

The advancement of hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia

Hospitality
and tourism
education

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the ways in which hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia is working with the Malaysian Industry 4.0 framework.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research approach was used to conduct 30 interviews with respondents working for academic institutions and local or foreign companies.

Findings – The analysis of data helped to identify themes relating to current foreign partnerships within this area of industry.

Originality/value – Through the resolution of this research question, specific recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders are made, which, if implemented, may facilitate further improvements in tourism and hospitality education in support of industry in Malaysia.

Keywords Malaysia, Tourism, Education, Hospitality, Foreign Partnerships

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which the Malaysian hospitality and tourism education industries are working with the Malaysian industry framework 4.0. To accomplish this task, the paper seeks to answer the following:

- What new partnerships are fostering the advancement of hospitality and tourism in Malaysia?
- How are those partnerships facilitated with academia and internalization within the country?
- In what ways can these partnerships be improved for the advancement of the hospitality and tourism education industry in Malaysia?

As an outcome of investigating these questions, specific recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders are made that offer the potential for further improvement in the nation's tourism and hospitality industries. While Malaysia currently ranks as the 11th most visited



destination in the world, if this ranking is to remain consistent or to be improved, efforts must be made to explore the current state of affairs within the industry ([World Tourism Organization, 2017](#)). In view of this, a qualitative and descriptive study was conducted to gather information as to how industry improvements could be made that might benefit the industry and Malaysia and yield wider economic benefits for the region.

Research approach

A qualitative and descriptive study was undertaken that drew on discussions with four participant groups, allowing for an exploration of different foreign partnerships in Malaysia that are currently or potentially influencing the hospitality and tourism industries. The ways in which those partnerships have affected or have the potential to affect hospitality and tourism were identified and documented. This information was used to construct an interview schedule, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives of management-level employees in foreign partnership companies and with academics to determine how those partnerships were fostered. The target number of participants was 30. Ten of the participants worked at foreign companies who held partnership agreements with domestic companies, ten worked at domestic companies that held partnerships with foreign companies and ten were senior academics. Using transcripts created from the semi-structured interviews, the researcher conducted a content analysis to facilitate a better understanding of the different interactions occurring among the three groups. This led to a number of recommendations that might facilitate industry improvements.

Partnerships and their influence

The first type of partnership identified was the relationship between international centres of higher education ([Poulain *et al.*, 2014](#)). Partnerships between institutes of higher education serve as one of the foundational partnerships within the hospitality and tourism education industry in the creation of connections between it and Industry 4.0 ([Poulain *et al.*, 2014](#)). Students who participate in such programmes and go on to be employed in other fields or other countries can use the knowledge gained from partnership programmes between the different institutes of higher education in their subsequent career paths. This, in turn, opens up possibilities for new partnerships that could bolster the hospitality and tourism industry in Malaysia.

In addition to partnerships in the higher education industry, partnerships also exist between the hospitality and tourism education industry and the Malaysian Government. These programmes are designed to provide support through foreign exchange earnings and to generate employment through improvements in competency, resulting in the creation of new international partnerships. By turning out students who have undergone high-quality education and acquired competencies that can be readily applied in the workplace, the government is able to promote these factors to international organizations, offering a framework that promotes the hospitality and tourism industry in an international context too ([Yusof, 2010](#)). By providing a high standard of education, the country is able to facilitate the promotion of partnerships with international organizations to further bolster and support the hospitality and tourism industry; this potential benefit suggests the need to prioritize the provision of resources and governmental support for the hospitality and tourism education industry ([Yusof, 2010](#)).

Interviews

Participants were divided into three groups: participants from academia, international organizations and from domestic organizations in Malaysia. Within the academia group, five of the participants worked in departments associated with domestic higher education

partnerships and five worked in departments associated with international higher education partnerships. The international organization participants worked for companies that had partnerships with the domestic hospitality and tourism industry as did the domestic organization participants. This resulted in the creation of four different semi-structured interview guides, allowing the questions to be tailored to the specific participant group with which each individual participant was affiliated. The interview guides consisted of ten questions each, with the option for the researchers to ask additional questions to gain clarification as needed. All interviews were conducted via Skype, and participants provided signed informed consent to the researchers beforehand. No video recording was conducted, and any personally identifying information was redacted to maintain participant confidentiality. A content analysis, using level-two coding, was conducted on the transcripts.

Results

Questions asked to international participants focussed on their perceptions of partnerships between hospitality and tourism education and their own organization, which allowed for the identification of areas in need of improvement and aspects that were working well. Questions asked to domestic participants focussed on their perceptions of partnerships with hospitality and tourism education, their own organization's role in the partnerships and their perspective on partnerships with international companies. As with international participants, this allowed for the identification of areas in need of improvement and aspects that were working well. The academic participants were asked about their perception regarding the partnership programmes and the relationship between higher education organizations, focussing on the identification of areas for improvement and aspects that were working well.

International partnerships

Looking first to those working in international organizations, many participants found the partnerships to be beneficial because of the additional benefits that such partnerships brought to their organizations. By partnering with Malaysian hospitality and tourism education providers, companies were able to maintain a steady stream of qualified applicants versed in international relationships, thanks to their backgrounds in hospitality and tourism education. Candidates were not only well educated but also brought with them a host of innovative ideas that worked to either bolster the international organization or provide additional opportunities for growth of the international organization that coincided with partnerships in Malaysia, resulting in increased opportunities for networking. Individuals in this participant group did, however, make note of several areas in which improvements could be made.

The first area for improvement identified was that participants desired an easier means of communicating with their educational contacts and with students to expand their potential applicant pools. Several of the participants indicated that they felt as though they may receive a wider sampling of potential applicants if they were able to more effectively communicate their company's vision and what they were looking for to students. Further, that such a partnership should provide the company they represented with additional opportunities to convey information about their company to those in the hospitality and tourism education sector. In addition to concerns about communication and opportunities for additional contact, participants also noted that they would prefer schools providing hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia to contact them more frequently with additional information on changes within the programmes. This would enable them to provide better insight into the areas that could be mutually beneficial or identify areas in which the programmes could be strengthened for better alignment with their needs, allowing for dynamic improvement in the partnership.

Domestic partnerships

Participants working for organizations with domestic partnerships with hospitality and tourism providers and with an international component to the relationship indicated that, on the whole, they were pleased with their partnerships with hospitality and tourism education providers in Malaysia. The respondents felt that they were provided with ample opportunities to connect with students and, based on those conversations with students, were able to contact educational providers with whom they had partnerships to provide their thoughts on different curriculum areas that could be strengthened or areas in which the curriculum may not be in alignment with current practices. Additionally, respondents felt that they were receiving a substantial number of applicants to work in their organizations from students graduating from hospitality and tourism education and that these students are “work ready” and are able to contribute to the tourist revenues of the organization for which those students now worked. Furthermore, several of the domestic companies reported an increase in international recognition after favourable tourism write-ups and increased media attention.

As with the international respondents, the participants identified certain areas for improvement within the partnerships. Participants indicated that while they were able to provide information to students and were able to communicate with hospitality and tourism education providers, there was a certain amount of difficulty when it came to reviewing information. It was noted that in spite of providing specific information to educational providers, they would often receive inquiries from students, which could have been answered had the students actually read the provided materials, resulting in diminished efficiency in the hiring process. As one participant put it:

It is as though, by providing information, many students feel that this is *carte blanche* permission to ask anything, instead of doing their own research and resolving their questions on their own. While some students may see this as being tenacious or expressing interest in the company, that type of interest decreases our interest in those students; something that we have had difficulty conveying to the schools. We are able to address curriculum concerns, such as getting technologies updated within the curricula, decreasing the amount of training that would be needed without those changes, but we cannot seem to convey the need to change student personal perspectives regarding presentation of interest in an organization. While it is possible that there are internationally based organizations that appreciate this type of approach, it is not a desired approach within our company.

Foreign academia members

Participants noted that the partnership(s) with Malaysian institute(s) of higher education, with whom their higher education institute worked, served a strong purpose, offering opportunities for advancement for students from both countries, including the potential for exchange programmes. Through continuous contact between the two organizations, curricula remained current and relevant through connections to the labour markets in both countries. Further, the contacts within the labour market facilitated through outside partnerships within each of the respective institutes of higher education offered opportunities that students may have otherwise had difficulty learning of, which in turn helped to create a streamlined path from education to workforce. Continued communication between institutes of higher education offered unique opportunities for vocational education that are not a traditional part of the tourism and hospitality education industry.

The areas identified for improvement were primarily logistical. These included concerns over working language, variations in administrative management and variations in degree plans and educational approaches. While Malaysia uses English as one of its working languages, and while English is a compulsory subject in schools, it is not the native

language of Malaysia, and depending on the region of Malaysia in which the domestic school is located, one of ten different dialects of Malay may be the primary language. While schools do teach in English, this creates certain difficulties for exchange programme students, who do not have the opportunity to learn Malay and who, as such, may have difficulties if a professor switches between languages, even inadvertently.

Similarly, the reverse can happen in the exchange programmes, creating difficulties for Malaysian students who may visit a hospitality and tourism institute of higher education in a foreign country as a part of an exchange programme, resulting in problems if the native language of that country is something other than English. Even if a course is taught in English, the professor may switch, even accidentally, to the primary language of the country, for example, German and French, which can create problems for the student.

Variations in administrative management may create a learning curve for students who may be used to a particular approach or a particular type of discipline, resulting in difficulties in student integration, even if the student is familiar with the material being covered. A further concern is the fact that different countries use different degree rankings and assign different levels of importance to different classes or have different numbers of classes associated with different degree rankings, which can make identification of where to place an exchange student a tricky process.

Domestic academia members

Domestic academia members expressed positive appreciation of the partnerships and academic collaborations with foreign and domestic organizations in the hospitality and tourism industries and with institutes of higher education. The participants noted that exchange programmes provided opportunities that worked to deepen student understanding of behind-the-scenes operations, that students were able to gain greater knowledge and that the knowledge gained by students had a greater applicability within the workforce as a result of these partnerships. Further, the participants thought that as a result of the innovations, partnerships and programmes that had been created, students had more opportunities than ever and were able to access a wider range of programmes and opportunities. This, in turn, worked to create positive reviews of the programmes themselves and increased the number of students applying for the programmes. Additionally, through word-of-mouth, new opportunities continue to be generated for partnerships.

When asked about areas in which improvements could occur, two of the three participants thought that the programmes worked well and were working as intended, and they did not notice any areas in need of improvement. The other three participants noted that there were certain minor difficulties in communication between their programmes and organizations with whom the schools that they represented had international partnership agreements and that there were occasional difficulties in the identification of programme placement for exchange students. They also noted the fact that there were, at times, too many tasks that required their attention, which resulted in issues with conveying information because of improper understanding of skimmed materials and things of a similar nature.

Overall synthesis

All participants had a host of positive benefits to discuss regarding foreign partnerships, academic collaborations and internationalization as they pertained to the advancement of the hospitality and tourism industries, with a focus on boosting tourism practices. Domestic businesses indicated that there was a boost to their organizations as a result of the high quality of hospitality and tourism education received by students, and international organizations indicated that individuals coming from hospitality and tourism education programmes in

Malaysia were a boon to their organizations. Those within academia associated with the hospitality and tourism providers, both foreign and domestic, indicated that the programmes provided positive results, and the partnerships between foreign and domestic hospitality and tourism education providers yielded benefits to organizations on both sides.

Areas in need of improvement or areas that could benefit from improvement were identified across all participant groups; in some instances, the areas identified for improvement overlapped in the responses of the different participant groups. The single unified area identified as in need of improvement mentioned by all participant groups was the need for improved communication within the partnership network. Additional areas identified as in need of improvement were somewhat specific to the type of organization represented by the participant. Within foreign organizations, there was a desire for additional opportunities for contact with domestic hospitality and tourism education providers and a desire for greater influence on programme curricula. Foreign institutes of higher education expressed issues with unified working language, programme logistics because of variations in administrative management, degree plans and educational approaches; these same issues were discussed by domestic institutes of higher education as well, though these areas were unique to institutes of higher education and were not concerns of domestic or foreign organizations within the hospitality and tourism industries.

Discussion

Through the analysis of interview transcripts, identification of themes and synthesis of the results, certain aspects of the research question were resolved. The foreign partnerships that work to foster the advancement of hospitality and tourism within Malaysia were identified: domestic participants in the hospitality and tourism education industry, foreign partners in the hospitality and tourism education industry, domestic organizations associated with the hospitality and tourism industry, foreign partners in the hospitality and tourism industry and the hospitality and tourism education industry itself. Through the interviews, it became possible to understand the manner in which these partnerships were fostered. The benefits and the detriments discussed by the participants provided insight into the partnership structure of the organizations, the relationships between the different organizations and insight into how each organization fits into a collaborative partnership structure. The third and final segment of the following research question can be explored within the context of the recommendations made in the next section:

RQ1. In what ways can these partnerships be improved for the advancement of the hospitality and tourism education industry in Malaysia?

Recommendations

Even though the only area in which all participant groups identified an issue was that of communication, there are still a great many things that each of the respective groups can learn from one another if the organizations are to work to address the identified communication concerns. It is recommended that, having identified these problems, each of the specific group should work to open a line of communication with others to resolve issues specific to their individual relationships. It is also recommended that conferences are created to facilitate further interaction, as conferences can provide stakeholder engagement through the creation of multi-stakeholder learning dialogues (Andriof *et al.*, 2017). The multi-stakeholder learning dialogue can provide an opportunity for open discussion of these

issues, integrating multiple perspectives, which can in turn offer the potential for innovative solutions to common problems, the creation of uniform solutions designed to address the problems that have been identified by all involved parties and the identification of issues not previously considered as areas in need of improvement but which, through continued discourse, are identified and can enable improvements within the defined relationship patterns among stakeholders (Andriof *et al.*, 2017). By placing all involved parties in a centralized location, on a neutral ground, any potential imbalances of power, whether real or imagined, can be reduced, facilitating progress in the aforementioned conversations.

Applying the recommendation to create a conference that would enable all parties to work to resolve their issues with communication between agencies would also give foreign organizations the opportunity for additional contact with domestic organizations. The implementation of a conference would provide means through which foreign organizations could connect more completely, and in person, with representatives from domestic organizations to create presentations and offer opportunities for one-on-one, in-person meetings that may not otherwise be possible because of distance or scheduling considerations (Andriof *et al.*, 2017).

Not all recommendations made can span all involved organizations; however, and as such, there is a need to look at tailored recommendations that can work to address identified issues. Looking specifically at the relationship between foreign and domestic institutions in the hospitality and tourism education industry, four key areas were identified as in need of improvement: a need for an improved unified working language, a path towards resolution of variations identified between foreign and domestic academic programmes, a path towards resolution of variations in administrative management that could result in programme difficulties and a path towards the resolution of variation in educational approaches. While it is true that these variations serve as strengths to each of the respective schools in question, when such variations start to affect working relationships between organizations, it is time for the different organizations to come together to create a unified method through which such variations can be addressed in a manner that does not compromise the working relationship or the programme offerings between those organizations (Toom *et al.*, 2017).

To this end, it is recommended that each of the respective schools engaged in a partnership of this nature should undergo teacher development efforts (Butler *et al.*, 2014). With these areas identified as problem areas within institutes of higher education, regardless of the country in which those organizations are located, in addition to interagency collaboration, teachers in their respective organizations should, through teacher development activities, work to explore ways in which they, as educators, have control over these problems, identifying potential steps that can be taken within their respective agencies to work to resolve them (Butler *et al.*, 2014). While the identified solutions may not work to resolve all interagency issues, they may work to reduce the severity or frequency of certain issues. For example, during teacher development, teachers may work to strategize the different efforts that can be made within the classroom setting to ensure that the working language remains unified throughout the course of the class duration, thereby working to increase comprehension by students during class time.

Similarly, educators may identify the need to create additional seminars designed to assist students in understanding how to read and comprehend materials provided by partnership companies and how to respond appropriately to those materials. The creation of such opportunities may result in an increased benefit to students participating in these programmes, which may result in increased interest in the programmes, translating into increased revenues within the hospitality and tourism education industry. Increased

revenue for educational providers will result in increased interest in hospitality and tourism education programmes, which will translate to the potential for improvement in curricula, programme offerings and similar considerations, resulting in increased desirability within the hospitality and tourism industry for students who have completed the programme, allowing the cycle of growth to continue.

It is not only teachers who will need to work to address identified issues in the hospitality and tourism education industry, given that programme logistic issues identified include variations within administrative management and degree plans, but also administrators will likewise need work to identify ways in which these matters can be addressed. Administrators should communicate with one another both within their own organizations and across organizations to identify targeted ways in which a more unified approach to degree management may be incorporated. This will result in a more efficient application of variations within the targeted degree planning process and facilitate integration within the different exchange programmes and the creation of additional programmes, such as student mentoring, that will allow for a smooth transition between exchange programmes, and the administrative programmes set up at each of the respective schools. This type of agency-centred pairing is advocated so as to facilitate a more effective method of educational organization and management (Hökkä and Vähäsantanen, 2013).

Because of varying and continual changes and challenges within the educational workplace environment, the creation of agency-centric pairings provides a method to facilitate organizational transformation, promote teacher development and reinforce educational organization commitment (Hökkä and Vähäsantanen, 2013). Organizations can engage in such couplings in instances where multiple agencies are working together towards the achievement of a common goal, as in the case of management of exchange programmes and partnerships with other institutes of higher education, and can apply similar practices and principles at the administrative level when working to facilitate interdepartmental communications and practices in the context of a single campus or organization (Hökkä and Vähäsantanen, 2013).

The final recommendation made for improvement of current practices in the hospitality and tourism educational industry is the creation of an online portal that may be used to offer a unified medium through which hospitality and tourism businesses and education providers can connect with one another without having to meet in person or go through a variety of different channels in the hope of receiving a timely response. Through the creation of an online portal, questions could be answered and teaching materials and walkthroughs could be created that would provide answers to standardized questions regarding interactions between the different organizations and industries. Still further, this would provide international and domestic organizations with the opportunity to connect and discuss curricula, offering recommendations through a unified portal that schools could then follow. By integrating the use of online technologies in the resolution of identified issues, all parties could work together through a unified system of communication that would allow for real-time communication.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore some of the ways in which Malaysian hospitality and tourism education providers are working with Industry 4.0 and to identify how those partnerships could be used to improve hospitality and tourism practices in Malaysia. The researchers identified pertinent partnerships in this area and discussed the manner in which those partnerships were fostered between agencies. The collection and analysis of this information led to the identification of recommendations that could work to facilitate improvements within those partnerships based on areas in need of improvement as

identified through interviews with individuals in the different areas of the industry. Recommendations were made for all agencies involved as a whole and for specific collaborative efforts and partnerships.

These recommendations were made based on a small, non-representative sample of individuals across four different locations/areas of the industry. While the sample itself may not be representative of the industry and its influences as a whole, the fact that multiple people identified similar areas which are in need of improvement suggests that, indeed, these areas merit further attention and investigation. In keeping with this qualifying statement, further research will be needed to identify the feasibility and effectiveness of those recommendations. It is believed that these recommendations will provide a solid foundation for improvement in foreign partnerships, academic collaboration and internalization, ultimately working towards the advancement of hospitality and tourism practice in Malaysia. Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industries have a history of steady and consistent growth, and making changes of this nature should afford improvements that will allow the country to continue to rise on the list of the most popular tourist destinations (World Tourism Organization, 2017).

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