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Caught between a Rock and an Inhospitable Place: How Should Hospitality Students Negotiate the Changed Employment Landscape?

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Title: Caught between a Rock and an Inhospitable Place: How Should Hospitality Students Negotiate the Changed Employment Landscape?

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Abstract:

The scale of hospitality and tourism employment is extensive: one in 11 people (WTTC, 2015) are employed across the sector globally. However, there appears to be a gap between the expectations of hospitality educators, hospitality employers, and students. This perspective is drawn from a synthesis of data obtained from semi-structured interviews with high-ranking global directors of corporate hospitality organisations in Europe and the Asia Pacific region; interviews with hospitality students in the first year and second year of their degree; and the researcher's own research experiences and teaching of undergraduate and post-graduate students. Although perhaps an unconventional approach, the author argues that a symbiosis of findings of two studies with the same theoretical career framing, method of data collection, and intersectional analysis can provide robust insights into the pressing issue of tourism and hospitality workforce staff shortages.

Managing the career expectations of students

Hospitality undergraduate students represent unique challenges to hospitality educators. They are restless learners, discounting theory unless it appears to be directly related to their own experience or relevant to employment opportunities, and slow to transfer knowledge across discrete domains (Lashley, 2015). When their sometimes calculative approach to learning (Brinkman-Staneva, 2015) is viewed in tandem with the hospitality academy's earnest (and potentially unrealistic) commitment to meeting industry's vocational training goals (Airey & Tribe, 2000; Lashley, 2015; Wood, 2015), it can be seen that providing university standard education may be an ambitious objective. If neither industry nor the students appear to value a university holistic education, why persist? One justification could be that students' desire for direct 'employability' related vocational education may not in fact prepare them adequately for a career in hospitality or, indeed, the adaptability required for other careers.

There is a considerable body of literature that suggests that hospitality students' desire to work in the hospitality sector after graduation is considerably eroded by negative workplace experiences (for example, Dagsland, Mykletun, & Einarsen, 2015; Ineson, Yap, & Whiting, 2013; Maxwell, Ogden, & Broadbridge, 2010; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2012). However, to date, no studies have shown how this motivation changes over the course of their degree. Many studies also fail to take into consideration the increasingly globalised nature of the education marketplace. Some of the students in the study did not benchmark locally, but internationally.

The nimble intersectional methodological approach

Therefore, a longitudinal study was designed to qualitatively examine students shifting career perceptions in Year One, Two, and Three of their degree. The same group of 19 students have now been re-interviewed in the second year of their degree. The data has been analysed using a nimble intersectional (Mooney, 2016) approach. The nimble intersectional approach is

based on the epistemological grounding of feminist research which states that researcher reflectivity is of paramount importance (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014). This contribution acknowledges the centrality of the researcher's prior lengthy hospitality career and current employment in hospitality education and research.

Here, first a theoretical framework was chosen in advance of the study, in this case career construction theory (Savickas, 2013). Second, the structural characteristics of employment and education in New Zealand were researched using secondary data sources. Third, symbolic representations about participants' expectations and understandings of hospitality careers and employment in the sector were uncovered and, finally, cross-tabulated with age, gender, and ethnicity dimensions. This approach usefully responds to Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet's (2016) exhortations to connect macro, meso, and micro dimensions in hospitality and tourism workforce studies and to ground meaningful career studies in a specific context (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2011). The second study on which this paper is based also used semi-structured interviews and the nimble intersectional approach to investigate senior executives' perceptions of career and talent management in the hospitality industry.

Findings and discussion

The preliminary analysis of data from students after the first year of their degree and second year of their degree suggests a somewhat startling change in student's attitudes towards a career in the industry. Motivations to remain in the industry were reduced, and students' revised ranking of important career factors have evolved to reflect a greater self-awareness and understanding of the sectoral employment context. The findings from the employers' study indicate profound changes in the nature of work and employment at all levels of employment from corporate executive to entry level employee. The changes appear not only to be a consequence of more precarious work arrangements but also reflect demographic changes in some countries, for example, dual career family dynamics and Millennials' use of technology and social media.

Implications

Significantly, similar themes emerged from both data sets. The findings indicate three areas of concern:

1. Effectively managing students' career expectations
2. Bridging the gap between the hospitality industry and hospitality education
3. The extent to which technology is impacting the employment landscape and the way students learn

The findings provide a rich base for a vital conversation that needs to take place between educators and tourism organisations. Currently, it appears that students are between a rock and an inhospitable place, caught between their career visions and the reality of employment in the sector. Hospitality education can, and must, bridge the gap.

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