
Hospitality Education in Transition: Curriculum Innovation and Industry Readiness in Europe

Abstract

This qualitative study examines hospitality management education in Europe, focusing on its essential role in preparing the next generation of hotel managers to navigate a rapidly changing industry. Considering recent economic recovery efforts, technological advancements, and the EU's push towards sustainability and digital transformation, the study explores how key educational components such as curriculum development, internationalization, technology integration, and internship experiences are evolving to meet contemporary demands.

Using secondary data sources, the paper identifies significant gaps between academic offerings and industry expectations, highlighting the need for more responsive, industry-aligned education. A conceptual framework is proposed to illustrate the interrelationship between the core educational elements and student readiness for future industry challenges. The findings underscore the importance of innovation-driven, experiential, and globally oriented learning in equipping graduates with the skills, adaptability, and resilience needed to thrive in an increasingly complex and competitive hospitality sector.

Key Words: *Hospitality Management Education, Next Generation, Industry Expectations*

Track: *The Future of Talent Management*

Focus of Paper: *Theoretical/Academic*

Type of Submission: *Paper*

Introduction

Hospitality management education has emerged as a critical pillar in preparing the future workforce of the hotel and tourism industry across Europe. The students currently enrolled in hospitality programs are the ones who will eventually manage and innovate within this dynamic sector. As the industry faces multifaceted challenges including post-COVID-19 recovery, shifting customer expectations, and the drive towards environmental sustainability the demand for a responsive and forward-thinking curriculum becomes increasingly essential (Ali, Egan, Haynes, Holland, & Martin, 2020). Ensuring that students are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and adaptability to thrive in this environment hinges on the relevance and quality of hospitality education.

The debate surrounding the academic legitimacy of hospitality management education continues to raise important concerns about its quality and relevance in the modern industry landscape. Although hospitality has gained traction as a field of study, questions persist about whether existing programs adequately prepare

students for the complexities of the profession. Ali, et al., (2020) notes significant discrepancies between what academic institutions deliver and what employers need, particularly in the areas of strategic thinking, innovation, and customer-centric service. As industry becomes increasingly complex due to globalization, digitalization, and evolving consumer behaviors, there is a growing need for educational programs to adopt a more competency-based approach. This includes emphasizing soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork, as well as emotional intelligence and leadership (Barron, & Leask, 2020). Moreover, service innovation and experiential learning should be at the core of curriculum design to ensure students can think critically and solve real-world problems (Rosenkranz, 2022). Aligning education with industry expectations is therefore vital to enhancing graduate employability and industry performance.

Background and Context

The European hospitality sector, largely composed of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), is particularly vulnerable to global disruptions such as inflation, energy shortages, and labor deficits. Despite EU interventions such as the provision of over 280 billion Euros in subsidies to aid recovery, the sector continues to grapple with structural issues that call for more resilient and innovative business strategies (HOTREC, 2024). Within this context, educational institutions have a pivotal role to play in producing graduates who cannot only navigate but lead through uncertainty. The integration of topics such as crisis management, and sustainability into hospitality curricula is therefore not just timely, but necessary.

Moreover, globalization and technological advancement are transforming the competencies expected of hospitality graduates. Employers now seek professionals who possess international experience, technological proficiency, and strong interpersonal skills alongside traditional operational knowledge. Educational frameworks that emphasize internships, intercultural exchange programs, and experiential learning can significantly enhance student preparedness (CHME, 2020). Thus, the future of hospitality management education in Europe lies in its ability to evolve with industry demands while fostering innovation, inclusivity, and resilience in the next generation of hospitality leaders.

Considering these challenges, policy frameworks and educational priorities must align to prepare students for leadership in a volatile and highly competitive environment. Institutions should integrate modules on risk assessment, change management, and contingency planning into hospitality curricula, in order to build a robust knowledge base for navigating economic disruptions. HOTREC (2024) advocates for education that supports the EU Green Deal and digital transformation goals, suggesting that tomorrow's hospitality leaders must also be trained to implement environmentally sustainable and tech-driven business models. Furthermore, as SMEs struggle with increasing regulatory and reporting obligations, educational programs should provide students with a sound understanding of regulatory compliance, supply chain dynamics, and stakeholder communication (Ali, et al., 2020). Equipping graduates with these skills not only ensures their employability but also strengthens the sector's capacity to recover from setbacks and thrive amidst uncertainty, reinforcing the crucial link between policy context and educational design (Barron, & Leask, 2020; Al Saba, Mertzanis, & Kampouris, 2023).

Research Goal, Question and Methodology

The goal of the paper is to synthesize and critically analyze existing scholarly literature, industry reports, and policy documents to identify key trends, challenges, and opportunities influencing hospitality education and its alignment with industry demands. The study adopted a qualitative desk research design using secondary data to explore the evolving landscape of hospitality management education in Europe.

The research was conducted by systematically reviewing two key documents: the *Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME) Report (2020)* and the *HOTREC Manifesto for the Future of European Hospitality (2024)*. These documents were selected due to their comprehensive and authoritative analysis

of educational trends, curriculum challenges, industry expectations, policy directions, and future priorities within the European hospitality sector. The CHME report offered academic and institutional perspectives on curriculum design, student engagement, and the role of internships, while the HOTREC manifesto provided critical insights into the economic, regulatory, and technological shifts impacting the industry and the skills required from future professionals.

The data collection involved thematic coding of the content within these documents, focusing on four key variables identified in the conceptual framework: curriculum development, internationalization, technology integration, and internship experience. These themes were analyzed to determine their relationship to student preparedness and graduate readiness for future industry demands. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps across the texts, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. By drawing from credible secondary sources, this methodology allowed for a broad, contextual analysis of hospitality education without the limitations of primary data collection. The qualitative synthesis aimed to provide a well-rounded understanding of how educational institutions across Europe can better align their strategies with evolving industry expectations and policy environments.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are based on the four thematic analyses of academic development, internationalization and diversity integration of technology the role of internship are given below:

Curriculum Development

Curriculum development in hospitality management education is a crucial determinant of how well graduates are prepared to meet the demands of the industry. As hospitality continues to solidify its place as a recognized academic discipline, the structure and content of its curriculum must align with emerging global trends and sector-specific challenges. The increasing emphasis on sustainability, digital innovation, and resilience in the face of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for curricula that go beyond traditional hospitality operations (Ali, et al., 2020).

Curricula must integrate modules on environmental responsibility, technological advancement, data analytics, and strategic risk management to ensure that students acquire both practical skills and critical thinking capabilities. Furthermore, policy-level support is essential for bridging the gap between academic institutions and industry needs. HOTREC (2024) emphasizes that future educational strategies should prepare students particularly within SME-dominated markets to adapt to EU green and digital transformation goals and to contribute effectively to a more competitive and sustainable hospitality sector.

Internationalization and Diversity

Internationalization is a defining characteristic of hospitality management education in Europe, playing a crucial role in equipping students with the global competencies necessary for success in a multicultural industry. As hospitality services are inherently international, often catering to guests from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, students must develop skills in cross-cultural communication, language proficiency, and adaptability.

Ali, et al., (2020) emphasizes that exposure to different educational systems and industry practices through international exchange programs enhances students' global awareness and professional versatility. Collaborative initiatives, such as Erasmus+ partnerships and dual-degree programs, enable students to gain firsthand experience in various hospitality markets, enriching their academic and personal development (Goh, & King, 2020). Moreover, internationalization fosters a broader understanding of global industry standards, service expectations, and management practices. According to Dai Quang, & Vo-Thanh, (2025), such exposure prepares graduates to work in multicultural teams, understand global customer preferences,

and manage operations across borders which are key attributes in the increasingly interconnected world of hospitality.

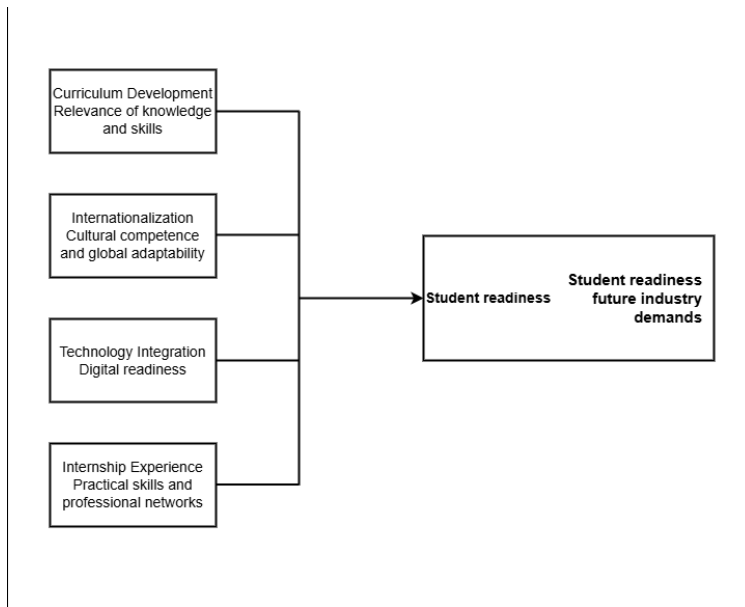
Integration of Technology

Technology is fundamentally transforming the hospitality landscape, influencing everything from guest interactions to operational efficiency. Innovations such as artificial intelligence, contactless check-ins, mobile bookings, and data analytics are now standard in modern hospitality operations, making digital literacy an essential skill for graduates entering the field. As HOTREC (2024) notes, integrating technological competencies into hospitality education is vital to ensure that future professionals are prepared to meet the digital and environmental goals outlined in the EU's strategic framework. Academic institutions must therefore embed technology not only in course content but also in pedagogical approaches, utilizing virtual simulations, online learning platforms, and digital assessment tools to reflect real-world practices (Ali, et al., 2020). According to Le, (2021), students exposed to technology-enhanced learning environments develop greater adaptability and innovation capacity traits highly valued in the evolving hospitality sector. Furthermore, digital proficiency supports data-driven decision-making and personalized guest services, reinforcing the need for continuous curriculum adaptation in response to emerging technological trends.

The Role of Internships

Internships play an indispensable role in hospitality management education by providing students with real-world experience that bridges the gap between classroom theory and practical application. Ali, et al., (2020) emphasizes that internships are not merely supplementary but foundational to developing professional competencies, as they allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in dynamic, real-time industry settings. These placements foster essential soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, time management, and teamwork, all of which are critical for career readiness (Tavitiyaman, Tsui, & Ng, 2025). Internships also offer students the opportunity to engage with hospitality operations, customer service, and leadership tasks, enhancing their confidence and professional identity (Giousmpasoglou, & Marinakou, 2021). Furthermore, by immersing students in the work environment, internships help them build valuable networks with industry professionals, improving employability and offering clearer career trajectories. The European hospitality sector's emphasis on experiential learning makes internships a strategic educational tool, directly contributing to smoother transitions into full-time employment upon graduation (Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2022).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Overall, the literature showed that hospitality management education in Europe is currently facing significant challenges and opportunities, driven by both internal academic structures and external industry demands. Secondary data from CHME (2020) shows that while the field has become increasingly institutionalized in higher education, there remains a persistent misalignment between what is taught in classrooms and what is required by employers. Many academic programs lack adequate emphasis on emerging areas such as sustainability, technological innovation, and crisis management, which are now essential competencies in a post-pandemic hospitality environment.

Further, it was found that experiential learning, particularly internships, play a crucial role in preparing students for the realities of the workplace. The CHME report underscores the importance of industry placements in enhancing students' practical skills, professional confidence, and employability (Ali, et al., 2020). Internationalization was also found to be a distinctive strength of European hospitality education, enabling students to develop cultural awareness, language skills, and global adaptability, key qualities for success in an increasingly international industry. In addition, the findings highlighted the growing demand for digital proficiency. According to HOTREC (2024), the rapid digital transformation of the hospitality sector ranging from contactless guest services to data-driven decision-making necessitates a shift in educational focus toward digital literacy and innovation. However, CHME (2020) observed that the extent of technology integration varies widely across institutions, suggesting a need for more consistent and updated approaches to teaching.

Finally, the study confirmed that policy and economic contexts, particularly within the EU's legislative framework, exert a strong influence on the direction of hospitality education. HOTREC (2024) emphasizes that SMEs, which make up most of the European hospitality industry, require graduates who are not only skilled in operations but also capable of adapting to regulatory pressures, sustainability targets, and labor market fluctuations.

Conclusion, Final Thoughts and Recommendations

The future of hospitality management education in Europe depends on its ability to evolve alongside the changing dynamics of the industry. As the hospitality sector becomes more complex due to global challenges and technological advancements, education must move beyond traditional models to embrace a

more holistic and adaptive approach. Emphasizing critical areas such as sustainability, digital integration, and crisis management within the curriculum will ensure that graduates are equipped with the skills and mindset needed to lead in an ever-evolving environment. Education must also foster soft skills, creativity, and innovation, which are increasingly vital in a service-oriented and customer-driven sector.

Internships and industry exposure remain essential in bridging the gap between academic theory and practical experience. As students engage with real-world challenges through placements, they gain the confidence and competencies required to transition successfully into the workforce. By staying attuned to both policy developments and market realities, hospitality education can maintain its relevance and continue to serve as a foundation for a resilient, future-ready workforce in Europe's vital tourism and hospitality economy.

To enhance the effectiveness of hospitality management education in Europe, institutions should prioritize curriculum development that aligns closely with current industry needs. This includes incorporating topics such as sustainability, digital innovation, crisis management, and entrepreneurship into academic programs. Emphasis should also be placed on building soft skills like communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence, which are critical for career success in the hospitality sector. Engaging industry experts in course design and delivery can ensure that educational content remains practical, up-to-date, and aligned with evolving market expectations.

Additionally, experiential learning opportunities such as internships should remain central to hospitality education. Stronger partnerships between educational institutions and small and medium-sized enterprises can provide students with hands-on experience and exposure to real-world challenges. Support mechanisms and incentives should be developed to encourage SMEs to host interns and participate actively in training the future workforce. Furthermore, professional bodies should collaborate with universities to establish quality standards, promote lifelong learning, and encourage the recognition of hospitality management as a respected and strategic career path.

Limitations of the study and future studies guidelines

One limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data sources only, which, while rich in insights, may not fully capture the latest developments or nuanced institutional differences across various European countries. The study primarily draws from two major reports, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives from different educational institutions, students, and industry stakeholders. Additionally, the absence of primary data restricts the depth of empirical validation. Future studies should consider incorporating mixed methods approaches, including qualitative interviews with educators, students, and industry leaders, as well as quantitative data on graduate outcomes and curriculum effectiveness across different European contexts. Expanding the scope to include longitudinal data as well as cross-country comparisons would further enrich understanding, and support more targeted policy and educational interventions.

References

- Al Saba, F., Mertzanis, C., & Kampouris, I. (2023). Employee empowerment and tourism sector employment around the world. *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing*, 9(2), 28-40.
- Ali, A., Egan, D., Haynes, N., Holland, C., & Martin, E. (2020). The Future of Hospitality Management Education.
- Barron, P., & Leask, A. (2020). Events management education. In *The Routledge handbook of events* (pp. 287-305). Routledge.
- Dai Quang, T., & Vo-Thanh, T. (2025). *Routledge Handbook of Tourism and Hospitality Development in Vietnam*.
- Giousmpasoglou, C., & Marinakou, E. (2021). Hotel internships and student satisfaction as key

- determinants to career intention. *Journal of Tourism Research*, 25, 42-67.
- Goh, E., & King, B. (2020). Four decades (1980-2020) of hospitality and tourism higher education in Australia: Developments and future prospects. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 32(4), 266-272.
- HOTREC. (2024). *Manifesto for the Future of European Hospitality 2024–2029*.
- Le, C. D. (2021). *Using Technology-Enhanced Language Learning Environments to Influence the Communicative Potential of Adult Learners of English as a Foreign Language in Vietnam* (Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University).
- Lee, P. C., Yoon, S., & Lee, M. J. (2022). Are you ready? Perceived career readiness attributes of the hospitality management students. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 34(3), 157-169.
- Lugosi, P., & Jameson, S. (2017). Challenges in hospitality management education: Perspectives from the United Kingdom. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 31, 163-172.
- Rosenkranz, N. (2022). The best of both worlds: Experiential problem-based learning approaches in hospitality education. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 34(2), 111-123.
- Tavitiyaman, P., Tsui, B., & Ng, P. M. L. (2025). Effect of hospitality and tourism students perceived skills on career adaptability and perceived employability. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 37(1), 43-54.