, however, they are lacking real-life work experience and possibly lack the right attitude. Participants acknowledge and understand many resources have been invested towards obtaining a Master's degree, and they perceive that individuals who pursue their master's degree immediately after a Bachelor's degree have the wrong intention towards the objectives of a Master's degree.

#### **3.2 Master's Fresh Graduate as Supervisors**

OP and HR participants perceive Master's fresh graduates are not prepared to assume the supervisory position as they lack of practical experience. Participants concurred that a Master's fresh graduate is likely to have a good grasp on theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless, it is insufficient to merit the graduate for the said position as the participants believe that work experience in a similar position of a supervisor is more credible than academic qualifications allowing reduced cost for training. However, being employed as supervisor depends on departmental needs including employment as an executive in the back-office departments or as management trainee in operations.

#### **3.3 Seniority is No Longer a Norm**

OP and HR Participants perceive that seniority is no longer considered as a factor for promotion because seniority does not guarantee an employee can carry out responsibilities. Participants are aware of the phenomenon that Gen-Ys are entering the workforce who have very different work attitudes and values compared to the other generations. Therefore, participants place more emphasis on the capabilities of an individual which include attitude, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, cognitive skills and technical skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings are interpreted according to the views of the participants, taking into consideration the choice of words they used and their body language. The findings have provided insights to understand the perceptions and preference of these participants and have also provided some new findings which will be discussed.

New findings of this study reveal that hotel managers perceive what is generally lacking in the curriculum of a Master's in hospitality management program is the ability to prepare its graduates in anticipating and 'surviving' in the realities of the industry- 'a dose of reality' as claimed by the managers from both human resources and operations. Hotel

managers perceive that the curriculum of the said Master's degree lacks in terms of ensuring these fresh graduates are equipped with the interpersonal, communication and leadership skills required for the industry such as the 'flare of handling guest'.

Hotel managers from both human resources and operations believe that there is a deprivation in the process of systematic knowledge transfer in both the industry and hospitality management institutions. They mentioned that in hotels, some managers in the top management are reserved in the sharing of their knowledge and experience in hotel management. In addition to that, these days there is a lack of teaching the basics of a job such as the basics of job responsibilities of a commis III (an entry level for the kitchen department). Further emphasized is that hospitality management educators of late are Master's fresh graduates, who have little or no working experience in hotels, that ends up in the education industry educating future hoteliers by the books. This could sometimes cause the knowledge transferred to be out of date and not suitable for hotels in the Malaysian context in specific. Hence, hotel managers believe that it will be beneficial for experienced individuals such as those who have at least a Bachelor's degree and at least fifteen years of work experience to venture into education and share their knowledge and experience with future hoteliers. Then their experience, coupled with the academic qualification, enables these individuals to have a more holistic knowledge of hospitality management.

Another new finding that this study provided is the different views in hotel managers in obtaining a Master's degree in hotel management. Hotel managers who have obtained, or in the midst of obtaining, a Master's degree, have positive views regarding a Master's degree. Hence, they will encourage individuals to pursue a Master's degree as they value the degree because it allows them to have a broader perspective towards carrying out the responsibilities they have and it adds value to the organization by integrating new ideas and concepts into their work. On the other hand, managers who do not have a Master's degree are less likely to see the importance of a Master's degree. Although they believe that education is important, there is no need to pursue a Master's degree per se. This is because they place more emphasis on work experience as accumulated experience allows an individual to carry out his/her responsibilities better in their own respective department. In their diverse views on obtaining a Master's degree in hotel management, the hotel managers mentioned concurred that it will be more beneficial for an individual to pursue his/her Master's degree after gaining a few years of work experience in the industry to better harness the knowledge to understand and relate real-life work experience to what is learnt in the Master's degree and vice versa. Hence, molding that individual to have the ability to analyze critically, recommend constructively and contribute practically. Another point to note is that hotel managers perceive that with the mentioned competencies, an individual with higher academic qualification is able to progress in their career within a shorter period of time.

In short, hotel managers are aware of the value of a Master's degree and the capability of its graduates. The only concern these hotel managers equally share towards employing master's fresh graduates as supervisors are the actual work experiences they have to allow them to perform as desired. Because as the latter may accumulate knowledge through studies, they lack of real work experience hence the inability to apply knowledge into practice. Hotel managers stated that the said course is able to provide a basic for its graduates and on the other hand, it is highly relevant to note that hotel managers do not emphasize too much on the level of academic qualifications an individual obtained and/or

which institution the graduate is from. They focus more on to the passion, attributes and competencies of the same individual.

### **Limitations**

Due to the size of the sample, the findings of this study are unable to be applied and used to generalize to other four-star and five-star hotels, properties of other ratings, and other sectors in the hospitality industry in Kuala Lumpur or even nationwide in Malaysia.

Lastly, although this study provided some insight into the different views regarding the relevance of a Master's degree in hospitality according to the academic qualification of the participants. However, the impact of participants' demographics and also the recruitment-selection process cannot really be quantifiable.

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