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# Purple rinses and pseudo-Escofferian menus

## The problem with training restaurants

Just as training restaurants seemed to be on their way out for good, **Matthew Alexander** reports that they are enjoying a new lease of life as a much-needed contributor to institutional income, with a new commercial edge and in one case a research mission.

**E**DUCATION IN FOOD and beverage in a training restaurant and training kitchen is a core element for schools of hospitality in higher education (HE) throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> 'Food and beverage' has been recognised as a 'defining characteristic' of hospitality management education, differentiating it from other business and management courses.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of a practical element in hospitality-management higher education is characteristic of the majority of hospitality courses offering food-and-beverage training of some kind.<sup>3</sup>

These curriculum elements have been subject to debate and criticism for the last 15 years or so. Criticism is largely centred on the problems associated with operating training restaurants within higher-education institutions (HEIs). In some cases these problems have led to institutions dispensing with in-house operations altogether (see Table 1) and other institutions outsourcing their operations to further-education providers.

As these problems have been receiving greater attention, so there has also been a change in focus in some of the degrees themselves. The mid 1990s saw many institutions replacing the word 'catering' in their degree titles with 'hospitality'. More recently, earlier this year the Hotel and Catering International Management Association (HCIMA) changed its name, dropping 'catering' and adopting the title of the

Institute of Hospitality. This shift in focus away from the more generic craft elements of hospitality degrees has had a significant impact on the ability of modern departments to justify the inclusion of an in-house training restaurant facility.

This article reports on part of an MPhil study addressing this area of hospitality management education. The research used a case-study approach to explore the role of operational elements in the curriculum and how these have changed over the years. Research was conducted in four UK HEIs offering degrees in hospitality management. The institu-

A lack of change has created a 'closed system where traditional methods have tended to duplicate themselves'

tions were chosen as examples of institutions that had diversified their operational models in the recent past. The research highlights the problems associated with traditional ways of running training restaurants and indicates where the future of these operations may lie.

### The traditional model

Research in the area of hospitality-operations education and operational facilities within hospitality

**Year**                      **% of hospitality courses  
with in-house facilities**

1995	85 <sup>a</sup>
2002	88
2007	65 <sup>b</sup>

a Based on sample in research by Baker *et al* (1995), reference 17  
b Updated sample used by Baker in 1995

**Table 1 UK hospitality degree courses with training restaurants**

academic departments often talks about a ‘traditional’ method of teaching. It is worth examining the rhetoric surrounding this terminology, which may not have had a positive effect on the facilities or the training within. The traditional approach is usually located with an in-house facility dominated by the ‘traditional’ teaching restaurant and kitchen facility.<sup>4</sup> The traditional approach to food-and-beverage teaching is associated with transmission methods of teaching and the teaching of traditional ‘craft’ skills.<sup>5</sup>

The heavy use of the word ‘traditional’ is symptomatic of the issues and problems associated with this element of the hospitality curriculum but also the attitudes to training restaurants in higher education.

The word ‘traditional’ itself is loaded with hidden values. Whether as an inherited pattern of thought or action or a specific practice of long-standing, it suggests a strong link with the past or perhaps an unwillingness to embrace the future. If traditional elements of the curriculum provide students with a valuable experience then they are more readily justified.

However, in the research that was conducted, this was not generally found to be the case, with one interviewee commenting:



**In the tradition 1** Silver service at The Scottish Hotel School in the mid-1960s, from J Fuller A Currie *The Waiter* (Barrie & Rockcliffe 1967). Apart from the room, the picture could have been taken at any time after 1890.

*It was a sort of ‘pseudo-Escofferian’ menu. It was harking back to some age that whoever was running the restaurant felt were the glory days of the British hospitality scene. It was ridiculous; it was a totally unrealistic experience we were giving students... [working] in a sort of brown classroom preparing bizarre food that someone who really doesn’t understand such things thinks may have been served at the Savoy circa 1903—[this] was not the way forward.*

The traditional model was not just problematic in terms of the actual educational delivery but also the environment itself where it was recognised that *you need to have a physical presence to offer and if you’ve got a dowdy-looking old training restaurant, who’s going to take an interest in that?*

Other issues with the traditional model were perceived to come from the market that they attracted and that

*some students were being tired of just working in a traditional restaurant and little old ladies came in with their purple rinses and said ‘yes, very nice dear’.*

The operational environment is one that was identified as needing to be realistic. The traditional operation was not *giving students an experience that in any way related to*

*the reality of what was going on in industry.*

This could create problems at several levels both within the institution and with relationships with industry.

Operating a ‘traditional’ model was an example of one of the many problems associated with operating training facilities in an HEI. Many authors in the subject area refer to these problems but until now no research has identified these problems as antecedents for change. Offering a contemporary experience both in terms of the physical facility and product but also

the educational philosophy is a challenge that institutions are only recently coming to terms with.

## Historically unchanged curriculum

A lack of change in the hospitality operational curriculum has created problems for operations education. Some hospitality management subjects are 'stuck in a time warp' and a student's experience of practical training today is not so different from what was experienced 30 years ago.<sup>6</sup> It is also recognised that the standard model was based on a background in rou-

students experiencing such unchanged programmes may be unable to reflect on and help improve current industry practice

tine operations and that this model was obsolete and not responding to current market needs.<sup>7</sup>

A lack of change has created a 'closed system where traditional methods have tended to duplicate themselves'.<sup>8</sup> This duplication results in an instructor-centred model where staff members have exclusive control over the teaching situation and students are excluded from any active role in making decisions about their learning.

The lack of change can be attributed no doubt in part to the historical roots of vocational education. Hospitality education has its roots in vocational and on-the-job training and practical training has (or should) to a greater extent have retained this focus.<sup>9</sup> This vocational focus has led writers in the area to comment that students experiencing such unchanged programmes may be unable to reflect on and help improve current industry practice.<sup>10</sup> This concern about students' abilities after exposure to in-house training was highlighted in the research, where there was recognition that:

*If we wanted to be seen as a modern, relevant hotel school, then we needed to be giving students a realistic experience...that relates well to what is going on in industry, that understands best practice, then we had to provide first-year students with a realistic learning environment.*

This recognition of the need to update both the facility and the training that takes place is highlighted in contemporary literature as a need to shift from 'purely practical skills to a mix of practical, leadership, commercial and transferable skills'.<sup>11</sup>

## Resource-intensive character

Key factors influencing practical provision have been identified as the resources required which include space, equipment and the investment in buildings. The cost of staff-contact time and the type of staff involved in the delivery of food-and-beverage modules were also of concern.<sup>12</sup> Essentially the traditional 'training restaurant and kitchen' model requires a large number of staff to resource it. Training kitchens need chefs, dishwashers and store clerks and restaurants need managers and potentially serving staff to supplement the student numbers. This creates a heavy economic burden and all for a facility that might have low utilisation in terms of credit values.<sup>13</sup>

Couple this with the operational footprint required for a training restaurant which may include kitchen, restaurant, bar, food stores, laundry, chemical store, wine cellar and all the associated equipment and you have a serious resource problem. Teaching equipment for laboratories has a short shelf life and priority-funding issues can dominate budgets. Catering equipment suffers as it is so specialised and departments, therefore, cannot manage by using equipment bought for other purposes (for example, a science department could use equipment bought for research purposes

that relates well to what is going on in industry, that understands best practice... we had to provide first-year students with a realistic learning environment

for teaching). The need to follow complex legislation (such as health and safety) also makes demands on capital, but also staffing levels.<sup>14</sup>

Resource problems are not easy to overcome, particularly if you are a victim of 'historical resource-based inequalities' which were not corrected by 'new' universities where most hospitality education is located.<sup>15</sup> This is further exemplified by reports that



**In the tradition 2**  
 Gueridon service at the Scottish Hotel School, 1980s. This is a colour shot; the length of the student's hair indicates a post-Beatles environment.  
 (Author)

while funding councils will continue to provide funding to improve existing facilities in engineering and science faculties, 'it has been made explicit that none

*restaurant over 22 weeks, so therefore I must accept that I've got to pay 30 weeks salary and infrastructure charges for nothing.' It just didn't add up.*

**In a research-dominated academic landscape... the resource-intensive and research-inactive parts of the curriculum will come under greater scrutiny**

When considering change in this area the resource issues were major drivers. In one case *the facility had been worn out. It had had no major investment over the last 25 years.*

will be made available for hospitality in the foreseeable future'. Thus the extra unit of resource that hospitality programmes attract for their 'laboratory' activities is being stretched further and further.<sup>16</sup>

Refurbishing traditional facilities was not seen as an option as 'we just couldn't warrant the capital costs that that would have demanded.'

These resource problems were recognised by all the case studies researched. Some of the operational footprint, in the cold light of day, was seen as a vanity where

## Research inactivity and operations teaching

*the reality was the wine cellar had three or four bottles of wine in it, a couple of cases of house wine. Well, that could have been stored anywhere.*

In a research-dominated academic landscape it is inevitable that resource-intensive and research-inactive parts of the curriculum will come under greater scrutiny. This places greater pressure on operational facilities which suffer from a perceived lack of academic rigour and whose resources could be spent on PhD students or research activity.<sup>17</sup> The principal issue around research and operations teaching is that staff in this area have traditionally been recruited from an operational background and therefore have no relevant academic experience. This is often coupled with the intensity associated with operations teaching

In terms of staffing costs the picture was even more unnerving:

*I was alarmed at the amount of resource that was pouring in one end and, apart from the teaching, very little was coming out the other end... there was a value to the teaching, but it's one of these things you have to analyse and say to yourself: 'I've got a 120 students through the programme, through the training*

which leaves little time focus on research.<sup>18</sup>

Problems with operations teaching were identified by the research. Transmission methods of teaching were exemplified by one participant who highlighted that in the past:

*the emphasis then was very much on... this is how you cut a chicken, this is how you cut a fish, this is particular sauce... this is how you make the particular sauce. It was very food, practically driven*

Staff attitude and resistance to change were identified by all four case studies. In particular, resistance to engaging in non-teaching activity was seen as a large hurdle to overcome:

*We had tremendous resistance from technician staff who didn't want to be seen as catering staff. You know, there was this huge problem—'We are here for the students.' Fine, but the students are only here for 22 weeks: 'Well, we're here for the students', and that's what was happening... I guess at the end if things had been left to drift on, eventually someone would have said we are pouring an awful lot of money down this black hole. It's got to stop.*

Providing students with a contemporary and valuable learning experience (as will be discussed later) was central to the diversification process undergone by all the case-study institutions. This created issues with existing staff where

*'wanting to keep things as they were' was much more important than driving anything forward.*

Changes to operations education within the case studies, therefore, also coincided with changes or a reduction in personnel to facilitate the changed environment and philosophy behind these operations. Dealing with negative attitudes and the low perception of operations education was also an issue to overcome in the pursuit of change.

## Low perception of operations education

External perceptions of hospitality programmes are not always positive ones. Comments like 'a Mickey Mouse' subject or 'low academic currency' seem to be fairly common.<sup>19</sup> The case studies found other less-than-positive descriptors such as 'pots, pans and pull-

ing pints' or 'cooks and bottle-washers.' These kinds of opinions can be viewed in two ways. First, as stereotypes which fail to understand the overall purpose of hospitality-management higher education. If so, then hospitality educators have to make a considerable effort to demonstrate the wider importance of the operational element and the way that, academic level aside, it underpins a vocational-degree programme in hospitality. It is also perhaps the case that the myth of the cooks' school is self-perpetuating, and results from the way the 'traditional' operational element is used; the 'fault' for that can only lie with hospitality management institutions themselves.

An alternative root cause of this perception is identified in a lack of educational development for the staff involved in operations teaching with staff unable to justify operations teaching for management in an appropriate academic language. It is suggested that this has led to a split between operations teaching

the myth of the cooks' school is self-perpetuating, and results from the way the 'traditional' operational element is used: the 'fault' for that can only lie with hospitality management institutions

and the rest of hospitality.<sup>20</sup> As a result introductory operations studies are carried out by less academically qualified (and lower grade) staff and the perception that operations are held in lower esteem than other parts of the curriculum. It is easy to see how this has perpetuated into a vicious cycle that some institutions have only recently been able to break out of.

## New operations and new challenges

Once the desire for change has been stimulated and, assuming that an in-house operation is to be retained (as was the case in all the case studies), institutions have to decide their strategy to ensure the continued success of this element of the curriculum. The research identified two strategies from the four case studies. Three institutions had created operations that were more commercially focused to varying degrees. The fourth institution had embarked on a potentially exciting strategy of using the operational area



### The training facility of the future?

The Culinary Arts Studio at the University of Brighton's School of Services Management. Note the overhead projection of e-learning and the fully equipped open kitchen.

(photo: Ken Woodward and Adrian Carpenter)

to stimulate research in gastronomy and consumer behaviour.

### Commercial approach

A commercial approach is essentially running the training operation 'like a proper restaurant' with the aim of generating revenue alongside educational aims. These facilities have to operate effectively outwith term time in order to maximise revenue-generating potential and meet the resource costs of the operation.

This created issues with existing staff where 'wanting to keep things as they were was much more important than driving anything forward'

A common thread between these institutions is their desire to contribute to the costs of running the facilities and minimise any financial drain on their respective faculties. Facilities were

*expected to generate revenue and to not be a drain on resources and if it makes a good surplus I think that's all the better.*

It is interesting to note the importance that was placed on this aspect of running a facility in an academic department—almost as though there was some kind of guilt over the costs of the past and this was being paid for through the commercial aspects of the

operation. Indeed it was noted that 'the tables would turn slightly, I'm sure, if it was draining cash out of the department.' Other benefits associated with a commercial approach are that students engage with a more 'real' operation and have the opportunity to make real decisions about commercial activity. This would seem an antidote to the tutor-centred traditional model outlined earlier.

The commercial model of operations education is not without its challenges—the principal one being to effectively balance the commercial and educational activity. One interviewee highlighted

*the culture and the people that we have; they are as committed to the training and the students' development as they are to the commercial side.*

However it was identified in another institution that 'some things that are good commercially are not necessarily good for a training restaurant as such' and another individual had experience

*in the further education sector where there were significant financial pressures on the restaurant to perform. It was at the expense of the quality of the training and the student experience.*

Engaging with operations education through a commercial approach requires very careful management. The principal reason for the existence of such a facility is to deliver a higher-education experience and

the extent to which an essentially educational model can generate serious income was called into question by one interviewee:

*I was told by Professor X ...I presented this place to him on a business plan and he almost laughed all the way through it ... he said that everywhere has tried it, everywhere thinks you can do it, but you can't, it's very very difficult.*

### Research approach

The final case study has embarked on a radical strategy of turning a resource-intensive, research-inactive operational facility into a vibrant interactive research centre. Essentially the facility can be adapted to operate as a training environment for undergraduate students where they both can take active control over their own learning and also utilise state-of-the-art IT facilities for research activity in gastronomy and consumer behaviour. When the research was carried out, the facility had only been active for a few months so the results of this model have yet to be witnessed although it should be recognised that the institution has

*established the need and the want and the desire within the faculty, the school and the university that there is a significant area that can be researched.*

The challenge ahead for this particular method is to maintain the facility and it was recognised that if *we want to keep progressing we've got to keep spending, and in order to keep spending it's got to come from somewhere...if the building doesn't start to generate revenue we won't get more coming in.*

This revenue would therefore be found through research funding or other revenue-generating activity. To achieve success with a research approach the staffing model is essential as is, once again, maintaining an effective balance, in this case between teaching and research.

### Reflective approach

Traditional methods of teaching operations typically utilise transmission methods of teaching within a tutor-centred environment. This is not the case with the case studies researched. All institutions incorporated reflection somewhere within the operational training and essentially created

*a structure which encourages students, not only to have an experience, but to learn from that experience, to reflect on that experience, to think how they might adapt their behaviour in the future... they have a greater understanding of the context of the hospitality industry so that their studies in the advanced stages of the programme make more sense. They've got something to relate their academic studies to.*

Based on this evidence, institutions have moved beyond a purely vocational-action experience to incorporate reflective vocational elements and this can only be a positive step. A reflective approach gives the hospitality student the opportunity to engage with and learn an important set of both operational and cognitive skills which act as a foundation, underpinning the student's ability to learn throughout the degree.

New models of delivery and diversified facilities for operations education within hospitality manage-

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ment education offer new possibilities for hospitality departments but they are not without challenges. How facilities of the future meet these challenges should provide opportunities for future research in the area.

### Conclusion

It is perhaps too early to say that pseudo-Escoffierian menus and purple-rinse diners associated with traditional training restaurants are a thing of the past. What is clear is that after years of working within a tutor-centred and historically unchanged model some higher education institutions have responded to the problems within the area and created new educational models for operations education. The key elements present in these models are summarised as follows:

- vocational-action and reflective-vocational elements in curriculum
- level of realism in operations
- generating revenue
- consideration of research potential
- staff that can support these elements.

If students are to receive a wider, more appropriate



(and more academic) knowledge from their exposure to the operational elements then the research suggests that they need as realistic an experience as possible. Students who are able to engage with increased levels of decision-making, real consumers and appropriate levels of pressure prepare more appropriately for a future in the industry and reflect on working in operational areas more effectively.

This can be achieved within a commercially active institution but one, perhaps, that also recognises the potential for generating research via operations. Staffing models that can effectively support these activities must also be established, models that continue to move this important area of hospitality education forward.

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