

**CHARACTERISTICS AND SPECIFICS OF HOSPITALITY
EDUCATION:
A PRELIMINARY COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY
APPROACH**

Assoc. Prof. Dr Detlev Remy

&

Dr. Tammy Wee

Singapore Institute of Technology

CHARACTERISTICS AND SPECIFICS OF HOSPITALITY EDUCATION

Although higher education in general has been researched for a long time, less focus was put on the characteristics and specifics of higher education, especially from the stakeholders perspective.

The aim of the research was two-fold; first, to analyse the specifics of higher education, with a strong focus on hospitality education, and second, to investigate what marketing strategies, respective quality standards are applied to foster these characteristics.

Based on a realism research paradigm, the authors have conducted a case study design, by interviewing 8 members of management of for-profit and non-profit universities, providing hospitality education programs.

Characteristics of Higher Education

Pettersen and Solstad (2007:134) state that “higher education institutions are knowledge-intensive organisations, characterized by ambiguity and interdependence”.

Barnett (1997:7) describes higher education as “more than just a sub-set of the education system. There are certain values and aims which are intrinsic to educational processes and which warrant the description of higher education”. The author (1997:7) notes that “until recently, higher education ...was provided almost entirely by universities”.

However, this has changed due to the development of polytechnics, colleges and other institutions offering higher education. A good example is hotel schools, providing higher education by delivering highly specialized curricula with the sole focus on hospitality management.

Characteristics of Higher Education

Collis (2002:48) states that “education plays a more important role in society than that of just another business. The notions of service, academic freedom, and social responsibility alone set it apart from other industries”.

Another characteristic is that most consumers buy an educational product once in their life, and it is a “large (both in dollars and time) purchase ...with lifetime implications” (Fried and Hill, 2009:37).

Quality is seen as an important factor in the decision-making process of students.

Winston (1999:21) argues that “it seems useful if crude to think of student quality in terms of intellectual/academic abilities and of school quality as dependent on expenditures per student and average peers”.

Non-Profit Higher Education

Higher education is still dominated by non-profit education institutions. Their characteristics are that they are publicly funded, not obliged to pay taxes and “their cost of capital is much lower because the bulk of their capital was donated or provided by the state” (Fried and Hill, 2009:38).

Winston focuses on various aspects which set non-profit education apart from commercial business such as “the asymmetry of information”, making it “impossible to draw up a contract that guarantees that the expected quality in all its dimensions will be provided” (Winston, 1999:14).

However, it must be said that this holds true for all educational organizations whether non-profit or for-profit.

For-Profit Higher Education

Coleman and Vedder (2008:5) have discussed for-profit education, arguing that “for-profit higher education is not new”.

The development of for-profit higher education was not always straightforward, “wiped out during the Middle Ages”, but since then “for-profit education underwent a renaissance”, and “for-profits are stepping in to meet market demands their highly subsidized counterparts have chronically failed to satisfy” (Coleman and Vedder, 2008:5).

For-profit education demonstrates high growth rates though Coleman and Vedder (2008:5) argue that “this high rate of growth has also been accompanied by highly volatile enrolment trends”.

Contrasting non-profit and for-profit education

Fundamental differences may be based on the fact that non-profit institutions still maintain their mission to serve society, whereas for-profits have discovered their niche to serve certain markets. Coleman and Vedder (2008:11) argue that the most important part is the balance sheet as “for-profits exist explicitly to make money for their investors.

Furthermore, Coleman & Vedder (2008:26) identify two main elements, describing the success of for-profit educational organisations such as “their ability to read and respond to market signals and their willingness to build their services around the student, whom they treat as a customer”.

The latter point is an interesting one, as non-profit institutions may consider the student more as part of the knowledge formation process.

Higher Education and Hospitality Schools

Airey and Tribe (2000:277) state that “in its origin, the education developed from on-the-job training in hotels”. Indeed, it can be said that one aspect is different compared to many other subjects in higher education such as the “internship components in their hospitality curricula” (Zopiatis and Constanti, 2007:392).

There are some critics of hospitality management education such as discussed by Tews and Van Hoof (2011:121) “that hospitality programs lack intellectual rigor, are irrelevant to successful careers in the hospitality industry, and are redundant or watered-down versions of business-school programs”.

However, hospitality-management curricula offer courses in accounting, finance, marketing, strategy, and human resource management, just like schools of business” (Tews and VanHoof, 2011:124).

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify the characteristics of higher education with a strong focus on hospitality education, the authors have applied a qualitative research approach, which may fit better with the problem under study and its circumstances.

The research based on a case-study design, using semi-structured interviews as the primary research method. Following Oka and Shaw's (2000) advice on sampling in qualitative research, a purposeful sampling is adopted. Hence, the authors chose senior members of the educational institutions, from different hierarchical levels, in order to gain rich information from decision-making managers.

The qualitative data of this study were analysed and reported following Creswell's (1998) recommendation such as organisation and categorisation of data, interpretation and identification of patterns and synthesis.

The Cases

The first case (A) is one of the major providers of for-profit hospitality education, operating worldwide, with five different brands. In terms of marketing most of the brands put emphasis on the aspects of accreditation, quality, internationality and employability.

If it comes to quality, emphasis is placed on the high faculty/student ratio and the vast industry experience of most faculty members.

Internationality is given to the fact that most brands have a huge diversity in their student body. Perhaps the strongest argument is employability due the fact that the hospitality industry already starts recruiting on campuses and during the internship programs and acknowledges the suitability of the hospitality education delivered for their own needs.

The Cases

The second case (Case B) is a recently founded non-profit university, based in South East Asia. The university with a focus on applied learning offers industry-focused degree programs.

As the university is a non-profit university, their target markets are mainly students from diploma programs and to a certain extent lower economic level students. Being the first university with an applied learning approach, their positioning is on a strong collaboration between academia and industry.

If it comes to quality, the university markets itself as having both, faculty with strong industry background and academic credentials. Based on the structure of their programs, and intense industry partnerships, the institution puts a strong focus on employability.

FINDINGS

Eight interviews with management have been conducted amongst the two cases. The authors limited the interviews to eight participants as saturation had been reached.

The Product of Higher Education

To investigate the characteristics of higher education, the different participants at both institutions were asked what they are selling:

“I think we’re selling international job opportunities or careers for students.”(A1)

The focus is here clearly on combining the product of education with the outcome of employability.

FINDINGS

Another statement:

“the way that we would look at it is that we are fulfilling dreams. So young people have a dream of an international career and entering a fast paced industry and we help them to achieve that.”(A2)

Another respondent (Case A) argued:

“For me, as an educator, we are selling clearly top quality education on a curriculum that has been evolving over many years, and continues to be reviewed and enhanced. ...we are an institution that considers the whole student, We are teaching them not only technical skills and theoretical skills, we are teaching them life skills” (A3)

FINDINGS

For Case B, the participants stated that higher education product is seen as being a privileged product that is not completely reaching to the lower socio-economic group:

"The way I see it for the longest time higher education only reaches for a small percentage of young people."

"Being a newly established university, it's not so much about reputation but to bring in innovation to higher education" (B1).

Another respondent echoed similarly:

"As a whole, I think that the higher education is in a way almost like a privileged product because it is highly desired especially in Asia and if you build a certain reputation people will always want it." (B2)

FINDINGS

Marketing of Higher Education

The authors developed a question asking the participants how they promote their product in order to gain more insight into the characteristics of hospitality education.

Almost all respondents from Case A agreed that the institution has a clear positioning, based on the specific education style, the mix of vocational and academic training, quality, cultural diversity and reputation. Thus, the main selling points are reputation, quality, internationality and employability. Indeed, one respondent from corporate management (Case A) stated:

“I think it’s all come back to reputation, that’s the only thing.”(A1)

FINDINGS

In line with this, Varini and Roberts (2013:2) argue that “quality and reputation are of prime importance [in higher education]”.

However, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006:327) state that “it seems important to note that the concept of institutional image and reputation might be interpreted differently in HE compared with other service organisations. A company`s high reputation is usually connected to high sales and high demand from customers. In contrast, a HE institution`s high reputation is often linked to minimal sales, i.e. the more prestigious HE institution is, the fewer students it often accepts onto its educational programmes”.

FINDINGS

As for Case B, the participants were asked about their market strategy applied, and they emphasized on their connection with the industry as their main marketing strategy.

"We want to be first in the mind of the industry. If we are first in the minds of the industry means that they like our professors talk and do things with them and they like to have our students whether it is in internship or graduation. If we are first in their mind, then, we have succeeded." (B1)

CONCLUSION

One of the prominent themes can be based on the fact that higher education has been identified as a very special service which differs substantially from any other service.

The respondents from Case A indicated the characteristics of higher education such as experience, the time line or duration of education up to four years, quality and reputation, whereas respondents from Case B have put more emphasis on the values and mission of higher education.

Having tried to identify characteristics and specifics of higher hospitality education, it is worth to discuss at a future stage, the importance of these characteristics for the development of hospitality education programs.

One can think about mapping these characteristics against curriculum development or the interdependence with the industry partners.