



O'Mahony, G. B., McWilliams, A. M., & Whitelaw, P. A. (2001). Why students choose a hospitality-degree program: an Australian case study.

Author's original draft of a work later published in *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 42(1), 92–96.

Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0010880401421011>

Copyright © 2001, Cornell University.

This is the author's original draft of the work, posted here with the permission of the publisher for your personal use. It has not yet undergone peer review and may vary substantially from the definitive version that appeared in the journal. No further distribution is permitted. You may also be able to access the published version from your library. The definitive version is available at <http://online.sagepub.com/>.

Why Students Choose to Enrol in a Hospitality Degree Course: An Australian Case Study*

G. Barry O'Mahony,
Alan M. McWilliams
and
Paul A. Whitelaw

School of Hospitality, Tourism and Marketing
Victoria University
Melbourne
Australia
(E-mail: Barry OMahony@vu.edu.au)

*A Paper Submitted for Publication in the
Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Review

Cornell University
Ithaca
New York

Why Students Choose to Enrol in a Hospitality Degree Course: An Australian Case Study

Abstract

There is a considerable body of work that seeks to explain why and at what type of institution students pursue tertiary studies. The bulk of this work however, focuses on participation among mature aged students. This paper reports on an investigation into the reasons why students chose to enrol in a hospitality degree course at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia. The results of this study suggest that students see the university as a cluster of attributes that includes teaching staff, facilities and services. In addition, it was found that the choice of university was based on the reputation and availability of a specialist course rather than the overall reputation of the university.

Introduction and aims

In Australia, many opportunities currently exist to study hospitality at tertiary level, which range from vocationally orientated technical colleges and private institutions to government-endorsed universities. Although some work has been done on tertiary course choice and associated issues in other countries, the majority of these investigations have focussed on mature aged students. As a result, identifying the reasons why students choose to study the Catering and Hotel Management undergraduate degree course offered at Victoria University was seen as appropriate and timely.

The aim of this research was to explore the issues involved in students' decisions to enrol in hospitality studies at Victoria University. These issues, whether perceptual, structural, personal or environmental, needed to be identified in order to allow the university to revise and enhance current courses and support mechanisms within the School of Hospitality, Tourism and Marketing. The study used a combination of 'focus group' interviews and a quantitative questionnaire to explore the factors which affect student choices in respect of specific hospitality courses. Participants in the study included the majority of the first year Bachelor of Business in Catering and Hotel Management student intake for 1996 and was conducted in semesters 1 and 2 of the 1996 academic year.

Literature review

As previously noted, the issue of student motivation has been the subject of a number of investigations which attempt to develop an understanding of what motivates students to engage in tertiary education (Houle 1961; Boshier 1971; Burgess 1971; Peters & Gordon 1974; Morstain & Smart 1974; Tough 1978; Cross 1981; Woodley et al. 1993; Purcell 1994). A comprehensive study by the UK Society for Research into Higher Education synthesises much of the work of these authors, collapsing their theories into a typology of adult student motivations (Woodley et al. 1993). This typology seeks to explain why adults participate in education and why individuals select a particular course of study. A table of adult student motivations has subsequently evolved from this study, and is reproduced as Table 1.

The Woodley et al. (1993) study, which investigates the educational choices made by mature students in the UK, found that there is a marked difference between the age

of students and their choice of university. Students in the age group 21-30, for example, chose to study at colleges that offered specialist courses in preference to conventional universities. This would appear to suggest that motivation, in this instance, was associated with obtaining the credentials required to obtain employment in a particular profession or industry. Similarly, a 1995 survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) into educational attainment and employment in the state of Victoria, found that:

The most frequently stated reason for people obtaining their most recent qualification was for career purposes. This included those obtaining a qualification in order to get a specific position (61.9% or 693,500) followed by the need to be competitive in the job market (26.1% or 296,400), and then as a hobby or self interest (22.1% or 247,200). Multiple reasons could be stated (ABS 1995, p.2).

| <u>TYPE OF GOAL</u> | <u>EXAMPLES</u> |
|------------------------------|---|
| Career | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To carry out present job more effectively -To gain promotion in present job -To change jobs |
| Social | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To be able to re-enter the job market -To make new friends -To meet members of the opposite sex -To feel a sense of belonging |
| Escape/Stimulation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To get relief from boredom -To get a break from the routine of home or work |
| Cognitive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To learn just for the sake of learning -To pursue an interest in a subject for its own sake |
| Personal Fulfilment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To gain self confidence -To develop one's full potential -To prove some thing to oneself |
| Role Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To become a better parent, spouse -To become a better citizen, trade unionist, colleague, manager |
| Obligation Fulfilment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To comply with instructions from someone else -To carry out expectations of someone with formal authority |
| Practical Skill | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To learn how to mend cars, make cakes etc. |
| Health and Well-being | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To keep fit, lose weight, learn a sport etc. -To further one's spiritual well- being |

Table 1: Typology of Adult Student Motivations (Woodley et al. 1987, p.4)

Some work on tertiary course choice has been conducted in Victoria (Australia) by Kidd (1987). Kidd looked at students enrolled in year 12 at high school and attempted to define tertiary course selection among this group. In summary, Kidd maintains that students make tertiary level course choices based on aptitude and abilities that emerge during their high school years. Further, Kidd asserts that students who exhibit high levels of achievement in science and mathematics subjects at high school, for example, normally go on to study courses of a similar nature, such as engineering or science, at tertiary level.

Kidd's thesis is predicated on a behavioural model that was posited by Holland in 1985. Holland theorises that there are six personality types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. There are also six 'model environments' which mimic these personality types. Holland claims that there is an association between the environments in which people live and their personality types and he asserts that the pairing of persons and environments can be used to predict and understand behaviour based on a knowledge of both personality types and environmental models. This behaviour includes vocational choice, vocational stability and achievement, educational choice and achievement, personal competence, social behaviour, and susceptibility to influence (Holland 1985). Synopsising Holland's model, Kidd asserts that '... it is explicit in the theoretical model of the conventional type that a particular pattern of preferences, competencies, self-perceptions, and values predisposes the conventional person to be 'careful', 'conforming', 'efficient', 'inflexible', 'methodical', 'persistent' and 'imaginative'.' (Kidd 1987, p.16)

Some students' course choices, however, were not readily explicable in terms of the theoretical model as applied in Kidd's own study. By way of explanation, he suggests that a number of influences, external to the student's environment, were significant, however, these were not measured or examined. He cites occupational interest, for example, as a powerful determinant of course choice, in addition to student aptitude and environmental influence. As a result, it was decided that this study would solicit information from students about; their knowledge of, and interest in, the hospitality industry; the influence of parents, career counselors and peers; their experiences as customers in the hospitality industry; and how these experiences may have effected their decision to engage in hospitality studies. These issues were included among the questions posed to respondents.

Methodology

The initial stages of the project entailed gaining insights into the principal motivating factors involved in the decision to choose a hospitality course at university level, and, more specifically, at Victoria University. In the initial stages, qualitative methods were chosen because according to Patton, (1987) 'qualitative methods are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery and inductive logic' (p.15). In contrast with the hypothetical-deductive approach of experimental design, this method allows the researcher to begin the research process without specifying a hypothesis (Patton 1987; Burns 1987; Merriam 1988). In this instance, a 'focus group' interview technique was used to elicit responses from students. According to Minichiello et al., (1995) focus groups '... involve discussions among small groups of people with the researcher acting as a moderator or facilitator' (p.66). Three separate focus groups were convened. Each comprised 6-8 students. Group

members were categorised according to the method by which they had entered the university as follows:

- (a) students entering directly from high school via the Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre¹,
- (b) students articulating from Technical and Further Education hospitality courses², and
- (c) students transferring from other degree courses both at Victoria University and at other universities.

According to Stewart and Shamdasani, (1991) the focus group technique '...allows respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members' (p.16). This was extremely beneficial in this project because it provided information on the sorts of decision-making processes which students employ. Areas that were identified as important included; the role of influencers (such as parents, teachers and peers); expectations of the course; and some notion as to the importance of these issues. The techniques described by students in the elimination of alternative educational institutions (particularly the elimination process and logic involved) was also valuable. The insights that emerged from the focus groups were included with factors that had been identified in a review of the relevant literature to develop a five point Likert style questionnaire. The questionnaire included 86 items presented as a series of statements which students were asked to rate from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In total 143 of the 154 commencing students completed the questionnaire.

Findings

Analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed that the largest group, and hence the largest target market for the University's Catering and Hotel Management Degree Program, were students from the state of Victoria (89%) 65% of which had entered the university directly from high school. There was also a predominance of females in the 1996 cohort (77%).

A review of the decision making process by which they had elected to study for a career in hospitality and the timing of those decisions uncovered that 53% had decided to study at university before selecting a course in hospitality studies. In other words, these students had a goal to study at university before they decided what particular course they should study. A further 37% reported that they had decided to study at university at the same time as they had decided to embark on a career in hospitality. Only 10% had made a decision to embark on a career in the hospitality industry before they had decided on a course of study, presumably to compliment this decision.

The role of parents, teachers, school counselors' or peers was not perceived to have been a major factor of influence among these students. Indeed, these items were among the lowest scored on the questionnaire. This was notable because these issues were raised as important in all three of the focus group discussions. Responses to other questions, however, indicated that students' had been influenced by positive

¹ The Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre is a government body that administers university entry for high school graduates.

² Technical and Further Education Institutes are equivalent to vocational or community colleges

perceptions of the hospitality industry. These perceptions resulted from personal observations, personal experience as casual or part time employees, media reports on the projected rates of growth in the hospitality sector and from discussions with other referent groups.

One of the major strengths of the Victoria University course was the one-year, industry internship which students complete in their third year of enrolment. As well as the possibilities for travel afforded by this program, it was seen as providing the opportunity to put theory into practice. The reputation of the University's teaching staff was also important not only in terms of teaching ability but also with regard to their friendliness, availability to consult with students and their general interest in students' career aspirations. It was also particularly important to these students that the course was well regarded at both national and international levels. In summary, there was a general and consistent acknowledgment on the part of students that a university is not an homogenous entity. Rather it was seen to consist of a variety of attributes ranging from the reputation of the course and course content to the quality of facilities and services.

In this study, no evidence was found to support Kidd's theory of student motivation. That is, that students choose to study in courses that are linked to subjects which they have shown to have strengths in at high school. The entry requirements for the course at Victoria University, however, is likely to have had an impact on this because entry is based on applicants reaching an overall Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER), determined by the combined results of end of high school exams, rather than the scores obtained in specific subjects. Moreover, the links between high school subjects and hospitality studies are not well defined or easily identified.

There were some similarities, however, between the findings of this study and the previously outlined findings of the Woodley et al. (1987) study. In that study students in the age group 21-30 chose to enrol at colleges that offered specialist courses in preference to conventional universities. Similarly, in this study the choice of university was based on the reputation and availability of a specialist course rather than the overall reputation of the university. Students in this study, however, were in the age group 18-22.

Conclusions and implications

The foregoing discussion highlights a number of key issues particularly with regard to educational processes. In this study, a substantial number of students chose to pursue a university level qualification prior to choosing a career. That is, the decision to pursue a career in the hospitality industry followed the decision to pursue a university qualification. Choosing an appropriate university course from the available options followed after the first two choices. This would seem to suggest that the choice of a hospitality course at university level was a second or third preference. Students who did not achieve the entry requirements to study, law, for example, may have compromised and elected to enrol in hospitality studies. Moreover, the timing of this decision is seen as important. In Australia, students complete their final high school examinations in November and it is the results of these examinations that determines their Tertiary Entrance Rank. These results are published in January of the following year and university classes begin in late February.

In an attempt to explain the decisions made by those respondents that chose university study and career simultaneously (37%) a number of explanations are offered. On the one hand, it is feasible that some students may have delayed their study and career decisions until their exam results were published in January. On the other hand, it may be that an existing desire to enter the hospitality industry at some level was facilitated by a TER that enabled them to enter the industry via a degree level course. If this assumption is correct it would follow that respondents with a result that was inadequate for university entry would have sought entry to the industry via a vocational course, a course delivered by a Private Provider or they may have opted to enter the industry without a formal qualification.

Given the lateness of the timing of the course selection decision among such a high percentage of the student intake, it is likely that students have very little knowledge of the hospitality industry or how it operates. This has implications for teaching and the manner in which the industry is projected to students by teaching staff. It is felt, for example, that students' motivation to engage in a career in the hospitality industry might be moderated by their perceptions of subject relevance, delivery techniques of lecturers and their ability to comprehend the concepts as communicated. If an unrealistic picture of the industry and career path opportunities within the industry is profiled, this might lead to dissatisfaction and, indeed, industry attrition following graduation. As a result, the manner in which lecturers present educational material to first year students, the content of this material and the perceived importance of such material to students future careers is an issue deserving of attention. It is acknowledged, however, that there are some limitations to the interpretation of these results in that all of the respondents were already enrolled in a university program. There may, therefore, have been a tendency among some respondents to rationalise a choice which had already been made.

Finally, since it was found that a university is not an homogenous entity but rather consists of a variety of attributes, it may be possible to identify a series of market segments based upon the respondents' relative sensitivities to the delivery of these attributes. These findings suggest that university administrations, in focussing on the needs of their existing and future students, need to consider the management and presentation of their university's resources to the wider market place.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995, *Education Attainment and Employment*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Boshier, R. 1971, 'Motivational Orientations for Adult Education Participants: A factor analytic exploration of Houle's typology', *Adult Education*, vol.21, pp.3-26.

Burgess, P. 1971, 'Reasons for Adult Participation in Group Educational Activities', *Adult Education*, vol.22, pp.3-29.

Burns, R. B. 1994, *Introduction to Research Methods*, 2nd ed., Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.

- Cross, K. P. 1981, *Adults as Learners*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Darkenwald, G. G. 1980, 'Continuing Education and the Hard to Reach Adult', in *New Directions for Continuing Education*, ed., A. G. Knox, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 1-10.
- Darkenwald, G. G. & Merriam, S. B. 1982, *Adult Education: Foundations of Practice*, Harper and Rowe, New York.
- Holland, J. L. 1985, *Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments*, 2nd ed., Prentice Hall, New Jersey.
- Houle, C. O. 1961, *The Inquiring Mind*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Kidd, G. J. 1987, *The Predictive Power of Measured Interests In Tertiary Course Choice: The case of science*, M.Ed. thesis, Department of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- Merriam, S. 1988, *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Minichiello, V. Aroni, R. Timewell, E & Alexander, L 1995, *In-depth Interviewing*, 2nd ed., Longman, Melbourne.
- Morstain, B. R. & Smart, J. C. 1974, 'Reasons for Participation in Adult Education Courses: A multivariate analysis of group differences', *Adult Education*, vol.24, pp.83-98.
- Patton, M. Q. 1987, *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, Sage, Newbury Park, California.
- Peters, J. M. & Gordon, S. 1974, *Adult Learning Projects: A study of adult learning in urban and rural Tennessee*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.
- Purcell, K. 1994, 'Managing Change from an Educational Perspective: The International careers and choices survey', Paper presented at the *International Hotel Association Human Resource Management Forum*, Sydney, October 1984.
- Spencer, B. 1980, 'Overcoming the Age Bias in Continuing Education', in *New Directions for Continuing Education*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 71-86.
- Stewart, D. & Shamdasani, P. 1991, *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, Sage, Newbury Park, California.
- Tough, A. 1979, *The Adult Learners Projects*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.
- Woodley, A. Wagner, L. Slowey, M, Hamilton, M. & Fulton, O, 1987, *Choosing to Learn: Adults in Education*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

Barry O'Mahony and Paul Whitelaw are lecturers in Hospitality Management at the Victoria University School of Hospitality, Tourism and Marketing. Alan McWilliams lectures in Management at the Victoria University School of Management in Melbourne Australia.