

Identifying the perceived barriers to participation in tertiary education among hospitality employees

G. Barry O'Mahony

Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Marketing, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

James F. Sillitoe

Centre for Educational Development and Support, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

Reports on an investigation which identified a number of barriers which deter some hospitality industry employees from taking advantage of formal study opportunities. These barriers, which are categorised as informational, situational, financial, institutional or dispositional, need to be examined further if we wish to capitalise on those employees with existing skills in the workforce and develop them to their maximum potential in order to provide a highly educated workforce capable of supplying the standards of service required for continued growth within the sector. Among the implications of this study is a suggestion that tertiary institutions increase access for these potential students by modifying existing arrangements to cater to their special needs. In so doing, institutions might be able to increase the number of experienced industry personnel in their student population, thus enhancing their contribution to the future development of the industry.

Introduction

The absence of educational qualification criteria for employment in many areas of the hospitality industry, results in an industry comprised of employees from diverse educational backgrounds. This open entry, however, mitigates against unqualified employees as they seek career advancement, often resulting in loss of experienced personnel from the industry with subsequent economic implications for service provision, productivity and the training of replacement personnel.

Background to the study

In the current competitive and changing market environment, the training and development of staff is fundamental to the evolution of a flexible efficient workforce (Stewart and Johns, 1996; Drucker, 1992). Indeed, Bennett and O'Brien conclude that in the current era of global competition and emerging technology "... knowledge is what matters, [and] organisations and individuals alike must become *continuous learners*" (1994, p. 41), thus setting the argument for continual employee education. Furthermore, as a labour-intensive industry where "... the overwhelming majority of staff have some form of direct customer contact ..." (Teare *et al.*, 1994, p. 9), service standards within hospitality establishments are judged on the performance of employees. The key to stimulating growth in the industry, according to Conlin and Baum (1996), involves "enhancing educational opportunities as a lifelong and career-focused process rather than simply a short-term expedient ... [which among other measures] will enhance the prospects of the total workforce working with greater effect and,

ultimately, achieving improved productive performance" (p. 64).

Because many positions within the industry involve relatively low-skilled work, opportunities exist for entry into the industry for people with little or no previous experience, skills or qualifications. Arguments advanced above suggest that a professional competitive industry attempting to deliver international standards of service, depends on the subsequent education and training of such personnel. Although courses currently exist for study at tertiary institutions which would enhance promotional prospects and aid transition to managerial or professional levels, many hospitality industry employees in Melbourne do not take advantage of these educational opportunities. While published works in this area are scarce, it would seem that this phenomenon is not unique to Australia. A UK investigation conducted in 1971, examined career advancement among hospitality employees and found that 64 percent of experienced hospitality staff had never progressed past operative level (Knight, 1971). Implicit in this study is a connection between promotion and formal qualifications, since Knight (1971) reported that only 15 percent of those industry employees who were surveyed claimed some form of formal qualification. A further breakdown of Knight's report reveals that gender issues are also likely to have an impact on employee promotion. He noted that, while 45 percent of experienced male employees had failed to progress past operative level, the figure for females reached a staggering 74 percent. That this has an educational implication is suggested in a report by the UK Hotel and Catering Industry Training Board (HCITB, 1983), which disclosed that men were twice as likely to possess an industry qualification as women.

At the local level, Wood (1992) asserts that the industry profile in Australia is very similar to that of the UK and the USA. He



contends that, “Insofar as it is possible to assess, the problems and experiences of the UK hospitality industry workforce are not unique, but are repeated on an international scale” (Wood 1992, p. 154). This view is confirmed by Mars *et al.*, who, while recognising some obvious cultural variations, contend that “... many of the social and economic problems of the industry tend to have general applicability” (1979, p. 153).

More recently, the link between formal qualifications and promotion within the hospitality industry appears to have strengthened. According to Wood (1994), for instance, “... there is evidence that, in the corporate sector at least, formal qualifications and formal training of employees at all levels has gained in importance” (p.166).

For the purposes of this work, we have divided the hospitality industry employees into three specific types. These types are:

- 1 those who do not wish to engage in formal study;
- 2 those who are currently enrolled in or have completed a formal course of study; and
- 3 those who have considered enrolling in a formal course of study but did not enrol.

The first type recognises that there are employees in the hospitality profession who do not desire to progress in any way. These employees are content to carry on in operative positions without formal qualifications. Indeed, some may see the hospitality sector as a source of casual or temporary employment, and use it as a means to achieve short-term economic goals. The structure and the flexibility of hours within the industry makes it possible for those who are financially ambitious, for example, to use the hospitality sector as a source of short-term income or, indeed, as a means to generate a second income.

Type 2, those who have completed formal study or are currently enrolled in a formal course of study, fall outside the focus of this particular project. However, Type 3, those who have considered enrolling in tertiary studies, but who subsequently did not enrol, appear to wish to pursue formal study but have been hindered in some way. This group are seen to be disadvantaged because their educational aspirations have been thwarted, and it is this group, therefore, which is the focus of this study. As a result, a prerequisite for respondents involved in this project was that they had considered enrolling in a course at a technical and further education

(TAFE) college or at a university but, for some reason, have not done so.

This investigation allows that barriers to access to education in Australia, therefore, may be perceptions held by those seeking further education rather than actual barriers. Indeed, much of the literature on barriers to education focuses on group and individual perceptions which act as deterrents to those who would otherwise engage in further study (Woodley *et al.*, 1987; McGivney, 1993; Cross, 1979; Darkenwald, 1980). Early works by Freud and Jung have linked such perceptions to personality and the psychological theory of personal constructs. This work was continued by Maslow and Kelly in the 1960s (Maddi, 1996). Implicit in these works is a suggestion that the identification of personal constructs can be used to predict behaviour or, in this case, motivation to engage in tertiary courses (Kelly, 1963). A more recent comprehensive study by the UK Society for Research into Higher Education, however, synthesises many of the works of these authors, integrating their theories into a typology of adult student motivations (Woodley *et al.*, 1987). They propose four goals in the pursuit of formal study, these are:

- 1 to carry out present job more effectively;
- 2 to gain promotion;
- 3 to change jobs; and
- 4 to be able to re-enter the job market.

Literature review

Our review of the literature on educational access has identified a multitude of barriers which inhibit participation in formal education and training. For the purposes of this study, the barriers which apply to tertiary and adult education have been condensed into the following five key categories: informational barriers, situational barriers, financial barriers, institutional barriers and dispositional (or attitudinal) barriers. These are described as follows:

Informational barriers

An informational barrier to education results from a lack of information on study opportunities within the potential student population. Studies investigating the effects of informational barriers have shown that many potential students are unaware of what educational opportunities exist (McGivney 1993; Darkenwald, 1980; Spencer, 1980; Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982). Research into the adult population reveals that many adults have little knowledge of opportunities

for learning or where to go to get such information (Spencer, 1980). Other informational barriers include a lack of information on support schemes for study such as loans and other available benefits (Bridge *et al.*, 1993).

Situational barriers

Situational barriers include such things as income, health, family responsibilities, work obligations, place of residence, childcare needs and transportation. Time constraints, arising from family responsibilities and work schedules, also fall into this category, with people that are engaged in part-time employment and shift work at unusual hours reporting the most difficulties. This is a common occurrence in the hospitality industry (McGivney, 1993; Darkenwald, 1980; Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982). According to Darkenwald (1980) many of these situational barriers are more of a concern for adults from low socio-economic backgrounds. Some situational barriers have also been found to be more of a concern for women. A report on women's participation in the TAFE sector, for example, identified factors such as inflexible formal course structures, inadequate income support, increased user-pays courses and insufficient childcare facilities as being within this category. Single parent women and women with low paid partners have been reported to be particularly restricted (Stangle, 1992; Bridge *et al.*, 1993).

Financial barriers

Financial concerns among potential students have been identified in a survey by the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE) in the UK. This study found that costs such as course fees, transport, resource and stationery costs were perceived by both men and women as a major barrier to enrolment (McGivney, 1993).

Institutional barriers

Educational institutions and administration procedures have also been found to be potential barriers to enrolment. This is a direct reference to inconvenient schedules, lack of appropriate course offerings, and policies and procedures that impose inconvenience, confusion or frustration (McGivney, 1993; Darkenwald, 1980; Cross, 1979; Pocock, 1987). In Australia, this is illustrated in the *Pocock Report* (1987) which found that when enrolment procedures involved lengthy queueing, a common practice in many institutions, women with children, and those with English speaking difficulties, face hardship and uncertainty.

Dispositional barriers

Dispositional or attitudinal barriers are individually and collectively held beliefs, values, attitudes or perceptions that inhibit a person's participation in organised learning activities. Attitudes, perceptions and expectations have been found to be major barriers to further education, particularly for adults. Some adults, for example, do not see further education as relevant, are unaware of learning needs, or are hostile towards learning institutions. In addition, a belief that one is too old to learn, and lack of confidence in one's ability to learn, are further deterrents (Cross, 1981; Darkenwald, 1980). Johnstone and Rivera (1965) advise that these perceptions and attitudes to education have a particularly strong impact, especially when supported by peer groups, family or the community.

Objectives

The continuing development of the tourism and hospitality industry in Australia is paramount to this country's future economic success. It is widely accepted that education is the key to the development of a professional and sustainable industry (Stewart and Johns, 1996; Conlin and Baum, 1996; Drucker, 1992; Bennett and O'Brien, 1994). Furthermore, it is claimed that the development of career pathways for hospitality employees can significantly reduce industry attrition (Woods and Macaulay, 1989; Bonn and Forbringer, 1992; Deery and Iverson, 1995; Rudall *et al.*, 1996).

Specifically, the study aimed to determine if these barriers to participation in education, which have been identified in the literature, are reflected at the local level. If so, it will enable policy makers to develop programmes to cater to the special needs of hospitality personnel and hence stimulate and strengthen the long-term development of the hospitality industry.

Methodology

The study relied on qualitative research methods to collect primary data from selected respondents. This procedure was preferred because no other investigation of this nature had previously been undertaken at the local level, and qualitative methods are particularly orientated towards exploration and discovery of social phenomena through the use of inductive processes (Minichiello *et al.* 1995). For the purposes of this study, in-depth interviews were chosen in an attempt to capture

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respondents' meanings, definitions and descriptions of personal life events.

The sample

In order to take into account individual differences in industry personnel, a theoretical sampling framework was developed (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995). This technique involves selecting respondents on the basis of relevant issues, categories and themes, which were identified in the literature review to be important to the study. These categories included educational aspirations, gender, level of financial and social responsibility, nature of work in the industry and previous educational success, each of which have been shown to have an impact on enrolment. The sampling framework drawn up to include these dimensions (see Table I) yielded 16 different categories of respondent. This table shows that, in addition to having considered enrolling in a tertiary course, the selection criteria included males and females, single respondents and those with partners, respondents in both manual and non-manual positions in the industry, those who had been educationally successful in the past and those who had not.

In an attempt to select respondents who fitted each of the 16 different background profiles, a survey was distributed to a variety of hospitality establishments. A total of 150 completed surveys, distributed using a convenience sampling method, were collected. Of the total, 30 per cent fell into types one and two of the previously mentioned industry profile and, therefore, were outside the ambit of this study; that is, they did not wish to engage in further study or they were already enrolled in tertiary

courses. Of those who had considered enrolling in a formal course of study but did not enrol (type three), one respondent in each of the theoretical sampling categories was selected to participate in an in-depth interview.

The research instruments

The survey was used to categorise respondents in terms of the sampling criteria and to explore, in a peripheral way, individual's perceived barriers to enrolment. A customised interview schedule was then developed for each respondent which incorporated themes which had been identified in their responses to the survey. In addition, several pre-determined questions were presented to respondents in order to determine whether factors identified in the literature were reflected within the hospitality industry in Melbourne. The adoption of a semi-structured interview technique allowed attention to be focussed on the emerging views of respondents, thereby allowing themes and topics to be further developed and elaborated on.

Limitations of the study

The scope of this project is confined to perceived barriers to education among hospitality industry employees employed in the city and suburbs of Melbourne, which although the industry in Melbourne is large and diverse, may have a different profile than the hospitality industry in other areas. In addition, the number of hospitality studies courses available in Melbourne, and the services available to students such as

Table I

Dimensions of theoretical sampling categories

Educational aspirations		Have considered enrolling at a TAFE or university but did not enrol							
Gender		Single				With partner or dependants			
Dependency status		Single				With partner or dependants			
Work category		Manual	Non-manual	Manual	Non-manual	Manual	Non-manual	Manual	Non-manual
Previous educational experience: successful or unsuccessful		Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful
Gender		Single				With partner or dependants			
Dependency status		Single				With partner or dependants			
Work category		Manual	Non-manual	Manual	Non-manual	Manual	Non-manual	Manual	Non-manual
Previous educational experience: successful or unsuccessful		Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful

childcare, public transport and car parking, may be unique.

There are also some limitations connected with the theoretical sampling method which are highlighted by Minichiello *et al.* (1995). One such limitation concerns the sampling framework where 16 respondents were represented in the theoretical model, but only 12 categories of respondent could actually be found. Having attempted to find the four missing categories through hotel human resource information systems, and by distributing 150 surveys within hospitality organisations, it became clear that employees who fit into these categories do not exist or are, at the very least, exceptional.

Results and discussion

The study identified a number of barriers to enrolment, ranging from a lack of finance to deeper level perceptions of the culture and environment within institutions in which hospitality education is conducted. Some of these barriers were found to be more pronounced among certain sub-groups within the industry, particularly those with partners or dependants. Data analysis is presented in terms of the barriers identified in the literature review.

There was an observable difference between the aspirations of manual and non-manual employees. Manual employees, when considering further education, concentrated in the main on the TAFE system, while by contrast, those employees engaged in non-manual work were oriented towards university study. This is unlikely to be a factor associated with either previous educational experience, or the degree of success or educational achievement among each group of respondents, since the theoretical sampling criteria allowed an equal number of educationally-successful, and unsuccessful, manual and non-manual employees to be surveyed.

Informational barriers

Overall, most respondents were aware that a large number of courses existed in hospitality studies. Information on the courses offered at TAFE level, however, was perceived to be more easily available, and respondents showed a greater awareness of these colleges and the opportunities that exist within this system. Although there was a difference in the aspirations of manual and non-manual employees with regard to further education, both groups were unaware of the number of universities that offered courses in hospitality, or hospitality-related

studies. The availability of information on hospitality studies at university level was poor at best and no respondent had ever received a brochure, course guide or any other form of advertising connected with hospitality education at this level. This would seem to be a definite barrier for these respondents, all of whom had considered further study at one level or another, but were not aware of the options available in the university sector.

Another issue of importance, which is linked to the lack of information on course availability, is a perceived difficulty in choosing from among the various educational pathways available. Respondents explained that there were so many courses and areas of specialisation from which one could choose that it was “frightening” to have to make a decision to study and then to stick with it. Support and encouragement from employers, among other sources, was seen as valuable to help to choose a career path in the industry. It is feasible, therefore, that encouragement of this nature would assist these employees to make a decision to enrol, while simultaneously providing a sense of place and value within the organisation. It was also apparent that, while financial support at all levels would be welcomed by these respondents, support of a non-financial nature is also perceived to be important, and that this support could conceivably be provided by an employer, family member or peer.

Situational barriers

One of the most significant situational barriers evident among respondents was the issue of time. It would seem that the average working week for hospitality employees in Melbourne is well in excess of the considered norm of 40 hours, which would make attendance at formal classes difficult, and has implications for the ability to concentrate and devote time for study. Respondents also identified the added burden of varied shifts which was seen to make it extremely difficult for employees in this industry to commit themselves to long-term courses of study, particularly at institutions which require attendance for prolonged periods at certain specific times.

Several respondents were of the view that courses which did not require attendance, or at least minimal levels of attendance, such as those offered by distance education mode, would be beneficial. Courses of this nature would have the added benefit of being portable, thus allowing those employees who opted to continue their careers interstate or

overseas, to continue with their programmes of study.

Financial barriers

The majority of respondents expressed the view that their employers would not be willing to support them financially in their educational aspirations. It would, therefore, seem that reported findings on employee turnover, and the conclusion that the development of career pathways can be a prescription to reduce turnover and develop employee commitment, is unknown to, or largely ignored by, employers.

Institutional barriers

Information in relation to this barrier was diverse, and reflected the views of respondents on a number of issues, such as the relevance of subject content in hospitality courses, the scheduling of course offerings, and the fee structure at universities. It was evident that information on university systems, scheduling and courses, particularly that which directly relates to hospitality studies, is not reaching those industry employees that are interested in enrolling in formal award-bearing courses.

Respondents had more knowledge of the TAFE system and many were of the opinion that TAFE colleges were more approachable than universities. Universities appear to have a reputation, among these respondents, of being difficult to enter. A large proportion of respondents stated that they would be apprehensive about approaching a university as they found them intimidating. This apprehension was evident among respondents who were engaged in both manual and non-manual positions, despite aspirations among non-manual employees towards university rather than TAFE level studies.

Dispositional barriers

One of the structured questions posed at interview was designed to provide insights into respondents' perceptions as to whether a formal qualification is required to work in the hospitality industry. While the consensus among respondents in this study was that no formal qualification was necessary, the majority of respondents felt, however, that a formal qualification is required to progress to management level. This perception was held even among those who believed that many of the necessary skills required to work in the industry could be learned on the job. Indeed, many respondents perceived that a qualification at degree level was fundamental to promotion to a position in management.

This theme reflected a view that, in the past, management positions may have been attainable without a formal qualification. While several respondents were able to cite examples of people that had reached management positions in the industry without a formal qualification, there was a perception, evident among the majority of respondents, that such a career pathway was no longer available.

Emergent themes relative to the enrolment decision-making process

The issue of the lack of time was one of the most predominant themes among respondents. This is hardly surprising, since, it would seem, that employees in the hospitality industry work extremely long hours, in some cases up to 50 or 60 hours per week. This was particularly evident among respondents in non-manual positions. It is notable that this finding is not unique to this investigation, a similar pattern of working hours being reported by Wood (1992), who conducted a detailed study of the hospitality industry in the UK. However, if one of the reasons that non-manual employees work such long hours is to achieve promotion to management level, their efforts may prove futile because all of the evidence suggests that the pathway to hospitality management also requires a formal qualification in hospitality studies.

Costs associated with tertiary study also appear to be a significant barrier for many respondents, particularly in light of the data which indicates that employers are unlikely to become financially involved in their employee's education. All respondents reported that they would not be eligible for any government assistance programmes, since they are currently employed with a salary in excess of the minimum requirements for government aid. In addition, most respondents perceived that they would not be able to opt to defer payment of university fees through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) (an Australian government scheme which allows students on low incomes to defer payment of university fees until such time as they are earning in excess of \$20,000 per annum). This, in effect, means that hospitality students would have to pay their university fees up front, a prospect that was of some concern for a number of respondents. When other expenses such as course costs, text books, calculators, notebooks, photocopying, transport, childcare and food are taken into account, the outlay for students can be considerable, hence the significance of this barrier.

Recognition by industry of formal qualifications was seen by the respondents as an important issue. Some institutions, for example, have achieved high status within the industry and are recognised as being at the forefront of hospitality education, and it was reported that some employers were perceived to give preference to graduates from particular courses. Some confusion also exists in terms of course selection at university level because of the difficulty in understanding the types of hospitality degree programmes available at universities. Students, for example, can enrol in a Bachelor of Business in Catering and Hotel Management or a Bachelor of Applied Science in Hospitality Management. Employees are confused because each of these degree courses is designed to prepare students for the same position, at the same level, within the same industry. Since one is a business degree and the other a degree in science, it is not surprising that potential students can be somewhat bewildered.

The need for flexibility or mobility of courses offered by both TAFE colleges and universities was highlighted as important. This was because the hospitality industry in Australia actively supports the idea of further experience gained by employees through travel and employment at different hospitality venues both interstate and overseas. Indeed, holistic experience of this nature is guaranteed by some hotel corporations whose management trainees are placed for specified terms in corporation properties Australia-wide. Consequently, corporate trainees involved in such a scheme perceive themselves as unable to commit themselves to a long-term course at a university in Victoria.

The lack of recognition of previous experience (prior learning) was another important issue and it was suggested that the experience respondents had built up, over several years in the industry, should be taken into account when applying for tertiary courses. It was asserted, for example, that many tertiary education programmes incorporate vocational aspects relating to industry procedures, and that employees' experience in these areas should be accepted as advanced standing by tertiary institutions. Some arrangements of this nature do exist at both the TAFE and university level, but this information has not been successfully disseminated within the industry.

Conclusion and recommendations

A major issue for educational institutions is the confusion among respondents in relation to:

- the educational options available to them;
- the availability of government support;
- university entry requirements; and
- information or guidance as to which course of study would be best suited to the advancement of their careers.

One explanation for uncertainty with regard to the university sector may be that many respondents had not been exposed to tertiary studies in the past. It is probable that, because many of them did not intend to continue past a secondary level of education, they did not involve themselves in career guidance activities relating to tertiary education when those options were explained at high school. As a result, the benefits of any links between high schools and tertiary institutions would have been lost. Some career path advice, therefore, would be beneficial to encourage enrolment, to allay negative perceptions which might be held about courses and to emphasise the value of such courses to their career aspirations.

In this regard, it is suggested that institutions should work more closely with hospitality organisations so that they are made aware of what courses are available at the various institutions. This information should include details on schedules, study patterns, specialisations and entrance requirements. Conversely, educational institutions should be aware of the standards and types of training conducted within industry organisations. Such information would prove valuable for the purpose of assessing the extent of prior learning and, therefore, allowing credit where applicable, for experience gained in an industry setting.

Hospitality employees also have special needs with regard to course scheduling as a result of the long hours that they work, and the variety of different shifts in which they are engaged. Consequently, educational institutions might consider developing specific course delivery methods in order to encourage them to enrol. One way of doing this might be to schedule courses in intense blocks, over a number of days or weeks, rather than by continual long-term attendance. Distance education is another alternative, however, surprisingly, courses in hospitality studies offered by distance education are few and far between. Additionally, it appears that those courses

that are offered by this mode were unknown among respondents involved in this project. It also seems that the majority of courses delivered by distance mode are offered by private institutions and therefore attract full fees in excess of \$10,000 per annum, which is often required prior to commencement.

The majority of respondents indicated that no support of a financial nature would be available to them. On the surface this would seem to be a myopic view on the part of employers, and a view that appears to suggest that little or no regard is given by employers to long-term industry planning. It is likely, however, that the issue of industry turnover could in fact be a mitigating factor in employer attitudes. The extreme turnover associated with this industry, for example, is likely to create a *Catch 22* situation. If employers were to invest in education and training for individual employees, the current turnover rate suggests that much of that investment might be forfeited, or indeed accrue to a competitor, if these employees were to shift employment.

Our view is that the benefits of a wider education base in the hospitality industry are manifold. This study suggests, for example, that opportunities for promotion to managerial level, improvements in productivity, standards and status for the industry and the possible reduction in employee turnover are based on the completion of formal studies. In view of the high rate of employee turnover, which is a major issue in the industry, those employees who are prepared to make a long-term career in hospitality should receive every educational opportunity. In addition, because of their insights into the industry, and the perspectives that they bring to tertiary education, the conceptual links between theory and practice should be well-defined, a situation that may result in accelerated learning and cognition.

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