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Adoption of sustainable practices by Asian hotels: gaps in academia

Sidharth Srivastava - Department of Hotel Management, Banarsidas Chandiwala Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology, New Delhi, India

Sandeep Kumar Dey - Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Zlin, Czech Republic

Savita Sharma - Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Shri Vishwakarma Skill University, Palwal, India

Mark Ratilla - Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Zlin, Czech Republic and Visayas State University, Baybay City, Philippines

Corresponding author Savita Sharma can be contacted at: drsharmasavi@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose - An extant literature review of hospitality manpower performance reveals the scarcity of green skills among young graduates of hospitality management in the Asian context. Studies signal the discrepancy between knowledge imbibed and skills acquired. The current study is a call to action to identify the barriers to green training at the academic level.

Design/methodology/approach - The paper is based on a qualitative investigation by senior academics from Asian countries. Thematic analysis is the primary method deployed.

Findings - Four major themes emerged from the analytical exercise. They include lack of resources, policies and regulations, an overburdened curriculum and awareness. Interestingly, the themes are in tandem with the Tourism Education Futures Institute (TEFI) value framework for nurturing sustainability practices in the hospitality industry through systematic programming of hotel management education.

Practical implications - In order to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2030 (Goal 4) of ensuring lifelong strategic education to foster sustainability, the green skill-knowledge gap must be bridged at the academic level. The current paper sheds light on how the synergy between industry and academia can address this knowledge-skill gap and develop sustainable capacities in the long run.

Originality/value - This study used a qualitative dataset, and the findings contribute to the sustainability literature. Further studies can be undertaken using big data in varied settings.

Keywords: Hospitality education, sustainability, future leaders, qualitative study, capacity development

Introduction

Tourism is considered an agent of social change and one of the fastest-growing economic segments in the world. The UNWTO estimates that by 2030, the industry will record 1.8bn international tourist arrivals. Tourism in the Asia Pacific (APAC) region is forecasted to be worth US$1117bn with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.6%. Total visitor arrivals in the region will experience an increase from 715m to 972m, following an average annual growth rate (AAGR) of 6.3% in the years 2020-2024. Regarding tourism receipts, North East Asia will surpass the Americas and become the largest receipt-earner in the APAC region. Further, South-East Asia will stabilize and retain third position in the rankings, and South Asia will experience rapid growth in the coming five years (**UNWTO, 2022**). With a predicted 589.7m hotel users by 2026, the hospitality sector is significant in the context of employment and revenue (**Peter, 2021**). As outbound and inbound travel from Asian economies like China, South Korea and India continue to grow, interest in taking up hospitality-based careers has also gathered momentum, especially in the South Asian sub-region (**Rahimi et al., 2016**). Conservative estimates in India reveal that there are over 1,245 hotel management colleges. The Philippines has an estimated 651 institutions for hospitality administration, while Malaysia records 24 universities/colleges teaching hotel management courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Neighboring Indonesia has around 24 universities offering hotel and hospitality management programs. Thailand has seven premier institutions imparting hotel administration courses (**Bachelorsportal.com**).

Given the growing challenges the tourism industry faces concerning sustainability, hospitality educators know they must revise the tourism and hospitality management curricula to prepare tomorrow's hospitality workforce (**Alexakis and Jiang, 2019**). **Ruhanen** (**2008**) observes a gap between knowledge imparted and skills acquired among graduates of hospitality programs. Correspondingly, **Anderson and Sanga** (**2018**) narrate the incongruity between skill required and skill supplied in the hospitality industry. Further to this, **Elnasr Sobaih and Jones** (**2015**) comment on the necessity of establishing synergies between hospitality academia and industry to develop knowledge-based economic systems and **McCartney and Kwok** (**2022**) elucidate that the prevailing gulf between skills available and skills needed among hotel management graduates can be bridged by connecting educators with the industry. To this effect, **Anderson and Sanga** (**2018**) argue that in many emerging economies, a lack of synchronization between the hospitality industry and academia fuels the mismatch discussed above. Opening the discourse on the paucity of sustainability skills in the hospitality industry, **Carlisle et al.** (**2021**) narrates the critical issue of 'green' skill shortage among hotel human resources. From past literature, it is evident that educating students in the ethos of sustainability ensures substantial preparedness to mitigate the ecological and societal challenges that the world faces today (**Munilla et al., 1998**). Interestingly, the United Nations emphasized the link between sustainability education and sustainability action by framing policies like Education for Sustainable Development or ESD (**UNESCO, 2021**). **Wilson and von der Heidt** (**2013**) reveal that while institutional and systematic pressures help to inculcate sustainability values in the hospitality curricula, enabling such capacities in the higher education context remains challenging. In the same vein, **Berjozkina and Melanthiou (2021)**, in their study of Higher Education Institutions providing hospitality education based in Cyprus, noted that sustainability as a concept in the curricula was still at its nascent stage. Similarly, **Boley** (**2013**) and **Hussain et al.** (**2020**) call for action regarding the integration of sustainability in tourism and hospitality education programs, as this is needed to counter exigencies like mass tourism and environmental degeneration in the Asian context.

Ryan et al. (2010) researched higher educational units in the Asia-Pacific region and found that sustainability education does not always translate into praxis, and thus scientific scholarship is needed to determine the gap. Furthermore, case studies that concentrated on green skills acquired from informal learning in Asian countries like Malaysia (**Ismail et al., 2022**), Philippines (**Talavera, 2022**) and Nepal (**Lamichhane and Neupane, 2022**) iterate the importance of imbibing sustainability education at the tertiary and higher education levels to develop green competencies in the long-run. The authors cited above remain skeptical about the efficacy of sustainability skills received from unconventional education systems, especially in the service industry. Taking cognizance of the extant findings presented herewith, the current investigation aims to probe the following research question:

> RQ1. What are the barriers to incorporating sustainability skills among hospitality students in Asia?

Literature review

Skill gaps in sustainability practice is a contemporary issue, as sustainability education should inculcate morality, accountability and pragmatism to impact climate action (**Jamal, 2010**). The UN Sustainable Development Agenda (2030) supports developing new knowledge and skills to enable sustainable tourism capacities. Goal 4 emphasizes strategic learning for the tourism and travel industry's future workforce (**UNWTO, 2017**). In today's scenario, the skill gap discourse progresses to the lack of hospitality skills (**Camargo and Gretzel, 2017**). Yet, the quality of the tourism product and the industry's competitiveness depend on employee skills. The sector has a skills shortage, partly due to high staff turnover, which harms businesses through talent drain, inefficiency and time spent on recruitment and training (**Lolli, 2013**). **Carlisle et al. (2021)** reported that the hospitality and tourism industry currently suffers six primary forms of environmental skill gaps attributed to a lack of skill training at the academic level. The identified gaps are i) ability to minimize the use and maximize the efficiency of energy and water consumption, ii) ability to manage waste, sewage, recycling and composting, iii) knowledge of climate change, iv) promotion of environmentally friendly products and services, v) conservation of biodiversity and vi) promotion of environmentally friendly transport. Concurrently, **Kim and Choi (2013)** identified five critical ecological management skills that are required but were largely absent among hospitality staff in the Northern American context due to a lack of college-level training. These competencies include i) green training mapping, ii) environmental actions and iii) green guest engagement. In their study to determine career choice motives among generation Y, **Goh et al. (2017)** revealed a positive association between a hotel's green behavior and individual choice to study hotel management as a career. The former evidence underlines that future industry workers, especially generation Y, will focus significantly on gaining sustainability-related job skills. It is here that the role of educators and academia plays a vital role. **Garay et al. (2017)** strengthen the claim that sustainability knowledge should converge into practice at the academic level by underscoring the importance of customizing learning needs.

Ali et al. (2017) found that employers in the hospitality sector view green skills as important to their operations and put the onus on hotel schools to impart these skills in graduates. **Hughes et al. (2022)** conducted a decoupling analysis and found that hospitality students lack green practice skills. Further, Asian hotel schools are slower than their EU or US counterparts to adapt their curricula to shifting conditions (**Lugosi and Jameson, 2017**). **Yeh et al. (2017)** found that hospitality and tourism students emphasize communication and soft skills over sustainability. Yet, the same study found that many recent graduates from hospitality schools are unemployed. **Sheldon and Fesenmaier (2011)** examined

sustainable skill deficiency among the Asian hotel workforce by adapting the five sustainability values that every tourism and hospitality student must exemplify according to Tourism Education Futures Institute (TEFI), namely, green stewardship, green knowledge, green management and green mutuality. The authors conducted this qualitative study to examine the knowledge-skill gap in the Asian hospitality workforce.

Green Stewardship

The goal of Green Stewardship or environmental stewardship is to educate students about the serious ecological problems the planet and homeland face and then prepare them to lead in helping society address those problems, particularly climate change (**Bennett et al., 2018**). **Tidball and Krasny** (**2010**) note that youth environmental education supports green stewardship. Others (**Leisher et al., 2012**) observe that environmental stewardship programmes can change students' thought processes and intrinsic motivations. According to a leading asset investment advisory group, Asian economies, especially 'frontier' countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and emerging ASEAN states like Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos and Thailand, must invest in instilling environmental stewardship in their workforce (**Milon, 2021**). In summary then, as the hospitality industry faces climate change challenges, it will need green-skilled workers.

Green knowledge

Green knowledge is the ability to comprehend and assess how the ecosystem affects society or more precisely, the ability to recognize various ecologically connected symbols, notions and behavior is called "green knowledge" (**Laroche et al., 2001**).

In the hospitality industry, various studies have signaled the importance of green knowledge in predicting environmental performance (**Munawar et al., 2022**). To this extent, pragmatic frameworks like Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) have underscored the significance of green knowledge in ensuring sustainable operations in the Asian hospitality sector (**Memon et al., 2022**). Similarly, Green skills among employees add to their environmental commitment (**Shoaib et al, 2021**). In a study about hotel employees and their disposition toward implementing green practices, **Chan et al.** (**2014**) reiterate the critical role of green knowledge and so it is interesting to observe the state of green tacit knowledge among budding hoteliers in Asian economies.

Green mutuality

The concept of mutuality in the study of ecological competencies among hospitality and tourism students emerges from the work of **Sheldon and Fesenmaier** (**2011**) who define mutuality as a process of integrating aspects from a plethora of scholarships, including environmental humanities, theology, cultural education and sociology with the process of developing a comprehensive sense of ecological sensitivity among students of hospitality and travel. The authors mentioned above have reiterated that mutuality is not a skill per se but a medium for lifelong learning. The essence of mutuality is acquired through varied experiences and knowledge systems that are expressed through human relationships (**Folke et al., 2016**), interactions (**Cabezas and Diwekar, 2012**) and interpersonal communication (**Lolli, 2013**). To the best of the authors' knowledge, studies in this particular aspect of green skills have not

been undertaken in the past. Therefore, a qualitative examination would help to reveal latent facets of green mutuality in the Asian hospitality labor market.

Green management

Green management aligns operations/production practices with environmental sustainability criteria (**Raharjo, 2019**). **Cabral and Chiappetta Jabbour** (**2020**) found that green management hospitality leads to positive environmental outcomes among Indian hotels. A Fuzzy-MDMC-led analysis of star-classified hotels in Oman found that green management skills among staff members influenced the sustainable development of the hospitality sector (**Piya et al., 2022**). Wilkes and Reddy argue in their book (**2015**) that the green economy requires students who understand green managerial principles and in this sense, green management is key to a sustainable hospitality company ecosystem. **Yeh et al.** (**2017**) have analyzed the inhibitors of green management in the hospitality industry. One of the key causes of green management scarcity among hoteliers is a lack of sustainable managerial capacities and relevant information.

A broad-spectrum literature review determined that green management and education research does not exist in the Asian setting. A Swiss based study by **Wu et al.** (**2021**), highlights the need to incorporate green management skills during college training in order to generate green experience outcomes and they argue that sustainability education in hospitality schools must be studied.

Research method

A large number of students enroll in hospitality programs in different Asian countries. Most of of sustainable them belong to the same geographical background, but some have crossed national and international borders. These hospitality courses with distinct nomenclatures focus more on the hospitality core areas with a limited concentration on the characteristic of sustainability. To identify barriers related to incorporating sustainability skills among hospitality students in Asia, we decided to proceed with a qualitative research stance, where data was collected through email interviews. Interviews through email are gaining popularity as a tool of qualitative research, and collecting the responses from different Asian countries (see **Table 1**) was considered the most appropriate tool for the current research. In this process, the questions were either attached to the email or pasted in the mail (**Burns, 2010**). This is a cost-effective mode of data collection from different geographical locations compared to face-to-face interviews and it does facilitate the extraction of in-depth information from respondents (**Guest et al, 2017**). A non-probability sampling process with judgmental sampling techniques and limited sample size was used.

A set of senior academic faculty members were approached in order to elicit responses and address the research question. The sample in the judgmental sampling technique is based on representation of the population's interests (**Malhotra and Birks, 2007**). The questions posed to the respondents were adopted from a critical analysis of the available literature that has implications for academia.

The respondents were interviewed via structured email and the questions followed a common format with the aim of yielding patterns or themes. Individual responses were coded based on the research question, then evaluated, scrutinized, redefined and combined to form core themes. The overarching themes reflect the sustainability-related challenges hospitality academics must address.

Finding and discussion

Email interviews with senior academics revealed many aspects of the topic under investigation. None of the institutions, colleges, or universities preparing students to work in the hospitality industry focus on sustainable practices. In fact, the most prominent theme reflects academia's failure to teach students sustainability skills.

Table 1. Participant profile

Participant	Organization type	Participant age	Participant total experience	Participant experience in current organization	Country
Par 1	University	51	20	12	Japan
Par 2	Affiliated Institute	49	18	6	Philippines
Par 3	University	57	24	18	India
Par 4	University	43	21	3	China
Par 5	Affiliated Institute	47	24	14	Malaysia
Par 6	University	54	28	2	Hongkong
Par 7	University	56	24	4	UAE
Par 8	University	54	21	1	Malaysia
Par 9	Affiliated Institute	52	23	16	India
Par 10	University	45	19	8	Singapore
Par 11	University	52	21	1	UAE
Par 12	University	39	16	2	Hongkong
Par 13	University	48	22	12	China
Par 14	Affiliated Institute	47	20	9	Sri Lanka

Source: Author/s

Based on our analysis, it was clear that academics face significant challenges trying to embed sustainability, create environmental awareness and teach sustainable practices. Lack of resources, policies and regulations, an overburdened curriculum and awareness were highlighted. Now we'll discuss these responses:

(1)   Lack of resources: Most hotel management colleges are part of universities and these institutions must make provision for a broad range of students. Financial and workforce resources are the key priority in dealing with a large number of students and the concept of green practices is an emerging sustainability area that requires specialist expertise. Most institutions do not have the necessary faculty members to enhance the students' sustainability-related skills and so this is likely to add to a gap in the adoption of green practices. Adequate sustainability equipment that can help to foster green practices and reduce levels of pollution is usually absent in hotel schools as they are generally limited and expensive:

Par 9 *"The prime focus of the hotel management colleges is always to ensure good education of the students but the angle of sustainability in the curriculum is always missing as we don't have adequate resources to ensure this"*.

Par 12 "*I have never seen anyone teaching sustainability-related issues to the students practically, most of them always discuss what is already written in the books. The reason is lack of skilled manpower, shortage of equipment and financial support*".

Most institutions don't provide financial support because green practices require heavy investment for long-term viability. Moreover, hotel management colleges cannot achieve the required sustainable performance due to a lack of manpower, financial and equipment resources.

(2)   Policies and Regulations: Most institutions consider governmental policies and regulations to be an extra burden that puts pressure on management to implement green practices in the system. The policies and regulations related to environmental management are coercive, thereby requiring management to enforce green practices. A few institutions have incorporated local policies and regulations related to environmental management, but others are just struggling to fulfill the norms.

Par 2 "*The interpretation of local and international policies associated with environment management are often outdated. They should be reviewed in line with current standards and so that implementation aligns with the norms. Further, this should happen at frequent intervals to ensure better results*".

An implication here is that governing bodies should aim to ensure that policies and regulations are updated in line with evolving green environmental practices so as to ensure timely and correct implementation by educational institutions.

(3)   An overburdened curriculum: The most common theme that emerged from responses related to challenges faced by academics is an overburdened curriculum. Most respondents mentioned a lack of opportunity to incorporate any new module due to lack of space in the curriculum. Almost all of them mentioned that it is challenging to include sustainability-related topics in their semester as the entire syllabus is already occupied by the core hospitality subjects, which are the priority areas. Academics who are motivated to incorporate aspects of environmental discussion and the related challenges usually draw the students' attention to key points but there is no dedicated provision as yet to explore environmental issues and impacts.

Par 7 "*Faculty members don't have dedicated time to discuss environment-related issues and solutions but are instructed to use sustainability-related examples during core subject classes with the students*".

Par 9 "*We can't do much in terms of environment-related issues and problems as core skills and courses occupy much of the curriculum time. I would love to contribute more to green practice teaching and learning but we don't have the space and this is the practical problem*".

Par 11 "*The concept of accreditation also plays a key role. Most content is dictated by professional course requirements and the awards made should match certain professional requirements. Unfortunately, sustainability is not a part of it and we are just scratching the surface at the moment*".

Few institutions have sustainability as a standalone subject and the responses point to an over-crowded, tightly controlled curriculum. Educational institutions must train students

with high-order operational skills but the limited attention given to sustainability issues has longer-term consequences for hospitality operators and particularly hotels.

(4)   Awareness: The final theme that emerged was a lack of awareness of sustainability issues, challenges, problems and solutions among students and academic staff. Further, some department heads and business owners do not recognize the need for environmentally friendly practices at the grass roots level and so faculty members accept the need to align with current industry practice. Additionally, some academics are unwilling to adjust their approach to teaching because they are unfamiliar with industry's environmental practices. A further point made was that it is difficult to modify faculty behavior in the classroom.

Par 1 *"Some of our senior academic colleagues don't know much about embedding sustainability with teaching and probably they don't want to explore it further. They want to stick to their core teaching areas and teach the students using a familiar format with traditional lectures*".

Par 6 *"It is also a point of concern as to whether we should be discussing sustainability and green practices in relation to all the units and core subjects or as a particular subject*".

Altogether 11 from 14 participants highlighted that a gap exists in relation to awareness of green practices followed in the hotels and so it is clear that faculty should be encouraged to incorporate green practices skills in the curriculum.

Implications

This study has several implications, especially for educational institutions and star-rated hotels in Asian countries. It is evident that teaching faculty should focus more on the sustainability and green practices that are gradually being adopted by hotels. To facilitate this, hotel management could conduct professional updating sessions for faculty to brief them on recent green initiatives and practices. Further, hotel school heads should review their curricula and make revisions where necessary to ensure that it is aligned with international benchmarks for sustainable practice, industry requirements and local sustainable practices. Besides meeting standards followed by the green practices at the various hotels in Asian countries, students and faculty should be aware of the objectives, structure, pedagogy and rationale of the entire course as it relates to sustainability. Additionally, policymakers also need regular updates in tandem with the changing dynamics of the industry. As a matter of policy, hotel schools should aim to take the lead and mentor emerging institutions in order to reduce barriers in teaching sustainability to hospitality students. This initiative could also be supported via certification programs and by benchmarking best practices.

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