

Conclusion: how is Malaysian hospitality and tourism education working with industry?

Malaysian
hospitality and
tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to summarise the main points arising from the articles contained in this theme issue and to provide some directions for the future development of hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews the contribution made by this theme issue in response to the strategic question: How is Malaysian hospitality and tourism education working with the industry?

Findings – The paper observes that authors with different academic and industry backgrounds are able to generate significant outcomes in terms of the contribution to knowledge and/or professional practice, the implications for management action, applied research and industry practice in Malaysia.

Originality/value – This paper considers the extent to which the strategic question discussed in this theme issue could be applied to other ASEAN countries.

Keywords Malaysia, Hospitality and tourism education, Human capital development

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

This theme issue explored the question:

Q1. How is Malaysian hospitality and tourism education working with the industry?

The theme consists of an interrelated collection of studies that, taken together, addresses three related questions about aspects of curriculum development, academic partnerships with industry and minimum wage and employability issues in the industry. The issue features nine articles that range from conceptual papers to case studies and research articles about Malaysia. The first addresses hospitality and tourism education from the perspective of an emerging digital economy. The second



article highlights the importance of a work-based learning (WBL) approach to industry and higher education and the third profiles graduate employability arising from the 2u2i programme. The fourth paper considers advances in hospitality and tourism education, and the fifth article provides insights on hospitality internship programmes. The sixth article explores the perceptions and preferences of hiring managers for management positions in food and beverage outlets and the seventh considers the role of education in human capital development. The eighth paper addresses minimum wage issues in the industry and the final article outlines why and how hospitality and tourism education is promoted in Malaysia.

In response to our theme issue question, the theme editors drew on their own academic and industry backgrounds and assembled a writing team consisting of both academics and industry practitioners. This blend of skills and experience helped to ensure that the outcomes are of practical and theoretical value to hospitality and tourism education development with particular reference to current industry issues.

Significant outcomes

The aim of the theme was to foster lifelong learning with a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing hospitality and tourism education and to begin articulating a practical vision for moving hospitality schools forward. The Malaysian hospitality and tourism education sector is expected to produce well-rounded, skilled graduates for an anticipated 600,000 new jobs in the coming decade. This poses a great challenge to colleges and universities nationwide, as they must meet educational requirements and industry needs. The context is especially challenging given the rapidly evolving technological environment, global competition in the student market, socio-economic factors and expectations, innovations in learning and teaching methods, the importance of employability skills and existing shortages of industry professionals and educators. This collection of articles identified the following industry challenges for hospitality and tourism educational development:

- *The importance of “work ready” graduates:* Graduates who possess the skills that the industry is seeking have better job opportunities, more financial security, greater social mobility and an enriched sense of societal peace and prosperity.
- *An industry-specific curriculum:* Education providers must work with industry partners to develop and refine their WBL approach, study and internship linkages (e.g. via the popular “2u2i” programme) and lifelong learning facilitation that aligns with the needs of industry.
- *Digital literacy:* Those who are graduating must know how to use information and communication technologies – specifically to find, evaluate, create and communicate information. This requires both cognitive and technical skills.
- *Entrepreneurial learning:* The curriculum should facilitate the development of entrepreneurial attitudes, skills and knowledge to enable the individual to turn creative ideas into action.
- *Academic collaboration:* Partnerships with academic and other institutions across the globe help to expand the student experience and facilitate faculty growth via a wider contribution to scholarship and research.

- *Industry collaboration:* Collaboration with industry on aspects of curriculum development, teaching and learning, research and development, consultancy and internship placements for students yields an array of benefits.
- *Internship placements:* Paid internships enable students to gain relevant knowledge and the skills required to succeed in a specific career field. Payment can take the form of an hourly wage, weekly salary or stipend over the course of the internship.
- *Minimum wage standard:* Educational providers need to be well informed about the minimum level of remuneration that an employer is required to pay employees for the work performed during a given period. In Malaysia, this cannot be reduced by collective agreement or an individual contract.
- *Employability skills:* Educational providers need to make provision to develop the generic skills that are needed to function well in most job categories.

Commentary

Higher education adds value by developing job-related skills and competencies, though as this issue has indicated, these outcomes must be aligned with industry needs and expectations. It is generally viewed that the role of higher education is to develop the knowledge of its graduates. Although this is often related to developing many other skills and abilities, it is still unusual in hospitality and tourism to support industry with technical knowledge that might provide a market edge.

Hospitality and tourism education is widely offered and imparted at colleges, polytechnics and universities in Malaysia, with enrolments of around 35,000 students nationwide at 26 institutions. Malaysia is currently the 11th most visited destination in the world, with 25.8 million tourist arrivals in 2018 contributing MYR 181.4bn to the economy and generating 1.7 million jobs in a booming industry. If the hospitality and tourism industry is to continue to prosper, it will need many more industry entrants who are ready and able to perform and live up to industry expectations.

Higher education providers are working together with industry to design and offer unique, industry specific programmes that embrace WBL and lifelong learning. WBL is a powerful platform for developing knowledge and technical skills at work that incorporates the development of critical thinking so that graduates are equipped with the skills needed to learn how to learn. WBL neither is non-restrictive nor does it have a specified definition, as it equally values the discovery and application of knowledge acquired in the classroom. WBL yields an array of stakeholder benefits for industry in general and more specifically for students, educational providers and employers. Students benefit as they are able to foster and develop a positive attitude towards the industry while acquiring relevant industry knowledge and technical skills. Higher education providers are able to keep up with industry trends and more quickly adapt and improve their curriculum. Industry benefits from an inflow of enthusiastic graduates and this also helps to lower the recruitment cost for organizations. The 2u2i programme concept provides students with systematic learning experiences that take place on- and off-campus. The approach incorporates and develops generic skills, communications skills, adaptability skills, developmental skills, group effectiveness skills, influencing skills, self-management and lifelong career-building skills.

The lifelong learning pathways offered by the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL) are pioneering this approach, based on action learning and evidence-based learning. GULL provides a structure, system and process that facilitates lifelong learning by knowledge sharing and by equipping participants to become skilled, self-directed learners. GULL has no formal curriculum – instead, the curriculum is derived from the participant's own life and work (whether paid or voluntary) and facilitated for a group of participants in accordance with an overall learning pathway design. The action learning pathway helps the individual to develop their interpersonal, technical, and conceptual skills and is best characterised as personal and professional development. As noted earlier, it is self-directed and the rationale for this is that all participants are uniquely different, with their own motivation for learning and for personal development.

The hospitality and tourism industry is no different from other service industries that are struggling to adapt to and keep pace with the disruptive digital impacts on their industry and the economy as a whole. In hospitality and tourism, technological innovations are affecting accommodation, food services and travel and planning activities. An important discussion point related to the inclusion of digital technologies in the curriculum with reference to: learning outcomes and pedagogy, developing professional skills for employment and knowledge about mobile technologies and apps, automation technologies, cloud technology, robotics and artificial intelligence, the internet of things and big data concepts.

Entrepreneurial learning brings reality and responsibility into learning. Academic collaborations whether domestic or foreign enable hospitality and tourism students to build confidence, appreciate cultural diversity and fast track career adjustments and options. There are many examples of fruitful collaboration between higher education, industry partners and company start-ups. Further, many ideas from research in universities are put to use through collaboration between institutions and firms. Others reach the market through licensing or start-up companies. AirBnB, Uber, Grab, HOSCO are notable examples, and there are likely to be many opportunities to create similar developmental platforms in the hospitality and tourism industry via this form of collaboration.

In spite of various negative perceptions and dissatisfaction among both students and industry regarding the internship experience, the role of the internship is significant and is seen to be a good model in developing the potential of aspiring professionals. Smart partnerships between academic institutions and the hospitality and tourism industry that are characterised by defined roles and contributions from both parties, yield better insights for students in relation to industry expectations and future career path options. The preferred period for internship placements ranges from six to nine months with placements of three months or less viewed as ineffective. It is also important that the industry develop customized career progression plans for interns/employees – from entry level to management – to ensure that succession planning is in place. Though a salary is vital, non-monetary benefits are equally important to gaining realistic experience. These include a positive work environment, responsibility at work and fair and reasonable working hours. These and other factors strongly influence retention rates.

The minimum wage was introduced in Malaysia in 2012 as part of a national transformation plan to achieve higher income status for a larger proportion of the population, poverty reduction, increased domestic demand and to encourage enterprises to move up the value chain by investing in more advanced technology. The aim is also to

improve labour productivity and reduce the demand for unskilled foreign workers. Malaysia currently ranks 43 out of 197 countries in its minimum wage per hour rate. To overcome challenges relating to affordability of the minimum wage in the hospitality and tourism industry, four payment structures were adopted: the so called “clean wage”, fully top up from service point, partially top up from service point and top up by the organization. With the clean wage minimum salary, the new salary remains fixed at RM 1,100 per month irrespective of high or low peak season. If an organisation’s revenue increases, there is no salary increment or reward. This has caused resentment among employees in peak periods as there is no additional reward for an increased workload. That said, minimum wage implementation has resulted in the adoption of the best payment structure for reduced operator labour costs. In effect, this has led to a reduced service charge allocation to employees although the impact of this has been minimal in terms of improved employee productivity and motivation. On a positive note, this change has helped to reduce staff turnover and it affords a fairer wage settlement for foreign workers who were previously paid at a lower rate.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the knowledge and ideas graduates bring to an organisation; their willingness to learn and speed of learning; their flexibility, adaptability and ability to deal with change; their logical, analytic, critical, problem-solving and synthetic skills; and the impact they have on contribution towards innovation and development are vital to the future of the Malaysian hospitality and tourism industry. In support of this, the Malaysian qualification framework places emphasis on knowledge, practical skills, social skills and responsibilities, values, attitudes, professionalism, communication, leadership, team skills, problem-solving skills, scientific skills, information management, lifelong learning skills and managerial and entrepreneurial skills.

The way forward for hospitality and tourism educational providers should include more options for WBL approaches, 2u2i and lifelong learning programmes and in doing so, this will forge closer and stronger links with the industry. Malaysia’s hospitality and tourism industry is facing an acute shortage of skilled employees – accentuated by the fact that jobs in the industry are not broadly appealing to Malaysians. The industry is keen to attract graduates with a professional attitude and mindset and to secure this objective, a greater focus on WBL is needed. This issue also highlights the fact that Malaysia’s minimum wage policy has proven to be cost-effective for industry but that as yet, it has not helped to enhance employee motivation and productivity. This is a facet of the industry that needs attention and support by both educational providers and the industry as they seek to model professional practice in their respective development approaches. Short internship programmes (typically three to six months) are not viewed by stakeholders (students, industry, educational providers) as especially productive because WBL approaches and 2u2i programmes and/or collaboration with organizations such as the GULL better reflect the changing needs of industry. For educational providers, the wider adoption of digital technologies within the curriculum is viewed as a priority as funding for this becomes available to augment the graduate skill set, enhance employment prospects and add value for employers.

Although much has been done by the Malaysia Centre for Tourism and Hospitality Education and other agencies to promote hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia, this initiative will need to be sustained given the anticipated 600,000 new hospitality and tourism job opportunities in Malaysia in this decade. Further support

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from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture is clearly needed. Finally, the strategic question *The way forward: How is Malaysian hospitality and tourism education working with industry?* could and perhaps should be considered by other ASEAN countries so that they are better able to understand how their hospitality and tourism education sector is working with industry.

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