Hospitality student learning styles: The impact of gender and nationality

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SUMMARY *Hospitality and tourism education at degree level is increasing in popularity for both home and international students and it has been argued that the student body is becoming more diverse. One consequence of the increased popularity of such programmes is the increasing cultural mix in the contemporary classroom in western countries. Consequently, academic staff are increasingly faced with teaching multicultural classes that comprise students with a range of preferred learning styles. Within the context of changes in the hospitality and tourism educational environment in Australia and the UK, this paper provides a comparative analysis of learning styles of students studying hospitality and tourism programmes in these two countries. Firstly, this paper compares the learning style preferences of students studying in Scotland and Australia and highlights how an understanding of students' preferred learning styles could improve their educational experience. Secondly, it analyses the impact that students' gender and nationality has on learning style preferences. The results indicate that certain groups of students possess learning style preferences that are at odds with their peers and consequently may have difficulty in learning effectively when, for example, tackling group projects. The results of this research also celebrate diversity and highlight the advantages to students of sharing their educational experience with students from other cultures and recognising the benefits of working with peers who adopt a learning style different from their own. The paper concludes with a discussion of the importance of understanding students' learning styles in relation to curricula development, assessment methods and the achievement of deeply processed material.*

Key words:
comparative learning styles; hospitality education; Scotland; Australia

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Since the early 1970's there has been a dramatic increase in the number of hospitality and tourism programs offered by universities in the UK and in Australia. Indeed a rudimentary search of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training website (2002) (http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/ausunis.htm) found that of the 43 publicly funded universities in Australia, 29 offered hospitality and/or tourism programs at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. Added to this are at least five private providers who specialise in hospitality and tourism education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

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Undergraduate hospitality and tourism education in the UK commenced slightly earlier with the first Hotel and Catering degrees being launched in the mid 1960's and by 1997 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) found that some 28 universities in England offered hospitality management programs (HEFCE 1998). In the UK the Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME) indicate that they represent 27 universities offering degree level qualifications in Hospitality Management. In Scotland there are currently seven universities offering programmes in the field of hospitality management (SHEFC 2005). The Hospitality Training Foundation (2002) indicated that around 3,500 students graduate from UK higher education establishments with hotel and catering degrees each year (1998-2000). The Learning Teaching Support Network (Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism 2004) published data, provided by the University and College Admission Service, indicates that the number of accepted students to hospitality courses has remained fairly stable for the last 3 years at around 1,500 students.

While the majority of students studying hospitality and tourism management at publicly funded universities in the UK and Australia continue to be domestic; there is evidence that the student body is becoming more diverse (Hsu 1996). As disciplines, hospitality and tourism management appear attractive to international students and draw a higher than average number of such students (Malfroy and Daruwalla 2000; Khwaja and Bosselman 1990). This popularity perhaps is due to the maturing of hospitality and tourism management as an area of study. In addition, the notion of a career in the hospitality and tourism industry is no longer seen as demeaning for international students (Zhao 1991). This, coupled with the rapid growth of the hotel and tourism industry in, for example, mainland China (Huyton 1997; Yu 1998) and Eastern Europe, has encouraged students from countries with developing service economies to pursue hospitality and tourism education in western universities.

A consequence of this diversity is that the cultural differences that often manifest themselves with different cognitive and linguistic patterns often constitute formidable barriers that initially may prevent successful participation in Western classrooms (Beaven, Calderisi and Tantral 1998). Western tertiary institutions are consequently confronted with the tasks of managing this diversity, and not only ensuring a measure of quality in international students' learning but also for domestic students who share the same classrooms.

In addition, educational providers are facing a number of key changes that are focusing attention on efficiency in relation to delivery methods. New opportunities offered by information technology could facilitate major change in delivery of education, providing greater flexibility for learning (Litteljohn and Watson 2004). At the same time attention is being drawn to improving the quality of student experiences by quality assurance agencies, with more attention being given to student centred learning (Rogers 2004). In relation to Hospitality and Tourism programmes changes on the balance between generic business knowledge and sector specific skills in the curriculum at undergraduate level exist (Litteljohn and Watson 2004). Other social changes related to hospitality and tourism education include changing government funding policies that have influenced the nature of student experience. Many more students than in the past take on part time job commitments, working during term time as well as holidays. In light of the different influences affecting students' educational experience, it is important to consider how student's learning can be enhanced. This paper addresses how an understanding of students' preferred learning styles could improve their educational experience. The research aim is to compare the preferred learning styles of domestic and international students studying hospitality and/or tourism programs in the UK and Australia. Specifically, the paper will:

• identify the learning style preferences of hospitality and/or tourism management students in the UK and Australia;

• compare the learning style preferences of the UK and Australian sample;

• identify differences in learning preferences on the basis of gender;

• compare the learning style preferences of respondents based on nationality/ethnicity;

• present recommendations concerning identified preferred learning styles that may be taken into consideration by academic staff relating to teaching methods.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEARNING STYLES

Kolb (1984) identified individuals' learning styles by means of the Learning Styles Inventory which identified

four stages of learning that require specific learning abilities. Based on Kolb's theories, Honey and Mumford (1986) developed the Learning Styles Questionnaire and suggested four basic learning styles: activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist. Activists like to involve themselves in new practices and enjoy tackling problems by brainstorming. They appear to be easily bored and prefer to move from one task to the next as the excitement fades. Reflectors are more cautious and thoughtful and prefer to consider all possible avenues of action before making any decisions. As the name would suggest, any actions they take are based on observation and reflection. Theorists like to integrate their observations into logical models based on analysis and objectivity. They appear to enjoy the structure associated with sound theoretical frameworks. Pragmatists are practical, hands on people who like to apply new ideas immediately. They often get impatient with an over emphasis on reflection. It is argued that a wholly effective learner is proficient in all four styles.

It has been noted that there are at least 32 commercially published instruments being used by researchers and educators to assess the different dimensions of learning styles (Campbell 1991). When determining the appropriateness of choosing the Learning Styles Questionnaire over another tool that measures learning style preferences, it is useful to reflect upon Curry's (1987) Onion simile. On analysis of all the available learning style questionnaires, she placed each in one layer of a three layer system. She suggests that the three layers are like an onion. The first layer (or core) presents learning behaviour as controlled at a fundamental level by the central personality dimension. The middle layer centres around a theme of information processing dimensions. The outermost layer, influenced by the interaction of the environment, is based on the theme of instructional preferences. This model is built on further by the work of Sadler-Smith (1996) who advocates a holistic approach to learning styles, which encompasses learning preferences and cognitive styles. Learning preferences (autonomous, dependent, collaborative) are similar to the outer layer in the onion, while cognitive style relates to the core of the onion.

This research clearly aims to determine the information processing preference of students studying hospitality and/or tourism management in Australia and Scotland and it might therefore be seen that the Learning Style Questionnaire fits neatly into the middle layer of Curry's (1987) onion model.

Marshall (1987) agrees with Curry's (1987) analogy and places the Kolb (1985) Learning Styles Inventory and the Honey and Mumford (1986) Learning Styles Questionnaire firmly in the information processing preference layer of the model. While there has been some criticism regarding the use of the Learning Styles Questionnaire for managers (Duff 2000), it has been found that this tool is most appropriate to determine the learning style preferences of students, particularly those of diverse backgrounds (Anderson 1995).

It might be concluded that the learning approach adopted by students depends on both the socio-cultural setting as well as the school milieu (Biggs 1987). Students' approaches reflect not only their own attitudes, habits, abilities and personality, but also the demands made by the learning environment (Kember and Gow 1990). Each student normally has a preference for a particular approach to learning but will modify or abandon that approach if an alternative approach is more suited to the learning task (Gow, Balla, Kember and Hau 1996). Course syllabi, teaching methods and assessment all place constraints on the student and affect and influence the approach to learning taken (Sims and Sims 1995).

LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES OF HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

Several studies have been undertaken that attempt to identify the learning preferences of hospitality, tourism and travel management students in the UK, Asia and Australia. In his study of predominantly domestic students in the UK, Lashley (1999) found that the vast majority of students who were attracted onto a particular hospitality management program in the UK display preferred learning styles that indicate that they enjoy practical activity, but who are less comfortable with theorising and reflection. As such, these students display preferences for Activist learning styles (Lashley 1999).

Indeed, it would have appeared that these students thrived on the challenges associated with new experiences and they were described as tending to "act first and consider the consequences later" (Lashley 1999:181). Not surprisingly, students with Activist learning style preferences learn most easily from activities involving group work that is exciting, challenging and quick to change.

On the other hand, Activists find it more difficult to learn when they have to take a passive role, not become involved or undertake solitary work. They are not keen on practising and do not enjoy the constraints of having to follow precise instructions (Honey and Mumford 2000). Indeed, such was the propensity for these students to adopt Activist learning styles that strategy had to be designed and implemented in order to develop students studying hospitality and tourism programs in the host universities into more reflective practitioners.

However, it would appear that domestic students studying hospitality management, hotel and catering management, tourism management and travel and tourism studies at Higher Diploma level and above in various colleges and universities in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan already display preferences for Reflector learning styles (Wong, Pine and Tsang 2000). It was found that all but one of the student groups questioned displayed a strong preference for the Reflector learning style. As such, these students prefer to learn through observation and benefit from the opportunity to think before acting. They appreciate the opportunity to undertake research before an activity and think about what they have learned. Reflectors find it more difficult to learn from activities where they are forced into the limelight, for example through peer presentations or role-playing. Similarly, methods of learning such as case studies may prove problematic for these students as they are not keen on undertaking a task without prior notice or sufficient information (Honey and Mumford 2000). It may be argued that the approach to both research projects identified above were similar in nature. Essentially, both groups of students were studying similar programs in their home country and both groups completed the same questionnaire using similar data collection techniques. It is contended that a reason that could have influenced the difference in results may be the differing cultural approaches to education. This is supported by conceptual work by Chan (1999), who contends that Chinese history and Confucius philosophy has a major impact on learning styles of Chinese students.

In Australia, recent research has indicated that international students, and particularly those with a common Confucian culture background (i.e. whose nationality or ethnic origin is either Chinese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Japanese and Korean), tend to display preferences for activist learning styles (Barron 2004; Barron and Arcodia 2002).

It might therefore be suggested that such students' learning style preferences change when they commence study at a western university. This is a potentially worrying shift as many educators strive to engender more reflective practice amongst their students (see for example, Lashley 1999). The adoption of a more Activist learning style preference by such international students may, in part, be explained by the most western universities adopting a four course, semester design. It has been suggested (see for example Barron 2002) that this design encourages students to view courses in short (typically thirteen week) bursts to be assessed at the end of the semester and never be revisited. Thus, the opportunity for deeply processing material over a period of time is not afforded to students. This, in turn, will discourage students from reflecting on material and actively encourage a more short-term, activist outlook.

Thus there are two significant issues which might challenge current models of effective teaching in hospitality and tourism management programs in universities that have implications for teaching methods, curricula design and assessment strategies. Firstly, it is important to understand the learning style preferences of domestic students studying hospitality and tourism management and to attempt initiatives that encourage students to adopt a more reflective approach to their studies. Secondly, it is important to recognise the diversity that is currently common in university classrooms and attempt to recognise the preferred learning styles of students from different backgrounds. Equally, it is essential to nurture and encourage the use of more reflective learning approaches that some international students seem to possess as opposed to academic, administrative and structural constraints that appear to discourage a more reflective approach

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A variation of the Learning Styles Questionnaire designed by Honey and Mumford (2000) was used in this study to investigate the learning styles of domestic and international students studying hospitality and tourism management at a variety of tertiary education institutions in Australia and Scotland. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first section asked respondents to answer questions concerning age, gender, nationality, ethnicity and number of dependents.

This section also asked questions that attempted to determine motivations for current area of study and reasons for choosing the particular university. The second section comprised a total of 80 questions: the four learning styles (Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist) each being evaluated by 20 specific questions. Respondents were asked to identify on a six-point scale (0 = Strongly Disagree; 1 = Disagree; 2 = Disagree on Balance; 3 = Agree on Balance; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree) their strength of feeling for each statement.

This means of response differs from the original Honey and Mumford (2000) method of responding which involved respondents merely placing a tick to indicate if they agreed with a statement, or a cross to indicate that they disagreed with a statement. It is felt that the employment of a scale adds to the sophistication of the responses as it allows respondents to present a more accurate measure of their feelings concerning each question (Lashley and Shaw 2002). The questionnaires were analysed, using SPSS, by the score mean of each type of learning style. This allowed the researchers to develop tables and undertake cross tabulations.

In order to achieve a maximum response, and to answer questions students may have had during the completion of the questionnaire, the questionnaire was administered in the controlled environment of formal class time and under the supervision of a tutor. Ticehurst and Veal (1999:138) describe this approach to a questionnaire survey as a 'captive group survey' and suggest that this method of questionnaire administration is expeditious and less problematic than in less controlled situations.

A purposive method of selection was used to determine the higher education providers used in the Australian part of this study and a selection of both private and public universities were chosen. In total, some 514 students from nine Australian institutions took part in the study. All higher education institutions that offer hospitality and/or tourism management at bachelor level or above were invited to take part in the Scottish part of the study and all but one agreed. In total, some 391 students from six Scottish institutions took part in the study. The composition of the respondents was broadly similar in that female respondents outnumbered their male counterparts by at least two to one and that there was an even mix of the number of respondents in each year level.

The average age of both the Australian and Scottish sample was just over 22 years.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Results from this survey would suggest that both groups of students might be considered as reasonably well balanced with regard to their preferred learning styles (see Table 1).

Table 1
MEAN SCORES FOR ALL RESPONDENTS' LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES

	Australia	**Scotland**
Activist	57.0	58.0
Reflector	54.0	59.0
Theorist	57.0	59.0
Pragmatist	58.0	59.5

These results would therefore indicate that both groups of students are relatively comfortable adapting to a range of teaching methods and styles. It can, however, be seen that the learning style preference with the most disparity between the groups is that of Reflector. Indeed, it can be seen that the Reflector learning style preference is the most preferred learning style for the Scottish cohort, and the least preferred for the Australian students. This result is significant if one considers Lashley's (1999:185) assertion for the development of more "reflective approaches to study and management tasks" amongst students studying hospitality and tourism. Consequently this might indicate a teaching culture evident in Scottish universities from which Australian educators might learn.

Table 2
MEAN SCORES FOR LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES BY GENDER

	Scottish	**Scottish**	**Australian**	**Australian**
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
Activist	60.0	53.0	60.0	56.0
Reflector	66.0	56.0	53.0	55.0
Theorist	58.0	61.0	59.0	55.5
Pragmatist	64.0	57.0	61.0	56.0

It has, however, been noted (see, for example, Barron, 2004) that it is unwise to treat a cohort of students as being one homogenous group. Indeed, there is a danger in assuming that the preferred learning style of a group of students is representative of all major and minor sub groups within the cohort.

For example, Table 2. presents an indication of the differences in learning styles of females and males in both the Scottish and Australian samples. This table indicates that, within these major subgroups, there are differences in preferred learning styles that should be taken into consideration when developing structure and deciding on teaching methods. For instance, it can be seen that among Australian males, the least preferred learning style is that of Reflector. If Australian educators are desirous of producing graduates who are measured in their decision making process and who take the opportunity to reflect on a range of options, then effort should be concentrated in developing a more reflective approach among this group.

The concept of treating all students as possessing the same learning style preferences is further confused when one considers the increasing diversity of students studying hospitality and tourism in major English speaking destination universities. Table 3. presents an indication of the differences in learning style preferences of students of Confucian heritage culture (those of Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese or Chinese nationality or ethnicity) in comparison with their domestic counterparts. It can be seen that Confucian heritage culture (CHC) students studying in Scotland, tend to demonstrate lower all round preferences, but have a slight preference for a Reflector style.

Table 3
MEAN SCORES FOR LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES BY NATIONALITY/ETHNICITY

	Scottish	Scottish	Australian	Australian
	CHC	Domestic	CHC	Domestic
Activist	54.0	59.0	53.0	58.0
Reflector	56.0	57.0	61.0	52.0
Theorist	56.0	61.0	57.0	57.0
Pragmatist	58.0	60.0	57.0	58.5

This is more clearly demonstrated in those CHC students studying in Australia who demonstrate a strong preference for a Reflector style and whose least preferred style is that of Activist. In both the Scottish and Australian cases, this is exactly the opposite from their domestic counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Educational institutions have a legal and moral obligation to provide students, who are having to pay increasing levels of fees, with a quality education. Arguably, the education provided will have a direct influence on the future number of both international and domestic students studying at that particular institution. One method of providing quality education that universities might adopt is a clearer recognition of students' learning styles. This research has demonstrated that, while there are some general similarities between students studying hospitality and tourism in Scotland and Australia, the composition of both cohorts presents a more complex picture. While it is not the recommendation of this paper that student cohorts should be separated into males and females and further segregated in order to comprise entirely of students of similar backgrounds, it is suggested that different learning styles might be taken into consideration when developing new subjects and programs, considering and implementing new teaching methods and, perhaps most importantly, planning assessment.

The consequences of such diversity amongst students' preferred learning styles presents lecturing staff with a number of challenges. First amongst these is the ability to cope with such a variety of styles during the delivery and assessment of subjects. It is contended that while the pressure placed on lecturing staff to cope with such a challenge might elicit somewhat negative responses concerning stress and workload, it might be suggested that the different learning style preferences, as demonstrated within the two groups of students, is an advantage and should be celebrated. Viewed positively, hospitality and tourism educators might use these identified differences to the advantage of all students. This might be achieved by using alternative means of assessment in order to develop a more reflective approach in students who display Activist preferences or presenting more rigorously structured subjects to students who have Reflector preferences.

In addition, educators may find that where learning style preferences are concerned, students learn from each other and that simply encouraging diversity in, for example, group exercises will result in the development of more rounded approaches to learning.

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