

ARE STUDENTS COMPETENCIES IN LINE WITH INDUSTRY EXPECTATION?

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Abstract: *Competencies are perceived as essential for student's future career. Educational providers need to consider industry requirements when planning related educational programme. Thus, a continuous effort must be carried out to identify relevant competencies for hospitality students. This study was undertaken to investigate competencies from the hospitality students' perspective. The research was carried out using questionnaires that were administrated to 30 students from year 3 and year 4 of bachelor hospitality programme in Universiti Utara Malaysia. The results indicated the importance of soft skills as essential competencies. Hospitality students noted the power of teamwork in hospitality industry and good customer relations as essence for excellent customer service. On the other hand, an industry specific competency such as writing standard operating procedures (SOP) and business acumen competencies for example interpreting financial statements, forecasting revenues and forecasting staffing needs were perceived as less important. The study results provide implications that further collaboration between the hospitality education providers and hospitality industry are needed to enhance student's competencies desired by the industry.*

Keywords: *Competencies, Hospitality Students, Hospitality Industry*

Introduction

It is crucial for hospitality students to be equipped with relevant competencies in order to be successful in the competitive hospitality industry environment (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005). As revealed by Kalargyrou and Woods, (2011), the responsibilities of entry-level managers in the hospitality industry are continuously changing due to fast changes faced by the hospitality industry worldwide. Therefore, managers in the hospitality industry are forced to respond to the changing needs and challenges of their organization. Although hospitality educations have been supporting the industry to provide relevant hospitality workforce, there is a concern whether

hospitality students are able to grasp the competency needed by the industry (Wang & Tsai, 2014).

Numerous past studies have been conducted to investigate competencies needed for hospitality graduates to be industry ready (Chung-Herrera, Enz & Lankau, 2003; Hsu, 2012; Jauhari, 2006; Littlejohn, & Watson, 2004; Nolan, Conway, Farrell, & Monks, 2010; Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera, 2009). These past studies focused on the perceptions of the industry leaders, graduates of the program and hospitality program educators. According to Kalargyrou and Woods, (2011), skills and competencies needed for hospitality students may not be the same and keep changing over the years. Hence, understanding and determining hospitality competencies will remain a critical research in the future.

Lately, the issue related to unemployment rates amongst Malaysian graduates has become a major concern for Malaysia higher Education. Chu (2016) revealed that Malaysian graduates and employees in the range age group of 20s cannot cope with work stress, are not willing to work from below and are eager to be in the top position although they are just graduated from college. In addition, a survey on fresh graduate unemployment by Jobstreet.Com in 2016 indicated that top five reasons why graduates are not hired are due to demand for unrealistic salary and benefits (68%); poor command of English (64%); choosy about the job or company (60%); poor communication skills (60%) and poor character, attitude or personality (59%) (Jobstreet.com, 2016). From the top five criteria mentioned above, poor command of English, poor communication skills, poor character, attitude and personality are parts soft skills competency.

For Bouchan, Daya and Ragavan (2016), what students learned during their tertiary education years are crucial in preparing them before entering the workforce. However, nowadays, a good academic qualification does not guarantee graduates to secure a good job position (Ismail, 2011). From the issue pertaining to the graduates' unemployment, several questions have emerged concerning the competencies of our local graduates. In this context of the study, it focused on hospitality students. Do hospitality education programs adequately equip hospitality students with the competencies required by the industry? If not, can the program be improved or changed to meet the demands of the employers?

This study aims to investigate hospitality competencies perceived by hospitality students and focused on competencies for hospitality students. The study also attempts to identify students' self-perceived level of preparedness in various competencies. This would enable hospitality educators to ascertain competencies to be emphasized and prioritize in planning and re-designing the hospitality program. Specifically, the research question emerged from this study: What are the essential competencies for hospitality students?

Literature Review

Why are competencies important?

The changing needs of hospitality industry indirectly influence the needs on what kind of the competencies hospitality students need to embrace (Lolli, 2013). As revealed by Weber (2009), the identification of competencies needed in hospitality industry has become essential as a result of dramatic changes of the industry due to globalization, advancement in technology and changes in economic landscape. Further, the number of people travelling abroad has created a competitive service for hospitality industry as more international visitors visiting places of

interest. This resulted in more competencies for hospitality employees to be able to deliver hospitality service at a level required by global visitors (Harkinson et al., 2011).

Hospitality Competencies

The concern of hospitality industry on graduates lacked of competencies when they are in the workforces has been documented by many studies. Past research revealed that the fast growth of the hospitality industry produces challenges for hospitality educational providers to prepare graduates with competencies that fulfill industry's expectation (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2011).

According to Sandwith, (1993), competencies have been used widely in business and education sector as a means to identify the potential employees and students. Competencies allows for a better assessment of which potential candidate is suitable for a particular job position. Identifying these competencies is vital for hospitality students' success in the industry. By knowing which competencies are the most important will enhance students' chances of being recruited and are industry's relevant (Weber et al., 2009). Competencies are always associated with employability skills (Wang & Tsai, 2014). These employability skills are competences that include knowledge, skills, and abilities an individual needed within a particular job.

From students' perspective, competencies related to human resource skills and ability to deal with guests is the most important skills (Okeiyi, Finley & Postel, 1994). Other than that students also identified interpersonal skills as key skills for their career success (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; 2006). Examples of interpersonal skills include: maintain professional and ethical standards in the work environment; demonstrate empathy in dealing with customers and staff; demonstrate listening skills and demonstrate cultural awareness in dealing with staff and guests. Their research revealed interpersonal skills as top rank skills by industry and students.

A study undertaken by Tesone and Ricci (2005), discovered hospitality managers prefer graduates with good attitudes. The attitudes include optimism, achievement and pride in helping others. In addition, the study also suggested a need to have good teamwork, empathy, anticipation of customer needs and a high tolerance for ambiguity in order to work in the industry. In conclusion, managers prefer to hire graduates with good teamwork, communication (listening, verbal and writing skills and empathy with others) and have good guest services.

Connolly and McGing (2006) suggested that hospitality educators need to include both soft people management skills and strong practical skills for hospitality students. While according to Sisson and Adams (2013) the mix of soft and hard skills are crucial to ensure hospitality students are equipped with competencies desired by the industry. For Tsai et al., (2006), interpersonal competencies, conceptual competencies and leadership competencies are among a few sought competencies in hospitality industry. For Cheung et al., (2010), their study revealed that hotel managers and educators in Hong Kong prefer hospitality graduates to acquire strong leadership skills and teamwork. From graduates' perspective, communication skills are considered as the most desirable skills.

As for Huang and Lin (2010), their study examined essential competencies for hospitality management trainees. Their findings conclude that leadership, interpersonal skills, language abilities, communication skills, flexible leadership and positive customer service are crucial for management position success. One disagreement revealed from their study is hospitality practitioners emphasize more on management skills compared to technical skills while

educators highlighted more on technical competencies, Thus, their study suggests hospitality educators to incorporate effective courses relevant to management skills in their course design to equip hospitality students with managerial competencies.

Definition of Competencies

There are many definitions of competencies offered by past literatures. To name a few: Boyatzis (2008) defines competencies as skills, types of behaviours and knowledge that successful managers have in performing their task. Tas (1988) defined competencies as activities and skills important to perform the duties of a specific position. Lefever and Withiam (1998) describe competency as knowledge, traits, skills and abilities attributed to people that constantly behave in specific ways that differentiate between outstanding and average performance. As for Brophy and Kiely (2002) competencies refer to the skills, knowledge, behaviours and attitudes to perform a role effectively.

Another definition of competencies was offered by Tsai et al., (2006) where they refer competencies as a person skills, knowledge and attitudes through observable and measurable behaviours and outcomes. For Kouwenhoven (2010), competencies are the combination of observable and applied knowledge, skills and attitudes that create competitive advantage for an organization. Competencies can further be classified as hard skills and soft skills. As described by Weber et al., (2013), hard skills are associated with technical and administrative categories while soft skills relate to human, conceptual, leadership and interpersonal categories.

Industry Expectation

The ever-changing needs, globalization and changes in guest requirements have subsequently influence service provided in hospitality industry (Wang & Tsai, 2014). As a result of sustaining the hospitality industry, industry prefers to hire employees who are competent and can perform well. Accordingly, Sisson and Adams (2013) revealed industry expected future hospitality graduates to have the mix of both soft and hard competencies. Examples of hard competencies industry prefers include ability to use computers whether for communication purposes such as writing report and for day to day communication (email). Another example of hard skills using computer relates to day to day operational duty for all departments involved in hotel operations. For soft competencies, several examples expected by hospitality industry include positive customer relations, working effectively with other employees, professional grooming and appearance, good communication skills, ability to manage stress, ability to delegate task, leadership qualities and ability to work as a team.

Hospitality industry has provided many job opportunities for future hospitality students. However, issues on hospitality students are not capable in certain competencies as expected by the industry has been alarming (Cheung et al., 2010; Hsu, 2012). As a result, Harkinson et al., (2011) suggested that in order to develop effective hospitality education programme, hospitality industry expectation and requirements must be first evaluated. Hence, an alliance with hospitality industry is recommended so that hospitality educational providers can add value to the hospitality programme offered (Nolan et al., 2010).

Competency Based Education

Hospitality industry executives and the hospitality educators are in dilemma whether the hospitality graduates are sufficiently prepared for the industry (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Kouwenhoven, 2010). In order to develop competitive hospitality programme, hospitality educators are advised to refer to industry for information on expectations of future graduates.

Competency based education (CBE) has been applied to technical and vocational education. As such, according to Brownell and Chung (2001), educators have integrated CBE to curriculum. For hospitality industry, it is inevitable to separate students from hard competencies or the technical and practical skills. Therefore, as outlined by Kouwenhoven (2010), one characteristic of CBE is learning environments that are competencies focused and based on graduate's future workplace. Hence, CBE is used as the foundation approach for this study.

Methodology

This survey was pre- tested to 30 final year students from hospitality management programme in Universiti Utara Malaysia. The instrument developed was also distributed to 5 hospitality educators from the same programme to check for the appropriateness of the language and content. The final draft of the instrument was then distributed to hospitality students through convenience sampling method.

Development of Instrument

The instrument was developed based from competencies items adopted from Mayburry & Swanger,2010; Sisson & Adams, 2013; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Tsai et al., 2006; Littlejohn & Watson, 2004; Nolan et al., 2010). The competency items were grouped into four categories namely: personal effectiveness, management, workplace and academic category based on Employment Training Administrative (ETA) generic competency model (Ennis, 2008).

Analysis and Results

This section provides answers to the research question on what the essential competencies for hospitality students are. A questionnaire was prepared to further investigate on required competencies for hospitality students. Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 24). A total of 30 responses were gathered from the pilot study. The sample comprises year three and year four hospitality students. From the sample, 80% was female and 20% was male. 46.7% of the sample was Malays while 43.3% was Chinese and 10% was from another ethnicity. Majority of the samples were between the ages of 23 to 25 years. This is not surprising as 93.3% was from year four students. Of those respondents that completed the survey, 73.3% enter Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) through Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) qualification, 13.3% was from matriculation and 10% from other qualification background.

Table 1 presents the data on highest means score and standard deviations for the most essential competencies for hospitality students.

Table 1: The Highest Rated Competencies for Hospitality Students

| Competency Items | Highest Means | (SD) |
|---|---------------|------|
| Communication skills (oral, professional writing , email etiquette) | 4.63 | .490 |
| Adhere to standard operating procedures (SOPs) & other hotel policies | 4.63 | .490 |
| Professional grooming & appearance | 4.60 | .563 |
| Work as a team | 4.60 | .563 |
| Develop positive customer relations | 4.60 | .563 |
| Knowledge on customer service | 4.57 | .504 |
| Possess basic problem solving skills | 4.53 | .507 |
| Need to maintain professional& ethical standard in the work environment | 4.53 | .571 |

| | | |
|---|------|------|
| Need to emphasize personal development, prioritized training & on the job opportunities | 4.53 | .507 |
| Demonstrate sense of responsibilities | 4.50 | .572 |
| Should be able to prioritize task | 4.50 | .509 |
| Develop working relationship with associates, managers, outside representative & agencies | 4.47 | .507 |
| Manage personal stress & emotional control | 4.47 | .507 |
| Have positive thinking while facing difficulty | 4.47 | .571 |
| Have knowledge on general hotel operations | 4.47 | .507 |
| Need to have knowledge of health, safety & hygiene | 4.47 | .571 |
| Demonstrate empathy in dealing with customers and staff | 4.47 | .571 |
| Deliver consistent customer service | 4.43 | .504 |
| Commit to high performance | 4.43 | .504 |
| Demonstrate listening skills | 4.43 | .626 |
| Be a flexible team player | 4.43 | .568 |
| Able to write simple business report | 4.43 | .568 |
| Demonstrate time management skills | 4.43 | .504 |
| Able to communicate effectively across different departments | 4.43 | .568 |
| Possess high level of personal skills | 4.43 | .504 |
| Should have leadership abilities | 4.40 | .675 |
| Develop management skills | 4.40 | .675 |
| Should use ethics in decision making | 4.40 | .563 |
| Able to work in pressurized environment | 4.40 | .563 |

Table 2 presents the data on lowest means score and standard deviations for the most essential competencies for hospitality students.

Table 2: The Lowest Rated Competencies for Hospitality Students

| Competency Items | Lowest Means | (SD) |
|---|--------------|------|
| Write a standard operating procedures (SOP) | 4.00 | .587 |
| Should have people(HR)skills | 4.03 | .669 |
| Able to interpret financial statements | 4.07 | .691 |
| Know how to forecast revenues & staffing need | 4.10 | .759 |
| Need to have knowledge of multiple languages | 4.10 | .803 |

Competency Findings

The survey items comprised of 69 items assessing essential competencies for hospitality students. The three highest mean score of competencies items and the three lowest mean scores competencies items were presented. Two competencies items, communication skills and ability to follow standard operating procedures (SOPs) and hotel policies have the highest mean score of 4.63. This is followed by professional grooming and appearance; ability to work as a team and develop positive customer relations with means scores of 4.60. Another competency item on knowledge on customer service obtained mean score of 4.57.

Three lowest mean scores competencies items comprise of competencies on ability to interpret financial statements with 4.07 mean score, followed by students should have people or human resource skills with a mean score on 4.03 and the lowest mean score is ability of students to write standard operating procedures (SOPs) with a mean score of 4.00.

Discussion

The findings suggest that hospitality students see interpersonal competencies as the most relevant competencies for hospitality industry. Students perceived in hospitality industry, they need to be able to communicate effectively and have good writing skills. Further, good communication skills will help hospitality personnel to develop positive guest relations. In hospitality industry, hospitality personnel have to deal with both the hotel personnel and guests from various backgrounds, ethnics and cultures. Therefore, communication skills become important to perform the task effectively while providing good and exceptional service to the hotel guests.

Hospitality students also perceived ability to follow hotel SOPs and policies as essential knowing quality service involves zero defect, thus following the procedures determined in advance by the hospitality industry will eliminate or alleviate the possibility of future error in serving the hotel guests. Further, every hotel has its own SOPs (house rules) that need to be followed; therefore, hospitality students believed that when they are out working in the industry, they need to carefully monitor SOPs provided by the respective hotels.

In addition, professional grooming and appearance are another salient factor contributing to good image in hospitality industry. This competency was considered one important aspect of business acumen for hoteliers especially the front lines and those dealing directly with hotel guests, for example employees in the front office department, food and beverage department, business centres and concierge. Apart from that, hospitality students indicated teamwork as another crucial element for outstanding guest service. In hospitality industry, specifically the lodging industry involving many sub departments, the ability to work as a team is important as all departments requires teamwork commitment to ensure good service to hotel guests. Additionally, hospitality students noted that hospitality industry deal with people 24/7, thus developing positive customer relations and knowledge on customer service are other essential competencies hospitality students must be able to get hold to.

On the other hands, three competencies items on ability to interpret financial statements, have people skills and ability to write SOPs were perceived as not so important to hospitality students. As this survey was distributed to undergraduate students, these students may perceive these three competencies as more appropriate for managerial position. In this research, the results revealed that hospitality students strongly agree that they must follow SOPs provided by the respective hotel, but in terms of preparing and writing SOPs, these students perceived this competency as not essential to them as they may be thinking after finishing college they will join the industry at a lower position and not a higher managerial position.

In terms of ability to interpret financial statements and have people skills, hospitality students see these competencies as more appropriate for higher management task, thus these students perceived these two competencies as not a desirable competency to have in hospitality industry. However, according to Kay and Moncarz (2004), knowledge on financial management is crucial for hospitality graduates especially for their future career advancement in lodging properties. Four competency categories were identified from their findings, namely human resource management; marketing; financial management and information technology. Their study revealed that competency for hospitality students have changed overtime. For example, their study revealed human skills as basic skills and hospitality industry in the 21century is looking for graduates who are more competent in financial management knowledge.

Conclusion and Implications

The main objective of this study is to investigate on student's perceptions on essential competencies needed in hospitality industry. The results indicated that hospitality students acknowledged the competencies needed for hospitality industry. In addition, this study suggested the incorporation of competencies to hospitality curriculum to better prepare hospitality students for future career in hospitality industry. As suggested by Lolli (2013), incorporating essential competencies in curriculum can involve variety of ways, for example role play, simulations, videotaping and case scenarios. This learning style interaction will enhance students' competencies in terms of improving, developing and encouraging interpersonal competencies. Further, this study contributes to the existing literature in hospitality competencies in the context of Malaysia.

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