

Building a new curriculum for hospitality management programs in collaboration with practitioners

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English abstract:

The aim of this study is to increase the understanding for which critical aspects should be included in the curriculum of hospitality management programs. The need for a new curriculum is currently up for debate, with specific requests emerging from the hospitality industry, an industry that is currently faced with major challenges concerning recruiting, engaging and retaining talent. Results indicate that the merging of practical aspects with more general literacy aspects may raise the level of employability among students at the same time as it meets the needs of the industry.

Leading practitioners have participated in seminars (focus groups) to identify the most important cornerstones for a new curriculum for Swedish hospitality management programs. The results from the study can be used to set the agenda for the Swedish higher education institutes and as a template in the development of new and adapted curricula in higher hospitality management education.

Svenskt abstract:

Syftet med studien är öka förståelsen för vilka kritiska aspekter som bör ingå i en utbildningsplan inom hospitality management. Behovet av en ny utbildningsplan debatteras allt mer, inte minst med anledning av att nya behov uttrycks från branschen; en bransch som för närvarande står inför en rad utmaningar, framför allt när det gäller att attrahera, engagera och behålla sin personal. Resultaten från studien visar att kopplingen mellan praktiska och mer teoretiska delar kan öka studenternas anställningsbarhet genom att bättre uppfylla kraven från hospitalitybranschen.

Ledande näringslivsföreträdare har deltagit i seminarier (fokusgrupper) för att kunna identifiera de viktigaste hörnstenarna i en ny utbildningsplan för svenska hospitality management. Resultaten kan med fördel användas för att dra upp en färdplan för svenska lärosäten och som mall för utvecklingen av nya och bättre anpassade kursplaner för högre utbildning inom hospitality management.

Keywords: Hospitality Management, Higher Education, curriculum, industry collaboration, practitioners

Introduction

In the hotel and restaurant industry, which has experienced a tremendous growth over the previous years, the supply of well-educated talent is paramount (Kavita & Sharma, 2011). In its expansive growth, this industry has encountered prevailing and serious challenges pertaining to profit, efficiency, and staff turnover. The latter has been apparent specifically concerning recruiting, engaging, and retaining staff. A first step to rectify this, we argue, is to analyse the educational programs providing the industry with staff. How are the hospitality management programs at university level in Sweden adjusted to the needs of the industry? How do these needs intertwine with the university ideal of *bildung*¹, which we perceive to be an inherent part of university education (Gustavsson, 2018)? In other words, how can hospitality management programs provide both a relevant and sustainable university education for free-thinking citizens, while at the same time catering to the current and future needs of the hospitality industry?

The Swedish hotel and restaurant industry is currently falling short of target when it comes to profitability and efficiency. The industry statistics underline this issue, with profit margins well below comparable industries (Carlbäck, 2012; Hinkin & Tracey, 2000). Dolsanski & Reynolds (2018) also pinpoint the problem of high staff turnover (in several industrialised markets up to 60%). Increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining talent to an extent where the competitive advantage could be maintained or even improved also seems like a difficult challenge. This task, by no means unique for Sweden, becomes specifically important for the hotel and restaurant industry. This is due to its role as a backbone in the tourism industry, which is singled out as one of the most important sectors for the future of the Swedish economy, at a time when other jobs are disappearing (BFUF, 2018).

The objective of this research project is to raise the level of understanding of the critical aspects that should be included in the curricula for hospitality management programs: critical aspects that will balance the needs of the industry at the same time as they meet the requirement of a university education in terms of its *bildung*-ideal (Gustavsson, 2018). *Bildung* is here understood as equivalent to self-cultivation and used to express a higher level of education, where learning and philosophy merge and create freethinking individuals. The long-term goal is to contribute to educational programs that afford students a holistic education that meets both short-term industrial needs and more long-term goals for higher learning.

Literature overview

While hotel and restaurant programs have previously had a rather service-oriented focus and a tendency to emphasise practical skills, several studies now indicate a transformation to an approach oriented towards leadership, management, and control (Lashley, 2010). Grönroos (2015) describes the importance of distinguishing between high touch and high tech as important factors for the hotel and restaurant industry in the future. High touch could here be defined as the service sector, with softer values, while high tech represents both technical development related to digitalisation and more IT-based support (Grönroos, 2015). At the same time, Kavita and Sharma (2011) stress leadership and management as crucial factors for any company's success, not just in the hospitality industry. All these considerations will be intertwined, and the better the balance between them, the better for the company or organisation in terms of efficiency, profitability, and reduced staff turnover.

As both the operational aspect, and consequently the educational aspect, have previously emphasized the high touch sector, this could have affected both the operations (in terms of efficiency and profitability) and also created a certain bias in the educational curriculum (Neuhofer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2013). When the focus is now gradually shifting direction towards a more high tech and leadership-based approach, it is necessary to adapt the curriculum to these new challenges, requirements and levels. This would mainly call for a deeper understanding of what is required to align the programs with the desired needs of the practical world, i.e. the industry (Brochado, Rita, & Margarido, 2016).

Most hospitality management curricula were developed some 5-10 years ago (Lashley & Morrison, 2010) and are therefore adapted to needs which may not be relevant in the present, or where the factual circumstances have altered substantially. Even though there are several areas of great similarity, the hotel and restaurant industry of today has its own specific and often new challenges which need to be addressed (Lashley, 2004).

A closer connection between the industry and the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) is proposed as one alternative to rectify the issue (Erbakanova, 2016). When, as a result of working together with hotel and restaurant chains, the HEIs in a country provide a curriculum that meets business needs, both the community and the students would benefit (Erbakanova, 2016). This could only be achieved if the hotel and restaurant companies influence the HEIs. At the same time, the HEIs would not be able to survive if they cannot produce students who are competitive in the labor market (Erbakanova, 2016).

Lashley (2004) also suggests that recent endeavor to explore the nature of hospitality from an array of social science perspectives provides opportunities to support the development of those students in terms of being prepared for proper management in the hospitality industry; this can be achieved by encouraging the study of hospitality and management through critical and theoretical perspectives.

The question is thus how to adapt, and continue to adapt, the curricula to the current needs of the industry by upholding or even increasing efforts to create an outstanding platform for both a generally accepted level of *bildung* and for the formation of employable individuals equipped for the future (Lashley & Morrison, 2010).

To achieve balance in an HE program, where the practical and vocational components have dominated for a long time, one has to draw from two sources: academia and the industry. Any serious attempt to create a program that not only produces an employable workforce for the industry but also well educated, reflective, mindful individuals, requires some fine tuning between the wants and needs of academia, the industry and society as a whole.

Hence, some areas could be identified as crucial or at least highly critical for curriculum development:

2.1. Bildung

To fulfil their *bildung* ideal, the HEIs need to distinguish themselves from vocational educational institutes, whose learning outcomes are more focused on producing students for specific professional vocations. Higher education institutes have a fuller range of learning outcomes for students that cannot be reduced only to employability (Elmgren & Henriksson, 2016). In the transition process from a general education to one that provides *bildung*, general knowledge and personal development constitute essential attributes (Elmgren & Henriksson, 2016).

Stemming from medieval mysticism and romantic *weltanschauung*, there are many versions of the concept of *bildung*. In this study, we will use the term *bildung* in denoting the process of unfolding individuality by learning. In this process, *bildung* “combines elements of education, erudition, formation, experience” (Hopmann, 2007) and thus becomes more than a mastery of contents or development of competencies and abilities, more than a way of ‘knowing something’ or ‘being able to do it’: “In [*b*]ildung, [emphasis added] whatever is done or learned is done or learned to develop one’s own individuality, to unfold the capabilities of the I” (Humboldt, 1792/2000, as cited in Hopmann, 2007). From a *bildung* perspective, knowledge is not about transporting knowledge from society to a learner (curriculum) or from science or other domains to the classroom. Knowledge is rather a transformative tool for unfolding the learner’s individuality and sociability (Hopmann, 2007). *Bildung*, from this perspective, rather provides students with categories, i.e., exemplary concepts, languages, tools, etc. to open up the world and themselves (Hopmann, 2007). This is fundamentally different from the instrumentalism of Dewey and that of other pragmatists, which sees these categories as something that has to be acquired and developed (as with Dewey), and as a process which unfolds a unique individuality (Guoinlock, 1990; Hopmann, 2007).

Because *bildung* can be understood from different philosophical, methodological, and normative perspectives, it has led to critical discussions as to the usefulness of the concept (Robinsohn, 1967). Following Hopmann, however, we argue that this very vagueness, even elusiveness, of the *bildung* concept is a necessary feature as it is thus confined to only one type of theorising on education; it is indicative of a core aspect of something, i.e., the student’s individual access to ‘the world’ (as Humboldt puts it) and the outcome of this meeting: “*Bildung* reminds us that the meeting itself and its outcome are not embedded in the content or given by the teaching, but only emerge on site, then and there where the meeting between a particular student and a particular content happens. Then, *bildung* is what remains beyond this situated engagement” (Hopmann, 2007).

2.2. HE law and ordinance

Any development of a new curriculum or program needs to embrace the directives stated in the Higher Education Act. The Swedish Higher Education Act (2013:119) clearly states the need for a close link between research, course curricula and the structure of study programs. Higher education institutions shall further promote sustainable development to guarantee, for present and future generations, a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice (2013:119) - aspects all central to the curriculum development.

2.3. Vocational versus reflective

Airey and Tribe (2000) suggest that whilst several of the current hospitality programs meet, or have the intention to meet, the needs of industry and employers, the same programs can be criticised as being “dominated by the tyranny of relevance.” This is further stressed by Lashley, Lynch and Morrison (2007) in that studying hospitality, in its broadest sense, should also provide opportunities to locate the subject in the wider context of social sciences, and provide a more reflective agenda. These programs unmistakably link with industry, and their vocational aims consequently impose several challenges to both find a balance and at the same time fulfil their position within higher education. Airey and Tribe (2000) found a reluctance among many hospitality students to reflect and theorise, and Lashley et al. (2007) argue that educators need to adopt strategies that challenge both the aforementioned “tyranny of relevance” and the reluctance of many students on hospitality management programs to reflect and theorise.

2.4. *High tech vs. high touch and the notion of personality*

A challenge today in the hospitality business is the balancing act between high touch (personal meeting and level of service) and high tech (technical solutions in order to enhance operations and control). One hospitality industry study reports that 92% of hotels express a desire to improve customer service as the primary motivation for switching to technology infused interactions (Hospitality Technology, 2011). It would seem that technology is considered as beneficial in academic research, where it is suggested that companies view technology as a way to enhance service exchanges and where it has been posited that the increasing role of technology in such encounters offers benefits to both customers and firms (Giebelhausen, Robinson, Sirianni, Brady, 2014). Several companies, however, express a trade-off concern in the relationship between high tech and high touch and the difficult issue of maintaining a personal approach in the process.

Another related factor to consider is Lemke’s (2001) explanation that learning is something that affects the entire learner and is therefore an important part of the creation of an identity for that person, or in this case the student. Students do not only need to grasp the theoretical and practical components, but also to transform into their future professional roles. This is further stressed by Kavita and Sharma (2011), who point out that hospitality companies demand that graduating students possess both theoretical and practical skills and that education plays a critical role in shaping future industry leaders. In hospitality programs, the students will have to talk, think and act as hospitality managers after completing their studies, hence the notion of bringing *bildung* to a new level.

2.5. *Creating imbalance*

According to Säljö (2000) and Illeris (2007), one way of working towards a more *bildung*-centred education is *accommodation*, wherein new information is forced onto old structures (knowledge) in order to create an imbalance that later would create a new mind-set for the students. This forces the students to reflect and redistribute previous knowledge, something that could result in new understanding, new ways of perception, and a fresh approach to challenges (Erbakanova, 2016).

Methodology

This project was carried out using a qualitative approach and was based on previous research in the same field. Hoadley et al. (2015, 2016) used a mixed method of seminar interviews and

surveys (questionnaires), where the first method was used for practitioners and academics, and the latter for students. As this project focused on the industry experts, a series of seminars was conducted over a prolonged period. These could also be described as focus groups, where interviews are performed in a group rather than on an individual basis. This creates an alternative opportunity for the interviewer, as the seminar or focus group interviews, if done correctly, can create a dynamic environment. To ensure this setting, Bryman (2011) suggests that the interviewer or facilitator take a more peripheral role, rather than a fully controlling role.

All seminars were held at a hotel in Stockholm to ensure a relaxed and hospitable environment, free from distractions. The same six leading industry experts (selected as representing the largest and most influential players in the Swedish hospitality market) were invited to each seminar.

After a concise introduction and presentation of the aim of the seminars, an inspirational speaker held a short presentation on a relevant topic in order to address current trends and challenges. A structured and controlled seminar discussion that lasted 2-3 hours was conducted, and extensive written notes were duly taken. These were presented to the seminar participants for revision before the next seminar. The seminar followed a pre-set structure to allow each participant to voice their opinion and contribute.

After the three seminars, the participants agreed upon the compilation of the notes, which ensured that the results were a true reflection of the product from the seminars.

In the analysis of the data, the results were first collected anonymously in the groups. We then divided the results according to the themes that crystalized in our analysis. This enabled a further analytical process where each theme/topic could be allocated its share of data received during the seminars and where every outcome was allocated to a specific topic or team (i.e., where it fitted best, based on content).

The themes or topics used were the ones identified from previous studies and theories as follows:



Figure 1. Structure/themes for analysis

After the analytical process, the data presented in the new format produced an alternative story and a framework for a newly structured, well-balanced curriculum, with consideration taken to previous studies, theories and the expressed needs of the industry—all with the concept of *bildung* as an overarching concept.

Results

Below, the results from the three seminars of focus group interviews are presented in table format. In the first seminar, the objective was to analyse the threats, possibilities and crucial factors related to the industry in general, and the HEIs more specifically. All this was done with emphasis on talent-related factors such as recruitment, engagement and retention.

Table 1: Results from seminar 1

Threats	Possibilities	Important factors in curricula	Critical factors for success	Goals for HEI
Industry not professional	Passion and drive	E-commerce and social media	Passion – to create the education of the future	High number of applicants
Degrading the industry	Growing with flow	Right level for finance and project management	Ambition – to stand out and work with powerful industry players	First choice among industry
No proudness in industry	“Sharpen all knives”	Do not forget aesthetics	Courage – to deliver what the industry needs and demand response from industry	Mapping of alumni
Other industries have reach further	Cooperation HEI-Industry	Service – you do not get that at business schools		Ensure right partners
Lack of boldness in leadership	Need to profile and professionalise industry	HEI network (alumni, current students and industry)		Ensure continuous industry knowledge
Fragmented industry	Attract stars?			Ensure continuous research and knowledge building
Flow, but not attractive as an industry	Leading school (HEI)?			
“Temporary” jobs industry	Industry + HEI = developed industry			

In the second seminar, the focus, and consequently the questions, were aimed at finding a balance in a new hospitality management program, this time with emphasis on *bildung*, high touch, high tech and personal development. The results are presented in Table 2:

Table 2: Results from seminar 2

Students characteristics for employment	Expected outcome (after graduation)	Expectations on industry	Critical for curricula
Humbleness for the task ahead	A desire to develop after graduation	Inspiration, time and internships	Academic writing, academic research
Put theory into practice	Understand profitability and see the whole picture	View HEI as hub (Hotel & F&B)	Communication
The passion of creating real experiences	Curiosity	Mentorship	Industry related practical knowledge
Passion for industry	Ask questions and challenge the company	Facilitate combo theory and practice	Staffing, revenue management, project management
Management focus	Be drivers more than receivers	More generosity, more professionalism	Cost management
State-of- the- art knowledge	Aware of trends, Think outside the box	Mentorship after graduation	Profitability, efficiency
Communication skills			Leadership: leading self, leading others, leading team
Able to build relations with guest "small talk"			Boot camp
Willingness to give service			Innovation
Drive and ambition to face financial challenges			Social media
Understand financial challenges			Analytics
Guest focus			Report writing and presentation
Feel for innovations			Problem solving – real cases
Hunger for exploration			Sales
Patients – not become GM directly			Management control
Empathic approach			Structures and organisation
Desire to manage/lead			Finance
Passion for cost cutting and drive profitability			Leadership
Staffing and staff planning			Law
Specialists or generalists			Security
Courage			Psychology, guest and staff
An ambition to get fast promotion "hunger"			Personal leadership
			Technology
			Social psychology

For the third seminar, the participants were presented with a brief mock-up of a curriculum for a new hospitality management program. This was developed from the analysed data above in combination with theories and concepts identified in the literature review; this combination allowed participants to state pros and cons and reflect further on the challenges and issues presented. The results are presented in Table 3:

Table 3: Results from seminar 3

Difficult to get the message across as to what the curricula entail
The balance between depth and width
It needs to be comparable to foreign curricula
The balance between theory and practice (i.e. what the industry wants)
What is in it for the student?
The balance between traditional teaching and internship/practical training
The program needs to have a lot of good students applying in order to select the best ones
The research connection is crucial
It needs to be so good; it almost guarantees a good position
How to attract students before the first ones are “delivered” to the industry
The name of the program is important
Internship should focus on leadership and management
Shadowing the leader
100% = Leadership (soft) 40%, Management (hard) 40%, Service (soft) 20%
Important: communication, conflict management, culture, situational management, a combination of theoretical and practical leadership
Important: Program finance (enough good students to break even). Industry guarantee?
Marketing: bragging activities
Recruitment: test, games, online
Need to deliver proud students
Close relationship with official organisations (Visita, etc.)

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion

The process of disassembling and reassembling the data into new themes/topics after the initial two seminars (see Figure 1) produced a foundation for analysis, which in turn created a base for the actual development of a proposed new curriculum. The new curriculum was later presented to the seminar participants in order to be able to make further adjustments in accordance with their requests.

Even though at present there is quite a wide gap between the content of existing hospitality management programs and the expectations placed on them by the industry and society, the understanding is there. The practitioners from leading companies in the industry sent a clear message: the *bildung* perspective is as important as the practical or vocational elements (Elmgren & Henriksson, 2016). The participants stressed the importance of research-based education and the need for facilitating an arena where the students become more reflective. This was a clear indication from the industry. They were calling for a higher education that took a further step away from the vocational training that at present is closely linked to hospitality management higher education. It becomes clear that the notion of “tyranny of relevance” stated by Airey & Tribe (2000) is still an issue, but any program development should take a further step away from this.

While the hospitality management programs have previously focused on the high touch aspect, the results indicated a necessary move to a more high tech focus in order to stay in tune with reality (Giebelhausen et al., 2014). The results indicated a model that could be used as a framework for development: the 40/40/20 model, where 40% of the programs should be aimed at management, 40% focused on control, and the remaining 20% on soft values such as service (see Figure 2).

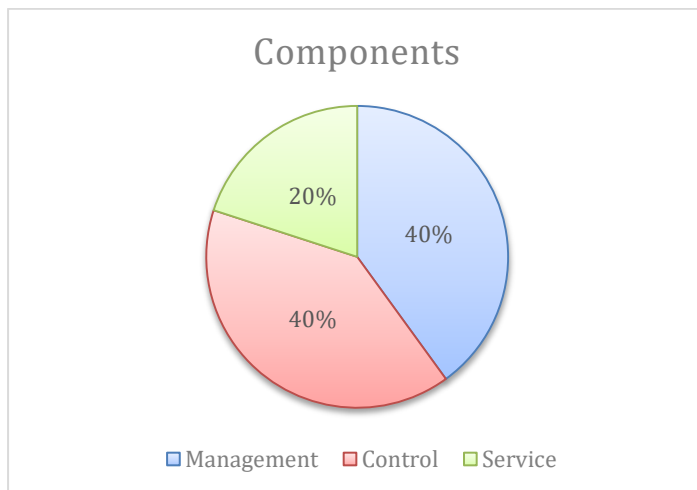


Figure 2. Components in a balanced curriculum

The notion suggested by Säljö (2000) and Illeris (2007) of creating imbalance (*accommodation*) in the program in order to establish balance long-term was supported by the respondents as a method to shake and stir old ways of thinking and adapt the learning to both current and future needs.

5.2. Conclusion

Through finding a balance between practical knowledge, mainly high touch and high tech, and adding a substantial proportion of management and leadership theory, hospitality management higher education will produce employable students for the industry. Linking this with the notion of *bildung* will ensure the discipline has good research connections and creates an opportunity for the students to become reflective, self-motivated individuals. Such an approach will also meet the current and future needs of society. A well-balanced program will also clearly make a distinction between the vocational aspects and aspects of higher education, something that today is less evident.

5.3. *Practical applications and directions for further research*

The results from this paper could be used in the creation of future hotel management programs to ensure employability and *bildung* development. Even though the results are based on findings only in Sweden, they could be used in any program development in most developed countries as the hospitality industry is international and homogenous. The proportions of the main aspects of a new program call for further research. It would also be beneficial to further understand the most pedagogically apt teaching methods, examination forms and course evaluation methods connected to the proposed new educational program in order to ensure the whole process is aligned.

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