

# **The Study of the Hospitality management students' image of the Hospitality industry**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to surface the hospitality management students' image of the hospitality industry and the consequent effects on graduate recruitment and retention. A survey of students, from a number of higher education institutes, on their hospitality management courses in 2001 was undertaken. The response rate to the pilot questionnaire was satisfying (86%), due to the self-administrative style. Responses to the main survey (in May 2001) was encouraging with 216 completed questionnaires, which were used for the analysis, representing a final response rate of 86% (216 out of 250 questionnaires distributed). Representing 9% out of the total sampling population are students enrolled on hospitality management programmes at the Blackpool Flyde College, 43% were hospitality management students from Salford University and finally 48% representing students enrolled on hospitality management courses at Hollings Faculty (MMU). Due to the controlled nature of administering questionnaires, a total response rate of 86% (n=216) was achieved. The result of the survey seems to suggest that students with no-experience of the industry appear to have positive views of the industry and these views contrast with those who have experience in the industry. It is argued the responsibility of improving these images in terms of graduate recruitment and retention rates lies in the hands of employers and hospitality management educators.

## **Background**

The importance of the hospitality industry, nationally and internationally has been well documented. It is said that to keep its importance in the global economy, the industry needs a steady supply of suitably trained, committed and motivated managers. However a number of previous studies have highlighted poor graduate transfer and retention rates, suggesting that a large number of graduates do not seek employment in the industry after graduation.

A potential reason for this could be that students embarking on a hospitality management course have an unrealistic or illusory image of the industry and that this image tends to be from students with no previous experience (exposure) of the industry. On the other hand students with experience of the industry have negative perceptions in regard to the industry.

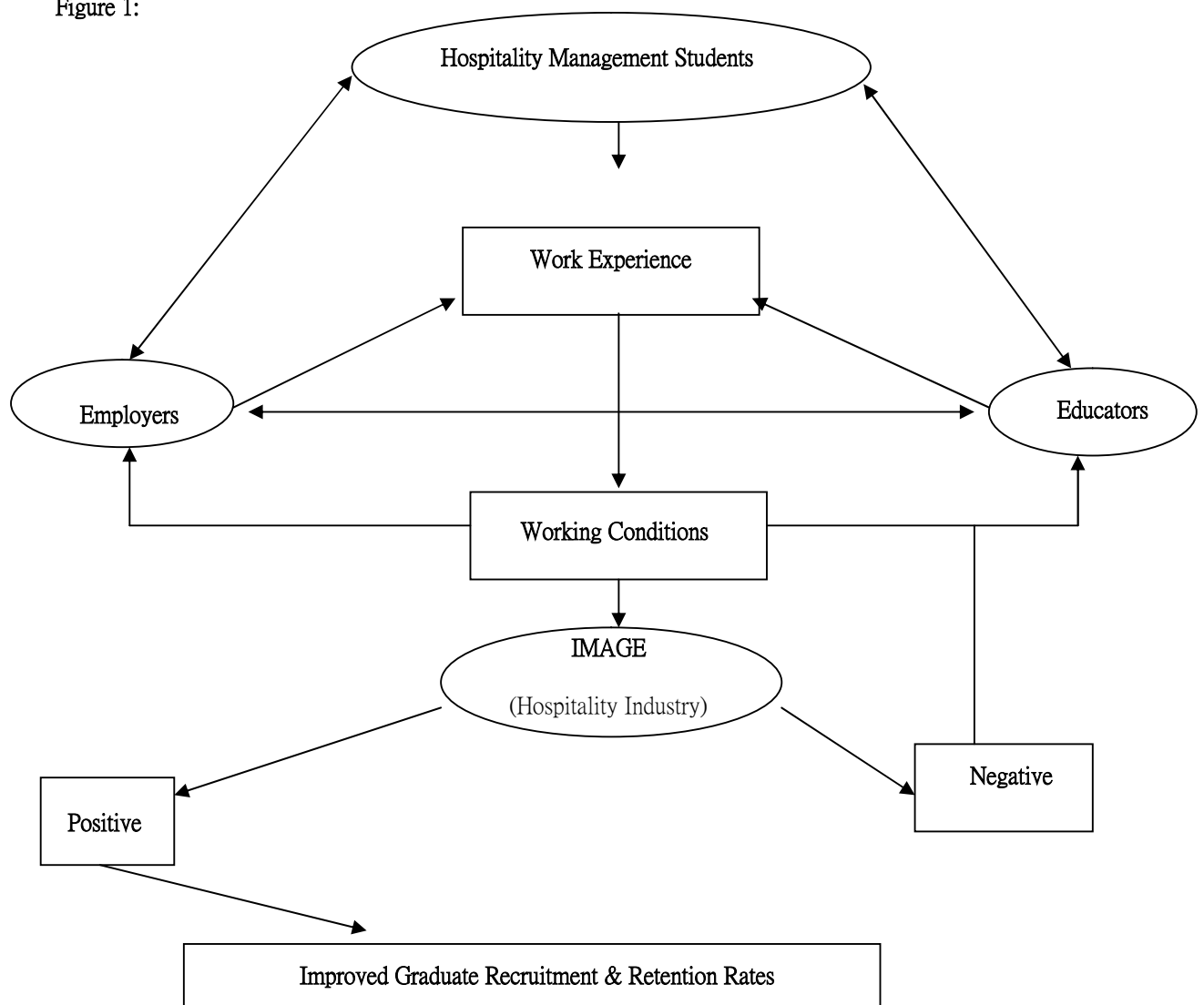
In order to detail this image, a survey of students, from a number of higher education institutes, on their hospitality management courses in 2001 was undertaken. The result of the survey seems to suggest that students with no-experience of the industry appear to have positive views of the industry and these views contrast with those who have experience in the industry. It is argued the responsibility of improving these images in terms of graduate recruitment and retention rates lies in the hands of employers and hospitality management educators.

As above, the aim of this project is to determine hospitality management students' image of the hospitality industry and the consequent effects on graduate recruitment and retention. This aim will be achieved by the following objectives:

- 1.** To evaluate the image of the industry as held by students with no-prior industry experience.

2. To review the way in which industry experience effects hospitality management students' image.
3. To assess the image of the industry from the perspectives of two distinct groups of students, firstly students with no-prior industry experience and secondly students with industry experience.
4. To determine the impact that both groups of students' image has in relation to graduate recruitment and retention within the hospitality industry.

Figure 1:



## **Hypothesis and Discussions**

In order to increase the rate of graduate recruitment and retention rates, both educators and employers of hospitality managers should be involved. Educators' responsibility lies, first, in effective student recruitment and, second, in maximizing students with the motivation to contribute to an improvement in industry working conditions. Equally employers should first accept that the general quality of working life should be enhanced. Furthermore, employers should usually bring about improvements in working conditions. The hypothesis is assumed and provided in figure one as a framework for this study.

The general consensus is that students, who have no experience of the industry, hold it in high regard and are positive in their views towards their future careers. If this seems to be the case, why then are retention rates among students and graduates so poor. It is not unfair to say that the image of the industry that a student has is, in some part 'illusory'. This illusory perception could be rectified by ensuring that the recruitment process detect, and if necessary, correct these impressions.

A number of negative images were also discussed, such as, low pay, hard work and odd working hours. We concluded this with a view into the way entrants to vocational courses (Hospitality Management) are admitted onto degree programs. It is viewed that entrants without the necessary personal characteristics may well be un-suitable for a career in the hospitality industry as employers rely heavily on the candidates' suitability for the job, rather than academic achievement. It is important that entrants to 'vocationally oriented' hospitality management courses have a clear and realistic image of the industry before they set out on their journey into study.

The following two actual cases show two different experiences of recent graduates. These cases illustrate the problems and the opportunities that exist in different

employment scenarios. Each case shows how components of a management-career package, or lack thereof, can affect an individual's decision to stay in, or leave, the hotel industry (Dermody and Holloway, 1998, pp.24-25).

**Case One: Cathy (Negative Experience)**

After completing her Bachelor in business administration in Hospitality Management, she was excited to be offered a job as a management recruit for a hotel company. She showed up highly motivated and ready to do a good job. When she arrived she was assigned to housekeeping where she almost immediately begin to feel isolated as the head housekeeper communicated with staff almost exclusively in Spanish. On top of this she was not allowed to rotate through other departments. She left this position and started work as an assistant manager at another establishment, where again she got little support and no training. When the night auditor left she was expected to work all day and then complete the night audit as well. Cathy was persuaded by friends and family to leave the industry as she was over worked and very depressed.

**Case Two: Mark (Positive Experience)**

When Mark completed his BA in Hospitality Management. He took a position a management trainee in a hotel establishment. The position had excellent training opportunities, and he got the feeling that he would be an important member of the management team. He had opportunity to experience a number of departments within the hotel where he would report to an assigned manager who would watch over him. At one point he was allowed to negotiate a contract with a small local vender. This all heightened Mark growing enthusiasm for the industry. Mark interacted with hotel executive and attended management meetings once a month; although he was training he was accepted as a manager from the beginning. This means he was

included in all management activities as well as recreational outings. Asked whether it bothered him that he had turned down better paying entry-level jobs from other industries, Mark's answer was, No.

***To sum up the two cases:*** The employment scenarios for Cathy and Mark could not be more distinct. By lack of attention to Cathy's training and career, two lodging operators squandered a potentially strong management candidate. In contrast, an effective management-career package was used to make Mark's experience positive so that he would want to stay in the industry. The industry still has not offset negative perceptions regarding its working conditions and, as Cathy's case shows, in some ways it still earns those negative perceptions.

To summarize this we have looked at the way in which students' experience of the industry has affected their image, generally in a negative fashion rather than positive. In particular we looked at student work placement. More often than not work placement is a student's first experience of the industry, and is important that this experience be made as rewarding as possible. But to many the reality of actual working life in the industry comes as a shock, which in turn, deters a large number of students from committing themselves to a career within the industry. A number of problems regarding this topic are looked at, such as employee-organisational fit and poor employment conditions. A number of benefits are also reviewed concerning student work experience and their propensity to pursue a career in it, as well as benefits to the industry. Two brief case studies were reviewed of actual graduates' first-hand experience of the industry and the way that proper management career packages benefit both industry and graduates in terms of industry perception and retention.

## METHODOLOGY

A pilot study was undertaken at Manchester Metropolitan University targeting 10 students enrolled on HND and B.A. (Hons) Hospitality Management courses to test their effectiveness, as described by Kent (1999), and to remove any apparent errors. Following this, questionnaires were distributed during the first week back from the Easter Holidays to two sample populations: (1) students enrolled on hospitality management with no prior industry experience, and (2) students who have experience of the industry. Students at these stages of their education in higher educational institutions offering hospitality management courses, such as University of Salford, Blackpool Flyde College and Hollings Faculty (MMU) were given a questionnaire (see appendix 1). In order to achieve maximum response and to answer questions students may have during the completion of the questionnaire, the questionnaires was administered in a controlled environment, i.e. during formal class time under the supervision of the author. It was recognised that the author's ethnocentricity could have influenced students' responses. Therefore, no priming took place; the student merely being informed that this questionnaire was designed to determine students' image of the hospitality industry.

Denscombe (1998) argues that a sample of around 250 to 300 is seen as sufficient for small-scale research projects. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed. The technique used to achieve this is cluster sampling; this is where samples are taken in clusters from a population (Marshall, 1997), for example, clusters of students who were attending formal classes at their respective universities/colleges. The questionnaires can be described as normative in that they enable typical views to be identified. It is, however acknowledged that the sample population represents a cluster sample in a geographical sense, and that there is an inherent disadvantage in

questionnaires; namely the impossibility of checking the accuracy of results and the restriction placed on information yielded by setting questions. Closed questions were mainly utilised, using combination of likert scales, list and category type questions as described in all research textbooks (Bell, 1999) (Denscombe, 1998) (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996). The questionnaire, which although potentially limiting the respondents answers, did not allow for any qualitative responses except for the inclusion of the category 'other' where it was felt appropriate. This enabled the responses to be easily analysed using the statistics package SPSS. In order to mediate the latter problem, students were encouraged to make qualitative comments at the end. Despite these methodological limitations, the scale of the survey clearly achieves the threshold of 'generalisability' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991, p.41), at least in terms of students at the University of Salford, Blackpool Flyde College and Hollings Faculty (MMU). Students were asked to answer a range of questions regarding their rationale for choosing the Universities, the type and amount of experience gained in hospitality prior and during their course and what influenced them to undertake a qualification in hospitality management. Specific questions were then asked regarding their image of the hospitality industry. Students were given a number of statements, both positive and negative, taken from the literature; describing various aspect of the image of the industry and asked to what extent they agree or disagree with each statement. The likert method of scaling will be employed to achieve this, for example, using a scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Demographic questions were also asked to determine background characteristics (including age, gender and marriage status to assess the likelihood of perceptions of the hospitality industry) (See Appendix 1).



## **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONNAIRE**

The response rate to the pilot questionnaire was satisfying (86%), due to the self-administrative style. However, the design and wording of the questionnaire was understood and correctly filled in by those who responded. To substantiate interpretation of the overall results, it was decided to incorporate the pilot questionnaire responses into the analysis of the main survey.

Responses to the main survey (in May 2001) was encouraging with 216 completed questionnaires, which were used for the analysis, representing a final response rate of 86% (216 out of 250 questionnaires distributed).

Representing 9% out of the total sampling population are students enrolled on hospitality management programmes at the Blackpool Flyde College, 43% were hospitality management students from Salford University and finally 48% representing students enrolled on hospitality management courses at Hollings Faculty (MMU). Due to the controlled nature of administering questionnaires, a total response rate of 86% (n=216) was achieved. Of these responses it was found that 38% were male and 62% were female, 87% were aged between 18-23, 11% were aged between 24-30 and 2% aged 31 or over. As would be expected from the age range of the majority of respondents, 89% were single and 95% had no dependents.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software was used to analyse the results of the survey. Firstly, an analysis of the frequency count was undertaken. This gives the frequency of which data conforms to certain criteria. One example would be age group of, say, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, etc. It tends to be the first analysis carried out because other statistical techniques use it as a basis. Secondly, a Wilcoxon-mann-whitney non-parametric test was utilised to determine the results from the data collected. An explanation follows on the table below...

Type of Data	Between Subject (Independent Samples)	Within Subjects (Related Samples)
	Two Samples	Two Samples
Interval	Independent samples t-test	Paired samples t-test
<b>Ordinal</b>	<b>Wilcoxon-mann-whitney test</b>	Wilcoxon signed ranks t-test
Nominal	Chi-square test	McNemar test

(Kinnear & Gray, 1999)

### **Ordinal Data**

Consider an experiment in which subjects rank ten objects in order of preference. This would generate ten related samples of data, each sample comprising the ranks given by the subjects to one particular object. Here is a set of inherently ordinal data, not independent measurements on a scale with units. In this case, the use of a non-parametric test is required by the nature of the data: A parametric ANOVA would be inappropriate here.

### **Non-Parametric Methods**

When there are serious violations of the assumptions of the t-test, non-parametric tests can be used instead. The data which has been utilised in this study has been of an independent nature, not that of the paired type. Independent data tests subjects under only one condition, this variant has no repeated measures, or is of between subjects design. Paired data tests subjects under two conditions and is of repeated measures, or within subjects design. The non-parametric alternative to the independent

samples t-test would be the Wilcoxon-mann-whitney test.

## **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

For the purpose of this study the sample population was divided into two groups...

1. Group A = No-prior industry experience.
2. Group B = With industry experience.

It is possible to divide the sample population into these individual groups by exploiting the eighth question in the demographic profile of survey respondents. The respondents fell into two separate parties, those with no-prior industry experience were grouped into A and respondents with industry experience were grouped into B.

In this section, brief explanations are given to a number of positive and negative statements, produced by students studying hospitality management at an undergraduates level. Students were divided into two groups, A and B. A had no prior experience of working within the hospitality industry and therefore, their views on the industry would have been formulated either by themselves or by some outside influences. Group B on the other hand had experienced working life in the industry, prior to or during their studies, albeit at a non-management level. From the answers given by the two sets of students, it can clearly be surmised that the views of the different groups contrast with each other. When analysing group B's answers to the negative statements, all percentages agreeing with the statements (apart from manual staff are treated poorly) are higher than those of group A. When asked to give answers to a number of statements regarding positive image, the emerging picture is that group A's image is rather more positive in respect to the questions asked. From the results it seems that group A, those with no experience of the industry, have an unrealistic image of working life. Group B will, it is argued, have an indication as to the demands and constraints of working life in general.

## **Conclusion**

This study endeavoured to determine what image students enrolled on hospitality management courses held as to the industry they 'hopefully' intended to be a part of. The perceptions of two groups of students were recorded, one being from a group of students with no-prior experience of the industry and the other who had some form of exposure to the industry, but as mentioned earlier, perhaps not at a management level.

The purpose of dividing the sample population into two groups were to determine if students who had no experience of the industry had false or unrealistic image of the industry and to what extent, influenced their image and second group to see if their image contrasted with the first group in regard to a number of statements and questions regarding the industry and the course they were enrolled on. To what extent do the image that both groups have determine their level of commitment to the industry.

From the results obtained, it can clearly be stated that students who have no work experience hold a generally more positive image of the industry, while students with some exposure or experience of the industry hold negative perceptions. Baring this in mind a number of steps can be taken to ensure realistic industry perceptions, which will benefit group A and a number of preventative measures can be used to ensure students from group B gain a better image of the industry than what they already hold. This image that group A has, obviously has been fostered before the course started, so in terms a certain amount of responsibility must lie with the way in which students are enrolled onto the course. Ways of ensuring that students have realistic industry perceptions include stipulating new entrants onto the course have had some realistic job preview experience and in certain cases the detection and correction of industry impression, in regards to checking the source of their interest to make sure that it does

not derive from unrealistic sources, such as media.

The issue can be tackled in number of ways. Students could in part of a pre-requisite undertake in period of orientation to the industry prior to the start of their programme. This could be arranging by the institution. This seen to be quite in an extreme measure and no doubt very resource intensive, with the possible result of discouraging students who intend upon taking the course, but on the other hand what will be left, will be a group of committed and motivated students.

Another alternative could be that students independently obtain some experience of the industry as a pre-requisite of entry onto the course. This seems and much more realistic in terms of institutional resource availability. Specific points to examine are...

- Strongly recommending to applicants that they have some, however limited, experience of a working environment, ideally in the hospitality industry (for example, through course literature and careers advisers).
- Developing recruitment and selection skills in academic staff involved in student selection.
- Outlining the true nature of working life in the industry, including, of course, stressing that good employment practices do exist with some employers and future managers can help to expand the incidence of this.
- Testing for potential managerial qualities (for example, through role-play, simulation and/or psychometric testing).
- Arranging, possibly through industrial liaison tutors, job previews for applicants who have no work experience but are in all other respects good candidates: and making completion of a job preview a condition of offer.

It is felt that an overall guidance document is required for lecturers, students and employers to ensure that the mutual aims of work placement are met.

It is important that recruiters of hospitality management students convey an accurate and realistic impression of the industry, while more importantly the industry itself has to change the nature of employment to portray a positive image of working life in the industry.

There are a large number of negative factors associated with employment in the industry, which leads to high levels of staff turnover, those factors include low wages and long irregular working hours. These negative factors can be helped by improving working conditions, but to implement improvements that tackle factors like these, will incur a certain amount of cost. The benefits must be weighed against the cost of introducing improvements to the industry.

Although there is a difference of opinions, no doubt, upon the working conditions of the industry. The result of both this and Barron & Maxwell's previous study, show students with experience do not hold the industry image a high regard, which in term may deter a number of students from committing themselves to the industry.

However, the results from this study show that students with industry experience have a more positive view of the course than those without experience. As suggested earlier, if it is possible to give students the opportunity or as a pre-requisite to course entry allow them to experience the industry, this will not only give a realistic industry image but also improve their positivity towards the course. Of course, this has to be coupled with improvements to working conditions within the industry itself or the result will be, all students have some form of experience but still harbour negative images of the industry.

Above we have talked about a number of issues surrounding the image of both groups of students, but when we look closely at the results, a number of other issues relevant to the topic become apparent.

One is that students from both groups, who enrolled on this course, see it as a worthwhile general qualification, as we mentioned this was surprisingly due to the vocational nature of the course. Are a number of students knowingly enrolling onto their course with no intention of entering the hospitality industry and do they see this course as an easier option when compared to other business management programmes. As this percentage of students in the questionnaire indicated they had no desire to work in the hospitality industry upon enrolling for the course, and the question probing their future career aspirations indicate, they may use this qualification as a means to gain entry into completely different industries altogether. Again we see the necessity of an intensive, professional recruitment process to detect such behaviour.

In order to improve graduate recruitment and retention rates, we have to refer back to (figure 1), where the triangular relationship between student, employer and educator can be seen. It can be said that the educators' responsibility lies in firstly effective student recruitment and secondly instilling in students the necessity and motivation for improving working conditions in the industry, as these are our future managers.

Equally employers have to realise that the general quality of working life in the industry must be enhanced. Perhaps looking at the rationalisation of working hours and a softening of management style. The result being improved commitment, motivation and ultimately retention. The three corners of the diagram have to communicate effectively for the benefit of all parties involved. If this can be achieved the cycle can be broken, resulting in the above conclusion, which is improved graduate recruitment and retention in the industry.

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