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Higher education hospitality programmes in Bahrain: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The hospitality and tourism industry in Bahrain is predicted to grow over the coming years with the development of new five star hotels, which will create new jobs to the Bahraini economy within the next 4-5 years. Currently there is limited provision of hospitality and tourism education, which is offered mainly at vocational level. This paper presents the potential of developing a hospitality and/or tourism programme in higher education in Bahrain. In-depth interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to explore the potential of such a programme in Bahrain. The findings suggest that there are skills gaps in two key areas, generic and soft skills. It also proposes that there is an opportunity to establish a hospitality programme at Bachelors level that should be supported with collaboration with an international institution to enhance the curriculum design and facilitate the programme development. Finally, public awareness is vital to support the image and the prestige of employment in the sector.

Key Words: Hospitality, Tourism, Higher Education, Bahrain

Conference Theme: Education Futures

Introduction

The real growth of the Bahraini hospitality industry began in the 1980s when Bahrain was established as the new financial hub for the Middle East, after the relocation of several banks due to the civil war in Lebanon. Today, the hospitality and tourism industry is one of the main pillars in Bahrain's long-term economic development and diversification strategy known as "Economic Vision 2030" (<http://www.bahrainedb.com>). The latest data show that Bahrain currently hosts 115 hotels including 12 five-star multinational brands providing 3,193 rooms and 48 four-star with 5,327 rooms. The new luxury hotel developments in the pipeline include another 1,540 five-star hotel rooms by 2015 (Alpen Capital, 2012). With many plans to build infrastructure and transportation, the total contribution of travel and tourism to Bahrain's GDP is forecast to rise by 4.6% p.a. from \$3.58 billion USD in 2012 to \$5.98 billion by 2023, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2013). While these statistics are not a guarantee, some new initiatives and developments are already being rolled out to contribute to these figures.

Although the country ranks third in the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) tourist arrivals (Bagaeen, 2013), Bahrain's hospitality industry is facing strong and growing competition from Dubai. The small UAE state has managed to be established as one of the world's top tourist destinations over the past ten years under the strong leadership of the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Kampaxi, 2008). The hospitality and tourism industry in the region is also challenged by conservative Muslims who oppose the sale and consumption of alcohol, and support the implementation of Shariah law in hospitality and tourism, trends that are known as 'Halal Tourism' and 'Islamic Hospitality' respectively (Battour et al., 2010; IHS Global Insight, 2012; Jafari & Scott, 2010). Moreover, Bahrain's hospitality industry is dependent upon tourists mainly from Saudi Arabia, as since its inauguration in late November 1986, the most prominent catalyst for

Bahrain's hospitality and tourism development has been the 26km King Fahd Causeway (Mansfeld & Winckler, 2008). After a dramatic drop in tourism arrivals caused by the political unrest in Bahrain in 2011, the sector has returned to growth, and tourist arrivals are restored to pre-2011 levels (Alpen Capital, 2012). Hence, it is important to understand that the context influences the path of tourism development in each country.

The current situation in Bahrain Hospitality Sector

From a manpower and human resources perspective, the private sector in Bahrain in general, and the hospitality and tourism industry in particular, has relied heavily for many decades on immigrant workers and expatriate managers. Bahrain as well as the rest of the GCC economies adopted the *rentier* economic model (Karolak, 2012) that relies solely on oil profits and distributes oil surplus among citizens in the form of free services and subsidies (Hertog, 2010). The depletion of oil reserves, the demographic change, and growing unemployment especially among young Bahrainis, however, has caused the government to implement a policy of Bahrainisation, which mandates that expatriates to be replaced by local workers and managers (Sadi & Henderson, 2005).

As a consequence, the development of the Bahraini hospitality and tourism industry was based on the presumption that its expansion would not only create new jobs (Bagaeen, 2013), but in contrast to the UAE and Qatar, would not require a massive import of foreign workers (Mansfeld & Winckler, 2008). However, the official statistics from the Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) shows that in the past decade the vast majority of the newly created jobs in this industry went to expatriates. In this context, Louër (2008) argues that Bahrain is no different than the other GCC states which rely on mass labour migration for the implementation of their development strategy.

Today, the hospitality industry in Bahrain struggles to maintain and grow its Bahrainisation rates. Five Star hotels in Bahrain are responsible for meeting a 20-25% target of Bahraini staff, and they struggle to meet this quota (LMRA, 2012). Expatriate recruitment currently addresses staffing shortages at all levels of hotel employment, but attracting Bahraini staff remains problematic even at middle management level. The hotel industry is perceived as an unattractive career choice by many locals because of the reputations of hotel bars, mixed gender staff and other features that conflict with religious practices (IHS Global Insight, 2012). Even though these perceptions exist in Bahraini society, organizations such as the Specific Council for Training in Hospitality, Tamkeen, and the Ministry of Labour are working to alleviate the gaps through various funding initiatives and training support.

For more almost four decades the provision of hospitality training in Bahrain was offered at the Catering School in Muharraq. The government subsidised School stopped operating in 2007 leaving Bahrain with only one private vocational training provider in hospitality (BIHR). In early 2013 the council was assigned the task of investigating the reopening of a catering school, which was previously run in Bahrain. Their study was conducted by KPMG and proposed the idea of international collaboration (Trade Arabia, 2013). If the Council decided to re-open the vocational hospitality school, they intend to completely rebuild a state-of-the-art facility.

At the same time, the council of Bahrain's five star hotel general managers approached Bahrain Polytechnic Business School (BPBS) to investigate the possibility of facilitating a hospitality management Bachelor's degree. The aim of this programme was to address the lack of Bahraini managers especially at line and middle management level. Currently, there are no programmes in hospitality and/or tourism offered in higher education in Bahrain. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the potential of developing hospitality programmes in HE in Bahrain, by exploring the various stakeholders' views.

Methodology

For the purpose of this paper a qualitative approach was used, as semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with various stakeholders in hospitality and tourism in Bahrain including the Specific Council for Training in Hospitality (CTH, 2 participants), managers (i.e. hotel managers, HR or training coordinators, 7 participants) at five star hotels in Bahrain, government organizations (4 participants), hotel employees (11 participants), existing (hospitality related) training programmes managers (3 participants) in Bahrain, and

potential partner schools / higher education institutions (2 participants). The participants were asked to respond to 4 key areas such as to identify the educational opportunities of such a programme, the current and future skills of work in the sector, the future growth of hospitality education in Bahrain and to determine the most appropriate type / style of programme for the Bahraini context. Content analysis was conducted to identify any key areas that concern those involved in hospitality management in reference to a hospitality programme.

Findings

The various participants were required to discuss the skills required to work in the industry. The skills identified were generic and soft, such as motivation to work. It was found that there is currently a need of about 1000 managers, and a need for further training. The lack of appropriate training has led to a gap in the above-mentioned skills and more specifically to the lack of human resource management, communication, people and relationships skills, customer service and work ethics. Hotel general managers reported that it is difficult to attract and retain sufficient supply of suitably trained employees. In addition, they proposed that they find it difficult to motivate staff to participate at further training, even though improved staff skills through training have the potential to increase their competitive advantage, increase productivity and the potential to go higher in the hierarchy, as Freeland (2000) proposes.

A main challenge with work in hospitality in the region is the perception of work in the sector, mainly for females. Even the effort to change the perception among Bahraini population was not highly desired. The Bahrain Tourism Authority (BTA) proposed to develop a communication strategy to create awareness of education and training options and career pathways in the sector. They suggested that they could target potential employees, existing workers, employers, young female Bahrainis and career counsellors. The participants claimed that it is vital to change the perceptions of Bahrainis about working in the sector, and to encourage greater investment by employers and individuals, otherwise the country will heavily rely on non-Bahrainis to fill the jobs. Nevertheless, it was mentioned that they had already launched a campaign to encourage more Bahrainis to take up jobs in hotels and other hospitality establishments (Gulf Daily News, 2008). Nevertheless, *“the results of the previous efforts were not very encouraging”* as stated by one interviewee. Currently, the majority of unemployed Bahrainis originate from a more conservative background; this fact poses multiple challenges when targeting the unemployed for jobs in the industry. According to the Council, the main problem with staffing in the hospitality industry of Bahrain is with the cultural issue of working in the hotel industry and Bahrainis' perceptions of the industry. The Council argues that there is a need to encourage and persuade Bahrainis to enter the industry, which requires coordinated action from all the hospitality related stakeholders from the private and the public sectors.

There was a general acknowledgement by the industry stakeholders of the lack of a comprehensive programme in Bahrain that incorporates both practical/work related as well as theoretical aspects of hotel management, facilitated through a Bachelor's degree. It was also found that the five star hotels do not currently need as much support training for their current staff as much as they do with recruiting Bahrainis that have the experience or education needed for the industry as well as the passion to pursue a career within the industry.

Furthermore the results of the interview sessions with the Specific Council for Training in Hospitality and the hotel employees highlighted the existing cultural barriers and the low salary scales in hotels as the main barriers for attracting Bahrainis to the sector. According to the Council's representatives, hotels in Bahrain are currently not as interested in qualifications as they are in employees' attitudes. It seems also that currently, qualifications do not necessarily mean a larger salary for Bahraini employees. In addition, based on the Council's official statistics, there is not much career progression, especially in 3-4 star hotels and employees can be stuck in the same job with the same salary for years. Job opportunities in hotels are most likely to be found in Administration, Accounts, Sales and Marketing, and the Health Club/Spa. In all of these areas the percentage of Bahrainis is relatively very low. Hence, they proposed that more Bahraini should be hired in managerial positions.

Interviews were also conducted with hotel employees, in order to get a better understanding of how employees view the hospitality and tourism industry. The participants were asked a series of questions in order to learn from accomplished Bahrainis in the industry about how they have built their careers, what challenges (if any) they faced, as well as advice on how to promote this industry as a career path for Bahrainis.

The interviewees discussed the positive aspects of working in the hospitality industry including the interaction with guests and meeting people from different cultures, from all over the world. They acknowledged the satisfaction of being able to help a guest and receiving positive feedback as being very rewarding and motivating. They also argued that working in hotels is not boring at all since every day presents new opportunities to learn and brings different problems to solve. Another benefit of working in hotels is job rotation in different departments. This provides a well-rounded experience for employees and helps them develop themselves and be more productive. With regard to the negative aspects of the job, cultural barriers appeared again on the top of the list especially for female employees. Traditionally the conservative Bahraini mentality holds that females should not work in hospitality as this is not considered to be an ‘appropriate’ and respectable career. In addition, shift work makes it difficult to maintain a social life and spend time with family. The low salaries and the limited promotion and pay-rise opportunities seem to be the main problem for Bahraini hotel employees. Some of the participants had attended training programmes in various hospitality institutes in Bahrain, including BIHR and Baisan. They stated that *“regardless of whether you have a diploma or not from these institutes, you start on the same salary as someone with no diploma”*. On the other hand, they proposed that the acquisition of a bachelor’s degree may guarantee a higher entry level salary and better position in some of the five star hotels. The participants also argued that it is challenging to study when you have a career in hospitality because the schedule is very demanding. Nevertheless, it is often the case that the luxury hotels send their employees on various trainings or courses during the year.

In addition, HR managers proposed that young Bahrainis are prepared to accept managerial positions, but they are reluctant to accept any service positions, especially those related with the Food and Beverage Department. In view to this, Sadi and Henderson (2005, p.252) argue that “promoting greater receptivity toward working in the service industries is a long-term process and may necessitate salary increases”, but this action alone does not seem to be the remedy for the skills shortage in the Bahraini hospitality workforce (The Allen Consulting Group, 2009). In addition, hotel managers argued that the removal and replacement of expatriates with locals hospitality graduates might not be feasible and could have a negative impact in the sector’s Bahrainisation efforts because of the candidates’ lack of preparedness and job related skills.

The training and education providers suggested that there was a gap in the provision of training and certification as well as the provision of hospitality related degrees. Developing such specialised education and training programmes would assist in narrowing the skills and competencies gap (Alpen Capital, 2012). Tayeh & Mustafa (2011) suggest that the perceived low status of hospitality as an academic discipline in this region has caused many institutes and universities not to consider the introduction of new hospitality training programs and education courses. Nevertheless, the education providers continued by proposing that the creation of these programmes should be facilitated with external partnerships with international institutions that offer similar programmes along with an awareness raising campaign in potential students. Moreover, they claimed that the current prevailing work culture in Bahrain seems to be incompatible with the multinational hotel chains’ work ethic. In view to this, they argued that certain Western work ethics and practices should be adapted or modified to suit the local culture. Like most of the youth in the GCC region (Sadi & Henderson, 2005), young Bahrainis have grown used to a comfortable lifestyle and take many privileges for granted; for those who wish to work in the hospitality industry it means that this attitude has to be challenged in order to match the demanding nature of the job.

In further reference to the content of the programmes i.e. in terms of type and style, it was proposed that the programme should integrate theory with practice, as internships were identified as a key element. Giousmpasoglou (2012) claims that facilitating hospitality related programmes requires more resources than other traditional study pathways do. For example, Pinto (2013) proposes that hotel management programmes require labs for practical training and training kitchens in which hands-on skills are taught. Some reputable Hotel Schools are even responsible for running hotels or restaurants on their campus for training purposes (Airey & Tribe, 2005). The skills needed to succeed in such programmes can be broken down into vocational and theoretical skills. The most highly rated and known hospitality programmes contain a mix of both styles in order to produce graduates who not only know how to complete all of the chores involved in the industry, but also have the competencies needed to manage those functions and the teams of people delivering them. They combine sound theory and craft-based learning with professional internships. A typical programme would consist of semesters that have a balance of being on campus and gaining practical training through an internship with a hotel in line with international practice (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2013). The success of the internship programmes attached to the hospitality degree requires very good industry links, and the

development of personalised relationships between faculty members, students and industry representatives. Gaining the experience of applying skills in parallel with classroom studies is a crucial element of working in an industry such as hospitality. Graduates should be able to not only manage tasks, but also perform them on their own. Education providers and hotel general managers agreed on the above content of the proposed programme.

Finally, the education providers and the CHT and the BTA proposed that it is vital to explore the potential collaboration with a reputable hotel school or university. The on-going reform in Bahrain's tertiary education (Karolak, 2012) renders the need for an international collaboration and/or validation almost imperative. A strong collaboration could also attract overseas students (especially from the GCC region) and thus enhance Bahrain's efforts to create an Education Hub (Knight, 2011). This model seems to work very well in the GCC, since all of the current existing hospitality programmes are either franchised or validated by European, North American or Australian higher education providers.

Conclusions

The hospitality sector in Bahrain is growing and tourism is one of the main pillars of growth in the 2030 vision in Bahrain. Although, Bahrainisation rates are low in the hospitality industry due to the negative perception of work in the sector, poor wages, long working hours, and working in an environment that can be incompatible with religious and/or cultural issues, many organisations are trying to support the industry and are in favour of the development of higher education hospitality programmes in the country. The creation of a new hospitality degree requires the coordinated efforts from everyone who has a vested interest in creating new career paths for the talented young Bahrainis who really aspire to avail themselves of an exciting job opportunity in the luxury hospitality industry. The programme should combine theory with practice, and should aim at developing these skills that the current sector is lacking such as communication, customer service and work ethics. Internships are found to be an effective medium to accomplish the above; employers and other stakeholders are found to be ready to contribute to the success of such a programme and can offer employment to hospitality graduates.

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