

Addressing sustainability in hotel management education: designing a curriculum based on input from key stakeholders

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This paper reports on combining generic reference points that can be distilled from literature with the analysis of 18 face-to-face interviews with relevant stakeholders as input for designing a sustainability course within a (higher education) hotel management curriculum. The train of thought presented here shows that by using this input as design parameters for a curriculum, education could serve as a crucial catalyst and change agent for a societal transition towards sustainable development. It shows that this is also true and relevant, maybe even especially, for the hospitality industry. Subsequently, it is explained that for the specific hotel management education addressed in this paper to fulfil this role, the sustainability course incorporated in its curriculum needs to combine various components and approaches. It needs to provide students with an ethical framework that helps them develop a reflective attitude towards their own and others' actions and decisions. This framework needs to focus on generic values and norms, but also on envisioning practical social, ecological and economic consequences. Therefore, it also needs to help students acquire the knowledge and develop the skills required to envision and discuss these consequences, also with involved stakeholders, and (jointly) devise context-dependent solutions.

Keywords: hospitality industry, sustainable development, education for sustainability (EfS)

Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a research project dedicated to exploring the views of key stakeholders with respect to addressing the topic of sustainability in hotel management education. The objective of the project was to collect relevant input for designing a course dedicated to sustainability within a (higher education) hotel management curriculum; the international hotel management curriculum of NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. The reason for doing so was twofold. First of all, as is also shown in the remainder of this paper, sustainability represents a topic that is highly relevant for the hospitality industry and, thus, future hospitality professionals need to be equipped to deal with this challenge. Second, at the time of conducting this research project, NHTV's Academy of Hotel Management was redesigning its international hotel management curriculum. One of the outcomes of the early stages of this redesign effort was to include a course dedicated to sustainability in the 'new' curriculum.

The research project reported on in this paper was based on combining generic reference points that can be distilled from literature with 18 face-to-face interviews with relevant stakeholders regarding NHTV's hotel management education: students, lecturers and hospitality professionals. This paper presents these generic reference points, the results of the interviews, and how (combining) both helped to define specific reference points for the design of a course dedicated to sustainability. Finally, the contours of the resulting course, which is now an integral part of the 'new' international hotel management curriculum of NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, are presented.

Background

The relevance of furthering sustainability or, more precisely, the need for sustainable development within and of our society needs no further explanation or justification. What's more, higher education could play a key role in realising the societal transition required to achieve this. So-called 'education for sustainability (EfS)' has been identified as a priority within the context of sustainable development (Littledyke et al. 2013). Higher education can serve as a catalyst and change agent to promote the type of social learning that is needed for this transition (Barth et al. 2007, Stephens et al. 2008).

Sibbel (2009) suggests that, to actually contribute to sustainable development, higher education needs to assist students in developing the capacity to apply systems thinking and to base decisions and actions on accounting for the full range of economic, ecological and societal costs and benefits associated with those decisions and actions. A curriculum should also create 'a greater awareness of social and moral responsibilities' (Sibbel 2009, 79) in future professionals. Consequently, sustainability education should not just focus on practical applications, such as technology-based solutions for energy and water use reduction, but should also encompass ethics and an ethical foundation for decision-making related to sustainability (Biedenweg et al. 2013). Simultaneously, sustainability education must help students to develop the interpersonal, intrapersonal and change agent skills (Svanström et al. 2008) needed to engage in dialogue with relevant stakeholders and to devise practical – context-dependent – solutions and

approaches. Interestingly, addressing sustainability based on these generic reference points not only furthers sustainable development, but also higher education itself. Based on its need for contextualisation and trans-disciplinary debate, the topic of sustainability provides an avenue for reflection and jointly creating solutions, for students and educators alike, which not only contributes to sustainable development but also to improving the quality of learning processes in higher education (see e.g. Wals and Jickling 2002).

Whether or not the hospitality industry is going to play a crucial role in furthering sustainability remains to be seen. It is part of a wider context, i.e. tourism, in which involved stakeholders are clearly struggling to 'arrive at a consensus for concerted action' (Weaver 2011, 13) and to (successfully) address all relevant social-ecological-economic interactions (see e.g. Bramwell and Lane 2005 2012, Moriarty 2012). With respect to the specific industry named after the concept of hospitality, it is important to note that hospitality and sustainability represent two concepts that, so far, have had a rather problematic 'relationship'. Some progress has been made, especially with respect to the ecological imperative of sustainable development, by implementation of so-called 'green practices' and 'green' certification schemes. However, these initiatives are often ad hoc and usually not truly embedded in overall business strategies (see e.g. King et al. 2011, Melissen 2013, Tzschentke et al. 2008). Furthermore, hospitality businesses' reporting on environmental and related (Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR) activities does not necessarily reflect actual performance and practice, especially for global hotel chains (Font et al. 2012, de Groisbois 2012). With respect to those related activities, it is important to note that actual progress regarding the social component of sustainable development is limited (see e.g. Kusluvan et al. 2010). Overall, it seems the hospitality industry is still very much struggling to find ways to apply a systems perspective to addressing sustainability (Melissen 2013).

However, all this certainly does not have to mean that the hospitality industry is a 'lost cause'. A number of individual businesses have shown that significant progress can be made (see Melissen 2013). What's more, it seems that many of the barriers to making progress reported by others – those that have not (yet) made significant progress – 'rest largely in myth and lack of knowledge' (Ricaurte 2012, 5). Finally, a review of the specific characteristics of this industry reveals that it is actually well positioned to play an important role in furthering sustainable development. As Melissen (2013) explains, hospitality businesses have a direct and significant impact on the (local) social, economic and ecological systems in which they operate, for instance through employing local residents, providing/procuring services and products to local buyers from local suppliers, and the (negative or positive) effects on the local ecosystem. As indicated above, sustainable development requires systems thinking, dialogue, change agents and context-dependent solutions and approaches. Therefore, 'the nature of the hospitality industry – a wide variety of people-oriented companies and organisations, ranging from influential and powerful global hotel chains to locally operating, often independent, businesses that are very much intertwined with local communities – only reinforces its relevance' (Melissen 2013, 820).

Combining the current state and nature of the hospitality industry with the role of higher education in furthering sustainable development clearly highlights the need for addressing sustainability in hospitality management education. In fact, this paper is certainly not the first to address this issue. For instance, Millar and Park (2013) examined the perspectives of hospitality managers on sustainability in hospitality education through conducting 11 in-depth interviews. They conclude that hospitality managers appreciate the need for addressing this topic, especially by focusing on the multidimensional nature of sustainability beyond merely focusing on environmental aspects. In fact, current hospitality managers seem to view hospitality students as potential change agents and important (future) contributors to defining sustainability and sustainable business processes in practice. This notion is especially interesting when compared to Barber et al.'s (2011) findings based on a survey on perceived importance of sustainability education amongst three stakeholder groups: students, educators and professionals. Whereas all three groups agree that sustainability is an important topic to address in hospitality education, 'there are differences in environmental attitudes and behaviours as well as what topics should be included in the curriculum and how the courses should be taught' (Barber et al. 2011, 15). That is why the authors conclude that students, educators and professionals should work together as of the early stages of curriculum design for hospitality education to be successful with respect to furthering sustainability. The work by Boley (2011) confirms that there is agreement amongst stakeholders that sustainability should be incorporated in hospitality education, but differences in opinion on how to do so. That is why 'research should move away from the importance of teaching sustainability within hospitality ... management towards more of a focus on the implementation and assessment of how sustainability is taught' (Boley 2011, 28/29).

In line with these suggestions, the remainder of this paper focuses on establishing specific reference points, beyond the generic guidelines mentioned in this section, for addressing sustainability in hospitality education. The subsequent sections discuss the set-up, the outcomes and the implications of a research project that focused on involving students, educators and professionals in the early design stages of a sustainability course within the international hotel management curriculum of NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands.

Method

To involve stakeholder groups in the design of this sustainability course, students ($n = 6$), educators ($n = 6$) and professionals ($n = 6$) were interviewed. All interviewees were asked to share their views on sustainability, the relevance of sustainability for the hospitality industry and the way this topic should be addressed in hospitality education in general, as well as NHTV's international hotel management curriculum in particular. To ensure that findings would be as specific and as relevant as possible for the design of this particular sustainability course, the set-up of this research project and the interviews followed the principles of the interpretative constructionist research paradigm (see e.g. Rubin and Rubin 2005). Students were randomly sampled out of second-year

NHTV international hotel management students, whereas both educators and (management level) professionals were purposively sampled (out of teachers involved with NHTV's international hotel management education and the industry network of NHTV's Academy of Hotel Management respectively) to grand valuable and relevant outcomes.

A semi-structured format for the interviews was developed based on the objectives of this research project and relevant literature (see previous section). Test interviews ($n = 3$) were conducted and those resulted in a slight modification of the format. The same final format was used for all 18 interviews that this paper reports on. All interviews with students and educators were conducted at NHTV's premises. Interviews with professionals were conducted either at NHTV's premises ($n = 2$) or in the working environment of the professionals involved ($n = 4$). The interviews lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the (same) interviewer using F4 software and checked by the second author of this paper to ensure accuracy. All interviews were conducted in Dutch and quotes presented in this paper have been translated from Dutch to English.

In preparation for and prior to the interviews, all interviewees were sent and asked to read the text on the current state and characteristics of the hospitality industry in relation to sustainability, as included in the previous section of this paper. This provided context for the interviews and was intended to serve as a catalyst for discussions on the relationships between hospitality, sustainability and education. If an interviewee had not read the text prior to the interview, the contents were presented to the interviewee by the interviewer at the start of the actual interview. As indicated above, the interviews were semi-structured, using the following topics/questions as a guideline:

- Introduction and explanation of the research process and objectives
- Discussion on the introductory text
- What is sustainability?
- Discussion on social, ecological and economic aspects of sustainability and the relevance for and link to the hospitality industry
- What are or should be the implications of all this for hospitality education and NHTV's international hotel management curriculum?

The transcripts and research diary of the interviewer were analysed using NVIVO 10, resulting in 16 different codes divided into three main themes, using the coding basics of Bazely and Jackson (2013). These were then used to create the narrative presented in the next section.

Results

Even though answers to questions varied greatly, sometimes even within one stakeholder group, some specific patterns and shared views could be observed within specific stakeholder groups, as well as differences between the views of different stakeholder groups. These are described below and illustrated with key responses of individual interviewees.

One of the most interesting differences in views with respect to sustainability related to what is often referred to as the prisoner's dilemma or social dilemma (see e.g. Dawes, 1980).

Some interviewees seemed to 'accept' that a (fully) sustainable world is simply not realistic, nor is sustainable hospitality.

... hospitality is polluting in nature, but [then] every economic activity is. Everything you do is. Even sports, theatres, shops, hotel schools. Wherever people come into action, which is something we have to do, is pollution.

Others indicated that while 100% sustainable development might not be realistic (yet), every step towards a more sustainable society is valuable.

To be honest, I started some sustainable initiatives for commercial reasons. However, I also believe in participating, even though you are just a small hotel, participating in contributing to sustainable development [for instance] when it comes to energy. We cannot continue using oil ... forever.

Ultimately, it seemed that interviewees, regardless of the particular stakeholder group they were a part of, could be divided into two main groups: (1) those that focus on the fact that creating a fully sustainable society is a daunting objective and tend to get demotivated by that 'observation' or even use it as an 'excuse' not to act themselves, and (2) those that focus on the positive effects of (combined) individual/small steps in the right direction and are motivated to contribute themselves as well.

With respect to the hospitality industry itself, all three stakeholder groups agreed that the current state of the industry is not sustainable (yet) and there is a need for (further) action. One of the main reasons for the current state of the industry that was mentioned is that sustainability does not seem to be a logical or natural part of the DNA of hospitality businesses and/or hospitality professionals (yet). Consequently, actions taken so far are usually more the result of competitive or legal pressures than based on an intrinsic motivation to become more sustainable.

Every chain will do something. They have to When you do nothing, you can be sure to miss out on business, there is an expectation that you do something with sustainability. [However] it is not in the DNA of hospitality professionals to think of sustainability.

Interestingly, some of the students added to that observation that guests are an important part of the equation as well. They felt that most guests do not base their selection of hotels on, for instance, the carbon footprint of that hotel. Educators highlighted another barrier to more sustainable operations in the hospitality industry: the specific characteristics of this industry. They indicated two possible reasons for a lack of innovation, also with respect to sustainability: (1) the hospitality industry is a service industry and these industries, compared to product/manufacturing industries, tend to represent late adopters when it comes to innovation, and (2) the hospitality industry employs a lot of poorly educated people, which also hinders innovation.

This lack of innovation and reluctance to adopt more sustainable practices was further addressed by the interviewees in relating to comfort and luxury as key aspects of hospitality. One of the professionals clearly worded the complications linked to these aspects as follows:

I think every hotelier would like to save energy and become more sustainable. However, if this means a decline in comfort [offered to guests], the

product or the quality, tension arises. For example, air conditioning in a hotel room is obviously not very sustainable, it costs a lot of energy, but for the comfort of the guest, who is paying a certain amount [of money] for his/her stay, it should be there.

Whereas all three stakeholder groups agreed that something needs to be done, professionals and students often quickly followed that up by mentioning these types of barriers to further action. In contrast, most educators focused on the need for a systems view and embedding sustainability in the identity and strategy of hospitality businesses as the logical next step. Somehow, most educators felt that hospitality and sustainability need not be mutually exclusive and focused on looking for ways to create 'sustainable hospitality' or 'hospitable sustainability'.

In all interviews, the interviewees were challenged by the interviewer to think about the future of the hospitality industry in relation to sustainability. A number of professionals stressed that the hospitality industry cannot afford to continue to engage in sustainability initiatives for the 'wrong' reasons, especially based on the people-oriented nature of this industry. However, some professionals predicted that embedding sustainability in the DNA of hospitality will not happen easily.

Until management sees tangible advantages of integrating sustainability in every aspect, I believe it is going to be a long journey before it is completely embedded in the culture and DNA of the hospitality industry.

Interestingly, when thinking about the future, students clearly indicated that they themselves would prefer to work in companies that have a clear vision with respect to sustainable development.

The manager should be convinced that the sustainable way is the way they should operate ... it is something that should be integrated within the entire company, not just the 'front'. You should be a role model as management team ...

In fact, for many students this not only relates to (the environmental side of) sustainability.

I think you should use the same values for everyone. When you think your employees should do everything possible to keep guests happy, then you as a company should do everything to keep your employees happy.

In a number of interviews, these discussions then evolved into a discussion on ethics and the ethical foundation for sustainable practices. Especially the educators indicated that sustainable development requires more than knowledge and skills.

... I believe we should emphasise the ... ethical dilemmas and considerations more. Because learning a trick ... is not going to work. That is in my perspective short-term ... Therefore, it is not really about the skills we teach, nor the knowledge, even though this is important, but it is more about the attitude.

Interestingly, a number of educators actually seemed to think that professionals and students lack a sense of urgency.

Then you see that the sense of urgency is not high enough. The heart of the matter is not known to people, [they think] it happens in Africa, not here.

However, most students explicitly stated that they would like to contribute to a societal transition towards sustainable development, but that they simply lack the knowledge and

skills to do so. Similarly, most professionals acknowledged that the hospitality industry needs to change and engage more in sustainability initiatives, and for the right reasons. However, in most interviews, the interviewees seemed to be unable to move beyond stressing that the current state of the industry is hindering progress.

This is typically something in the hospitality industry, in a hotel it [i.e. responsibility for sustainability] is placed at the technical department, or housekeeping. Those are the two departments where sustainability is on the agenda. ... someone in the F&B department, or someone in the financial office or HR department, they will do much less. Yes, they might turn off their computer, or their printer. However, do they see the advantages?

Finally, with respect to how to address sustainability in hospitality education, educators once again stressed the need to focus on a systems/holistic perspective. Educators mentioned the following topics as most important to include in the curriculum: ethical decision-making, long-term perspectives and financial skills to translate vision into action. However, most of them indicated that the crucial role of education is to create awareness.

... for example, that tourism has a great impact ... as well as the hospitality operations within that [sector] ... as well as social impact. And that you have to deal with countries that are disadvantaged compared to the 'first' world. That broad perspective. Awareness, because for students it is difficult to generalise ... that ethical aspects are a significant part too.

Interestingly, both professionals and students acknowledged the need to address awareness, but not so much awareness for/amongst themselves, but how to do so for/amongst employees and guests respectively. Similarly, whereas educators continued to stress how hospitality education should educate future professionals about the relevance of sustainability, professionals and students stressed that they were fully aware of the relevance, but not quite sure how to turn this into action in practice. That is why professionals stated repeatedly that they hope education can 'create' new professionals that dare to challenge the status quo and have the skills, knowledge and attitude to look for and find new solutions and approaches. Students, in turn, actually seemed willing to take on this challenge, but stressed that they need help (from educators) to be able to do so successfully. This can best be illustrated by a final quote from an interview with one of the students:

[What I need is] to know what is really important, because I experience[d] being overwhelmed by it [all]. Because everything intertwines with everything and one needs to think about it in the smallest details ... it is really hard to keep a good overview.

Discussion and implications

The results described in the previous section confirm some of the generic reference points established in the background section of this paper. The relevance of sustainability for the hospitality industry is clearly endorsed, as is the crucial role of education in preparing future professionals for dealing (successfully) with this topic. Also, all stakeholder groups agreed to the fact that sustainability needs to be addressed

based on a systems perspective and education should not merely focus on the environmental aspects of sustainable development. The findings presented above also support the notion put forward by Millar and Park (2013) that hospitality professionals view students as potential change agents that could help define sustainability and appropriate solutions and approaches in practice. Finally, all stakeholder groups indeed stressed the relevance of an ethical foundation for furthering sustainable hospitality; embedding sustainability in the identity and strategy of a hospitality business/manager was repeatedly identified as being crucial to (long-term) success.

However, the findings presented in the previous section also highlight some specific differences between the perspectives of involved stakeholders – educators, students and professionals – beyond those already mentioned in the background section of this paper. Interestingly, educators seemed to question the level of awareness of students and professionals and, especially, their sense of urgency with respect to furthering sustainability, also within the hospitality industry. The interviews with students and professionals, however, did not indicate a low awareness level, nor a low sense of urgency, but rather a ‘call’ for help and assistance from educators to (learn how to) devise relevant, context-dependent solutions and approaches based on the realities of today’s hospitality industry. All three stakeholder groups acknowledged the need for paying attention to ethical decision making and long-term perspectives. However, whereas educators stressed the relevance of education as ‘place’ for reflection and developing ‘appropriate’ norms and values, students and professionals indicated they would also like to focus on (jointly) creating solutions or, at least, developing the skills and knowledge needed to do so. In fact, based on the findings presented in this paper, one might argue that students and professionals are (already) aware of the need for and motivated to contribute to sustainable development within the context of the hospitality industry, more so than most educators seem to realise. Therefore, hospitality education not only needs to address the relevance and complexities of sustainable development, but also focus on practical – context-dependent – solutions and approaches. The characteristics and specific nature of the hospitality industry, as discussed in the background section of this paper, only reinforce this. In other words, addressing sustainability in hospitality education should be based on a ‘think-global-act-local perspective’, as suggested by one of the interviewees in this research project. An exclusive focus on the former and ignoring (the skills and knowledge needed for) the latter could very well result in hospitality education demotivating future professionals and alienating current professionals, instead of serving as a catalyst for the transition that all stakeholder groups wish for.

Therefore, the specific reference points mentioned above have been used to (re)design the sustainability course within NHTV’s international hotel management curriculum. The resulting three-year course has been set up to provide students with an ethical framework that helps them develop a reflective attitude towards their own and others’ actions and decisions. This framework not only incorporates generic values and norms, but also a focus on ‘envisioning’ practical social, ecological and economic consequences on all levels of the global-local nexus. The required knowledge and skills to envision and discuss these consequences, also with involved

stakeholders, constitute the second main component of this course. Finally, three key questions that are jointly addressed by students and lecturers, through deployment of a variety of teaching methods – including group presentations, case based learning and debates – and throughout the three years that this course runs, are:

- What are current best practices in industry, what makes these a ‘best’ practice, and (how) could this practice lead to even ‘better’ results?
- What is your role as (future) professional in furthering sustainable development and how can you successfully fulfil this role?
- How can sustainability be incorporated in daily operations and business models for hospitality businesses?

Addressing these questions helps students in developing the required knowledge and skills to devise context-dependent solutions. A full account of all details of this course lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, those interested to learn more are warmly invited to contact the authors.

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