

WHTER054 Academia Meets Industry: Bridging the Gap to Produce the Preferred Graduates

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ABSTRACT

With worldwide growth of tourism and its respective industries, there has been increased focus on tourism and hospitality education in recent years. Concurrently, there is growing industry demand for better educational infrastructure and curriculum relevant to build a competent workforce. Despite shared consensus between academics and industry on the need to produce graduates with suitable theoretical and practical competencies, there seems to exist a gap between what educators are nurturing and what the industry expects. This study aims to examine the tourism and hospitality programs currently offered by institutions vis-à-vis the graduate competencies and job-specific skills sought by the industry. It aims to assess the gaps (if any) existing between industry expectations and education curriculum; and in doing so provide the foundation for future research on strategies needed to bridge the gap(s) identified for a better fit between tourism and hospitality education and industry requirements.

Keywords: *Education, Graduate Competencies, Curriculum Design, Employer Expectations.*

INTRODUCTION

In the 1920s, E.M. Statler and the American Hotel Association helped to establish the first hotel program at Cornell University (Chung, 2000). From its very beginning, tourism and hospitality management (THM) education has grown with the industry, establishing necessary changes to provide the type of skilled labor deemed most necessary (Goodman & Sprague, 1991). Brisk industry growth and changing sectorial needs in recent years have resulted in the rapid expansion of THM studies at various levels, including tertiary and higher education (Zeher & Mossenlechner, 2009). Concurrently, there has been a demand for more sophisticated educational infrastructure to build a competent work-force (Ritchie, 1988). The above has fuelled the establishment of numerous industry and education endeavors. For example, the establishment of the UNWTO (World Tourism Organization) Knowledge Network – a worldwide association of institutions with established research competency and extensive experience in tourism development and innovation. As at May 2012, the association’s members comprised 125 institutions, organizations and enterprises from 40 different countries (UNWTO, 2012). Meanwhile, THM scholarship has also evolved. In the decade from 2000 – 2009 six leading tourism and hospitality journals saw 2,834 articles published by 5,971 authors (Park et al., 2011). However, the evolution of tourism and hospitality education and scholarship has not been without its challenges. Table 1 illustrates the challenges of tourism and hostility studies, as well as the evolution of its approaches.

Challenges of Tourism and Hospitality Education	Evolution of Tourism and Hospitality Studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newcomer to education and immature scholarship • Multi-disciplinary and cross disciplinary nature • Lack of standardization and theoretical foundation • Vocational and sectorial influence • Relevance of industry application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and development emphasis • Increase in tertiary institutions and programs • More diverse specialism areas developed • Educational infrastructure and credibility established

Table. 1: Challenges and evolution of tourism and hospitality studies

(Adapted from: Cooper et al., 1996; Weaver & Lawton, 2010)

The tourism and hospitality industry has shown increasing competition and complexity in recent decades. The skills needed and expected by industry managers have reflected these changes (Raypould & Wilkins, 2005). Employers today aim to recruit graduates with (a) specific practical skills and academic knowledge, (b) competencies in specific functional tasks, and (c) capabilities to be proactive, and be able to see and respond to problems creatively (Fallows & Steven, 2000). Managers rate employee skills associated with interpersonal communication, problem solving and self-management domains as most important. However, there is a divergence between what the industry expects and what conceptual and analytical domains institutions are developing in their curriculum and graduates. There appears to be a gap between what educational institutions offer and the requirements as expressed by the industry. While both sectors agree that education and economy are inextricably related, it seems that educators are nurturing disciplinary-specific research, knowledge and skills which the industry tended to discount (Raypould & Wilkins, 2005). There are increasing calls from the industry for educators to develop programs and curriculum which are practically relevant, producing graduates who are prepared and equipped for professional careers in this globalized industry (Aswin, 2009). How then can THM scholarship and research be developed to meet the practical needs of the industry? The aim of this study is to discuss how tourism and hospitality educators can produce the *preferred graduates* as required and expected by the industry. To do so, it will examine existing THM programs vis-à-vis graduate competencies sought by the industry. It also seeks to assess the gaps (if any) existing between industry expectations and education curriculum.

With this in mind, the research objectives are to:

1. Analyze and understand the graduate qualifications, competencies and job-specific skills required by the tourism and hospitality industry.
2. Review and evaluate existing THM programs and curriculum being offered by institutions in terms of the academic and practical course coverage.
3. Identify and appraise the gap(s), if any, existing between industry expectations and THM curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism and Hospitality Education

Due to the relatively young history of tourism higher education (Tribe, 2005), international THM education has always had a strong vocational focus, where curricula predominantly included extensive training in specific skills and

competencies vital for the vocation (Zehrer & Mossenlechner, 2009). UNWTO’s manual of THM Education titled *‘Educating the Educators in Tourism’* was an inaugural collaboration by stakeholders from both sides to establish an educational framework endemic to the needs of the tourism industry. The document highlighted some key considerations for developing THM discipline, education and scholarship. These included (a) a need for industry leaders to support THM studies, (b) the importance of curriculum and course design appropriate to both practical and theoretical outcomes, (c) adopting a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach, and (d) the value of industry-education partnerships (Cooper et al., 1996). With globalized business growth, there is a need for internationally competent and qualified graduates proficient to work effectively in multicultural / global societies (Aswin, 2009). Graduates are moving into careers demanding exchanges beyond geographic borders and thus need educational foundations which promote a solid international outlook that adapts to a complex and changing world (Ayoun & Johnson, 2010). Xiao & Wu (2012) highlighted some of the dilemma faced by tourism higher education in Asia (China). Figure 1 illustrates several key areas of concern.

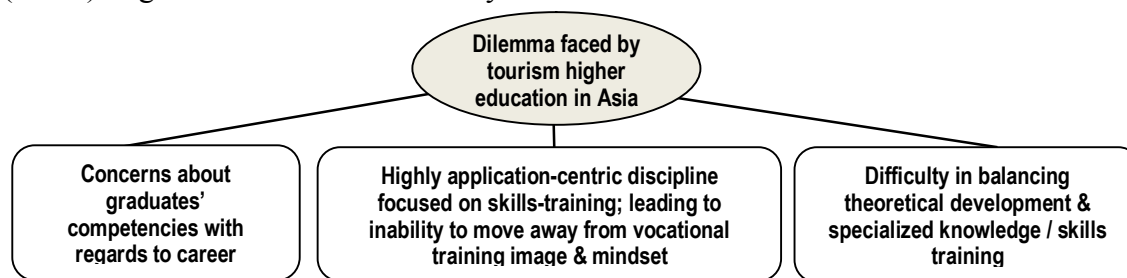


Figure 1: Dilemma Faced by Tourism Higher Education (Adapted from: Xiao and Wu, 2012, p. 663)

There has been increasing demand for education programs which are designed to fulfill industry needs. To do this, there is a need for an education–industry interface, where industry sector inputs into THM curriculum development are encouraged and valued to ensure that institutions develop future employees relevant and prepared for specialist positions in the industry (Penfold et al., 2012). The Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) model was developed (Barber, 2011), in which the core values of ethics, stewardship, knowledge, professionalism, and mutuality are embedded into THM curriculum. This model provided guidelines for writing clear learning objectives, creating instructional modules and defining assessment tools which reflected fundamental changes in THM higher education necessary to meet future challenges. Hobson (2011) had also discussed the evolution and progressions in THM education (Table 2) in which he discussed 10 key trends impacting THM education.

10 Trends Impacting International Tourism and Hospitality Education	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing international demand for education • User-pays tertiary education • English as the global language of education • Increased harmonization of education systems • International collaborations & initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing student expectations & institutional competition • The “War for Talent” & increase of labor mobility • International accreditation • Transnational education • Global education hubs and cities

Table 2: 10 Key Trends Impacting THM Education (Adapted from: Hobson, 2011, p.4 – 7)

Employer and Industry Expectations

Since the 1970s, some industry experts have criticized THM education as being out of touch with the industry’s needs (Casado, 1992). With increasing competition and complexity over recent decades, the education sector has begun implementing quality initiatives since the early 1990s (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Karathanos, 1999). However, those educational efforts were considered fragmented with no clear direction and there is a widening gap between the needs of the industry and education provided (Cooper et al., 1996; Tribe, 2005; Yeung, 2004). It was indicated that cooperation between companies and schools were insufficient. Today, higher education institutions are facing enormous pressure from their external customers as people are losing confidence in the “ivory tower” image of THM scholarship and research (Yeung, 2004). These circumstances have led to discussions focusing on an integrated approach to tourism education including contemporary, content-specific disciplines as well as skills training in competencies clustered broadly into employability, soft skills, personal skills, and generic skills, attributes, or capabilities (Atkins, 1999; Hager & Holland, 2006; Holmes, 2001) as summarized in Table 3.

Professional and methodological competencies	Social and communicative competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language competencies • fundamentals in management • fundamentals in economics and law • fundamentals in finance, fundamentals in information and communication technologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills for conflict resolution • social networking skills • social and team skills • ability and willingness to change • adaptability skills • proactive communication skills

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tourism-related knowledge • skills and competencies in written communication • applying and using information to specific contexts • efficient text work • rhetorical skills • problem solving skills • conceptual skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • active listening • persuasion skills • overall communication abilities
Personal competencies	Activity and action-oriented competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intercultural skills • ability to work under pressure • emotional intelligence • self reflection • empathy • self management • willingness and personal commitment • self motivation and willingness to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • determination and goal orientation • innovative spirit • decision-making abilities • initiative and proactiveness • assertiveness • creativity

Table. 3: Key Competency Outcomes for Tourism and Hospitality Education

(Adapted from: Zehrer & Mossenlechner, 2009, p. 270 - 272)

According to Zehrer & Mossenlechner (2009), social, communicative, personal, as well as activity and action-oriented competencies are far more important from the employers' point of view. This might be a direct result stemming from the overall strong customer orientation within the services industries such as hospitality and tourism. However, there seems to be dissimilarity between industry and education perceptions of what competencies and skills are appropriate for graduates entering the industry (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005).

METHOD

This study examined two key domains impacting on graduate outcomes: (a) THM education programs and curriculum, and (b) industry expectations and search criteria. The study was conducted via mixed methods research, and adopting an inductive approach with the aim of examining specific aspects of the phenomenon (Finn et al., 2000). Due to the indistinct nature of the phenomenon being investigated, the study took the form of an exploratory pilot study, where the objective was to test initial assumptions based upon data collected from a purposefully selected sample (Maxwell, 2013). Due to the delicacy of information access as well as limitations

within the scope of this pilot study, the research focused on the Hong Kong market, utilizing both online and offline secondary data collected from relevant industry and academic resources. Predominantly, website evaluation was undertaken using both the whole counting method as well as taxonomical and textual content analysis (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011; Law & Chon, 2007).

For the THM education domain, programs and curriculum from selected institutions were reviewed at the vocational and undergraduate levels. The research focused on these two educational levels since these were the programs from which the majority of new graduates would enter the workforce (compared to postgraduate programs which target working adults with professional experience). For the industry domain, the study reviewed job specific requirements and qualifications for various sectors within the industry. The study analyzed job listings from JobsDB Hong Kong (at website www.jobsdb.com/hk) as it is a leading global recruitment company and job search engine in Hong Kong and the region (JobsDB, 2012). Once collected, the data were examined and categorized via manifest coding into four primary industry sub-domains: (a) Hotel Management, (b) Tourism Management, (c) Food and Beverage/Culinary Studies, and (d) Events/Leisure Management. The data were then analyzed and interpreted via latent coding methods based on three key clusters of educational domains: (a) Bachelors Degree, (b) Diploma and (c) Certificate levels. Descriptive and contextual relationships were then inspected, assessing both similarity and contiguity relationships in the data (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011; Maxwell, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Industry Sector Analysis

Data for the industry sector analysis was drawn from job listings advertised in JobsDB Hong Kong (at website www.jobsdb.com/hk), which was sorted and categorized based on industry as well as educational sub-domains. The research adopted the four competency outcome categories suggested by Zehrer & Mossenlechner (2009) reviewed from employers' stipulated job requirements and expectations of potential employees. In each industry sub-domain, the researchers reviewed daily job openings available over the course of two weeks. For each industry, five job openings were purposely selected and evaluated based on the stated job requirements and minimum entry qualification levels. The job position openings were further categorized based on specific job titles within each sub-domain. Through content analysis of the positions available, job requirements and minimum entry

qualifications, a cross-comparison matrix (Table 4) was created outlining the linkages between (a) competency outcomes, (b) qualification level, and (c) industry sub-sector.

Competencies	Qualification Levels	Hotel Management	Tourism Management	F&B / Culinary	Events/ Leisure Management	Total Count
C1: Professional & methodological competencies	Bachelor	3	-	-	-	3
	Diploma	5	1	1	11	18
	Certificate	2	8	3	-	13
C2: Social & communicative competencies	Bachelor	1	-	-	-	1
	Diploma	3	2	2	5	12
	Certificate	1	4	3	-	8
C3: Personal competencies	Bachelor	-	-	-	-	-
	Diploma	-	2	-	4	6
	Certificate	1	4	1	-	6
C4: Activity & action-oriented competencies	Bachelor	-	-	-	-	-
	Diploma	2	1	-	2	5
	Certificate	-	-	-	-	-
Total Count		18	22	10	22	72

Table 4 : Job requirements Cross-comparison Matrix: By Competencies, Qualification Level & Industry Sub-sector

From the findings, it was observed that within the professional and methodological competencies, the majority of jobs requiring this competency were within the diploma qualification cluster – particularly within the events/leisure management sector, where this competency outcome was heavily sought after. The second competency category (social and communicative competencies) saw similar results; where there most common entry qualification level was the diploma cluster. For the personal, activity- and action-oriented competencies, these featured more prominently within the diploma and certificate levels – indicating a stronger emphasis

for skilled and vocation specific jobs (which usually required specialized qualifications and skills training). Conversely, the earlier competencies (professional and methodological; social and communicative) were particularly sought after in the hotel management sector, which also saw a higher requirement for potential employees holding minimum degree qualifications. Figure 2 below illustrates the distribution of competency outcomes sought by industry sub-sectors.

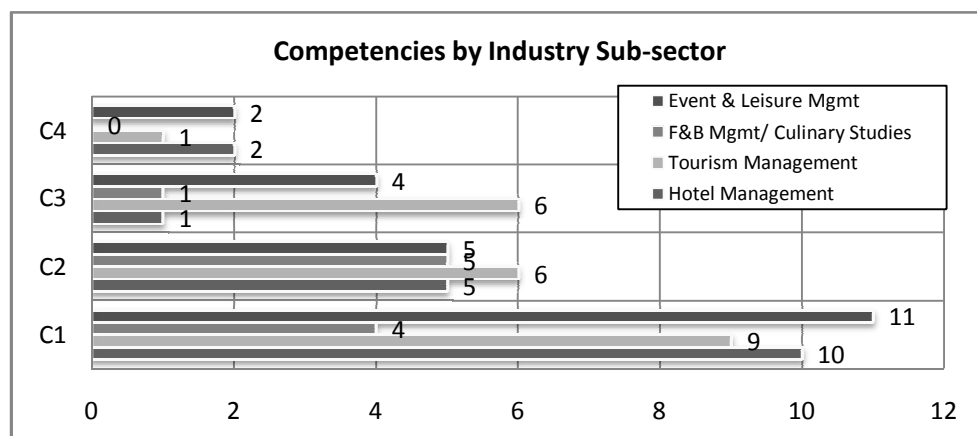


Figure 2: Competency Outcomes Required by Industry Sub-Sectors

Education Sector Analysis

For the THM education sector domain, four government institutions of higher learning in Hong Kong were purposefully selected and evaluated: (a) The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), (b) The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), (c) The University of Hong Kong (HKUSPACE), and (d) The Vocational Training Council (VTC). Within the qualifications sub-domain, the research reviewed academic programs at the certificate, diploma and undergraduate degree levels. Within these three variables the THM academic programs offered (for both full time and part time) were examined. For the purpose of coding and clustering, sub-levels within each qualification cluster were grouped together – for example, the diploma cluster included Diplomas, Higher Diplomas, Advanced and Executive Diplomas. Table 5 outlines the total number of THM programs reviewed displayed within the variables of (a) education institution, (b) department, and (c) qualification level. Frequency counts and qualification labels were indicated accordingly.

Institution	Department	Bachelor	Diploma	Certificate
PolyU	School of Hotel and Tourism Management	3 (BSc)	2 (H.Dip)	Nil
CUHK	CUHK Business School	1 (BBA)	Nil	Nil
HKUSPACE	HKU School of Professional & Continuing Education	2 (BSc) 2 (BA)	1 (Exec.Dip) 5 (Adv.Dip)	2 (Adv.Cert) 3 (Cert)
VTC & Associated Member Institutions	School for Higher & Professional Education Institute of Vocational Education Hospitality Industry & Training & Development Centre Chinese Cuisine Training Institute	1(BA) 4(BSc)	4(H.Dip) 1 (Dip)	1 (Adv.Cert) 1 (Int.Cert) 6 (Cert)
Total		13	13	13

Table 5: THM Programs Frequency Count by Institution & Qualification Level

Interestingly, while the researchers had reviewed and documented all probable THM programs at the four education institutions selected, the total count derived an evenly distributed number of programs per qualification level (13 each – total of 39 programs). It was observed that institutions with a heavier focus on continuing education and vocational / skills-based training – HKUSPACE and VTC had a greater range of programs spread over the three qualification levels and industry specialisms. In comparison, the mainstream university programs – PolyU and CUHK, emphasized more heavily on degree programs or related academic pathway programs like the Higher Diplomas. The findings also revealed that vocation-specific or skill-based programs (e.g.: culinary studies, housekeeping, spa management, etc) were predominantly offered at HKUSPACE and VTC. It is not surprising, since these institutions focused on vocational, professional and continuing education. Table 6

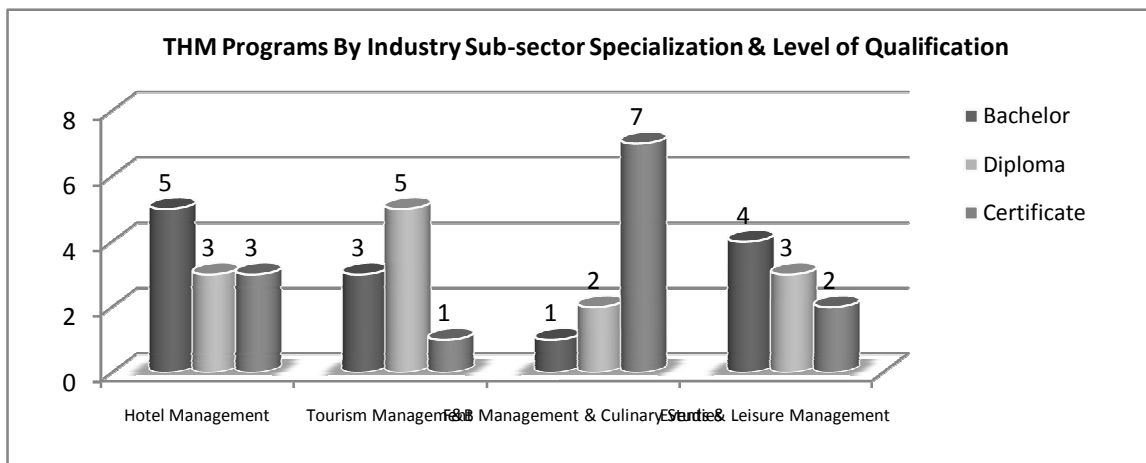
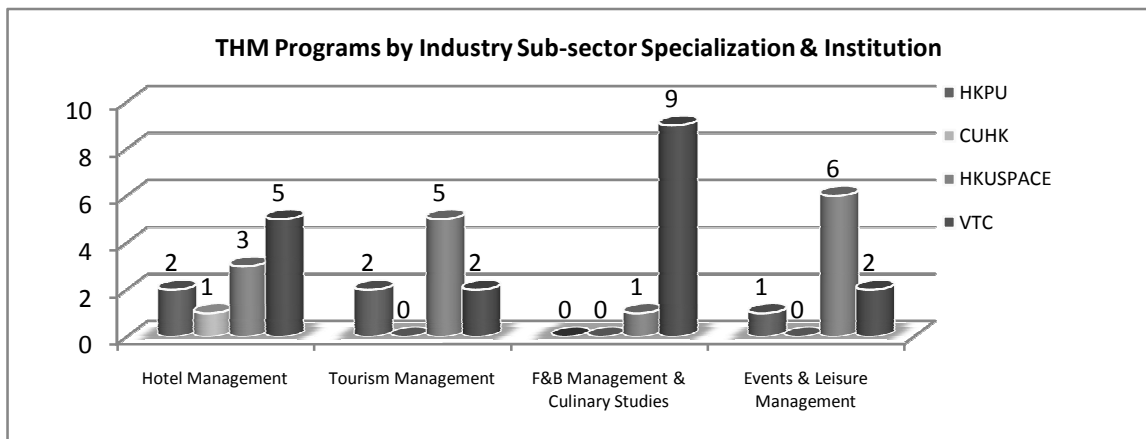
provides a cross comparison matrix outlining the linkages between the institution, qualification and industry sub-sector domains.

Institution	Qualification Levels	Hotel Management	Tourism Management	F&B/ Culinary	Events/ Leisure Management	Total Count
PolyU	Bachelor	1	1	-	1	3
	Diploma	1	1	-	-	2
	Certificate	-	-	-	-	0
CUHK	Bachelor	1	-	-	-	1
	Diploma	-	-	-	-	0
	Certificate	-	-	-	-	0
HKUSPACE	Bachelor	1	1	-	2	4
	Diploma	1	3	-	2	6
	Certificate	1	1	1	2	5
VTC & Associated Member Institutions	Bachelor	2	1	1	1	5
	Diploma	1	1	2	1	5
	Certificate	2	-	6	-	8
Total Count		11	9	10	9	39

Table 6 : THM Programs Cross-comparison Matrix: By Institution, Qualification Level & Industry Sub-sector

From the findings, it was observed that there was a much stronger emphasis on hospitality related specializations. Hotel management comprised 28% (11) of the total program count, while food and beverage and culinary studies comprised 26% (10). In total, these two hospitality specializations make up 54% of the total number of programs in the sample investigated. In terms of the distribution of programs within the qualification levels, it was observed that there was a heavier concentration on

tourism and hospitality management-related programs at the degree or diploma levels, while the certificate levels were significantly dominated by skill-, technical- or vocation-specific sectors – particularly within culinary studies and sport and recreation studies. These observations can be seen in Figures 3 and 4 below. As seen in figure 3, VTC has the strongest representation in culinary studies / food and beverage, while HKUSPACE has a strong concentration in tourism, events and leisure. Figure 4 highlighted that the majority of degree programs were concentrated in the tourism management, hotel management and event management specializations; with food and beverage / culinary significantly underrepresented.



Figures 3 & 4 : THM Programs by Industry Sub-Sector Specialization, Institution & Qualification Level

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that while there were some gaps existing, generally the industry and education sectors seemed to have comparable inclinations. Based on the above results and discussion within both the industry and education sector analyses, there seemed to be a correlation between the type of profession or vocation and the level of minimum qualifications required. For example, in industry sub-sectors like hotel management and event management, there was often a stronger emphasis on management knowledge and industry know-how. Hence, job openings advertised in the two sectors reflected the requirement for degree holders. This was similarly reflected in the academic programs offered, where there were a number of degree programs available in these two specializations. On the other hand it was interesting to note a converse situation with the tourism management sector. Based on the review of academic programs offered, it was observed that degree programs were offered for this specialization by the majority of institutions who have hotel management degrees – for example, CUHK offers a BBA majoring in tourism and hospitality management. However, from analysis of the job requirement attributes, the predominant qualification sought by employers in tourism was for diploma holders. In this instance, there is a divergence between what is being produced in terms of graduate outcomes and what is needed by the industry. With regards to the food and beverage and culinary sector, the findings revealed that the majority of employers were seeking employees certified for skill-specific and operational-oriented jobs. Correspondingly, the educational institutions are also offering vocational programs that serve to meet those industry needs.

As mentioned in the methodology, due to the limitations of this exploratory study, the sample population selected was restricted to only Hong Kong, and analyzed through secondary data. As such, it may not give a definitive account of the total phenomenon. However, it does provide some preliminary insights about the dimensions impacting both the academic and industry sectors; and identify the discrepancies, if any. Further research can be developed to apply the observations gathered in this study to produce a more comprehensive appraisal of the study population. Additionally, due to the time limitations of this pilot study, it was not possible to conduct an in-depth analysis into the specific modules and subject contents within each program syllabus at the various qualification levels. A study of this nature will be able to offer greater insights into the specific gaps between THM syllabus and industry requirements; and suggest strategies to bridge those gaps – particularly with regards to teaching pedagogy and curriculum development initiatives. This combined

with the adoption of in-depth interviews and focus groups may help to uncover greater knowledge and feedback from key stakeholders within the THM education trinity of the educators, the practitioners, and the graduates. This information can help to facilitate dialogue and partnerships between stakeholder groups, to foster an effective education-industry interface. Such future research can help to advance the role of THM education and suggest techniques for developing relevant and high-quality curriculum the industry expects. Eventually, it hopes to create improved employability and career opportunities for graduates through better fit.

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