Matching the Competencies of Hospitality Graduates with the Expectations from the Hospitality Industry in Ghana: A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to match the competencies of hospitality graduates with the expectations from industry in the Ghanaian context. The main aim of the study is to contribute both theoretically and empirically to addressing the challenges of training and developing suitably qualified hospitality graduates. The study envisages the use of Pragmatism as it seeks to apply both Positivism and Interpretivism approach to collect data from key stakeholders of the hospitality education and industry. The research design found appropriate for this study is the case study method with the use of mixed strategies. With the mixed method, the research will use in-depth interview to collect data from industry practitioners and lecturers whilst survey will be based on structured questionnaire for graduates working in the industry. Findings would be used to build a competency framework for hospitality programs at the Ghana Technical Universities. This research identifies the need to match what is taught in the Universities with the expectation of the industry and is limited to the hospitality and tourism industry. The gaps between the University hospitality curriculum and the industry are identified and a framework built to fill the gap. This research work will assist in the review of the hospitality curriculum and enhance the proposed Competency Based Teaching for the new Technical Universities in Ghana.

Keywords: Competencies, Hospitality industry, Hospitality curriculum, industry expectation

Introduction

The significant contribution of the tourism and hospitality industry to economic sustenance in both developed and developing countries deserves the attention of governments, economic growth policy makers, and researchers. The industry, which consists of four segments namely travel and tourism, accommodation, food and beverage and recreation, is one of the world's largest industries with a global economic contribution (direct, indirect and induced) of over 7.6 trillion U.S. dollars in 2016, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2017). The direct economic contribution of travel and tourism alone amounted to approximately 2.31 trillion U.S. dollars in 2016 (WTTC, 2017). In 2017, the total contribution of travel and tourism to the world's economy was forecasted to grow by 3.5% (WTTC, 2017). Africa's travel and tourism industry continues to record impressive growth over the years. In 2017, the continent hit a 63 million high in international tourist arrivals as compared to 58 million in 2016 which represent 9% increase compared to 2016 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016). This in general represent an improvement above the global performance of a 7% rise in 2017 resulting in 1,323 million international tourist arrivals in Africa (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016). Travel and tourism contributed a total of 8.1% to Africa's GDP (USD 177.6 bn) in 2017. This percentage was expected to rise by 3.7% (to reach 12%) in 2018 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016).

In Ghana, the direct contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in 2016 was USD1.2 M (3% of the country's GDP), forecasted to rise by 5.6% in 2017. In 2016, travel and tourism generated 288,000 jobs. This was forecasted to grow by 4.7% in 2017 to 301 500; thus supporting the crucial role of the tourism and hospitality industry in employment generation in Ghana (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016). To cater for the growing amounts of international visitors, it is imperative that staff is suitably qualified to cater for the needs of these travellers. This requires that the tourism and hospitality training institutions in Ghana produce the qualified human resources for the industry.

In spite of the fact that the educational curricula offered in tourism and hospitality is expected to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to meet industry needs, graduates are often not able to articulate their skills (Wong, Siu & Tsang, 2005; Asirifi et al., 2013; Avornyo, 2013). Not surprisingly therefore, several studies reveal that the tourism and hospitality industry is plagued by inadequately trained staff that often lack practical skills (Blomme, van Rheede & Tromp, 2010; Asirifi et al., 2013; Brown, Arendt & Bosselman, 2014; Pepra-Mensah, Adjei & Yeboah-Appiagyei, 2015). This creates a gap between human resource supply and competencies required by the industry.

Problem Statement

The tourism and hospitality industry is one of the major contributors of economic growth and sustainability in Ghana. (WTTC, 2018). As the largest sector in the tourism industry, the hospitality industry fulfils a major function in catering for the needs and wants of tourists. Thus, there is a need to sustain and advance growth in the hospitality industry by employing suitably skilled graduates. To achieve this, it is

imperative that university curriculums adequately prepare students for the world of work.

Although nine out of ten Technical Universities in Ghana offer Hospitality Management, there has been persistent complaints from industry that graduates do not meet the expectations from employers in the hospitality industry. The national tourism development plan published by Government of Ghana (2013) confirms this mismatch. There is thus a need to ascertain the expectations from industry and to ensure that university curriculums address the concerns. It is also imperative that the expectations from hospitality graduates are considered, so they can be successfully integrated into the industry. The main objective of the study is thus to propose a framework to match the competencies of hospitality graduates with the expectation from the hospitality industry in Ghana.

The main aim of the study is to contribute both theoretically and empirically to addressing the challenges of training and developing suitably qualified hospitality graduates.

Main Research Question:
How can the competencies of hospitality graduates be matched with the expectations from the hospitality industry in the Ghanaian context?

Specific Research Questions
1.   What are the key competencies expected from hospitality employees form a literature and industry perspective?
2.   To what extent do hospitality graduates exhibit the competencies expected of them by the hospitality industry?
3.   What are the gaps between the competencies of hospitality graduates and the competency expectations from the hospitality industry?
4.   Which framework can be proposed to match the competencies of hospitality graduates with the competency expectations from the hospitality industry?

Literature Review

Research identifying the necessary competencies for the hospitality industry is extensive (Chan & Coleman, 2004; Jauhari, 2006; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2011; Lee, Lu, Jiao, & Yeh, 2006; Ricci, 2010; Walsh & Linton, 2001). Employers in the hospitality industry worldwide are expecting graduates to be work ready, possessing competencies such as interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, communication skills, and problem solving skills to make them employable (Andrews, 2015; Balakrishnan, 2016).

Studies on the competencies required from hospitality graduates has been conducted since the 1980s. These include studies that focused on hospitality (Breiter & Clements, 1996; Harrill, 2005; Mulder, Weigel, & Collins, 2007), the hospitality industry in general (Nelson & Dopson, 2001; Valaei & Rezaei, 2016), and some special areas of hospitality (Baum, 2002; Jauhari, 2006). Jauhari (2006) focused on the existing gap in terms of ensuring that the needs of industry are met by the ongoing skills development in India and found that the critical success factors to be a strong

customer orientation, outstanding service, flawless operation management, marketing and cost management.

Interestingly, Chan and Coleman (2004) sought the views of human resource managers on the skills and competencies needed for the Hong Kong hospitality industry and found that employees must be service-minded and committed to the industry, with some degree of working experience rather than having a good educational background. Kay and Russette (2000) also concluded that the most essential managerial competences were leadership and interpersonal skills. Focusing on the competencies needed by the graduate student, Robinson et al. (2005) emphasise that soft skills, behavioural skills and generic attributes are the core competences needed by graduate students in the hospitality industry.

Some widely known studies that focused on hospitality management competencies include Tas, LaBrecque, and Clayton (1996), Siu 1998, Nelson and Dopson (2001), Baum (1991) and Partlow (1990). These researchers specifically surveyed hospitality managers on the essential competencies for the hospitality business and found human relation skills, leadership skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills and conceptual skills to be very important to the industry. Shum, Gatling and Shoemaker (2018) and Williams (2015) surveyed hospitality managers to ascertain their job related skills and highlighted solving guest-related problems, ethical standards, good communication, good relationships with customers and employees, and maintaining a professional appearance as pertinent to the hospitality environment.

Chen and Hsu (2007) found that being able to perform an operational analysis, on-the-job training, negotiation, management of service encounters, managing change and creativity were essential skills required from hospitality students. Baum (1991) concurs with these findings, while Partlow (1990) identified competencies which hospitality students at the bachelor degree needs to acquire. This included conceptualizing managerial responsibility, developing goals and objectives, developing procedures and policies, developing standards, etc. Enz, Renaghan and Geller (1993) used a mail survey to sample the views of graduate students, faculty and industry representatives on the competency requirements for the industry.

Graduates' ranked forecasting of future trends, managing and leading groups and problem identification and solution as the most important competencies. Faculty on the other hand, saw problem identification, conceptual thinking and current industry knowledge as the most relevant set of competencies whilst industry representatives rated acting in an ethical manner, leadership and communication skills as the three most important aspects that a competent person in the industry should possess. Using a brainstorming session, Ashley et al. (1995) gathered from industry executives that people's skills, communication skills, ability to develop service orientation and the problem identification and solving skills were some of the competencies required from the industry. Through a Personal Intercept Survey, hospitality managers stressed the development of teamwork skills, effective listening and communication skills as some of the vital management competencies for the industry (Tesone & Ricci, 2006).

Also, some of the studies on competency requirement for the industry were undertaken with specific focus on a particular specialized area in the industry. For example, Okeiyi, Finley and Postel, (1994) as well as Jeou-Shyan and Lu (2006)

looked at the competency requirements for the food and beverage segments of the hospitality industry. Their studies ranked human relation skills the number one competency needed for the food and beverage segment. Furthermore, some studies compared the competency needs of some specialized areas within the industry (Agut et al., 2003), whilst others looked at the competencies needed for club management and the culinary arts (see Perdue, Ninemeier & Woods, 2000; Zopiatis, 2010; Koenigsfeld *et al.*, 2011; Riggs & Hughey, 2011).

Millar, Mao and Moreo, (2008) conducted a study using an exploratory qualitative approach to identify competencies that students need to possess by focusing on educators and industry professionals in the lodging and food and beverage industry. Per the findings, educators and professionals in the food and beverage segment seem to agree on administrative, conceptual technical and leadership domain but not on interpersonal competencies. This they claim might be due to the fact that, most of the educators involved in the study had worked in the industry and had brought this knowledge to the classroom. As compared to the lodging industry, educators and industry differed in the competencies required. Whilst industry placed high premium on technical skills, educators emphasized conceptual competencies (Miller et al., 2008).

A study by Nolan *et al.* (2010) in Ireland sought to determine whether there were agreement among hospitality management graduates and employers with regard to the very important competencies required in the hospitality industry. They also looked at how these two stakeholders perceived the relevance of the training they received for working in the industry, with emphasis on the acquisition of the essential competencies. Both groups rated interpersonal skills and professional knowledge skills as very important competency domains. However, whilst employers regarded teamwork and cost control as important, graduates on the other hand rated managing poor performing staff and identifying training needs of staff as important. In all employers were fairly satisfied with the competencies in Information Technology, operational skills and financial knowledge of graduates of the hospitality programme. Ultimately, leadership and communication skills were rated as the major factors used to determine how successful a graduate will be in the industry (Nolan et al., 2010).

Challenges of working in the hospitality industry
As beneficial as the hospital industry is to the different stakeholders, it is confronted with several challenges that negatively affect its performance (Salleh, 2010). Some of these challenges relates to operational issues such as the long working hours of employees which has been found to impact negatively on their mental, emotional and physical health (Salleh, 2010).

Jin-Zhao and Jing (2009) further argues that poor human resource management strategies remain another challenge in the hospitality industry which influences on high employee turnover. There is globally a lack of skilled workers and there is a continuous concern for organisations to source suitably skilled employees. This naturally also extends to the hospitality industry (Wang & Jing, 2009). This is further aggravated by the relatively low levels of employee motivation which may negatively affect service quality and customer satisfaction resulting in high employee turnover (Salleh, 2010).

Competencies for working in the hospitality industry

Competence is defined as "a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one's job (a role or responsibility), that correlates with performance on the job, that can be measured against well-accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development" (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999).

Kokt (2018) explains that competence comprise four main components which are knowledge, skills, attributes and ability which are discussed below:

Knowledge implies an understanding of facts, truths and principles an individual gained through formal training and experience (Kokt, 2018).

Skills imply a developed proficiency (mentally or physically) that can be acquired through specialized training (Kokt, 2018).

Attributes imply the characteristics and qualities individuals possess. Individual attributes are a combination of genetics and experience gained. This component is often neglected by employers as it is the most subjective. The fact however remains that specific personality traits have been linked to individual performance (Kokt, 2018).

Ability implies the aptitude to perform the mental and/or physical activities that are expected from individuals that want to work in a particular profession (Kokt, 2018).

According to Kagaari (2007), employers are not highly enthused about the quality of skills of graduates churned out by higher educational institutions (HEIs) onto the labour market. The blame is subsequently placed on academic institutions, and the nature of programs they run for their students (Jamali, 2005). Blom and Saeki (2011), supporting the argument believes the challenge is due to the insufficient supply of quality skills in contemporary industries. Effah *et al* (2014) in a related study, pointed out that most developed countries have achieved this as a result of establishing institutions with the sole aim of giving its students technical and technological training. The object according to them, is to take care of unemployment and human resource challenges by churning out students with the required quality skills to enhance productivity and development of their nations' economy (Nduro, Anderson, Peprah, & Twenefour, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Competency-based education in Hospitality Management is necessary to prepare graduates for working in the industry. Since theory and practice are inseparable, a review of relevant theories towards competency-based hospitality education is necessary. As the study aims to address both curriculum issues as well as human development issues, both the Curriculum Theory and the Human Capital Theory will apply. This is explained below.

Curriculum Theory

Curriculum Theory has an ultimate goal of preparing the student for life through the best possible way. As put by Boyd (2003) and cited in Millar, Mao and Moreo (2008):

The central theory of curriculum is simple. Human life however is varied and consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately for these specific activities. This requires only that, one goes into the world of affaires and discovers the particulars of which their

affairs consist. This will show the abilities, attitudes, habits, applications and forms of knowledge that men need

One major purpose of higher education is to prepare students for the field of work (Starkey, Hatchuel, & Tempest, 2004). Curriculum therefore ensures linkage between institutions and industries to ensure that, what is required of the hospitality graduate is what is taught the learner. Simply put, the hospitality educator should prepare students for work in the hospitality industry. This they ought to do by imparting students with competencies expected of them in the field of work.

The Human Capital Theory

Human capital includes the skills, knowledge, capabilities, social and personality attributes embodied in people that can be translated into organisational productivity (Abel & Gabe, 2011; Fulmer & Ployhart, 2014). Some writers, such as (Protogerou, Kontolaimou, & Caloghirou, 2017) and (Teixeira & Tavares-Lehmann, 2014) have described human capital as crucial to a firm's capacity to absorb and organise knowledge and to innovate. Human capital is an important component for organisations to produce economic value and sustainability.

If human capital is not adequately prepared for the jobs that they need to perform, a mismatch can be created between the competencies of employees and those expected from employers. This can have far reaching consequences for organisations and industries. As the Human Capital Theory supports investment in individuals and organisations to increase productivity through education, it directly links to the objective of this study.

Conceptual framework

The following section presents the conceptual framework for the study.
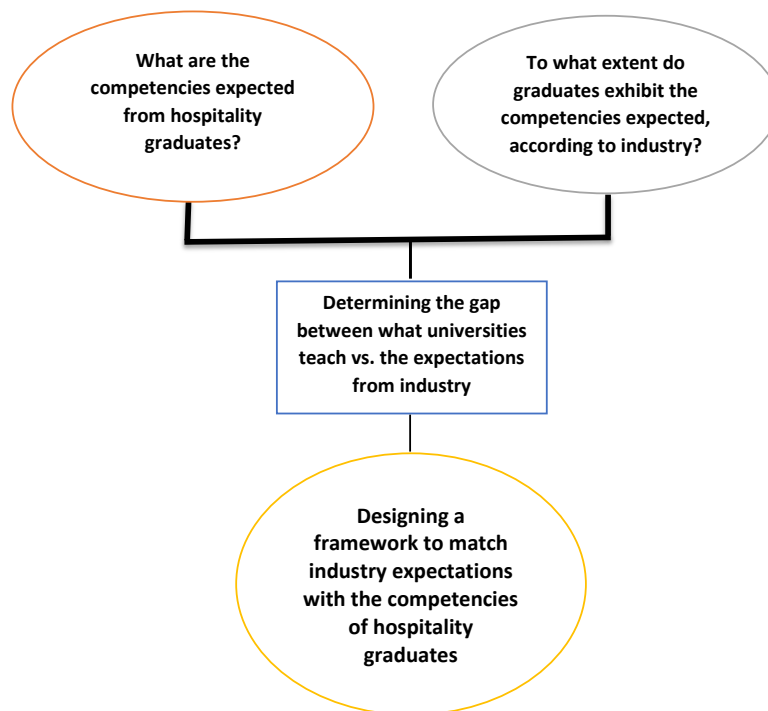

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study.

In their quest to supply industry with suitably trained graduates, universities need to ensure that their curriculums address the concerns form industry (Starkey et al., 2004). In achieving this in the Ghanaian context, Figure 1 relates the main constructs of the study. The competencies expected from hospitality graduates need to be determined (both from a literature and industry perspective), where after the extent to which graduates exhibit these competencies needs to be measured. This will enable the researcher to identify the gaps between what curriculums teach students and what industry expects from them. Finally, the gaps identified will inform the framework to match the curriculum offerings with the expectations from industry.

Methodology

The study envisages the use of Pragmatism as the study seeks to apply both Positivism and Interpretivism in the conduct of the study.

Research approach and design
Saunders and Thornhill (2007) refers to two approaches in research, the deductive approach and the inductive approach. This study follows the deductive approach because it moves from theory to research questions, to data collection, to findings and to either rejection or confirmation of the research question.

According to Kothari (2004), the basic approaches to research is the quantitative and qualitative approaches, while Caruth (2013) highlights that the mixed-method approach is receiving increased attention from researchers. Quantitative research is underpinned by exact and objective knowledge and it requires methods such as experiments and surveys to describe and explain phenomena (Anderson, 2010; Muthu, 2007). Quantitative research emphasises objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical or numerical analysis of data collected through polls, questionnaires and surveys, or by manipulating pre-existing statistical data using computational techniques (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Brynard and Hanekom (2006) agree that quantitative research methods include techniques such as observation, pilot studies, quantitative analysis and questionnaires.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is a systematic approach to describe life experiences by gaining an understanding of underlying opinions and motivations (Burns & Grove, 2010). The intention of qualitative research is to uncover trends and aims to probe deeper into the particular problem. According to Oun and Bach (2014), the goal of a qualitative researcher is to develop an in-depth understanding of human behaviour. Qualitative research, thus, examines and answers questions of how, where, what, when and why a person would act in a certain way towards a specific matter.
A mixed-methods study is research in which quantitative and qualitative approaches are combined or integrated intentionally as components of the research. The use of these approaches can occur at different points in the research process (Caruth, 2013; Creswell & Clark, 2007; Tashakkori, Teddlie, & Johnson, 2015). Owing to the nature of this investigation a mixed-method approach will be followed.

The research design found appropriate for this study is the case study method with the use of mixed strategies. Robson (2002) indicates as cited by Saunders and Thornhill (2007) that this exploratory design is a valuable means of finding out what is happening, it seeks new insights, ask questions and assess phenomena in a new light.

With the case study design, Saunders also admits that the use of mixed methods enables triangulation, which is an advantage because it enables the researcher to look at the problem from different view or standpoints (Saunders and Thornhill 2007).

The relevance of the case study design for this research stems from the fact that it makes it possible to embark on an in-depth investigation of a particular individual, programme, or event within a defined period of time. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005) a case study may be single case or multiple case with the latter involving two or more cases to allow comparisons to be made, build a theory, or propose generalisations. This research therefore employed the multiple or collective case study method as it targeted five selected Technical Universities in Ghana. The multiple case study is used to enable the researcher to do extensive study and to draw clear conclusion about the data.

Ethical considerations
The main ethical challenge researchers' face in the industry is the fear of practitioners to lose their trade identity and trade secret because of competition. This the researcher will ensure that respondents will not be forced to release information of any sort and the researcher will ensure and maintain confidentiality.

Ethical considerations for the investigation will include the following:
• No harm shall be caused research participants.
• Participants shall partake freely and voluntarily in the investigation based on informed consent.
• The research will be designed, conducted and reported in accordance with recognised standards of scientific competence and ethical research.
The possibility of producing misleading results will be minimised and eliminated (Bak 2004; Welman et al. 2005).

Expected Outcomes
Scientific outcomes: The scientific relevance of this research is seen in the examining and compilation of current competences that is required for success in the hospitality business, which can form a basis for further studies and also enrich the Ghanaian hospitality.
Social impact: The developed competency manual will provide a framework for training both the hospitality student and the industry employee on the job. It will also provide a wealth of information to prepare students for the job market. The work will be useful to researchers, practitioners, lecturers as well as learners to facilitate skill development, supervision and management in general.
Innovations / patents: The proposed competency framework will be published and made available to all hospitality schools and Universities in the country.

Organization of the study

The study is organized into eight chapters. Chapter one, this chapter introduces study background, the research problem, research questions, research objectives, main aim of the study, study outcomes. It also introduces the research methodology adopted for the study and the organization of the study. Chapters 2-5 deal with the literature review.

Chapter two, setting the scene for the study literature, defines competency, discusses competencies required in the hospitality industry, challenges of working in the hospitality industry and competencies required for work in the hospitality industry. The chapter also discusses the theoretical framework, the theories related to the study and the conceptual framework.

Chapter three discusses the global, African and Ghanaian hospitality education, the growth of hospitality in Ghana in both education and industry, gaps in learning skill or competencies in Ghana, overview of curriculum models in the hospitality sector and their relevance to the industry.

Chapter four discusses the reason why graduates pursued a career in the hospitality industry.

Chapter five focuses on competencies employers require of hospitality graduates and the extent to which the graduates exhibit these competencies expected of them (Assessment on whether hospitality graduates possess the required competencies).

Chapter six The Research Methodology provides tools used in the investigation and discuss the research methodology that will be applied to the empirical part of the study. Topics discussed includes the research philosophy, research approach and design, population, sampling and the data gathering instruments for the study.

Chapter seven Data analysis and the presentation of results. It Presents the data analysis and the findings of the empirical investigation.

Chapter eight presents Conclusions drawn and provides recommendations presenting the proposed framework based on results from this investigation.

The outcomes of the study

Scientific outcomes: The scientific relevance of this research is seen in the examining and compilation of current competences that is required for success in the hospitality business, which can form a basis for further studies and also enrich the Ghanaian hospitality.

Social impact: The developed competency manual will provide a framework for training both the hospitality student and the industry employee on the job. It will also provide a wealth of information to prepare students for the job market. The work will be useful to researchers, practitioners, lecturers as well as learners to facilitate skill development, supervision and management in general.

Innovations / patents: The proposed competency framework will be published and made available to all hospitality schools and Universities in the country.

Conclusion

This research is ongoing and therefore what is presented is the proposal. As such the main work is hopefully due to be presented at the next conference as the researcher is

working assiduously to collect the data, present, analyse, discuss and write the final conclusions and recommendations.

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