STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS HOSPITALITY EDUCATION: AN ANGLO-CYPRIOT CRITICAL STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

Hospitality is one of the fastest growing industries across the world (Boella and Goss-Turner, 2013; People1st, 2011). The expansion of the hospitality industry may be translated into the need to develop effective hospitality programmes in order to adequately prepare the workforce to meet present and future demands within this enormous industry (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009). However, the literature highlights a general disconnect between academic learning and employability skills creating concerns regarding the nature and context of hospitality education (Brown, Arendt and Bosselman, 2014; Aggett and Busby, 2011; Kim, 2008; Mayaka and Akama, 2007; Airey and Tribe, 2005). In 2003 Morrison and O'Mahony commented that the existing hospitality curriculum model was unable to respond to the current and growing needs of the hospitality industry. After a decade these challenges still appear to exist. There are significant differences between the perceptions of industry leaders and academics concerning the skills, knowledge, competencies and attitudes required by graduates for successful careers in the industry (Nachmias, Paddison and Mortimer, 2014; Teng, Horng and Baum, 2013; Suh, West and Shin, 2012; Kim, 2008).

Despite a growing trend in higher education offering student internship opportunities to enable application of theory to practice (Aggett and Busby, 2012), and the fact that hospitality qualifications might lead individuals to senior management positions (Harkison, Poulston and Kim, 2011), there still appears to be a problem with the hospitality industry's ability to recruit qualified employees as evidence suggests hospitality careers are not an attractive option for some hospitality students following graduation (Zainal et al., 2012). The causes of this are admittedly manifold. It is not necessarily de facto poor working conditions that detract students from subsequent hospitality employment, other explanations include an exaggeratedly positive, even glamorous, industry image (Nachmias and Walmsley, 2015; Fidgeon, 2010). A frequently overlooked issue in studies of hospitality students' early career development is the surprises encountered by simply entering the world of work (Hughes, 1958,

coined the term 'entry shock' in this regard). Rather than disappointment being directed towards the hospitality sector per se, the recent graduate may simply be surprised by the nature of working life itself (Walmsley, 2015). The literature highlights that a number of intrinsic and extrinsic variables are assumed to influence individual perceptions towards hospitality education, resulting in disillusionment with hospitality careers (Nachmias, Paddison and Mortimer, 2014; Kim, 2008; Raybould and Wilkins, 2005).

The notion of hospitality having an image problem has been recognised in numerous studies and industry reports. Wood (1997), for example, pointed out that work in this sector is largely exploitative, degrading, unpleasant, insecure and taken as a last resort. This is more generally accepted for tourism employment where even earlier (Pizam, 1982, p.5) it was suggested that the tourism employee is often regarded as 'uneducated, unmotivated, untrained, unskilled and unproductive' and where in 2013 the World Travel and Tourism Council by means of a study that spanned three countries (the US, UK and China) sought to understand students' perceptions of tourism and hospitality employment out of concern over sector recruitment difficulties. Moving beyond perceptions of the sector, it is a matter of fact that it attracts frequently marginalised groups in society such as women (Teng, Horng and Baum, 2013), immigrants (Baum, 2012) and youth (Walmsley, 2015). Studies such as those by Walmsley (2012) and Aksu and Köksal (2005) have demonstrated how attitudes towards tourism and hospitality employment in society can detract students from employment in the sector.

Current studies explore the overall education experience, curriculum development and educational environment (Alexander, Lynch and Murray, 2009; Harper, Brown and Irvine, 2005; Morrison and O'Mahony, 2003) but limited attention has been paid to understanding the link between student perceptions of hospitality education and careers. This study therefore aims to expand knowledge by exploring hospitality students' attitudes towards hospitality education and how a range of intrinsic and extrinsic variables may have an impact upon their attitudes towards hospitality careers.

The study focuses on hospitality students' perceptions based on research undertaken at various higher education (HE) institutions (universities) in the UK and Cyprus. The continuous growth of the hospitality sector in both countries resulted in a demand for capable professionals and the development of hospitality programmes with different specialisations emerging in an effort to educate future leaders in an ever demanding, labour intensive industry. Although education and industry structure, and scale differ between the two countries, HE has expanded rapidly in both countries over the last three decades (from elite to mass providers of education), off the back of massive growth in the tourism and hospitality service sector (Airey, Dredge and Gross, 2015). The Cypriot university system specifically has undergone major changes with the 'universification' and expansion of private education. Prior to these changes, HE needs were mainly satisfied by tertiary education institutions "colleges" that offered various hospitality degree programmes since early 80s and from universities abroad, with UK universities being the first choice among school leavers (Cyprus Higher Education, 2014). Similarly, the UK HE sector has undergone several major expansions since 2000 (HESA, 2016). In both cases, tourism and hospitality education expansion has intertwined with national policy goals to improve productivity levels and generate employment opportunities (Airey, Dredge and Gross, 2015). Further to that the strong relation between Cyprus and the UK inevitably affected curriculum design providing a good comparative study of different cultural 'norms' within a similar education system.

Nevertheless, demand for hospitality and tourism education is beginning to flatten off due at least in part to the recent financial crisis and changes in HE funding arrangements (Airey, Dredge and Gross, 2015). Calls continue to be made for HE to ensure academic integrity and maintain appropriate links with the industry (Airey and Tribe, 2005), and understanding and responding to these changes is of significant importance. Of course there are differences between institutions and countries, but the challenges that the HE sector faces remain similar.

The findings would enable HE institutions to continually adjust hospitality curricula reflecting to industry's expectations and needs; thereby improving hospitality students'

preparedness for the industry and career prospects. Furthermore, the empirical data can be used as a framework to inform graduate recruitment practices in the industry and enable employers to understand graduate expectations necessary to apply the best possible graduate recruitment practices. The findings can be extended to other industries which are experiencing issues with regard to graduate skills and capabilities.

The study is divided into two parts. The first section covers contextual, theoretical and methodological perspectives through the relevant literature. The review around the value of hospitality education and the factors affecting students' perception in achieving career goals are discussed thematically. The second part provides an insight into the findings and analysis, together with empirical discussions and implications to key stakeholders, followed by the conclusions.

2. Critical analysis of recent research into hospitality higher education

2.1 The value of hospitality education

There has been widespread support for industry-appropriate hospitality education. At the core of this issue lie the tensions and mistrust of various stakeholders including those of educators, graduates and the industry. Some commentators argue that technical skills and competences have become the dominant paradigm in hospitality education (Alexander, Lynch and Murray, 2009). Others, in contrast, argue that current HE practices are moving away from developing technical skills to a more detailed appreciation of operating systems and concepts which are actually very important for managers in the industry (Ali, Murphy and Nadkami, 2014). This is an indication of the different approaches to academic and professional development in hospitality education across the globe (Dredge et al., 2012). Nevertheless, many of the challenges are shared. The current complex environment in terms of policy development, student expectations and skills reinforces the need for HE to design an effective curriculum to satisfy the business needs (Airey, Dredge and Gross, 2015). Despite that educationalists have accused hospitality employers of out-dated and unsophisticated approaches towards recruitment and management in general (Morrison and O'Mahony, 2003). Williams et al. (2013) stated that the hospitality industry lacked capable managers suggesting that a majority

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of hospitality graduates complete their undergraduate programmes without gaining appropriate management skills. Such tensions concerning hospitality careers raise important questions about the value of HE qualifications in supporting the industry's needs. Kim (2008) suggests significant differences between the perceptions of industry leaders and academics of the skills, knowledge and attitudes required by graduates for successful careers in the industry. This is also highlighted by Teng, Horng and Baum's (2013) research which suggests a poor dimension in the quality of UK undergraduate degree criteria is the lack of alumni feedback, suggesting a divorcing of the student from academic practice once in a career. This leads to the possibility that hospitality programmes may actually produce disillusionment with career prospects in the sector itself. Academic qualifications now carry far less weight with most employers in recruiting and retaining graduates (Wolf, 2011; Heaton, McCraken and Harrison, 2008; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Sufficient work experience and operational competence are considered primary criteria to be successful in the hospitality industry (Suh, West and Shin, 2012; Green, Hammer and Star, 2009).

Nevertheless, the common concern among stakeholders is that HE is not producing well-prepared graduates with expectations relevant to the industry's needs and practices (Nolan et al., 2010; Hearns, Devine and Baum, 2007). Raybould and Wilkins (2005, p.211), for example, found that graduates were considered 'over qualified but under experienced', even for entry-level management roles. This shows that an academic qualification is in itself not enough to secure a graduate job, and in fact many employers often under-utilise graduate skills or abilities (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009; Zopiatis and Constanti, 2007; Walsh and Taylor, 2007; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). Hospitality education has been asked to develop an accurate understanding of the industry, its needs, and the nature of the changing graduate labour market (Nachmias and Walmsley, 2015), including career opportunities within small and medium-sized (SMEs) organisations (Wilton, 2008; Hart and Barratt, 2009).

A number of studies have highlighted the timeframe for utilising an academic qualification. For example, Harper, Brown and Irvine (2005, p.51) found that qualified managers were promoted faster than unqualified managers, noting that qualifications are 'an

integral part of career development'. This indicates that vocational training accelerates career advancement while working. By way of contrast, Ladkin (2002) purports that unqualified managers might progress faster into a managerial position due to their industrial experience. This is confirmed by Zopiatis and Constanti's (2007) findings that there is not an appropriate balance between academic education and industry experience. Within these circumstances, the student voice has however been conspicuous by its absence.

2.2 Hospitality industry conditions and the nature of hospitality careers

The reality of working life, old-fashioned HR practices and early work experiences have had a major influence on student work-related attitudes and career behaviours (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). This is certainly true in relation to Hospitality work experiences where, for example, Jenkins' (2001, p.2) study of students' expectations and perceptions of the industry found that, as their degrees progressed, student perception of the industry deteriorated and the desire to work therein suffered considerably, noting that 'the more exposure a student has to the industry, the less commitment he/she demonstrates'. Work experience acts as a guide to assessing future attitudes and behaviours in the industry. A study by Kelley-Patterson and George (2001) supports such an argument with students reflecting upon their work experience commenting negatively about the nature and context of the working conditions. Central to this disillusionment would appear to be work placement experience as students get first hand and realistic experience of working life (Chen and Shen, 2012; Walmsley, Thomas and Jameson, 2012; Harper, Brown and Irvine, 2005). Industry exposure significantly impacts upon hospitality student career choices. Kim and Park (2013) research into tourism and hospitality internships found that work experience acts as a strong influence upon student perception towards hospitality careers and can lead to a change in student perception supporting the findings of Chen and Shen (2012) and Jenkins (2001).

The above review demonstrates that the reality of employment in the industry is likely to lead to disillusionment about hospitality careers. Studies on hospitality graduates' attitudes have regularly found that students take a very dim view of the industry, not regarding it as a

serious career option (O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). Lindsay and McQuaid (2004) posit that the hospitality industry is frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held a career in the hospitality, with Richardson (2010) suggesting that international students seemed to have a more positive view of the industry as a career option This is partly because of the highly mobile and less structured working environment. For example, Barron, Maxwell and Broadbrige's (2007, p.126) study of the career expectations of hospitality and tourism undergraduates in Scotland found that career mobility appears to be a common strategy amongst hospitality graduates for achieving personal goals. However, the industry appears to underestimate the value of holding an academic qualification and pursuing a hospitality career in this form.

Despite the growing number of graduates, there is concern that the industry is unattractive in recruiting work-ready graduates and retaining adequately trained and motivated staff. This is supported by Kent (2006) who found that almost 61 per cent of UK hospitality employers reported difficulties in recruiting experienced managers which is in part because the industry is usually associated with low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future career prospects and limited career advancement opportunities (Nickson, 2007). It has been suggested that the majority of these jobs have become an increasingly important source of work particularly for un-skilled or low skilled people (Linsdsay and McQuaid, 2004). This raises questions about the appropriateness of hospitality education and its role in promoting career success. Rodriguez and Gregory (2005) undertook a study on non-hospitality students working in the industry and found that the menial nature of the work and poor career prospects affected students' perception and attitude towards the prospects of seeking a hospitality career. This would suggest that recognising and achieving graduate expectations could be used as a tool to avoid dissatisfaction. This has been supported by Brown, Arendt and Bosselman (2014) who suggest that ensuring graduates can utilise their skills is an important factor in the perception of hospitality as a career choice.

It is also evident that what is covered in the hospitality curriculum may prevent ease of transition into the sector. Some evidence suggests hospitality education is heavily weighted

towards major large graduate recruiters with many industry sectors neglected by hospitality educators in favour of the large hotel chains (Nachmias, Paddison and Mortimer, 2014; Raybould and Wilkins, 2005) who admittedly may make more of an effort of being visible with career service units in HE. Of course, the hospitality and tourism industry has a highly diverse structure encompassing a variety of careers, sectors and occupations (People 1st, 2011). Nolan et al. (2010) found that SMEs do not actively recruit graduates and do not generally have an understanding about the benefits of recruiting graduates to the operation and performance of their firms. Hospitality SMEs are more likely to under-utilise graduate skills as they are less equipped to recruit graduates (Pittaway and Thedham, 2005). However, employability of graduates in non-traditional occupations (non-traditional' occupations refers to jobs with a less structured approach to graduate recruitment and development across multiple firms) including SMEs is becoming an increasingly important dimension in curriculum design (Fearon et al., 2016). Despite that, it is difficult to precisely determine the number of graduates currently employed in SMEs, such organisations have the potential to increase management capacity and provide distinctive graduate career opportunities (Drummond et al., 2012).

Given the preponderance of small and micro-firms within the industry, this may have important repercussions for both the industry and educators. This is a critical point as HE institutions play a significant role in the development of graduates' expectations (Walmsley, Thomas and Jameson, 2012; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). Garavan and Morley (1997, p.53) suggest that universities are vital in 'structuring the experiences of graduates in terms of the kind of work they can expect to perform, their pay and promotion prospects and degree of freedom and discretion they may have within an organisation'. However, most hospitality programmes are structured around the large business paradigm (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005) raising questions with regard to graduate attitude and perceptions towards HE.

A significant attrition of hospitality graduates is sometimes explained by the absence of long-term career paths in the industry (Barron, Maxwell and Broadbrige, 2007; Brien, 2004). According to the Confederation of British Industry (2015) Education and Skills survey, currently

two thirds of UK businesses require degree level skills, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing and engineering, science and hi-tech firms (86 per cent and 83 per cent respectively), which decreases to less than 56 per cent for retail and hospitality, transport and distribution. Most importantly, the results show that a significant proportion of hospitality graduates often use their transferable management skills in employment outside of the industry. Holden and Jameson (2002, p.55) argue that 'although perhaps not envisaging a specific occupational role, these students have demonstrated a clear commitment to a specific field of employment'. Similarly, Broadbridge, Maxwell and Ogden (2006) point out that hospitality students who can demonstrate commitment to the industry, work hard early in their careers and make many personal sacrifices and believe these will pay off in the future. Again, these discussions demonstrate the complexity of graduate employment in the sector.

In fact, students' perception of hospitality education and its role in influencing career decisions has been largely a-theoretical. There is an abundance of literature in the area of career theory that could provide a fecund foundation for further research in an attempt to understand students' perceptions around hospitality education (i.e. Gati et al., 2010; Lent, 2005; Lent, Brown and Hackett, 2002). Social Cognitive Career Theory was adopted to understand the processes through which hospitality students form expectations, make choices and achieve varying levels of success in educational pursuits (Lent, 2005).

2.3 Social Cognitive Career Theory as an overarching framework

Variables such as self-efficacy, learning expectations, and commitment act as an intrinsic 'excise agency' towards personal goals and career decision-making (Bandura, 1997). This seeks support from the social cognitive career theory as a number of objectives and perceived environmental factors affect the individual's academic and career outcomes (Lent, Brown and Hackett, 2002). As highlighted, the quality of the educational experiences can either promote or hinder academic outcomes (Lent, 2005). For hospitality students, their educational experience acts as a 'reality shock' and increases negative views of hospitality education. They find it difficult to develop positive links with the industry and academia due to poor

employee-organisational fit (Kelley-Patterson and George, 2001) and poor commitment towards utilising the benefits of holding a hospitality qualification. It is evident that a lack of commitment and self-efficacy about the course of actions required to achieve personal goals 'hinder one's decision-making competencies in specific situations' (Germeijs, Verschueren and Soenens, 2006, p.398). Individuals are implementing their self-concept through life processes and learning experiences as well as seeking to establish or re-enforce their sense of self (O'Regan, 2010). However, the line between what serves as a motivator or a constraint is not always clear depending on individual circumstances (Ryan and Bryan, 2009).

Interestingly, hospitality students complete their education with the expectation that a degree in hospitality leads to a senior management position after graduating (Brien, 2004). This expectation appears unrealistic due to a number of external factors including the industry's working conditions and educational experience. Kidd (2004) stresses that the importance of acknowledging the complex interplay between judgements, feelings and actions and how we cannot isolate the emotionality of career from cognitions and behaviour. This mismatch between expectations about future opportunities could result in high anxiety and low self-confidence as individuals do not have a clear sense of self. This feature would have a negative effect on decisional status and commitment to career choice as individuals feel less confident and more ambivalent about their decision (Osipow, 1999). Crucially therefore, disappointment with a specific job after graduating may have longer term consequences for an individual's career development. The impact is not necessarily momentary.

From a hospitality perspective, the reality of working life in hospitality has affected their perception and attitude towards hospitality education and careers (Litteljohn and Watson, 2004). The industry requires a high degree of flexibility, mobility, work experience and operational competencies rather than academic achievements (Baum, 2006). An individual's cognitive ability could be affected adversely or beneficially by events that are beyond the individual's control or awareness (Lent, 2005). Most importantly, work experience negatively influences hospitality students' career aspirations and ambitions through a combination of various factors including extensive work demands, low wages and relatively poor working

conditions (Heaton, McCraken and Harrison, 2008). As Van Maanen and Schein (1979) argued, socialisation with potential employers or organisations plays a significant role in shaping individual perception as they learn the values, beliefs and skills that are necessary to their new work roles. This shows that the external environment affords the potential for personal agency in one's personal development and expectations (Gati and Tal, 2008). This is because students move from being 'outsiders' in the workplace to being 'insiders' by getting insight into their role and developing key attitudes and knowledge (Ashforth, 2001).

Consequently, a number of extrinsic and intrinsic factors should be considered when exploring students' perception towards hospitality education. Literature demonstrated that there is a mismatch of expectations amongst key stakeholders questioning the need to advance skills and knowledge in the industry. Industry conditions, reputation, commitment to hospitality career and emphasis on large organisations are perceived as critical attributes towards shaping students' perception. It recognises that individuals' perception would be affected by the level of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to organise, initiate and carry out the course of actions required to achieve career goals. Despite calls for hospitality education to pay greater attention to both vocational skills and 'higher order' knowledge (O'Mahony and Salmon, 2015), hospitality educational experience, academic engagement and relationships with the industry are likely to influence students' future expectations. The study utilised Social Cognitive Career theory to examine the sense-making of hospitality students and the impact of a number of intrinsic and extrinsic variables into their attitude towards hospitality education and careers.

2. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study has adopted an interpretivist approach. To date, many of the current studies in this area have been positioned in the positivist methodology with the research failing to embrace adequately the dynamics of social phenomena, thereby casting doubts on how research involving people could and should be carried out (Gill and Johnson, 2010). The adopted approach to this study enables the researchers to understand what is happening and why it is

happening (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009) as understood by participants' themselves. There is no one single accepted way of doing interpretivist research (Bryman, 2012). However, Berg and Lune (2008) argued that the purpose of research is to discover answers to questions through the application of systematic procedures. Fundamentally, the present study is intended to extend beyond previous research in the field by providing an empirical exploration of hospitality students' perception towards the value of hospitality education and how the possession of hospitality qualifications results in stronger career prospects.

It is also important to recognise that different perspectives can add different and meaningful layers without necessarily conflicting or contradicting each other (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative researchers 'seek answers to questions that stress how the social experience is created and given meaning' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.8). There is no way of predicting how individuals will respond to a situation unless one can look through that person's point of view and background (Sherman and Webb, 1988). This study accepts that the social world is constructed with meanings and that explaining social phenomena must be done through the participants' own perspectives.

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed. Such an approach establishes good correspondence between the research question and the sample, with the objective of yielding insights and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Streubert and Carpenter, 2010). The defining characteristic of purposeful sampling is to verify that participants meet the criteria for being in the sample (Bryman, 2012). The point here is not to estimate a minimum sample size for the purpose of statistical generalisation, as it is not applicable for a small sample size (Mason, 2010). Qualitative researchers tend to make analytic generalizations (Bryman, 2012), which are 'applied to wider theory on the basis of how selected cases 'fit' with general constructs (Curtis et al., 2000, p.1002).

Building on this, the study has purposefully selected a group of 24 final year undergraduate students from HE institutions in the UK and Cyprus (12 students from Cyprus and 12 from the UK – n=24), offering an accredited undergraduate programme in the field of hospitality management. The researchers in both countries had access to cohorts of hospitality

students at two HE institutions with an overall population of 176 enrolled students. They requested assistance in targeted classes where students were introduced to the study and given the time to make an informed decision as to whether they wished to be interviewed. 51 students expressed an interest in participating in the study. They were asked to complete and return a consent form with 39 students eventually returning the forms. Although initially a target figure was 20 interviews per institution, it became apparent that concerns raised in the interviews were very similar and that therefore an extension to 20 participants per institutions was neither necessary, nor resource-effective (specifically with regard to the notion of saturation).

Therefore, the researchers undertook 24 interviews in total. Participants' mean age was 23 years in both countries with all participating students having a greater exposure to the industry through part-time employment during their studies. The majority of participants in Cyprus were male (56.8 per cent), with good representation of female participants (43.2 per cent) whereas 54 per cent of UK participants were female with 46 per cent male.

Data collection was accomplished through interviewing. Qualitative in-depth interviews offer the potential to capture a person's perspective of an event or experience of a specific phenomenon, thereby capturing the meaning of individuals' experiences in their own words (Kvale, 2008). To explore individual perceptions requires a method that is 'attuned to the intricacy of the subject matter' (Denscombe, 2007, p.174). Interview themes were established prior to analysis based on pertinent issues that arose in the literature review with regard to perceptions of hospitality, hospitality education and careers in the sector. These themes aligned with the study's research questions. Key themes asked throughout the interviews revolved around: career behaviour and aspirations (questions were asked about defining the meaning of career, their intended outcomes, highlight previous experiences and key outcomes as well as their interpretation around the meaning of hospitality career), HE and industry perception (questions were asked to explain importance of a degree at personal and professional level, discuss their HE expectations and experience, evaluate industry practices and working environment, and how they perceive stakeholder perception including employers

and academics) and intrinsic related factors (questions were asked about their personal learning goals, self-confidence, commitment and self-esteem through the adoption of the Social Cognitive Career theory). These interview themes set no limits on the range or length of questions asked in order to allow participants to explain their feelings, concerns and experiences in a more in-depth manner. Follow-up questions were used to obtain a deeper and fuller understanding of the participants' meanings.

The exploration of the pertinent theoretical contributions in the field influenced the research design, including decisions about the development of research questions. The NVivo10 software was used to analyse the qualitative data and facilitate a more objective analysis and rigorous picture of the subject. A detailed index of the data was developed and the data was labelled into manageable themes for subsequent retrieval and exploration. Data themes emerged deductively from pre-existing arguments in the literature (i.e. intrinsic and extrinsic factors) as well as inductively from interviews (i.e. attitude towards education, work experience, employers' perception and industry reputation) (see appendix 1) to relate findings to a broader context, explain patterns from the findings and establish whether the data addressed the research questions. This also facilitated the comparison between both the Cypriot and UK cohorts as it eased retrieval of data relating to just one cohort.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the major findings of the research. The first part evaluates the findings with regard to participants' attitudes to hospitality education. The second part focuses on the intrinsic and extrinsic variables influencing the link between student perceptions of hospitality education and careers including working conditions, HE experience and qualification recognition. Such factors have been identified as important determinants in shaping hospitality students' attitudes towards hospitality education and hospitality careers. Findings are presented under the main themes that emerged from the analysis using appropriate verbatim quotes to illustrate those findings.

4.1 Attitude towards the hospitality curriculum

The exploration of hospitality students' attitudes towards hospitality education resulted in ambiguity regarding the demand for hospitality careers. Participants from both countries highlighted identical issues regarding the usefulness of hospitality qualification in seeking a career in hospitality. They noted the importance of knowledge and education to career progression. Interestingly, the vast majority of participants (n=22) responded to the question on the value of hospitality education simply with a single response 'employers do not really care about qualifications'. On the one hand, UK participants displayed poor recognition about the value of hospitality qualification and their role in ensuring effective transition to the hospitality industry (n=11). On the other hand, Cypriot participants expressed similar concerns highlighting a number of criticisms around the benefits of hospitality qualifications (n=10). There were few positive comments about the value of hospitality qualification (1 UK and 2 Cypriot participants); nevertheless, possession of a university qualification is not an essential requirement to achieve career goals and progress in the hospitality industry. One participant's response to the hospitality education question was instructive as it was representative of the sentiments of the sample:

> *When people ask you about the degree that you're doing, it's quite negative. Some individuals think that studying hospitality is just a waste of time and money, as you just need work experience to work for the industry... this is quite annoying as I have to justify my decision to study hospitality (UK2).*

4.2 Work experience and lack of qualification recognition

Throughout the interviews, participants were critical of the difficulty in matching academic qualifications with industry requirements (n=24). It was suggested that work experience was most vital in order to progress and succeed in the hospitality industry. They dismissed the value of holding a qualification by referring to practical and supervisory experience. One

participant's statement of the value of work experience in hospitality is indicative of all participants in explaining that:

> *…in real life you don't use the knowledge you learn in the university... okay you may have more opportunities with the degree...but to get a job as a manager you need work experience. In my recent searching process for a job I felt that I was approaching recruiters with the minimum qualification. I have realised that the last 4 years I engaged with my studies without a real contact with the hospitality industry. I think that it's better to treat a degree as a driving licence and develop further my skills… hospitality doesn't value HE It's all about business and numbers (CY7).*

Findings suggested that in participants' minds at least practical skills are essential to achieve career goals in the industry. This was mirrored by UK participants' responses who expressed their concerns about future employment as they do not have sufficient work experience and this minimises the possibility of securing a job in the hospitality industry (n=11). This is also captured by Cypriot participants who highlighted the importance of higher education as a means to secure employment, but also the need to acquire professional experience in the sector (n=12). In particular, one participant argued that he accepts the expectation of seeking professional experience, however *'I believe we shouldn't diminish the need to get a degree (CY3)'.* Very tentatively therefore we suggest that Cypriot students valued HE slightly more than UK participants as a means of securing employment.

Nevertheless, the comparative analysis shows that both groups of participants were surprised about the requirement to seek work experience and expressed their frustration with regard to how individuals perceive hospitality education. A student somewhat ambiguously claims that:

> *…a degree is not enough, you need to gain work experience… so we're in a business world where no one knows you and you really have to prove yourself... but I didn't know this... I didn't know that work experience is so important… you're going to get into a business, or you're going to get to a hotel to work and they're going to say something like 'forget everything that you've just learned, this is how we do it and*

this is how I want you to do it.' They do not really value our knowledge or qualification

(UK9).

It seems that participants had over-inflated expectations about their education programme and career opportunities in the industry. In both countries, many participants referred to the word 'realisation' to emphasise that they were not fully aware or cognisant of the real conditions in hospitality at the beginning of the programme (n=19). Their decision to study hospitality was based on the vocational nature of the programme and the possibility to 'wear the hat' (become managers after graduation) immediately after graduation. Very few participants (1 UK and 2 Cypriot participants) had made diligent decisions to study hospitality. Such a decision was formed by family influences (parents working in the industry) and prior work experience. Nevertheless, further questioning reveals that professional and industry expectations remained unfulfilled. The following statement is representative of the sentiments of the sample:

I did not have realistic views of the course potentials and benefits…my part time

job makes me realise that it is not as easy a job as it looks in the beginning and

how much hard work it was…I thought it would be much easier to become a

manager after graduation. I was like... yeah, I'll study for three years and then I'll

manage to find a managerial job… this is not so easy in reality...so I guess...oh...I

should be more realistic when I started my studies (UK11).

Findings indicated that participants had completely unrealistic expectations at the beginning of the programme, which they then discarded (n=21). The more unrealistic the expectations, the more difficult it was to minimise the discrepancy, provoking a sense of reality check. High expectations prior to HE seem to affect their perceptions towards hospitality education and careers subsequently. The interest in hospitality might not have manifested itself in hospitality education until choosing to study hospitality at university. For example, participants made what could be described as almost a 'random choice' to study hospitality (n=21). For example, one participant commented:

I took this course because I knew I wanted to carry on in education but I didn't really know where and I just kind of fell into it (CY4).

They also criticised the hospitality industry for not recognising graduate' abilities and skills as well as the benefits of employing university degree holders (*n*=17).

I think that a degree could help someone to progress, but employers do not really care about qualifications at all (CY12).

Similar proportion of UK participants expressed their strong disappointment with regard to current assumptions amongst hospitality employers. This indicates that there is a mismatch of expectations with regard to the value of the qualification in the industry, further damaging participants' attitudes towards hospitality careers. One of the participant's statements on current employers' expectations of holding a degree demonstrates his frustration about the socially contracted views and this is representative of the sentiments of most participants in the sample;

I think that and especially with the hospitality people environment, you could do without a degree…it depends more on your work experience rather than your degree. I think because I have actually been at my work and worked hard then that's got me further than actually my degree has (UK1).

Most participants (in both countries) expressed their concerns with the way hospitality employers approach graduates (9 UK and 10 Cypriot participants). As established, in some cases a degree would be essential to secure a job (large group hotel companies), but overall, graduates need to convince potential employers that they are capable of reaching a managerial position. They argued that qualifications do not count during the interview process and as one participant stated *'...managers mainly ask me questions only about my placement'* (CY5). Further questioning showed that studying hospitality is useful in gaining knowledge but ultimately, relevant working experience would be better for finding a job in hospitality industry.

On the contrary, very few UK participants argued that there is a need to highlight the service sector pressures and accepted the need for employers to recruit individuals with high levels of adaptability (*n*=2).

The fluctuation of the service demand and pressure to maintain quality puts pressure on businesses to act quickly, we need to acknowledge that (UK7).

Despite the comment on employer needs, they still criticised the industry's inability to utilise graduate skills.

4.3 Industry working conditions and higher education practices

The negative image of the industry appears to be a significant factor in changing students' perception towards hospitality education. Surprisingly, analysis shows that participants in both countries expressed concerns regarding the working conditions, a lack of appropriate human resource management practices and poor employee/organisational fit (*n*=24).

It's a bad industry to work in, low paid, low skills industry with a lack of appropriate training and development (UK9).

This statement aligns with Cypriot participants' perceptions of working conditions in the industry. They claimed that the hospitality industry is not an attractive place to pursue a career due to the negative perceptions around working hours, salaries, financial rewards and poor management practices (*n*=24). For example, one participant argued:

I have to say that working in the industry is just ruthless…they are not professional enough; they are not passionate about their jobs and this attitude discourages many students from considering hospitality (CY6).

Participants' perception of hospitality careers appears to have been largely influenced by the way educators approach the industry. As mentioned before, education plays a role in shaping future expectations. One participant commented that:

Lecturers promote [a] hospitality career as an attractive area for opportunities after graduation, but they didn't say anything about the working environment, the diversity of the industry (CY2).

This statement is representative of the sample, as participants argued that key HE stakeholders did not help them to establish a sense of commitment to a career in hospitality management (*n*=24). For example, one of the participants argued:

…some academics express their concerns about the industry, but…I have to admit the reality is completely different to practice. Some of the academics use examples to explain theories and models, but the course itself don't set up students to cope with the poor working conditions (UK12).

Findings show that that educators have encouraged in-class discussions around large organisations' operational, financial, marketing and developmental achievements. There was a negative observation that interaction with lecturers on a regular basis impacts upon hospitality students' behaviour and understanding of hospitality careers. On one hand, UK participants claimed that lecturers often emphasised the importance of a degree to reach a managerial position within large organisations (*n*=11).

Lecturers strongly support that qualification achievements do count during the interview process, but mainly for graduate training programmes (UK2).

On the other hand, Cypriot participants highlighted the need to recognise the diverse nature of the industry and the impact upon student career prospects (*n*=7).

Tutors just present one side of the industry… large organisations and don't really say much about other aspects of the industry (CY4).

In both countries, that the data show that participants' perception had been negatively influenced by their HE experience. The following statement puts into perspective participants' perception around HE experience and career opportunities in the industry:

> *This is a huge problem because most students think that hospitality is just graduate training programmes...this is so wrong and all students should learn about this diverse environment and not just about larger organisations (UK6).*

4. DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

An evident outcome of the HE experience is a 'reality shock' and increasingly negative attitudes towards hospitality education and careers. The findings revealed that there is a loose linkage between hospitality education and subsequent employment in the industry. Such ambiguity acts as 'excise agency' towards personal goals and influences individuals' perception of the value in holding a hospitality education qualification. The findings suggest that a hospitality career has a weak image among participants and the outcome of this ambiguity may result in increased labour turnover and devaluation of holding a higher qualification. This manifested itself in participants' responses towards the educational experience and their perception of hospitality careers emanating from their own personal experiences. As highlighted, the quality of the educational experiences can hinder academic and career outcomes resulting in high anxiety and low self-confidence as they do not have a clear sense of self (Gati and Tal, 2008; Lent, 2005).

Participants' low level of commitment seems to have a negative effect on their commitment towards hospitality careers, as they feel less confident and more ambivalent about their career decisions and future utilisation of holding a higher education degree. Data strongly suggested that participants' learning experiences and individuals' activities contribute towards establishing their sense of self and ability to make effective career decisions (O'Regan, 2010). This is a critical factor as poor self-confidence can hinder career decisions (Germeijs, Verschueren and Soenens, 2006) leading to disillusionment towards the hospitality industry as a career destination.

Participants expectations and perceptions seem incompatible with those of hospitality employers. This can then result in a lack of commitment and increasing dissatisfaction. They strongly criticised hospitality employers for under-utilising hospitality graduates' skills, abilities and academic competencies as they diminish the values of studying hospitality management (Brown, Arendt and Bosselman, 2014). This finding confirms research in that having a strong academic background in non-traditional occupations is in itself not enough to secure a graduate career (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009; Grugulis, 2007). However, participants in both countries were critical with regard to the value of a degree in pursuing a career as well as contributing towards the organisational success. Sufficient work experience and practical skills are perceived as primary requirements to be successful in the industry. This confirms current arguments that an increase in qualifications leads to skills mismatch and declining returns on education as well as the danger of over-estimating the need for academic qualifications (Suh, West and Shin, 2012; Green, Hammer and Star, 2009; Heaton, McCraken and Harrison, 2008).

HE qualifications may have little consequences for industry entry, yet long-term benefits can be achieved in that students who hold a qualification tend to progress to higher levels in conjunction with career longevity. As individuals progress from lower level positions to middle and senior management, there is a greater emphasis upon the requirement for HE achievements (Green, Hammer and Star, 2009). Hospitality industry's working conditions did not convince participants of the future career benefits of hospitality employment. The reality of working conditions and the unsophisticated employment practices are having a significant impact upon participants' perceptions, even jeopardising their career goals in the sector. This confirms current findings that the nature and context of the industry has been shown as crucial in providing a framework of influence upon career goals (Brown, Arendt and Bosselman, 2014; Chen and Shen, 2012; Morrison and O'Mahony, 2003). This is not surprising as literature has already highlighted the critical role of working conditions towards hospitality students' career progression (Heaton, McCraken and Harrision, 2008; Littlejohn and Watson, 2004).

Nevertheless, the study demonstrated that there is a direct correlation between work experience and career decisions as participants are less willing to consider the industry as a potential career destination upon graduation. There is mismatch between educational inputs and industry practices resulting in graduates not valuing academic qualifications. This supports the arguments concerning the role of HE and the responsibility of 'delivering' graduates who are capable academically and practically (Aggett and Busby, 2011; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). The interviews uncovered that HE qualifications and industry knowledge are typically required to pursue a career within large organisations. Participants' responses strongly support this argument as educators' practices and processes are likely to facilitate the alignment of hospitality students to large organisations (Walmsley, Thomas and Jameson, 2012) raising questions about graduate oversupply in hospitality (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005). Participants demonstrated little understanding of the industry's available career opportunities particularly within SMEs (Nachmias, Paddison and Mortimer, 2014). Some authors have expressed concerns about the domination of large organisations in HE teaching (Nolan et al., 2010; Pittaway and Thedham, 2005). The data highlighted that lack of awareness acts as a limiting factor towards individual development and career expectations leading to disillusionment with regard to the hospitality qualification.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study aimed to investigate hospitality students' attitudes towards hospitality education and careers. Participants in both countries share common concerns regarding the hospitality education curriculum and its role in forming future career goals. The uniqueness of this study lies in the fact that a number of intrinsic (low commitment, self-efficacy issues) and extrinsic (work experience, lack of recognition, hospitality industry conditions and higher education practices) variables influence hospitality students' perception towards the value of hospitality education and act as inhibitors of change towards career goals. Critically, the findings contribute to the current debate concerning the appropriateness of hospitality qualifications (for example, Teng, Horng and Baum, 2013; Suh, West and Shin, 2012; Alexander, Lynch and

Murray, 2009; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). There was substantial uncertainty about participants' ability to utilise academic qualifications in the industry and high anxiety about working conditions which may have a negative impact upon future career goals. It is difficult to envisage participants pursuing a successful career in hospitality and subsequently exerting a positive influence on the industry's future growth and success.

The study revealed significant concerns with regard to the hospitality curriculum and students' level of preparedness to make an effective transition into the hospitality industry. Hospitality is suffering from its stakeholder's unsuccessful attempt to provide a curriculum than can develop capable graduates with a set of competencies and skills that reflect on the industry needs. Curriculum development needs to take into account academia-industry forces in order to develop curricula that will address future needs and ensure that the hospitality curriculum covers aspects important to enhancing graduates' career prospects (Teng, Horng and Baum, 2013). This reinforces the need for the industry to develop effective graduate recruitment and development practices necessary to utilise graduate skills and competencies. The industry across the world needs a more robust approach to credentialing and training its workforce. There is no denial that the provision of hospitality educational is not straightforward as there are differences between capabilities, knowledge and expectation development across institutions and countries. Nevertheless, there has been a long-standing debate about the working conditions in the industry. In such a fragile economic environment, key stakeholders in the hospitality industry need to be more proactive in encouraging graduate recruitment, changing individual perceptions about seeking a hospitality career and strengthening the industry's image. Given the dominance of SMEs, there is need for small employers to build mutually beneficial links with higher education institutions and graduates to ensure that essential labour skills will remain in the industry. Such actions aim at attracting and retaining key talents, enabling organisations to achieve their goals.

It is of more immediate value to those responsible for designing hospitality management curricula to ensure that programmes meet academic standards as well as student expectations regarding the skill sets needed in the workplace (Ali, Murphy and

Nadkami, 2014). The issue here is how hospitality graduates perceive hospitality and how HE encompasses the employability issues in the undergraduate curriculum. The cross-national research revealed that hospitality students expressed doubts about the skills and competences developed in higher education necessary to make the successful transition from HE to work. This study could be seen as a thought challenge for new directions of higher education research, curriculum reengineering and student preparedness for the industry. High commitment and self-efficacy are required to achieve personal goals and expectations (Richardson, 2010; Germeijs, Verschueren and Soenens, 2006). Nonetheless, current pressures on educational experience, student retention, attributes and assessment might have an impact upon curriculum design and the overall HE experience in years to come.

Finally, the study provides a foundation for future research that lends a theoretical basis for research into the hospitality curriculum and graduate employability. The social cognitive career literature provided a fecund foundation to explore hospitality students' perceptions and advance research in the field. The data reveal that participants were not fully aware of their own interests and abilities in hospitality. Further research which investigates and compares similarities and/or differences of new undergraduate hospitality students and graduates career-related behaviour and aspirations will be valuable to improve academic services and curriculum provision. Such a comparative study is likely to add to the richness of the data available around hospitality students' perceptions toward curriculum development, career decision-making and employability. The study's empirical and methodological approach could be extended into other subjects in order to add to the richness of the data around the appropriateness of vocational education in supporting career goals.

A final note relates to the admittedly surprising similarity between UK and Cypriot students' responses to the issues addressed in the interviews. While some similarities were expected, just how aligned both cohorts' views were in relation to the value of hospitality education, the nature of work in the sector and work entry was surprising. In an increasingly globalised world perhaps there is more commonality in relation to perceptions of work and

careers than we have hitherto recognised, certainly in developed economies. Further studies might usefully explore this question.

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Appendix 1: Data codes
- **Attitude towards the hospitality management degree**
    - Perceived advantage
    - Perceived disadvantage
    - Over-inflated expectations
    - Education and lecturers

- **Work experience and qualification recognition**
    - Industry exposure
    - Qualification and career
    - Qualification and work experience
    - Transferability of qualification

- **Employers' perception of the qualification and graduate skills**
    - Industry reputation and higher education practices
    - Hospitality and working environment
    - Perceived dissatisfaction
    - Perceived satisfaction