

**A critical analysis of skilled labour supply and demand in the
Australian hospitality industry.**

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Abstract

The critical imbalance between skilled labour supply and demand in the Australian hospitality industry is frequently noted. Workforce development issues are driving the agendas of industry and government alike, yet there is little evidence to suggest a reverse in this imbalance in the near future. While increasing importance is being attributed to this issue, there is only a minor contribution in the literature that extends beyond the conceptual and offers practical solutions that might arrest current trends and fortify the labour bases available to industry. This paper consolidates current research and reveals key issues underpinning the current skills shortage. It identifies ways and means that industry, academia, and governments can work together to overcome the current crisis of skills shortages within the hospitality sector. The contribution of this paper lies in the fact that it clearly demonstrates the need for the sector to embrace a fundamental tenet of today's knowledge-based economy – creating innovative solutions in a dynamic environment through tri-lateral collaborations involving industry, academia, and government. The effective management of such collaboration is perhaps where the greatest challenge rests.

KEYWORDS: Gen Y, Labour skills, Labour shortage, Hospitality workforce

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The critical imbalance between skilled labour supply and demand in the Australian tourism and hospitality industry is well recognised, with workforce development issues driving the agendas of industry and government alike, yet disturbingly, there is little evidence to suggest a reverse in this imbalance in the near future. While increasing importance is being attributed to this issue (National Tourism Investment Strategy Consultative Group, 2006), there is little in the literature that extends beyond the conceptual and offers practical solutions that might arrest current trends and fortify the labour bases available to industry (Robinson & Beesley, 2010). By reviewing recent literature pertaining to hospitality labour supply and demand, this paper aims to highlight dominant issues and, drawing from examples in Australia, identify ways and means that industry, academia, and governments can work together to overcome the current crisis of skills shortages within the hospitality sector. Labour shortages are addressed not just through recruitment activities, but also through retention strategies. This paper takes a multi-faceted approach in identifying not just the dominant issues but also the interrelatedness among them. As shown in Figure 1, the review of the literature undertaken in this investigation considers recruitment and retention in conjunction with dominant hospitality

workforce issues to better understand how they interact and, in turn, impact upon labour supply.

Introduction

Although tourism is not an official industry in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC), the aggregate consumption of all goods and services related to visitors' activities are collectively known as the tourism industry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, 2006), a definition now widely accepted by the broader tourism research community. At every level, from international through to regional, tourism is increasingly viewed as a means to generate foreign exchange (Richter, 1985), promote employment development (National Tourism Investment Strategy Consultative Group, 2006) and ultimately, stimulate economic growth (Department of Industry, Tourism & Resources, DITR, 2003). Over the past two decades Australia's inbound tourism has shown consistent growth, and in the long-term, the industry has been remarkably resilient to external shocks over this period such as the Gulf war, the Asian Financial Crisis, September 11, various pandemics, and the Iraq war (DITR, 2006). To some extent, this resilience can be attributed to innovation in the airline and accommodation sectors. The combination of low-cost carriers and online room markets has increased demand for travel, and businesses within Australia's tourism industry responded by adopting a cost leadership strategy, marketing to the masses and competing

predominantly on the basis of price. The most unfortunate outcome of this cost cutting orientation is that human capital has been largely neglected, not just by industry, but also within policy planning and policy formulation.

While attention has been paid to the economic contributions tourism might make to a society and ways in which Australia might move away from the traditional price orientation and develop higher yield tourism, scant attention has been paid to human resource issues in tourism policy planning and policy formulation, and where considered, discussions can best be described as rhetorical. In the Australian context, recent statements have acknowledged the dominant human resource challenges the sector faces (Davidson & Timo, 2006; DITR, 2006; Hadley, 2006, 2007) yet consistent with findings in the broader context of tourism, the core issues remain poorly conceptualised, and at both a theoretical and practical level, there is little to provide a consolidated approach that sees the human dimension as a fundamental part of an encompassing planning framework for tourism (Liu & Wall, 2006). As a result the Australian tourism industry is now faced with a skills shortage crisis, and under the constellation that constitutes tourism as an industry, this crisis is most pronounced within the hospitality sector – a situation that becomes critical when considered in line forecast tourism growth. When forecast industry growth (DITR, 2006) and the prospect of a shrinking workforce created by an aging population are

considered (Dwyer et al., 2008), it is patently obvious that Australia's future as a destination is at stake if strategies are not put in place to address the current skills shortage within the hospitality sector (Hadley, 2006, 2007).

Review of tourism / hospitality and its relationship to current HR challenges

A literature search was undertaken using the terms 'hospitality', 'labour shortage' and 'labour supply' across electronic databases and search engines. Filters were applied to limit results to literature published after 2000 in order to obtain most relevant data pertaining to the emerging labour crisis within the hospitality industry. Selection of articles was based on both the title and abstract in terms of their relevance to topic under investigation. A 'snowball' technique was also used to identify additional sources from references cited within the articles. Particular attention was given to articles published in dominant tourism and hospitality journals and relevant government reports to ensure quality, relevance, and scientific rigour in the data drawn upon in order to identify the extent of labour shortage problem, and current approaches to addressing the labour supply issue.

Extensive debate has questioned the appropriateness of the term 'industry' as applied to tourism where heterogeneity impacts upon all aspects of operations, organisations, marketing, finance, and human resource management (Leiper, 2008). Almost without exception, any

commentary on the nuances of the tourism industry will first note the fragmented nature of the industry. As already noted, this spans across all facets of the tourism industry, but within the hospitality sector this is perhaps most pronounced in organisational terms, where multi-national companies (MNCs) reside alongside small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and owner-operators. This point is made, not to reignite the debate, but to acknowledge some of the unique characteristics of tourism as an economic sector and how these defining features have contributed to the current human resource crisis confronted by Australia's hospitality industry. Initially these features will be considered in the broader hospitality context, and then drawing on recent research findings, applied to the Australian environment.

This has clear implications for human resource practices where training budgets, career progression opportunities, strategic human resource plans, and required skill levels vary dramatically as a function of organisational size (Andrew, Baum & Morrison, 2001; Goulding, 2006). This is further exacerbated in Australia by the geographical dispersion of tourism operations, with over 50% of these micro-businesses operating in regional areas (DITR, 2006) where seasonality impacts more noticeably than in city areas. Baum (2008) argues that the role of seasonality in structuring how tourism operations are organised and how people are

managed is perhaps the single characteristic that most determines the nature of the human resource challenges faced by the sector. It should be noted however that not all hospitality operators view seasonality as a 'problem'. Rather, the lifestyle motivations that form the foundation of many micro-businesses view seasonal fluctuations as an opportunity to realise a work-life balance, where leisure activities and alternative lifestyle benefits might be pursued during the low seasons.

Seasonality therefore might hold appeal for some operators, however it does in large part, negate the application of 'standard' human resource principles in such instances (Getz, Carlson, & Morrison, 2004). In larger organisations seasonal fluctuations create highly volatile operating costs in conjunction with fixed operating costs, demanding discretionary expenditure and diligence and prudence in the ways fixed and variable costs are managed (Whitelaw, Barron, Buultjens, Cairncross, & Davidson, 2009). A by-product of seasonality is staff turnover, yet even within fixed operating costs, the industry has a phenomenal turnover rate of permanent staff. Within Australia there is a 39% turnover of managerial staff. In regional areas managerial turnover is 52% (Davidson & Timo, 2006).

Along with the aforementioned structural factors, other defining features of the hospitality industry are that it is a 24/7 business creating

work-life balance issues for employees (Baum, 2007; Kandasamy & Ancheri, 2009), consumers are seen as ‘guests’, which implies a particular relationship between customers and employees (Lashley & Rowson, 2010), and the cultural diversity that characterises the travel experience itself (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006) demands well developed communication and interpersonal skills in employees. In spite of these factors, the hospitality industry has low barriers to entry for both capital and labour (Christensen-Hughes, 2002), which again has ramifications for the management of the industry’s human resources. In isolation each of these factors present a particular challenge in the effective management of human capital within the hospitality sector; in chorus they have created a critical imbalance in labour supply and demand, not just in recruitment, but also in retention. To address this imbalance in labour supply and demand it is necessary to understand specific challenges manifested by the industry’s characteristics.

Factors underpinning current skills shortage

Skills required

Several studies have been undertaken to define the skills hospitality employees require from hospitality graduates. Literacy and numeracy are fundamental requirements (Ineson & Kempa, 1996), but the hospitality workplace demands what Warhurst, Nickson, Witz and Cullen (2000) describe as aesthetic labour – the skills required to behave in ways that is

compatible with the requirements of the job and in accordance with customer expectations. This perspective emphasises inter- and intra-personal skills, which in an experience-based economy is of great importance to any hospitality organisation (Baum, 2006). Of course these people skills are intrinsically linked to other skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, maintaining professional and ethical standards, and leadership, all of which are required to deliver quality customer services (Tas 1988; Baum 1990, 2008; Kay & Russette 2000; Christou & Sigala 2001). These skills create a complex milieu from which to create a curriculum that produces ‘industry ready’ graduates, particularly when the vocational component designed to develop more specific operational skills is also considered. Tourism and hospitality education providers are however, struggling to provide a curriculum that satisfies industry needs (Baum & Szivas, 2008; Ernawati, 2003). A recent investigation of hospitality training needs in Australia revealed education programs were “too generic” and “teaching materials were too old” (Whitelaw et al., 2009, p.8). The results of the Australian study showed a marked incongruence between education providers’ perceptions of skills deemed necessary and those that hospitality graduates would actually need once they entered the workforce.

Part of the problem here is tourism and hospitality education is expected to respond to diverse and constantly changing needs of various

sub-sectors (e.g., airlines, hotel companies, heritage sites etc.), while also addressing the needs of SMEs across the sector where such needs are commonly ill-defined at either a technical or knowledge level (Baum, Amoah & Spivack, 1997; Lashley, 2009). This places challenging demands upon education providers and continuing pressure on faculty to produce a curriculum that is of relevance to the workplace.

This concern is not unique to Australia (Cervera-Taulet & Ruiz-Molina, 2008; Ernawati, 2003; Hogarth, Shury, Vivian, & Wilson, 2003; Marchante, Ortega, & Pagán, 2006; Mayaka & Akama, 2007; National Skills Task Force, 2000; Sheldon, Fesenmaier, Woeber, Cooper, & Antonioli, 2007; Stergiou, Airey, & Riley, 2008; Zagonari, 2009). Recently, a group of 45 senior tourism educators and industry experts formed a summit to discuss how tourism education needs to adapt to significant societal and industry changes through the years 2010 - 2030. One outcome of the summit was identification of four categories of skills that participants felt would be important for students of the future to master. These skills relate to destination stewardship, politics & ethics, enhanced human resources, and dynamic business skills (Sheldon et al., 2007). With these categories a more specific list of skills were identified and are summarised in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Sheldon et al., (2007) emphasise the need to instil in students a strong culture of lifelong learning since employment in the coming decades will be vastly different to what it is today, and “the key jobs in 2015 may not even exist today” (p. 63). Responsibility for the current skills shortage however does not rest solely on the shoulders of the education system, and it would be imprudent to suggest so. There are several other mitigating factors at play.

Industry factors

One of the largest factors is the poor image the hospitality industry portrays to potential employees – a factor that is frequently cited in the literature. While it is encouraging to see many of the multi-national organisations adopting a clear strategic human resource approach, providing enhanced work-life balance for staff (Lee, 2005; Choi & Dickson, 2010), the reality is that the hospitality industry is dominated by small business and that little has changed since 1997 when Wood described the industry as “largely exploitative, degrading, poorly paid, unpleasant, insecure and taken as a last resort...” (p. 198, cited in Baum, 2007) and in emerging tourism destinations service is frequently equated with servitude (Beesley, 2005). A compounding factor here is the increasing demand for low cost tourism, which encourages the use of low cost labour, and reinforces poor

perceptions held towards working conditions within the hospitality industry. Whitelaw et al., (2009) suggested that for Australian graduates, the lack of clear career paths (and/or slow progression) within the industry further impacted on both recruitment and retention. Today's generation of graduates hold distinctive perceptions of and ideals towards work and there appears to be a gap between hospitality graduates' perceptions and the reality of the workplace (Richardson, 2009) – an outcome which is attributed to societal change and generational shifts in thinking and expectations (Solnet & Hood, 2008; Solnet & Kralji, 2010)

Employee expectations

Several societal changes over the past few decades have impacted greatly on employees' definitions of what constitutes preferred employment, and today's generation of hospitality employees hold vastly different expectations towards work than those of previous generations. As noted in Whitelaw et al., (2009),

“There seems to be a gap between graduates and the reality of the market. Indeed, this new generation does not have the patience to wait for promotion. In addition, even if training and education provide them with the right skills, the requisite behaviours do not necessarily follow and they often seem to lack a work ethic, attitude, motivation, willingness, passion and, as said before, realistic expectations” (p. 8).

Rather than work taking precedence over leisure and family, today's graduates place a premium on life outside the workplace, and achieving a

work-life balance (Withiam, 2005; Magnini, 2009). Today's graduates are ambitious, with over 80% expecting promotion within two years of commencing work (McCrindle & Hooper, 2006). According to McCrindle & Hooper (2006) the three most important aspects of employment for today's graduates are positive relationships with colleagues, interesting work, and continuous opportunities for learning. When accepting a job, salary ranks sixth after training, management style, work flexibility, staff activities and non-financial rewards. They are socially driven, have a need for recognition, inclusion in workplace decisions, and seek to be understood and accepted (Chen & Choi, 2008). To retain this generation of graduates employees need to provide job variety, feedback and reward systems, flexible work practices, autonomy, career development, and empowerment, all within a work-life balanced environment (Solnet & Hood, 2008). Richardson (2009) states that as students progress through their degree programs and gain industry experience (either through part-time work or internship programs) they become increasingly disillusioned with the industry's capacity to meet their expectations and explains the low conversion rate of graduates who enter or remain in the industry (see Figure 2).

The issue of retention takes on increased complexity when considered in the context of a sector comprised of MNCs, SMEs, and micro-businesses, all of which offer differing opportunities for career progression

and differing capacities to deliver on employee expectations. Employee expectations take on increasing importance, as the aging workforce will create an environment of low unemployment where employers will have to compete to recruit and retain staff.

Insert Figure 2 here

Industrial relations & government policy

In a global context there is now a ready access to low cost migrant labour being utilised to fill lower-skilled / seasonal jobs, an outcome that enables many hospitality businesses to ignore issues of skills development and general workplace enhancement (Baum, 2007). To some extent this holds true in the Australian context (Whitelaw et al., 2009), yet in 2007 migrant /extended visa workers comprised only 2.6% of the accommodation sector's workforce (ABS, 2008). Within Australia the main issue with the current industrial relations framework is that hospitality is no more attractive to prospective employees over other industries (in spite of penalty rates) and that there is no incentive for an employee to remain in the industry over time. Furthermore, the current framework provides employers with little incentive to invest in skills training and development. While dismissal laws have made it easier for larger companies to cope with seasonal demand, SMEs were most disadvantaged with unfair dismissal laws (Whitelaw et al.,

2009).

Discussion

This synthesis of the literature, while presenting much that is commonly known, has highlighted several themes, which if effectively addressed would in large part ameliorate the current (and future) skills shortage within the hospitality industry. These themes are discussed in light of interventions that industry, government, and academia might facilitate in order to reverse labour shortage trends.

The role of industry & government

There is a clear need for industry to improve its image if it is to attract quality employees. Industry needs to create a ‘career culture’ and initiate reward systems that recognise not just performance, but also tenure. Industrial relations policy might also look to the possibility to reward employee/industry loyalty. The introduction of apprenticeships across various dimensions of hospitality work is a notion that has been offered as a means to demonstrate a career path to employees and reduce turnover, yet given the inter- and intra- organisational turnover of chefs (where apprenticeships are offered) (Robinson & Beesley, 2010) this is clearly not a panacea to cure workforce ills.

If hospitality employers place emphasis on critical thinking and

problem solving skills as core graduate competencies (Sheldon, Fesenmaier, Woeber, Cooper, & Antonioli, 2007), then it would be prudent to provide internship programs that occasion opportunities to develop these skills in applied settings. Interns are most commonly placed in appointments where they engage in menial tasks, leaving students bored, and subsequently disillusioned (Nuemann & Banghart, 2001).

Industry needs to promote itself to the community (e.g. to schools) and emphasise its contribution to the community and to the economy, and create opportunities for ongoing professional development, thereby acknowledging the need for lifelong learning, and the relationship it holds to a knowledge-based economy (Dwyer et al., 2008). To achieve this industry will need to invest in training and development yet, in the absence of government policy to encourage this, there remains little incentive for the industry to do so. There is also the opportunity for industry to capitalise on re-skilling an aging population, but again, there is a clear need for government policy to incentivise and support industry initiatives.

The role of academia / education providers

Education providers need to be more responsive to industry needs, and produce graduates that recognise the volatile environment in which they are embedded, and give them the skills (both practical and technical) that equip them to be not just reactive, but also proactive to a constantly

changing environment. All these outcomes are dependent on one primary factor – the capacity for industry, education and government sectors to communicate effectively and seek solutions pursuant to a common goal. Australian hospitality education has seen unprecedented growth over that last 20 years and has been recognised as providing quality education (Davidson & King, 2008). It has been supported by a plethora of government, industry initiatives and associations yet there is still a question mark over its effectiveness.

The importance of collaboration

Meaningful dialogue needs to take place between industry and education providers, between industry and government policymakers, and between industry and potential employees. While there are number of organisations and agencies that do engage in collaborative undertakings to increase understanding of current and future issues within the sector and in turn, develop appropriate solutions, participants frequently have loyalties and agendas that lie outside of the sector (Baum & Szivas, 2008). Furthermore, few of these collaborative undertakings have paid attention to labour market issues as it relates to the hospitality sector. Another issue here is that within tourism (and its sub-sectors), few of these collaborative undertakings have come together in the true spirit of a knowledge-based economy. This explains why such ventures have achieved unremarkable success rates in terms of their capacity to deliver outcomes adjacent to

initial goals (Healey, 1998; Helling, 1998; Jamal & Getz, 1995) – an outcome that has led to stakeholder disillusionment and diminished faith in the benefits that might be realised through collaboration (Beesley, 2005). Tri-lateral arrangements (involving industry, academia, and government) of knowledge production is a fundamental tenet of a knowledge-based economy (Leydesdorff, 2000; Leydesdorff & Meyer, 2006), yet for these arrangements to maximally deliver on goals and provide solutions to current and future issues participants must move from the concept of collaboration to *convergence* (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 here

To be truly effective, individuals coming together in cooperative undertakings must form an organisation that stands outside of those that constitute its membership, and the emergent institutional order must be accepted and adopted by all those that participate in it (Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1996; Leydesdorff & Meyer, 2006). This outcome requires more than intellectual acceptance – it requires a fundamental cultural shift from one sphere of activity to another where existing roles are altered, and sometimes diminished in comparison to an individual's standing in their originating organisation. Participants need to understand how and why their roles might differ from those within their originating organisation. The high failure rate of collaborative tourism research projects is frequently attributed

to the complexities associated with a fragmented sector and issues relating to power and politics that emerge as individuals struggle to accept differing roles, and individual agendas take precedence over collective outcomes (Healey, 1998; Helling, 1998; Jamal & Getz, 1995).

Stakeholders come from separate public and private sector organisations whereby participants may be participating at either an enterprise or destination level (Faulkner, 2002) and where all participants are pursuing individual agendas that are simultaneously characterised by commonalities *and* differences. If a collaborative approach to addressing the hospitality labour crisis is to succeed, then the struggle between values and interests within these alliances must lead to the formulation (and perhaps reformulation throughout the course of the project) of outcomes in response to stakeholder needs. These challenges may not seem to hold much incentive to establish a tri-lateral collaboration to address the labour crisis, yet more recent research provides more encouragement.

The way forward

Sundbo, Orfila-Sintes, & Sørensen (2007) showed that collaborative arrangements that are ‘institutionalised’ lead to more effective outcomes than those that are not. Institutionalisation refers to settings where the capacity to produce and innovate is enhanced by the ability to realise the compatibility of interests and the management of conflicts through combinations of incentives and authority (Coriat & Weinstein, 2002) as

facilitated by an independent person or agency. To achieve the desired outcomes facilitating personnel need to be able to accurately interpret emergent dynamics and see these as expressions of values and beliefs; they also need to read their own affective responses and the underlying values and beliefs that feed these responses. They would need to be acutely aware of the political moves being made by stakeholders, and be able to determine when apparent political moves or ‘resistance’ might actually be expressions of a latent issue that has not been addressed. Realising the objectives of any collaborative undertaking to address hospitality labour issues is not just dependent on the acknowledgement and reconciliation of these struggles among interests. Given the amalgam of stakeholders that would comprise such a collaboration, possible solutions will hold different meanings among stakeholders, which presents additional challenges in the dissemination of knowledge (or solutions) designed for application.

Communication between participating stakeholders and broader business needs to be developed in ways so that the solutions presented have relevance and might be translated into immediate application. If solutions developed are to be optimised maximally, not only do findings need to be disseminated in a way that promotes the uptake of knowledge among stakeholders and the broader business community, but also dissemination efforts must demonstrate the value of strategic planning and how to engage it. This implies the need for an ‘educative’ component to built into

communication of new knowledge that might provide solutions to hospitality labour issues.

It is argued that managers of SMEs are research averse (Cooper, 2006) and frequently lack the capacity (Glen & Weerawaradena, 1996; Robinson & Pearce, 1984) and often the inclination (Malone & Jenster, 1991) to utilise new knowledge to inform their management activities. Although a commonly held perception, more recent research suggests that, where it can be seen to be of direct benefit to their business and because limited resources restrain their own research undertakings, SMEs *do* actively seek external sources for information (Desouza & Awazu, 2006; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2005; Thorborn, 2005). This being so, industry representatives then become a clear conduit through which to distribute new knowledge to broader business, but again, in ways that have meaning and relevance to SMEs.

A second means to transfer knowledge to SMEs is through internships that create an exchange of knowledge not just from employer to intern, but also from intern to employee in response to that particular organisation's needs. This approach develops an intern's problem solving skills in a 'real world' setting while also demonstrating to SME employers ways to engage with and apply new knowledge (for a detailed review of this program see Breakey, Robinson & Beesley (2008)).

Conclusion

The literature presented here highlights the complexities underpinning the current labour crisis faced by Australia's hospitality industry. What is evident is that in order to resolve labour issues, and develop a workforce that is able to meet the future demands of the tourism industry a formalised taskforce involving industry, academia, and government is required. This paper has argued that in order to address current hospitality labour issues it is not a question of whether this collaboration is required, but rather, how effectively it might be managed. The issue of effective management of such an alliance presents perhaps the greatest challenge in the development and implementation of solutions to reverse the current skills shortage and trends in hospitality labour turnover.

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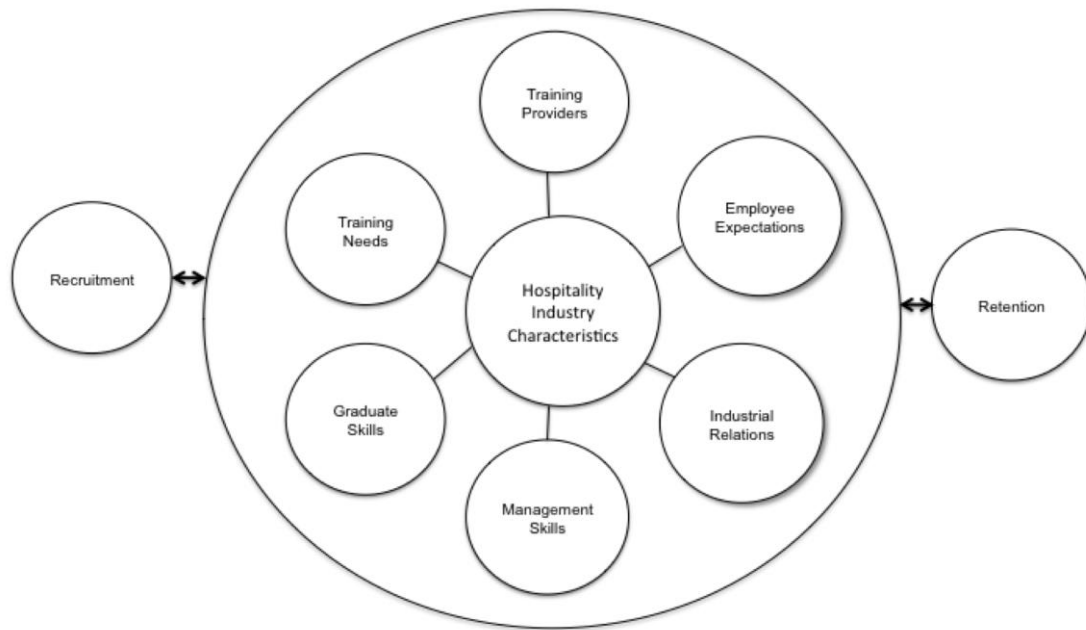


Figure 1. Conceptual approach to understanding interactions among dominant hospitality workforce issues.

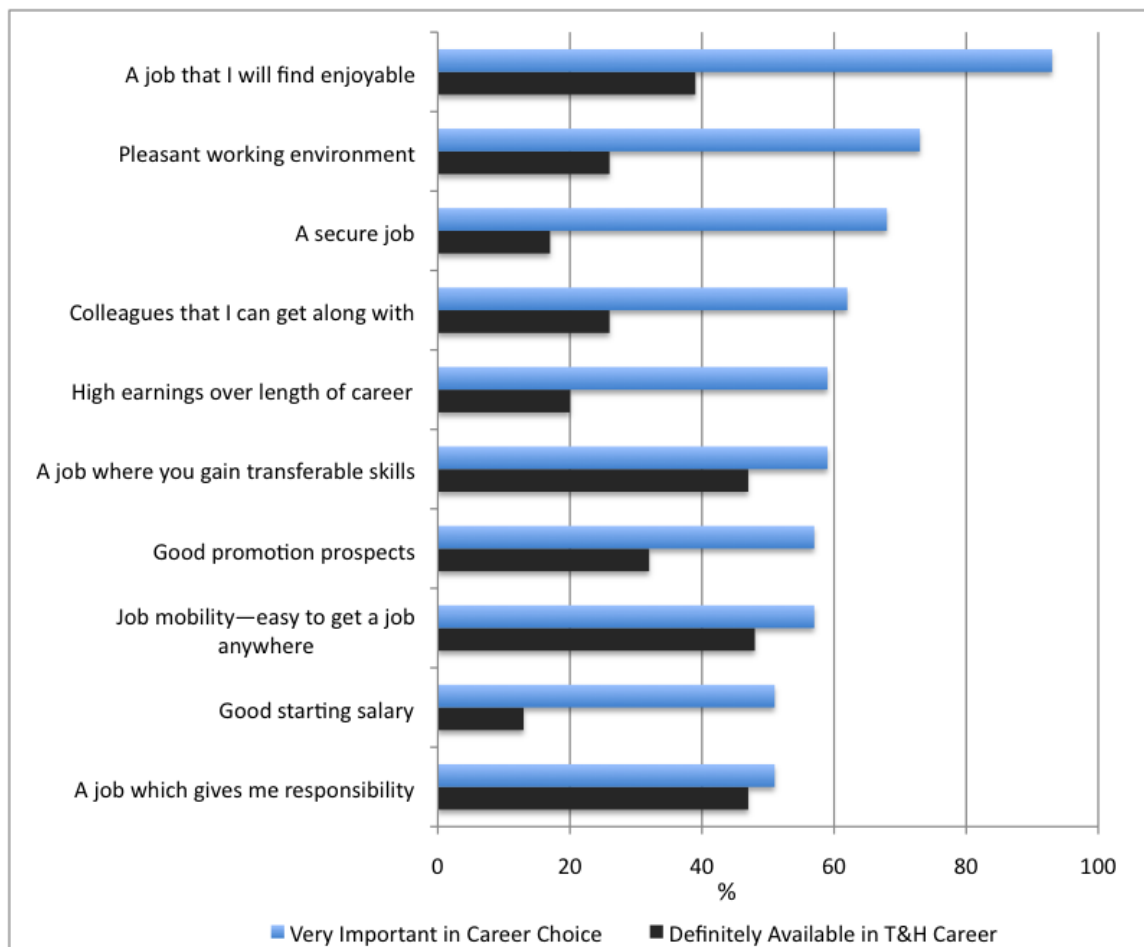


Figure2. The top ten factors Australian hospitality students consider very important in determining career choice and the extent to which they believe they are definitely available in a tourism and hospitality career (Adapted from Richardson, 2009)

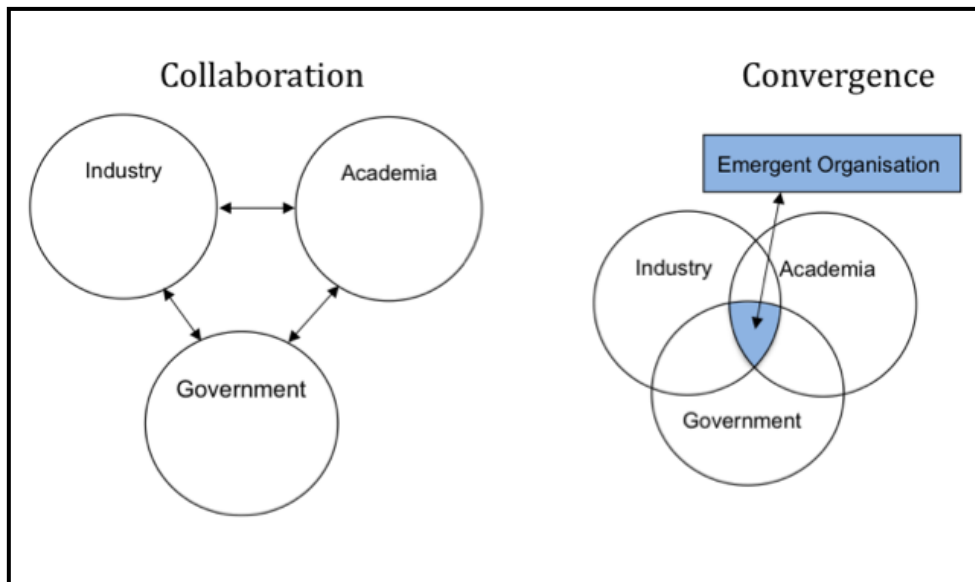


Figure 3. Collaboration versus convergence

Table 1.
Skills required of hospitality graduates – 2010 to 2030

Destination Stewardship Skills

Management of real and virtual networks
 Knowledge sharing skills
 Ability to respect and work with all stakeholders
 Managing complex adaptive systems
 Environmental management skills

Political and Ethical Skills

Ethical behaviour: demonstration and motivation
 Integration of basic human values into the workplace
 Lobbying and the ability to influence the political process

Enhanced Human Resource Skills

Team building
 Effective listening and negotiation
 Motivation and leadership
 Working with distributed, virtual project teams
 Emotional intelligence

Dynamic Business Skills

Flexibility
 Multitasking
 Critical thinking
 Optimal use of common sense
 Innovation/entrepreneurship
 Communication skills using new multimedia technologies
 Cross-cultural competencies
 Risk identification, estimation, and control
 Avoiding problems rather than solving them

Source: Sheldon et al., 2007, pp. 66-67