Competently skilled human capital through education for the hospitality and tourism industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the viability of the curricula offered by a university specialising in hospitality and tourism education in Kuching, Sarawak. The study also aims to explore the relevance and application of the hospitality and tourism education curricula to the needs of the Sarawak hospitality and tourism industry.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded in human capital theory, the article highlights the importance of education in facilitating competently skilled human capital. Using a qualitative research approach, the outcomes indicate that the curricula offered by the hospitality and tourism education sector does meet the basic industry needs in Sarawak.

Findings – The outcomes suggest that the education sector should adopt a work-based learning model as this is shown to be an effective approach to enhancing practical relevance and competency.

Originality/value – There is insufficient empirical evidence on the exact set of skills and knowledge needed by an individual to be competently skilled in response to the needs of the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak.

Keywords Competency, Human capital, Hospitality, Tourism, Education, Sarawak

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

From a macro perspective, the hospitality and tourism industry in Malaysia has made a significant contribution to Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) with an increase of 9.4 per cent since 2015, attaining 14.8 per cent of GDP in 2016, which equates to 182.4bn Malaysian Ringgit (MYR) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). Given the Malaysian government's goal to transform Malaysia into a higher income nation, the country needs to have at least 500,000 skilled and trained graduates in support of this initiative (Selvaratnam, 2016). Furthermore, with the launch of the Visit Malaysia 2020 programme early in 2018, Malaysia aims to attract at least 36 million tourists with projected income generation of 168bn MYR (Corporate Communication Division, 2018). In 2016, Sarawak received a total of 8.4bn MYR in tourism receipts with 4,661,100 tourist arrivals, an increase of 3.19 per cent since 2015. However, there was a decrease in tourism receipts of 13.45 per cent as compared to 2015 (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Sarawak, 2017).

Research conducted by Kasa and Hassan (2016) concluded that by ensuring the relevance and applicability of the hospitality and tourism education curricula to the industry, a skilled and

competent workforce can be created. Not only that, but for the tourism industry to succeed, Kasa and Hassan (2016) argue that it must follow the government's plan for equipping employees with the skills to deliver and maintain consistent service quality. The over-arching human capital development need in the industry is for an educational curricula that fosters an immediate interconnection with the economic development of the industry (Ladkin, 2005). After an extensive review of documents and guidelines published by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2013) relating to hospitality and tourism education, it was discovered that Bachelor-level graduates should be well trained and possess specialised and extensive practical skills and theoretical knowledge that are relevant to the industry. Additionally, graduates should be able to work ethically and efficiently in their chosen field of the hospitality and tourism industry.

According to Professor Theodore W. Schultz, the essential element in developing human capital is "'education' as it enhances the ability of a person to deal with uncertainty and it sharpens problem-solving skills (Lo, 2005; Lin, 2005). Although Schultz was writing about human capital in 1961, Gary S. Becker is regarded as a leading thinker on the development of human capital theory (Swanson and Holton, 2001). It accentuates the importance of education in developing productivity and employee competency. This is made possible as education influences a person's mentality, and therefore productivity (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008). Thus, investments in human capital through education are important as the knowledge acquired by the current generation can in a similar way be transferred to the next generation (Babalola, 2003). Not only that, the younger generation must be taught about the correct application of the knowledge passed down from the current generation and, at the same time, encouraged to be innovative in using the knowledge acquired. The concept of human capital theory is important to the development of a nation as the value of human capital is equal and arguably more valuable than physical capital such as money because human capability can be nurtured through education (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008). In essence, human capital theory is important to the development of a nation as it enhances the ability of the population to be productive (Schultz, 1971; Sakamoto and Powers, 1995; Psacharopoulus and Woodhall, 1997).

Given the potential of human capital theory, governments and other stakeholders should appreciate that the most valuable asset that a country or company possesses is its human resource. It is competent, skilled human capital that is the essential factor in the transformation of a nation. Other forms of capital and natural resources cannot be nurtured and released in quite the same way (Psacharopoulus and Woodhall, 1997). When the potential of education is realised, the justification for investing in human capital theory in developing and developed countries is met (Fagerlind and Saha, 1997). To highlight the importance of an appropriate undergraduate curricula for hospitality and tourism education, prior empirical studies on human capital theory by Robert (1991) indicated that productivity at work equates to investment made in the education sector. His studies, supported by statistics from the World Bank (1995), showed that countries in East Asia that made significant investments in education secured high productivity rates in support of economic growth. Without government support and funding, it is difficult for the educational sector to facilitate skilled human capital for industry (Van-Den-Berg, 2001). Although the specific location of research conducted is not specified, Van-Den-Berg (2001) observed that countries that are leading technological advancement have the highest percentage of the population that have received education. The level of innovation, research and development skills and entrepreneurial skills of a society is also linked to the level of education in society as noted by Odekunle (2001).

The human capital theory model, presented in Figure 1, as adopted from Swanson and Holton (2001), has three perspectives. Each is an underlying assumption of the key relationships in human capital theory as suggested by Schultz in 1961. The first link assumes that an increase in learning relates to an investment made in the provision of

education and training. The second link highlights a relationship between the learning process and an increase in productivity level, which, it is concluded, leads to an increase in learning and an increase in productivity. Last but not least, the third link deduces that an increase in productivity is likely to affect an individual's wages.

If the hospitality and tourism industry is to have sufficient competently skilled human capital, the industry needs to support educational providers (Lo, 2005). A well-structured curricula that matches the needs of industry provides a form of competitive advantage for the university (Lo, 2005). Ladkin (2005) suggests that regular communication between education and industry is needed to ensure that industry understands and recognises the importance of hospitality and tourism education in preparing young people to work in the industry. Walo (2000) agrees and suggests that collaboration and dialogue between both stakeholders is necessary to ensure that the reality gap is met.

As there have been few empirical studies of the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak, the viability of undergraduate curricula is investigated to ensure that educational providers are preparing graduates with the right skills and knowledge. In this context, two research questions were developed:

RQ1. Can the undergraduate curricula be applied in Sarawak's hospitality and tourism industry?

RQ2. How relevant is the curricula to Sarawak's hospitality and tourism industry?

Literature review
Roles of hospitality and tourism education
As hospitality and tourism in Sarawak is considered to be a fast growing industry, it will continue to create more employment opportunities. However, the growth of the industry will be stunted if there are not enough competent skilled hospitality and tourism workers. In view of this, educational providers should focus on developing business, hospitality, language and culture, and sales service skills as suggested by Graetz and Beeton (2001). Thus, the role that hospitality and tourism education plays is to ensure that graduates are equipped with knowledge about advances in technology and the skills needed to serve guests (Amoah
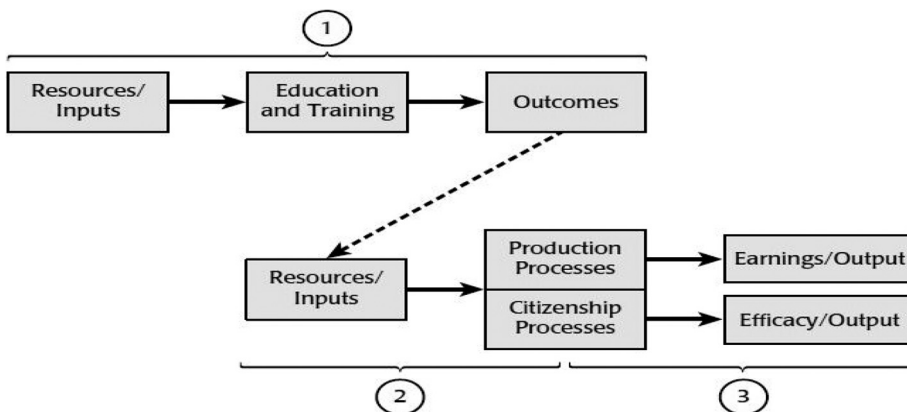

Figure 1.
The human capital
theory model

Source: Swanson and Holton (2001, p. 110)

and Baum, 1997). Further, educational providers can help to sustain the industry by ensuring a constant supply of graduates, ready to fill vacancies. Above all, there is a need for hospitality and tourism education to prepare its graduands to uplift the industry (Amoah and Baum, 1997). If educational providers succeed in this, it should be possible to reduce reliance on foreign staff working in the local industry (Amoah and Baum, 1997).

Towards a work-based learning curricula model

Most tourism industry organisations tend to support a vocational approach to tourism curriculum development as it more closely mirrors their economic realities (Stromquist, 2002). Cooper (2002) points out that education and the needs of the workplace are now more closely aligned and that tourism industry courses have become more vocational in orientation. In 2016, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) introduced work-based learning (WBL), specifically to enhance hospitality and tourism education. Although the concept of WBL in itself is not new, it was only recently introduced because the supply of graduates in hospitality and tourism fields is not sufficient to meet the industry's needs – an issue that was acknowledged in the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015-2025. In the context of hospitality and tourism education, WBL values the discovery and application of knowledge acquired in the classroom and yields stakeholder benefits for students, higher education providers (HEPs) and employers. Students benefit, as WBL helps to foster and develop a positive industry attitude while acquiring industry-relevant skills and knowledge. Further, WBL helps HEPs to keep up with industry trends of and incorporate them in the curricula and industry benefits from enthusiastic "work ready" graduates and this helps to lower recruitment and retention costs (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2016).

Hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia

Education for hospitality and tourism in Malaysia began in 1967 and it had a strong vocational emphasis, using a mix of coaching and technical training that was strongly influenced by the German technical education approach. However, hospitality and tourism programs are currently being offered and taught at colleges, polytechnics and universities without boundary setting by the Malaysian higher education system (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2013). As Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry is growing, the issue of skilled industry entrants is topical and related to this, the location, mode of delivery and flexiblity of educational providers (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2013).

Further, the Malaysian higher education system recognises that the hospitality and tourism industry consists of many large and small enterprises competing each other and that this is continuously re-shaping the industry and affecting the approaches and management of the curricula for hospitality and tourism education. The Malaysian government has sought to address this by working with the MQA to symmetrically develop the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF) that provides a lead in managing the standard of excellence and providing a definitive qualification for the education system (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2013). The MQF comprises learning outcomes with eight areas of emphasis, as shown in Table I.

Malaysian hospitality and tourism education programme standards

In the effort to elevate the nation's tourism industry, the MQA has developed guidelines that are known as the Programmes Standard: Hospitality and Tourism, for HEPs. The aim is to assist HEPs to respond to the ever-changing nature of the hospitality and tourism industry so that they are able to produce graduates who are well equipped to respond to the industry's professional needs. The guidelines also assist HEPs to ensure that the curricula for hospitality

and tourism education remains relevant to the industry. The guidelines contain four sections: hospitality/hotels; travel and tourism; culinary arts; and food service, and their purpose is to represent consensus on all aspects of educational quality and responsiveness to industry's needs. The guidelines developed by the MQA consist of ten elements that accentuate the value and capability of the curricula, such that HEPs can demonstrate how they are able to follow and consistently deliver on the standards stated in the guidelines. That said, HEPs are responsible for maintaining the standards of education and awareness of changes in the industry so as to ensure that their courses keep pace (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2013).

Hospitality and tourism education's Bachelor degree provision
In line with qualifications set by the MQA, the purpose of the Bachelor degree is to equip students with the skills that will enable them to be competent and knowledgeable when they enter the industry. Students undertaking the Bachelor degree are also introduced to analytical thinking and innovation skills together with an appreciation of cultural diversity, ethics and cultural sensitivity (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2013). In accordance with the standards set by the MQA, a graduate should be able to apply the skills acquired in their field of expertise and demonstrate ingenuity and awareness of legal and ethical considerations when dealing with operational issues and exhibit good leadership and entrepreneurial traits. The latter includes but is not limited to the ability to work in a team and communicate efficiently with co-workers (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2013). Table II compares the learning outcomes of an MQA diploma and Bachelor degree, respectively, as denoted in the Programme Standards: Hospitality and Tourism handbook.

Research approach
This study uses qualitative methods to understand the phenomenology of those delivering the Bachelor degree curricula. Phenomenology can be used to classify people's real-life experiences (Merriam, 2009) and enables the researcher to include their own opinions on the information obtained from participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). Other than that, the study is exploratory in nature as it includes semi-structured interviews with key decision-makers in curriculum development, supported by secondary data were reviews of official documents and guidelines released by the MQA relating to the standards of hospitality and tourism programmes in Malaysia.

Sample size and data collection
A total of four academic respondents and four hotel industry respondents were involved in the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher should cease to collect data from

Emphasis area no.	Learning outcomes
1	Knowledge
2	Practical skills
3	Social skills and responsibilities
4	Values, attitudes and professionalism
5	Communication, leadership and team skills
6	Problem-solving and scientific skills
7	Information management and lifelong learning skills
8	Managerial and entrepreneurial skills

Source: Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2013)

Table I.
MQF learning
outcomes emphasis

Diploma	Bachelor's degree
Demonstrate technical knowledge and associated hands-on skills in the area of specialisation	Apply in-depth knowledge and skills in the area of specialisation
Demonstrate creativity and entrepreneurship in operational issues	Communicate ideas and information effectively
Demonstrate supervisory ability, teamwork, interpersonal and social skills	Seek and analyse information for decision-making
Communicate effectively and solve operational problems	Display leadership and and entrepreneurship qualities ethically
Use information from multiple sources	Demonstrate creativity and innovativness in operational issues
Demonstrate professionalism in accordance with ethical and legal practices	Demonstrate managerial attributes, teamwork, interpersonal and social skills
Nurture intellectual and professional growth through lifelong learning activities	Apply professionalism in accordance with ethical and legal practices
	Nurture intellectual and professional growth through lifelong learning activities
Source: Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2016)	

Table II.
Comparison of
Diploma and
Bachelor degree

participants when there is saturation or repetition of data and information. The sample size for qualitative study (the number of participants) was not pre-determined by the researcher nor by various factors such as the questions asked, data collected or the availability of other resources that support the study (Merriam *et al.*, 2007). Data collection had, in fact, reached the saturation point after the fourth participant was interviewed. Participants were selected based on their level of involvement in designing and implementing university-level hospitality and tourism Bachelor degree curricula. Their consent was sought to record the interviews and the audio recordings are held in confidence solely by the researcher. After each face-to-face interview, the audio recordings were transcribed as qualitative data analysis is an ongoing, cumulative process (Kielman *et al.*, 2012). In total, the study involved eight interview sessions conduction over a period of four months during which data was analysed manually using word processing and spreadsheet software.

Research validity and reliability
Commenting on the validity of qualitative research, Merriam *et al.* (2007) observe that credibility resides in matching the real-world situation and condition with the participants' perspective. Further, the researcher plays an important role in the validity of the research, based on their observations and the interview process. The validity of this study was verified via multiple processes: triangulation was used to determine and ensure that the researcher's own opinions did not influence the outcomes (Brink, 1993). Second, various documents about aspects of the education sector and its curricula were reviewed together with hospitality and tourism industry reports. Besides that, face validity helped to ascertain that the various items used to analyse the research were appropriate (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). The data collected were reviewed and checked separately by a panel of experts to cross-check for consistency between the validators and the researcher, as suggested by Brink (1993). Further, inter-coder analysis was conducted to reduce bias, involving more than one data analyst in analysing and interpreting the data. Merriam (2009) states that this is a process used in qualitative research to ensure that the collection and interpretation of data is checked and that validity can be verified.

The purpose of research reliability is to determine whether the outcomes of the study can be applied to other contexts or if outcomes can be reproduced (Merriam *et al.*, 2007). Although the development of the hospitality and tourism industry is dependent on skilled employees, past studies have shown that different set of skills and knowledge are required (Ricci, 2010; Nolan *et al.*, 2010; Agut *et al.*, 2003; Jauhari, 2006). Additionally, the hospitality and tourism education curricula may vary from one tertiary educational institute to another. Given this, the outcomes of the study may only be applicable to the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak, and the particular tertiary education institute studied. However, using similar techniques, it should be possible to explore the extent to which findings might apply elsewhere (Merriam *et al.*, 2007). That said, the outcomes of any given qualitative study should not be generalised as each study is important, one-of-a-kind and yields particular benefits for that particular study (Denzin, 1998).

Findings
Practicability of the Bachelor degree education curricula
The hospitality and tourism industry of Sarawak should understand that the education sector prepares students holistically so that they are equipped to work in hotels and other sectors too. Ladkin (2005) observes that hospitality and tourism education providers must communicate with the industry so that they are able to prepare students for the workplace. Equally, the industry should be proactive in updating and advising the education sector on ways to improve their curricula.

The current study's education curricula aims to instil critical thinking, entrepreneurial, interpersonal and managerial skills and, as noted by Amoah and Baum (1997), this helps to ensure that graduates are equipped with important generic skills. This also accords with the standards established by the MQA in relation to the desired learning outcomes at Bachelor degree level. Furthermore, the value of curricula is enhanced by industrial placements of a minimum six month's duration – this point was cited as particularly important by Respondents 1 and 2. Additionally, such placements equip students to be employed by the industry on completion of their studies.

Respondent 3 observed that cross-exposure with workplace settings yields valuable experience and helps to improve problem-solving skills. Further, lecturers are encouraged to plan and incorporate industry visits (Respondents 2 and 4), and from these and other responses, it is clear that the education sector is aware and responsive to the needs of the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak. This is a different finding from Salleh *et al.* (2010) who found that non-alignment of hospitality and tourism education curricula with the needs of industry has contributed to graduate recruitment shortages as students did not have a realistic understanding of the workplace. That said, this study was completed some years ago and it might well be the case that educational providers have dealt with some if not all of the alignment issues, as is reflected in the findings of the current study.

Relevancy of the Bachelor degree curricula
According to academic Respondents 1, 2 and 4, the curricula for hospitality and tourism education are kept relevant by ongoing communication with the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak. This is facilitated by a group of assessors referred to as the Industry Advisory Board (IAB), which is entrusted with the task of reviewing the curricula annually. This kind of ongoing dialogue is advocated by Walo (2000), among others.

The learning outcomes for the Bachelor degree programme relates to the knowledge or skills that students will acquire, verified by assessment to ensure that the outcomes have been met (Respondent 1). Further to this, academic staff submit their teaching plans for

review (Respondent 4). Printed resource materials such as text books must also comply with requirements, and unless there are reasons for using old text books, they should not be more than five years old. These and other provisions are to help ensure that the curricula is relevant and aligned with industry changes and needs. This helps to ensure that the quality and relevance of educational provision fully supports the industry (Amoah and Baum, 1997).

Implications and limitations of the study.

Schultz's human capital theory, elaborated by Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008) among others, suggests that education is among the best ways of positively influencing a person's mentality – especially in a service industry context. This is reflected in the holistic approach to hospitality and tourism education at Bachelor degree level as this prepares students to work in industry operational roles and thereafter in junior management positions. Further to this, the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak expects its workforce to possess and demonstrate an array of professional traits ranging from appropriate behaviour and personality to aesthetic appreciation skills. WBL has proven to be an effective learning method (Kamin *et al.*, 2014), and Kamin *et al.* (2014) reported that WBL in a community college setting helps the students to better understand the automotive industry. This finding should encourage the adoption of WBL initiatives in hospitality and tourism as it is an effective way of ensuring that skills and knowledge are aligned with Sarawak's hospitality and tourism needs.

The current study is limited to the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak, with a particular focus on hotels in Kuching, Sarawak. It is interesting to note that some industry operators were reluctant to participate in interview sessions because of company policy and privacy concerns. Further, the qualitative nature of the study and analysis is limited to the hospitality and tourism industry and the education sector of Sarawak.

Direction for further study.

The current small-scale study could be extended to other sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak such as tour and travel operations and events management. In addition, work could be conducted on aspects of student behaviour and attitudinal readiness for roles in hospitality and tourism. In this and other studies, it would be helpful to include recent graduates so that they can assist in identifying gaps in educational development and "work readiness". As suggested by Christou (1999), it would also be useful to explore the extent to which teaching staff with industry experience add value to hospitality and tourism education – compared with staff with limited teaching experience or industry experience. Finally, a mixed-method research study would help in deriving a deeper understanding of the hospitality and tourism industry in Sarawak – not least because it would seem that practitioners are more likely to be willing to answer a questionnaire than participate in an interview session.

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