

Is Hospitality Education Becoming Obsolete? Rethinking Hospitality Higher Ed for the Future of the Industry

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Abstract

Higher education in hospitality and tourism is at a pivotal juncture, necessitating significant evolution to stay relevant amidst rapid industry changes. Technological advancements, shifting labor markets, and evolving consumer demands compel educational institutions to reassess their curricula and teaching methodologies. This symposium explores the critical arguments for and against the continued relevance of hospitality and tourism education. On one hand, the rise of alternative learning pathways, immediate hiring needs due to labor shortages, technological disruptions, and perceptions of low return on investment challenge the traditional four-year degree model. On the other hand, the need for leadership and strategic skills, technology-integrated education, the irreplaceability of soft skills and emotional intelligence, and the importance of sustainability and ethical leadership underscore the enduring value of higher education in this field. By examining these dynamics, this symposium aims to highlight how universities can innovate and adapt to prepare students for the future of the hospitality and tourism industry.

Key Words:

- Hospitality Education
- Technological Advancements
- Labor Market
- Sustainability
- Leadership Skills

Higher education in hospitality and tourism is not becoming obsolete, but it is at a critical crossroads where it must evolve to remain relevant. The industry is changing rapidly due to technological advancements, shifting labor markets, and new consumer demands, forcing educational institutions to rethink how they prepare students for hospitality careers. Here are some key arguments on both sides of the issue to consider.

Why Hospitality and Tourism Education May Be at Risk

1. Rise of Alternative Learning Pathways

The hospitality industry has long valued practical experience, often placing it above formal education. This trend is becoming more pronounced with the rise of alternative learning pathways. Employers increasingly recognize the value of hands-on experience and are more willing to hire individuals who have gained practical skills through internships, apprenticeships, or on-the-job training (Gursoy, Rahman, & Swanger, 2012). Additionally, the proliferation of online certifications, micro-credentials, and industry-led training programs, such as those offered by Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, and Google Hospitality Certificates, provides faster and more cost-effective alternatives to traditional four-year degrees (Chuang & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2010). These programs are designed to be flexible and accessible, allowing learners to acquire specific skills that are immediately applicable in the workplace. As a result, they are becoming an attractive option for both employers and job seekers in the hospitality industry.

2. Labor Shortages & Immediate Hiring Needs

The hospitality industry is currently facing significant labor shortages, which are exacerbated by the high turnover rates typical of the sector. This has led many businesses to prioritize immediate hiring needs over long-term educational qualifications. Companies are increasingly opting to train employees on the job, rather than waiting for graduates from traditional hospitality programs.

This approach allows businesses to fill vacancies quickly and tailor training to their specific operational needs (Baum, 2015). In Europe, apprenticeships and vocational training models have gained popularity as effective means of addressing labor shortages. These models provide a structured pathway for individuals to gain practical experience while earning a wage, making them an attractive alternative to four-year degree programs (Sigala, 2018).

3. *Technology Replacing Traditional Roles*

Technological advancements are rapidly transforming the hospitality industry, leading to the automation of many traditional roles. AI, automation, and robotics are increasingly being used to perform tasks that were once the domain of entry-level employees. For example, self-check-in kiosks, chatbots for customer service, and robotic housekeeping are becoming more common in hotels and other hospitality establishments. This shift reduces the need for entry-level positions and requires a workforce that is skilled in managing and maintaining these technologies (Liu & Wall, 2006). If universities do not integrate tech-focused skills into their curricula, graduates may find themselves underprepared for the industry's future demands. It is essential for educational institutions to adapt by incorporating courses on AI, data analytics, and digital transformation to ensure that their graduates remain competitive in the job market (Hsu, Xiao, & Chen, 2017).

4. *Perception of Low ROI on a Degree*

The perception of a low return on investment (ROI) for a hospitality degree is a significant concern for potential students. Hospitality careers often start with low wages and long hours, which can make the financial burden of a four-year degree seem unjustifiable. This perception is further compounded by the availability of alternative career paths in fields such as business and technology, which often offer higher starting salaries and broader career prospects (Kim, Kim, & King, 2020). As a result, some students may opt for degrees that provide more immediate financial rewards and greater job security. To address this issue, hospitality programs must

demonstrate the long-term value of their degrees by highlighting the potential for career advancement and the development of essential leadership and strategic skills (Pizam, 2017).

Why Hospitality and Tourism Education is Still Vital

1. The Need for Leadership & Strategic Skills

While hands-on experience is crucial in the hospitality industry, leadership positions in hotels, travel companies, and tourism boards require a different set of skills that are best developed through higher education. Strategic thinking, business acumen, and problem-solving abilities are essential for managing complex operations and making informed decisions. Universities play a vital role in teaching these skills through courses on financial management, revenue strategies, marketing, and sustainability. These subjects provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the industry and prepare them for leadership roles. Higher education institutions must continue to emphasize the development of these strategic skills to ensure that their graduates are equipped to navigate the challenges of the hospitality industry (Sisson & Adams, 2013; Wang & Tsai, 2014).

2. Technology-Integrated Education is the Future

The future of hospitality education lies in the integration of technology into the curriculum. As the industry becomes increasingly reliant on AI, data analytics, and sustainability practices, it is essential for educational institutions to offer courses that reflect these trends. Universities that adapt by providing programs in digital transformation, smart tourism, and experience design will remain relevant and essential. These courses not only equip students with the technical skills needed to thrive in a technology-driven industry but also foster a mindset of innovation and adaptability. By embracing technology-integrated education, universities can ensure that their graduates are prepared to lead the industry into the future (Gursoy, Rahman, & Swanger, 2012; Chuang & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2010).

3. *Soft Skills and Emotional Intelligence Cannot Be Automated*

Despite the rise of automation, the essence of hospitality remains rooted in service, leadership, and relationship-building. These soft skills and emotional intelligence are critical for creating memorable guest experiences and fostering a positive work environment. Unlike technical skills, these competencies cannot be easily automated and are best developed through immersive learning experiences. Universities provide structured opportunities for students to hone their soft skills through internships, simulations, and global exchanges. These experiences allow students to practice and refine their interpersonal abilities in real-world settings, preparing them for the human-centric nature of the hospitality industry (Baum, 2015; Sigala, 2018).

4. *Sustainability and Ethical Leadership in Tourism*

The future of the hospitality industry depends on sustainable business models and responsible tourism management. As environmental and social concerns become increasingly important to consumers, businesses must adopt practices that promote sustainability and ethical leadership. Academic study and critical thinking are essential for developing these practices, and universities play a crucial role in shaping the next generation of ethical tourism leaders. By incorporating sustainability and ethics into their curricula, educational institutions can prepare students to lead the industry in a way that is both profitable and responsible. This focus on sustainability and ethical leadership will ensure that the hospitality industry can thrive while making a positive impact on the world (Liu & Wall, 2006; Hsu, Xiao, & Chen, 2017).

What's the Future of Hospitality and Tourism Higher Education?

Institutions must evolve to stay relevant by:

- Integrating AI, data science, and sustainability into the curriculum (Kim, Kim, & King, 2020).

- Expanding partnerships with industry for enhanced hands-on, experiential learning (Pizam, 2017).
- Expanding the offering of flexible learning formats (hybrid, async online, sync online, competency-based, etc.) (Sisson & Adams, 2013).
- Aligning education with emerging industry needs (e.g., digital tourism, luxury hospitality, experience economy) (Wang & Tsai, 2014).

Questions to Guide the Discussion

Here are three follow-up discussion questions to engage the audience in a meaningful conversation about the future of hospitality and tourism higher education.

1. How can hospitality and tourism education programs adapt to better align with the industry's evolving demands, particularly in areas like technology integration, sustainability, and leadership?
 - Focused question: What specific skills do you think hospitality graduates are currently lacking when they enter the workforce?
2. With the rise of alternative learning pathways (certifications, industry-led training, apprenticeships), what should be the unique value proposition of a hospitality degree in the next decade?
 - Focused question: Should universities focus more on experiential learning, such as enhanced mandatory internships or industry partnerships, to maintain relevance – and why?

3. Given the rapid automation of entry-level roles in hospitality, how can higher education institutions ensure that students are prepared for managerial and strategic positions rather than operational roles that may soon be obsolete?
 - Focused question: Should hospitality programs shift towards business, analytics, and leadership training rather than traditional service-oriented education – and why?

Symposium Discussion Structure (1 Hour)

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- Welcome and introduction of the topic.
- Overview of the current state of hospitality and tourism education.
- Presentation of the key arguments for and against the relevance of higher education in this field.

2. Rise of Alternative Learning Pathways (7 minutes)

- Discussion on the increasing value of experience over degrees in the hospitality industry.
- Examination of online certifications, micro-credentials, and industry-led training programs as alternatives to traditional degrees.

3. Labor Shortages & Immediate Hiring Needs (7 minutes)

- Analysis of the talent shortage in the industry and its impact on hiring practices.
- Exploration of apprenticeships and vocational training models as potential solutions.

4. Technology Replacing Traditional Roles (7 minutes)

- Impact of AI, automation, and robotics on entry-level hospitality roles.
- Importance of integrating tech-focused skills into university curricula.

5. Perception of Low ROI on a Degree (7 minutes)

- Discussion on the financial and career prospects of hospitality graduates.
- Comparison with other fields such as business and technology.

6. The Need for Leadership & Strategic Skills (7 minutes)

- Importance of strategic thinking, business acumen, and problem-solving skills for leadership positions.
- Role of universities in teaching financial management, revenue strategies, marketing, and sustainability.

7. Technology-Integrated Education is the Future (7 minutes)

- Necessity of AI, data analytics, and sustainability knowledge for managerial roles.
- Examples of universities offering courses in digital transformation, smart tourism, and experience design.

8. Soft Skills and Emotional Intelligence Can't Be Automated (7 minutes)

- Importance of service, leadership, and relationship-building in hospitality.
- Role of immersive learning experiences in developing these competencies.

9. Sustainability and Ethical Leadership in Tourism (7 minutes)

- Need for sustainable business models and responsible tourism management.
- Contribution of academic study and critical thinking to ethical leadership.

10. Q&A and Open Discussion (10 minutes)

- Interactive session with the audience to address the three proposed questions and share insights.
 - Encouragement of dialogue on best practices and innovative approaches in hospitality and tourism education.
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