Bridging the Gap between Hospitality/Tourism Education and Hospitality/Tourism Industry in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study of hospitality/tourism is considered important due to the fact that it is a vital industry in the service sector.

The main aim of the study is to explore the perception of hospitality/tourism graduates on the important skills needed in the world of hospitality/tourism work and that of hospitality/tourism education.

The study adopted cross-sectional survey and qualitative approach. An in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted involving hundred and six (106) hospitality/tourism graduates in the hospitality/tourism industry.

The study revealed that communication skills, multi lingual, operational skills and skills in computing as the most prominent skills that are needed to fit into the industry.

However, graduates are unable to deliver owing to inadequate possession of the generic skills and hence impeded their performance in the industry.

The researcher recommended that, there should be a close collaboration between the educators and the industry players so that students leave school knowing industry expectation.

Keywords: Hospitality/tourism Education, Hospitality/tourism industry, skills

INTRODUCTION/ LITERATURE REVIEW

It is believed that education is a vehicle for social and economic transformation. It brings about progress and economic development. Therefore, the ultimate aim of every educational institution is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in order to achieve its set objectives. The quality of teaching and the worth of every school are to a large extent assessed on the basis of its academic achievement and how the students performed in the field level.

Indeed, the development of any country in this contemporary time depends largely on the quality of education of such nation. The basis for actual development of a nation starts with the development of its human resources (Akanly, 2007).

Consequently, in Ghana, the academic achievement of students has been a matter of serious concern to the government as well as the general public (Ankomah, 2010).

In line with these arguments, successive governments in the nation have made frantic efforts to improve teaching and learning process in tertiary institutions by introducing different programmes and one of such programme is hospitality/tourism education.

At present, nine out of ten polytechnics in Ghana offer hospitality/tourism programs at Higher National Diploma level. Also, the hospitality programmes are run by public and private universities either as separate entity or combined depending on the institution in question.

However, in the recent times hospitality/ tourism higher education has experienced rapid growth globally in terms of the number of students who were enrolled into the programme but still faces uncertainties in terms of the needs and expectations of the hospitality/ industry.

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For instance, research work carried out globally indicated that, the educators and industry have different viewpoints and do not understand each other's perceptions. The different perceptions between educators and the industry were recognised to be a problem (Collins, 2002; Harkison, 2004b; Li &Kivela, 1989; Petrova& Mason, 2004; Raybould& Wilkins, 2005 as cited in Kim, 2008).

Furthermore, researchers such as (Goodman& Sprague, 1991, Kang, Wu, & Gould, 2005, Petrova and Mason, 2004 and Ladkin, 2005 as cited in Goh, 2011 have also criticised tourism and hospitality educators for not adequately preparing students for employment in the industry. They often claim that, what educators teach in the classroom does not much current industry trends. This sometimes impedes employment opportunities for hospitality/ tourism graduates (Dale and Robinson, 2001; Airey, 2005, Asirifi et al.., 2013).

In view of this, many studies have also stressed on the important skills needed by the hospitality students in order for them to be part of the hospitality industry. For example, Connolly and McGing (2006) suggested that hospitality curriculum and courses must consist of strong practical skills and 'soft' people management skills.

According to McNair (2003), successful graduates will need to have greater ownership of their employability skills and the confidence to cope with economic upheavals in order to identify and capitalise on career opportunities over a lifetime.

A study by Walo, (2001) also identified 'soft' human relation skills including oral and written communication and interpersonal communication as essential for graduates and trainees to possess.

Wood, (2003) conducted a research to identify specific management skills that industry recruiters perceive as important for success in the hospitality industry. The results of the study indicated that leadership was the number one skill that employers felt was important for hospitality students to possess. Employee Relations ranked second, while Problem Resolution ranked third.

The aforementioned literature reviews clearly unveil that, the important skills needed by students to posses to fit into the industry differ from one country to another. The researcher wants to join the debate on the unresolved problem between the education and the industry that needs to be addressed.

The Research Problem

In Ghana, hospitality/ tourism tertiary education faces great challenges in the development of human capital for the hospitality/ tourism industry. Even though the main purpose of the hospitality programme is to equip students with knowledge and skills to meet industry needs, graduates are not able to articulate their skills in which they have been trained to work. Asirifietal.., (2013) and Avornyo(2013).

The study therefore seeks to explore the perception of hospitality/tourism graduates on the important skills needed in the world of hospitality/tourism work and that of hospitality/tourism education.

To do this, hospitality/tourism graduates in the industry were interviewed in order to ascertain what is on the ground. This is because hospitality/ tourism graduates in the industry have actually gained much experience in what was taught in class and what was useful in the workplace and therefore would be able to provide an in- depth information on important skills needed in the industry and suggest on how to bridge the gap.

The Aim of the Study

The main aim of the study was to explore the perception of hospitality/tourism graduates with regard to the important skills needed in the world of hospitality/tourism work and that of hospitality/tourism education.

Specific Objectives

i. To assess the reasons why hospitality/tourism graduates are not able to meet industry needs.

ii. To determine how to bridge the gap between hospitality education and hospitality industry.

Significance of the Study

- In practice, the results arising from this study would provide information, which will be useful to all stake holders on the important skills needed by hospitality/tourism students to fit into the industry.

- Results found in this study may be used as a benchmark for the hospitality/tourism institutions who want to design course work and revise their programs to match the students' needs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Method

Qualitative Approach

The study was conducted using qualitative research methodology. This was used to help the researcher seek the views of hospitality/tourism tertiary graduates to provide key information about the needed skills that they consider as being important for the students. As qualitative research, respondents were offered the opportunity to respond to questions more elaborately.

Instrumentation

The main instrument employed for the study was interview and the interview took a semi-structured form.

Amedahe (2002 as cited in Owusu, 2010) explained that semi-structured interviews are more flexible and allows the interviewer to probe into issues and in some cases follow the order dictated by the situation.

Consequently, hospitality/tourism tertiary graduates were selected to provide key information about the needed skills that they consider as being important for the students. The reason for the choice is that, they may have actually experienced what was taught in class and what was useful in the workplace.

The interview was conducted at the respondent's work place and it took about 30 minutes for each respondent. Notes were taken as respondents speak.

Population and Sampling Procedure

The population of the study was made up of all hospitality tertiary graduates and purposive sampling procedure was adopted to select 106 hospitality tertiary graduates from three to five star hotels in the industry as key informants to provide information about the needed skills that they consider as being important for the students.

According to Kumekpor (2002), purposive sampling has to do with the deliberate picking of respondents who satisfy some qualities for a given research. These respondents may not be obtained through a random sampling procedure due to the fact that the specific characteristics required of the respondents may not be randomly distributed in the universe.

Ethical Consideration

In this study, a written permission was sent to the general managers of hospitality/ tourism industries requesting their organisations to be used as the population of the study. After the general managers had acquiesced to the request, they communicated my mission to the respondents.

Thereafter, the rationale for the study was explained to respondents before the study commenced. The respondents were not forced to take part in the research. All these activities were done to ensure that the research is free of value judgment on the part of the researcher.

Limitations of the Study

In this study most of hospitality/tourism graduates interviewed were in the hotel industry and perhaps they do not represent the whole tourism and hospitality industry.

The study considered only teachers and hospitality managers. However, there are other respondents such as students and hospitality graduates that could impact the findings.

Data Analysis

In this study, notes taken were coded into categories for relevant themes. Thus, the thematic approach was employed to analyse the qualitative data that emerged from the study. According to Break well et al. (2006), thematic analysis considers issues which repeatedly run through responses and which are quite complex and elaborated statements which are not easily open to conversion into simple categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Important Skills Graduates Need

Graduates of hospitality and tourism programs need skills to be able to function effectively in the sectors. These skills are meant to make them more useful to their employers and the customers they will be serving.

The study therefore, deemed it necessary to interview hospitality graduates in the industry, since they might have actually experienced a gap between what was taught in class and what was expected in the workplace. Hence, respondents were asked to share their views on other important skills they may need in the future.

Most of the interviewees pin point communication skills, multi lingual, operational skills and skills in computing as the most prominent skills needed for them to fit into the industry. Majority of the interviewees believed that they did not possess skills in oral and written communication as well as foreign languages such as Chinese, French, and German to serve guests very well. The research finding supported the findings in Australia, 2007as cited in Weing, (2008). It added strength to Weing, (2008) study that communication skills are the key to graduate employment. It also confirmed some elements of skillsof Kay and Russette (2000) study which listed professional appearance and poise, communication skills in both writing and orally, positive customer relations, managing guests' problem with understanding and sensitivity.

This findings is contrary to the popular notion of Kim, (2008) study which considered people skills as the prominent ones needed in the industry.

One male respondent stated:

Because he did not possess skills in foreign language, he was not able to get what the guest put across and therefore affected the quality of services he delivered to the guests.

In addition to these skills, the interviewees identified other equally important skills such as first aids skills; tour guiding skills, security functions, moral skills, customer relationship, leadership skills, personal skills, and problem solving skills that need attention for both curriculum developers and teachers of programmes in hospitality and tourism.

Some of the findings support Wood, (2003) which indicated that leadership was the number one skill that employers felt was important for hospitality students to possess. Employee relations ranked second, while problem resolution ranked third. The study of Wood, (2003) confirmed some specific elements of skills in that of Jin, (2008) that revealed leadership and problem solving skills.

The study of Sheriff (2013) was an interesting one as some elements of his study confirmed and others contrary to the findings above. The study unveiled business functional skills, hospitality functional skills, personal skills and analytical skills as important skills needed by graduates to fit into the industry.

One interviewee at managerial level admitted that:

Some hospitality/tourism graduate lack operational skills and technical skills such as food and beverage management, marketing skills, ability to perform front office and housekeeping operation and attention to details.

These in addition to the general skills being taught in school will make the graduate of any hospitality programme more productive and efficient in the discharge of his/her duties.

It must also be noted that most of these skills were flagged by other researchers in their responses to the important skills needed by recruiters in their search for a prospective employee in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Why Graduates are not able to Meet Industry Needs

Each industry in an economy has its own specific requirements that prospective workers in that industry should possess. These requirements are needed for the efficient functioning of the prospective worker and to make him/her more productive. However, in most instances, graduates of tourism/hospitality are said to be incapacitated when it comes to working effectively in the industry in

which they have been trained to work. Consequently, the researcher, asked the respondents to share their views on the reasons why they were not able to meet industry needs after graduations. Most of the interviewees said that inadequate computer training, multi-lingual barriers, and short period of internship done when they were in school were not enough for them to meet industry needs. Other reasons include: Less exposure/practical work, outmoded lessons , inadequate modern equipment for practical lessons at school, more emphasis on theory, inability to apply what was learnt into the job place, inadequate modern text books, inadequate work shop for both teachers and students and so forth. Some of the findings are similar to the study of Asirifi et al.., (2013) and Avornyo, (2013) that hospitality education places much emphasizes on theory with less practical. This was in line with the early findings of Pavesic (1993), that some hospitality programs are faulted as being too theoretical. Also, inability of graduates to apply what was learnt into the job place supports an argument made by Mayaka and Akama (2009 as cited in Avornyo, 2013) that there is a lack of proper academic understanding and focused theoretic framework of most hospitality/ tourism studies.

Bridging the Gap between Hospitality Education and Hospitality Industry

The interviewees were asked on how to bridge the gap between hospitality education and the hospitality industry. Most of the interviewees suggested that there should be collaboration between educators and industries. This confirmed similar findings of Good enough and Page (1993 as cited in Avornyo, 2013) that there is the need to forge a closer link between the tourism industry and the training institutions.

In addition, other equally important suggestion made by the interviewees to bridge the gap between hospitality/ tourism education and hospitality/ tourism industry includes: fieldtrips to industry for teachers and students, longer internship periods, more practical lessons, modern equipment forpractical lessons, regular in-service training for teachers, regular review of the curriculum, competence based training, much attention be given to language training, strengthen communication courses and so forth.The finding confirms the study of several researchers that the use of fieldtrips in hospitality education can enhance student and staff learning through experiential learning (Ritchie, 2003, Goh, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The study was set out to explore the perception of hospitality/tourism graduates on the important skills that are needed in the world of hospitality/tourism work and that of hospitality/tourism education, why graduates are not able to meet the industry needs and how to bridge the gap between hospitality education and the industry.

It emerged from the study that communication skill, multi lingual, operational skills and skills in computing as the most prominent skills that are needed by the students to fit into the industry.

However, graduates are unable to deliver owing to inadequate possession of the generic skills and hence impeded their performance in the industry.

Consequently, the graduates suggested that there should be a close collaboration between the educators and the industries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings it is recommended that:

- There should be a close collaboration between the educators and the industry so that students leave school knowing industry expectation. This will go a long way in improving the quality of service delivered to guests.

- There should be regular conferences, seminars and workshops aimed at exchanging ideas. During such gathering, students and teachers would be well-equipped. They would gain a lot of theoretical and practical knowledge. In this way, the graduates from the institutions would not be square pegs in round holes, when they enter the world of work in the industry.

- Students should be exposed to fieldtrips to industry. Tertiary institutions should organise regular fieldtrips for students and teachers to industry as a form of exposing them to current industry trends and best practices.

- There should be an extension period of internship. Students on internship should spend about twelve weeks and there should be a way for the students to rotate in different sections in order for them to acquire skills in all areas of the department. Also, students should be closely supervised and be made to write a report after completion.

- It is recommended that tertiary institutions should strengthen the study of communications skill in both written and orally. This is because communication skills are needed in every important aspect of managerial activity such as, recruiting, defend and argue a case convincingly, make a business presentation, conduct staff briefing interview, training, orientation, interacting with guests and writing effective business memo, letters, e-mails, reports and many other managerial responsibilities that require communications skills.

- There should be an improvement in infrastructure and teaching materials.

Tertiary institutions should build modern food laboratory, computer laboratory, language laboratory centre and library with well equip modern equipment for practical lessons and well stock modern books for effective research work. However, building such laboratories requires considerable funds, which cannot be gained without the government's support. Government should increase the funds for tertiary institutions to support them in building laboratories for practical lessons. Besides, institutions should find appropriate means to generate internal funds to support developmental projects in their schools. For teaching materials, the textbook should be updated as industry develops and teachers should introduce new materials and impart new information to the students in class.

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