Intellectual activism: the path to change in policy and practice through critical research. The work of the Global Hospitality Research Alliance (GHRA)

Abstract

This presentation will focus on the role of intellectual activism as a driver and outcome of critical research in the area of hospitality employment. A criticism of much academic research in tourism and hospitality is that our impact is limited and our goals, in terms of output, are framed in terms of high-quality journal papers. Hospitality employment is a domain where our collective endeavours, as academic researchers, has been singularly unsuccessful in real impact terms. This conference presentation will explore the experience of an international group of critical scholars, sharing a common interest in hospitality employment, in engaging with intellectual activism to translate academic research into vehicles for stakeholder advocacy.

Key words: hospitality employment; workforce; intellectual activism; stakeholder engagement; impact

If COVID-19 has taught us as academics and researchers anything it is that university-led research can make a major difference to the lives of people. We have, hopefully, seen the slaying of the ivory-tower dragon for once and for all. And although they were at the forefront of the response to COVID-19, it is not just our colleagues in the natural, medical and biomedical sciences who have contributed to meaningful research that has influenced policy and practice. Those working in the social sciences and business have also undertaken studies that have garnered stakeholder attention, often by invitation (cfe. Leslie et al, 2020; Van Bavel et al, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). Debate about the contribution of social science has also extended into the tourism domain (Wen et al, 2020). This paper introduces a collective of hospitality researchers who are embracing an impact focus in their work.

In a wider context, such contributions to policy and practice from the social sciences are important. Our interest can be located in intellectual activism (Collins, 2012), which Contu (2020:737) argues "calls you to focus not only on knowledge production as an abstract process but as part of an actual academic praxis". We are concerned that our critical research makes a difference to society and specifically to the hospitality workplace where we perceive there to be a range of issues (*inter alia,* precariousness, low pay, abuse) that require rectification. We acknowledge that intellectual activism of this kind can come at a cost in terms of attracting detractors who may question the objectivity of the research, but we believe that such costs are worth carrying in seeking a greater benefit for the hospitality workforce and for society in general. Moreover, researchers embracing intellectual activism require a certain ontological disposition that can conflict with the dominant neoliberal business school ethos (cf. Spicer et al., 2021). This can risk ostracization, as views that challenge industry can compromise the attainment of KPIs expected of the modern (business) academic. On the other hand, as conspiracy theories and anti-science movements are gaining momentum, we have observed a "crisis of scientific truth", a distrust of expertise and scientific knowledge. When the worth of scientific expertise is devalued, the counter scientific discourses help produce a culture of resistance to science (Eslen-Ziya, 2022). A time of crisis, such as the present one, calls us to discern the role we play and the contribution we make to the new social order that is struggling to emerge (Contu 2017).

We also acknowledge the need to have a collective orientation, and to work with fellow researchers in specific strategic ways in order to effect structural and cultural changes in the field. Intellectual activists do not work alone; they address social change by facing the justice issues/demands, starting from where one is situated geographically, institutionally, socially and so on and working with others to face such issues (Contu, 2017). As such our work is built on a collective organised effort of an international group of researchers to find sustainable strategies in working towards improving employment conditions in hospitality.

This conference presentation will explore the experience of an international group of critical scholars sharing a common interest in hospitality employment in translating academic research, conventionally published in leading sector journals, into vehicles for stakeholder advocacy. Given the media and industry and policy interactions from our works there is certainly an alignment with the tenets of critical performativity (Contu, 2020), which speaks to knowledge production that becomes translatable and accessible *vis-à-vis* a phenomenon. Launching as the Global Hospitality Research Alliance (GHRA), our members have undertaken a series of hospitality workforce studies across eight jurisdictions and are currently galvanising a range of country- framed dissemination strategies that involve direct stakeholder engagement with politicians, government agencies, employee representatives and employer organisations through traditional media, social media, workshops, published reports as well as traditional journal outputs (e.g., Booyens et al, 2022). These outputs effecting positive change move beyond academic advocacy research which might not translate into stakeholder engagements, and which are sometimes prone to empirical 'over-reach' (Gilbert, 1997).

We employ several frameworks in our research. These include the Oxfordian fair work principles (Fairwork, 2022) of fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation. We also address several of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) such as SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). In our works we discuss practical implications to inform policy makers and management teams within the hospitality and tourism sector in dealing with endemic phenomena such as abuse and harassment of hospitality employees (e.g., Robinson et al., 2022). Respectively, employees' well-being is prioritised, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, and of its aftermath, to individual's mental health and well-being (Mooney et al., 2022) and in communication modes (Haavisto & Linge, 2022). Our studies also have a strong focus on industrial relations, critically examining the historicity of deteriorating conditions (Williamson et al., (2021). Inherently, following key findings from our cross-national study, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), are also spotlighted (e.g., Curran, 2021), and practical implications are outlined.

While there are, as we have pointed out, risks and challenges regarding the processes and practice of intellectual activism to the modus operandi of contemporary academics, in particularly those employed in business schools, the outcomes align well with the shifts to greater engagement and impact of academics. These are now being enshrined in the UK REF and Australian ERA university research assessment exercises that ultimately determine government funding flows to higher education institutions (Williams & Grant, 2018). We propose to appraise the value of this intellectual activist approach to our research as well as the limitations that it imposes.

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