

CAN COVID-19 GUIDE STAKEHOLDERS TOWARDS FUTURE OF HOSPITALITY EDUCATION? A STUDY ON STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS FROM TRAINING WITH REFERENCE TO HOTEL MANAGEMENT INSTITUTES IN MUMBAI

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ABSTRACT

Background: Barring few sectors like healthcare, the COVID-19 pandemic had severely affected most of the business. Tourism and hospitality were amongst few industries harshly hit by the pandemic. In hospitality worst affected segment of HR were 'freshers' from hotel management institutes. With literally no experience and limited skills they have very few takers in industry with minimum emoluments in offering. **Objectives:** The prime objective of this paper is to find out the change in the perceptions of students from hospitality education after COVID-19 pandemic. **Methodology:** This is survey-based study. The responses were taken twice with same set of respondents, first when peak of second COVID wave was over and it looked that things will be normal in near future and second responses were taken when third COVID wave seemed to be inevitable in India. Total 135 students took part in both the surveys and their responses were recorded for further analysis. **Results:** Pandemic compelled students to think outside their usual choice of four major revenue producing department to commence their career. Marketing and sales, retail industry, HR and training were their preferred choice. Communication and technical skills, physical fitness, creativity and food safety were the attributes listed by them as essential for hospitality professionals. Further, respondents wanted subjects like personality development and communication skills, hotel specific accounting and marketing operations. HRM as practiced in hotel industry, food safety and hospital catering and investments and trading as core subjects in their syllabi. **Conclusion:** It is high time that hotel management institutes should shift their approach from four operational departments to other equally lucrative field like marketing and retail.

Key Words: Hospitality Training, Hotel Management Courses, COVID-19 Impact.

INTRODUCTION

On 11th March 2020, the Director General at World Health Organization (WHO) professed novel corona outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), WHO's highest level of alarm. Amid fast spreading COVID infections, Government of India imposed lockdown from

midnight of 24th March 2020 for 21 days followed by many others by central government and local administrations. As a reaction, hotel industry was forced to limit its operation only for house guests who were struck in hotels because of lockdown. As per the data as released by the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), in

FY'21, the Indian hotel industry has taken a hit of more than Rupees 1.30 lakh crore (US\$ 17.81 billion) in revenue due to impact of COVID -19 pandemic (IBEF, July 2021). With COVID-19 pandemic few sectors gained positively (like internet and technology) but sectors like hotels, restaurants, travel agencies and transport etc. suffered massively due to global lockdown but there is scarcity of literature and/or previous knowledge to predict the future of this pandemic (Jafari et al., 2021).

Tourism ministry engaged National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in January, 2021 to find out the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in tourism sector. As per the report by NCAER, total 14.5 million jobs were lost during first quarter of 2020-21, further 5.2 million jobs were lost in second quarter and another 1.8 million jobs were lost in third quarter. Report further predicted a recovery time of 3-4 years for tourism industry (Mathur, 2021).

This unprecedented situation created the problem of employment in front of hospitality professionals and most effected segment are the students of hotel management institutes passed out in last two academic years. Generally, most of the hotel management institutions design their programmes with main focus on four major revenue generating operational department of hotels i.e., Housekeeping, Food and Beverages Service, Front Office and Food Production with little exposure to subjects like Accounting, Management, Communication and IT skills etc. With literally no hand-on experience and limited skills, there are few takers for freshers in industry compelling students to think beyond their usual choice to work in one of the revenue producing operational departments.

The study tried to establish the aspirations of these students from their training and education in present times. As a result of COVID-19 pandemic most of the education and training activities shifted its focus to unconventional mode, Choi (2021) found out that focus group wanted blended education, and communication between trainer and students

was most effective factor towards training while Zhong et al. (2021) established that hospitality students were positive and had career loyalty and expected that industry will recover and they can make career of their choice in future, Zhong et al. (2021). Pandemic had seriously affected the hospitality education with challenges from technological issues, reduction in fresh enrollments and behavioural issues with students, Joshi and Gupta (2021), multiskilling, employee development, sense of hygiene, sanitation and related SOPs, optimism and crises management are need of the hour for hospitality professionals, Kaushal and Srivastava (2020).

Stimulation and attractiveness was found to be most attractive factors towards online hospitality education amongst students although satisfaction was marginal (Agyeiwaah et al., 2021). Students as well as teaching staff acknowledged that online education gave them the required time towards research activities but at the same time they were deprived of their social life in campuses and much needed monitoring and accessibility required in academic process for hospitality and tourism programmes Alrawadieh (2022), similarly the research by Park (2021) also supported virtual internship of hospitality students stating the it empowered learning experience that allowed students to capitalize on the practical strengths while applying classroom learning.

As guests prefer hotels to have stringent hygiene and sanitation protocols in place, management at hotels are compelled to depend on training towards COVID-19 protocols. Environmental management further generated guests' loyalty (Gupta & Sahu, 2021). Hospitality industry and educational institutes had responded to pandemic by adopting technological changes, profit management, training, service blueprinting and online education, Sanjeev and Tiwari (2021). To combat this type of situation/s in future, hospitality institutions need to be proactive, they need to create crises management plan, adopt modern technology in teaching learning process and engage all stakeholders in teaching process Piramanayagam (2023). An exhaustive research was

carried out by Menon et al. (2022) on 147 research articles published in Scopus indexed journal and found out that of total papers published towards hospitality education, 37% were focussed on transformational education and 63% on hybrid education and blended learning.

The hospitality industry needs to take steps to avoid brain drain of talent towards freshers passed out during COVID era and at the same time curriculum and delivery method also needs to be updated and modified as per industry requirements such as health and safety protocols, Sigala (2021) and the concept probed further, study by Xu et al. (2022) suggested that hospitality education should adopt technology, marketing, cultural diversity, safety/ crises management, entrepreneurship skills, critical thinking, leadership and teamwork in their curriculum. Thus, the literature suggests that enough work is done towards effectiveness of online education, impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education and in hotel industry but there is scope of study to be carried out on how COVID-19 changed students' expectations from hospitality education and this study shall try to figure out some of the fields/ courses or subjects that can be added in hospitality curriculum.

The objective of the study was:

- To find out the change in the perceptions of students from hospitality education after COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Mixed research approach with objectives to find out the change in respondents' expectations from hospitality training and education during the pandemic was adopted. A survey-based research approach was adopted to collect the necessary information and later with interaction with respondents a descriptive analysis was conducted to reach to conclusion.

Locale: The locale for the research were hotel management institutes situated in Mumbai and its suburbs. Total four institutes were selected for the study.

Sampling Design: The population for the study were the final year degree students of academic year 2021-22 of hotel management/hospitality studies programmes. Hospitality education is offered under various titles by state university, few deemed to be universities and open universities. The samples were collected twice from same group. Total 135 subjects took part in both the surveys and their responses were recorded for further analysis. Majority of personal interactions were conducted in third and fourth week of December 2021 and in first week of January 2022.

Tools and Technique: The data was collected in two rounds; it was purely on online mode for first round and mixed approach for second round of data/information collection. During second round personal interaction with student was given more emphasis and only a small amount of information was collected through online meeting apps.

Most of the hotel management institutes in Mumbai conducted term-end examination of academic year 2020-21 even semesters (II, IV and VI Sem) on online mode and commence odd semester classes (III and V semesters) for academic year 2021-22 from second/ third week of June 2021. Government of India commenced COVID vaccination drive from 16th January 2021. Amid vaccination drive India touch the peak of second COVID wave in end of March and beginning of April and by June 2021 it looked like the end of pandemic is near.

In the month of July-August 2021, the researcher conducted webinars for final year hotel management students on the career avenues in front of them after getting their degree and after webinar a questionnaire was circulated amongst students. The webinars focused on career options, attributes expected of freshers in hospitality, conducting self SWOT analysis and creating a road-map for eliminating weaknesses and identifying strength.

Eventually from October 2021, local administration gave permission to higher educational institutes for off-line classes with some COVID protocols to be followed. On November

20, 2021, WHO released a press note that next wave of COVID has already arrived in Europe and its very worrisome (BBC, 2021) ultimately many countries went again for complete lockdown and by December 2021 there were clear indications that the COVID infections surge in most probable, will hit India also. During second half of December 2021 and January 2022 when it was almost clear that end of pandemic is nowhere near, researcher visited institutes where webinars were conducted, had interactive sessions with students and again the same questionnaire was circulated to students. Students who changed/modified their responses were further probed to find out the reasons of their change of opinion. Ultimately, on 6th January 2022, state government issued order to close down educational institute in Mumbai till mid-February. Total 135 respondents took part in both the surveys and their responses were taken for the study.

Data Analysis and Statistical Analysis: The results of two survey were analysed. Frequency and percentage were calculated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The summary of responses towards the first survey (July-Aug 2021) are summarized as:

Table 1: Responses towards the choice of department respondents want to make their career in

S. No.	Department	No. of students	Percentage
1	Food Production	63	46.67
2	F&B Service	27	20.00
3	Front Office	27	20.00
4	Housekeeping	18	13.33

Although there are another 5 to 6 other major departments in hotels like HRD, accounts, marketing and sales, security,

maintenance, IT etc., almost all the respondents wanted to join one of four revenue generating operational department.

Table 2: Responses of choice of organization

S. No.	Organization	No. of students	Percentage
1	Multinational hotels	54	40.00
2	Any hotel of repute	36	26.67
3	Cruise ships	24	17.78
4	Airlines industry	09	6.67
5	Higher studies	12	8.89

There are number of types of hospitality installations like multinational ownership hotels, Indian chain hotels, hotels running on franchise model, standalone hotels, cruise liners, airlines, clubs, quick service restaurants, out-door catering etc. But most of the students either wanted to join hotels, cruise liners or airlines or wanted to go for higher studies, mainly abroad, before joining the industry.

Table 3: Skills/attributes as identified by respondents required to become successful professional

S. No.	Organization	No. of students	Percentage
1	Communication skills	83	23.06
2	Technical skills	81	22.50
3	Soft skills	74	20.56
4	Physical fitness	63	17.50
5	Creativity	39	10.83
6	Sanitation & food safety knowledge	20	5.56

Students were asked to list maximum 3 attributes which they

thought were most important for hospitality professional. Candidates listed total 14 different attributes mostly under technical skills and soft skills. Menu planning, food presentation, positive attitude, subject knowledge, leadership, negotiation skills and team spirit were main attributes as identified.

Table 4: Student's choice of non-revenue generating department to work as secondary choice

S. No.	Department	No. of students	Percentage
1	HRD	49	36.30
2	Marketing	41	30.37
3	Training & Development	24	17.78
4	IT	21	15.56

The main objective of this question was to let students do their self SWOT and map their personal attributes with the job-specific attributes and be aware of career avenues other than usual four operational departments.

Table 5: Responses towards choice of one core subject student want to include in their syllabus

S. No.	Department	No. of students	Percentage
1	Personality development & communication skills	31	22.96
2	Hotel accounting & controls	27	20.00
3	Nutrition & special diets	23	17.04
4	Hotel marketing	19	14.07
5	HR functions in hotels	18	13.33
6	Investment & trading	09	6.67
7	No comments	08	5.93

Objectives of this question was instigate student to further probe about the need and wants of industry and gap in their abilities. Students identified 6 subjects as required by them in their syllabus.

The responses as collected during second survey (January 2022) are summarized as:

Table 6: Feedback towards question on department students want to make their career

S. No.	Department	No. of students	Percentage
1	Food Production	51	37.78
2	F&B Services	20	14.81
3	Front Office	19	14.07
4	Housekeeping	22	16.30
5	Marketing & Sales	12	8.89
6	Retail Industry	11	8.15

A shift in preference was noticed with nearly 17% of candidate opted for departments like marketing and retail as career choice, which was not there during first round of survey.

Table 7: Summary of responses towards type of organization in round 2 of survey

S. No.	Organization	No. of students	Percentage
1	Multinational hotels	49	36.30
2	Any hotel of repute, fine dine & QSRs	36	26.67
3	Cruise ships	19	14.07
4	Airlines studies	04	2.96
5	Higher studies	16	11.85
6	Retail Industry	11	8.15

One major shift third wave of COVID 19 made to students' preferences was decline in airlines and multinational hotels as organizations/ fields to commence the career in. Students were open to work for QSRs and fine-dine restaurants and there was increased interest for higher studies. Retail industry was additional filed which was not listed during first round.

Table 8: Matrix showing the attributes as identified by respondents necessary for hospitality professional

S. No.	Organization	No. of students	Percentage
1	Communication skills	89	24.72
2	Technical skills	81	22.50
3	Soft skills	72	20.00
4	Physical fitness	75	20.83
5	Creativity	35	9.72
6	Sanitation and food safety	26	7.02

Slight change in trend was notice with respondents gave more weightage to physical fitness and food safety aspects with marginal drop in communication skills and creativity.

Table 9: Feedback received for career choice amongst non-revenue producing department

S. No.	Organization	No. of students	Percentage
1	HRD	49	36.30
2	Marketing	49	36.30
3	Training and development	18	13.33
4	Information technology	19	14.07

Here shift was noticed for marketing as preferred choice and

marginal drop in training and I.T wherein respondents wanted to work in.

Table 10: Choice of subject/s students want to include as core subject in their syllabi

S. No.	Department	No. of students	Percentage
1	Personality development & communication skills	29	21.48
2	Hotel accounting & controls	25	18.52
3	Nutrition & special diets	21	15.56
4	Hotel marketing	23	17.04
5	HR functions in hotels	22	16.03
6	Investment & trading	09	6.67
7	Food safety & hospital catering	06	4.44

Initially almost all the students wanted to join the industry in one of the four revenues producing operational departments of hotels with maximum respondents wanted to join food production department (46.67%), the main reason for their choice was that students wanted to go abroad or in shipping industry as being a chef was considered as 'safe career'. Next in priority was F&B service and front office (20% respondents each) the reason respondents gave for their choice was that they had good communication skills, they like to meet people and extra income in terms of points (tips). 18% respondents preferred to make their career in housekeeping as they thought that it's a career with equal career opportunities beyond hotel industry like in malls, corporate offices, call-centers and high-end residential complexes. This trend also reflected the attitude of hospitality training which only concentrates on these four verticals and maximum resources in terms of faculty quality, practical training, infrastructure etc. are allocated to these subjects.

It was quite clear that third wave of COVID pandemic compelled the student to rethink their choice of department to make career in. From 46.67%, during third wave only 37.78% students were eager to work in food production department, the main reasons were mainly increased competition as students from last two batches were also not placed and anticipation of lesser compensation and more work pressure as hotels would hire lesser than required staff to cut costs. For similar reasons, around 6% subjects from front office and F&B service also shifted their options. However, housekeeping as career choice saw only marginal dip (from 18% to 16.3%). Around 8.89% students shifted their preferences to marketing, reasons being they had option to go in other industries like pharmaceuticals, high-end hospitals, D2C space etc. Another 8.15% respondents wanted to try retail industry as they thought that it would bounce back faster than hotel industry.

When respondents were asked about their preferences of types of organizations maximum number of them wanted to work with multinational hotels, reasons were impartial environment, chances of development & growth and staff policies. Next were any hotel of repute, since many of students wanted to hone their skills in initial years of their career, they were even ready to work in fine-dine restaurants or small properties. A good number of students wanted to make their career in cruise liners as they felt that Mumbai being the hub of shipping company's offices, they stand better opportunities to get chances of selection for onboard ship jobs. Higher studies were planned by 8.89% candidates, mainly to get a chance to go abroad and explore career options there. A small number of respondents wanted to work for airlines industry.

When asked the same question before onset of third COVID wave the choice of multinational hotels reduced from 40% to 36.3% mainly on anticipation of tougher competition. Any organization of repute to commence career remained same as 26.67%, however, students were ready to work in restaurants and QSRs also to gain skills. Realizing that the airlines industry also struggling towards revival, the demand for it

dropped from 6.67% to 2.96%. A marginal increase was noticed in students' preferences towards higher education i.e., from 8.89% to 11.85%, they perceived it as foundation for better career (apart from opportunity of going abroad and settle there). 8.15% students were clear about their vision of joining retail industry after their degree, the lot was convinced that retail has great future.

Respondents were given option to list maximum of three attributes which they thought were most important for them towards selection in organization of their choice. Maximum of responses were towards communication skills. Communication skills is already a subject in most of the hotel management courses but as per students, the syllabus of these subjects were focused on enhancing written, official communication skills whereas they want to improve their oral communication and presentation skills. Technical skills were another important attribute listed by students. On confrontation that technical skills are integral part of their programmes, many confessed that they did not pay much attention towards it in initial year of enrollment in the programme. Soft skills, specially developing positive attitude, time management, self-motivation, conflict management and negotiation skills were next attributes desirous by respondents. Quite-a-few number of students (17.50%) acknowledged the importance of physical fitness to be successful professional, many of the students confessed that pandemic had made them addicted to electronic gadgets and to be physically fit is a big challenge for them. Around 5.5% of students felt that awareness towards food safety and sanitation as generated by COVID-19 pandemic is here to stay so attributed it to professional success.

On second round of responses, there was slight change in opinion of respondents. Communication skills got more recognition as attribute towards successful professional, its ranking increased from 23.06% to 24.72%. Ratings of technical skills remained same with 22.50%, same was the case with soft skills with around 20% scores. Importance of

creativity as attribute dropped slightly from 10.83% to 9.72%, the reasons being the higher scores given to attributes of physical fitness (from 17.5% to 20.83%) and food safety i.e., from 5.56% to 7.22%.

In the first round of survey, when students were asked that if they could not get a chance to work in revenue producing department, where they would want to work in, human resource development was their first choice it was followed by marketing and sales. training & development and I.T were third and fourth choice for the students.

During second round of survey, it was observed that candidate's choice of marketing as career option increased (from 30.37% to 36.30%) as they felt that it had scope beyond hotel industry. It was unaffected for HRD (36.30%), a drop of approximately 4% for training and development (from 17.78% to 13.33%) and marginal drop for IT (from 15.56% to 14.07%) was noticed.

The final year students of academic year 2021-22 attended the college when they were in first year on off-line mode. COVID pandemic forced them to undergo on-line classes in second year and partially in final year (V Semester). When physical classes were not going on, there were many webinars and counselling sessions organized for them by their institutes with objective to compensate for off-line practical they were losing towards their holistic development as hospitality professional. Having being exposed to varied environments, one of the most important questions asked to them was one of the subjects they want the authorities to include in their programme. As they are in best position to assess and analyze their training needs, their responses can act as guidelines to stakeholders to include their suggestions in curriculum designing.

During first as well as second survey first choice of subject for respondents was 'personality development and communication skills' (22.96% and 21.48% respectively), respondents wanted this subject to be taught by industry professional like senior training manager of hotels of repute

and more practical oriented. They had aspirations of enhancing their grooming, spoken English, interview skills, public speaking and express themselves better. It was followed by 'hotel accounting and controls' as a subject (20% in first and 18.52% in second survey). Students felt that financial management is vital for success of any venture and many of them wanted to be entrepreneurs in long term. One common complaint was that traditional accounting is the part of syllabus which any case has to be taken care by professional accountants. Student wanted accounting in term of operations i.e., developing financial plans for hotels, calculating valuation of running hotels, food cost controls, calculating room tariffs and its analysis and other aspects of accounting and controls as exercised by operational managers. Many of respondents were of opinion that awareness towards special diets is here to stay. Many parents want their wards to adopt diet plan as per their activities, there may be job potential in armed forces, sports complexes, boarding schools, hospitals etc. so 'nutrition and special diets' was choice of 17.04% respondents in first response and 15.56% respondents voted for it in second response. For hotel marketing as core subject, respondents give scores of 14.07% in first survey which increased to 17.04% in second survey but again they wanted it to be hotel industry specific with many case studies and interaction with industry experts.

Similar trend was noticed for next expectancy i.e., HR functions in hotels. Candidates wanted hotel industry specific HR functions to be include in syllabus. HR SOPs of hotels could be taken for teaching and learning process. Investment and trading were preferred choice for 6.67% respondents. 5.93% students in first response and 4.44% students in second response did not had any specific choice.

The batch under study missed their Industrial Training because of lockdown and with that missed an opportunity to have hands-on experience and gauge their personal traits and that of requirements of each department and decide as in which department they should make their career in (Kumar, 2014)

nevertheless, it is high time that hotel management institutes should shift their approach from four operational departments to other equally lucrative field like marketing and retail. It should be made more meaningful (Nachmias, 2017).

Hotels can take a note that freshers' want to work in a place wherein there is impartial environment, fair scope of growth & development and favorable staff policies. However, another important dimension was opportunities of honing trade specific skills.

During interaction with students, it was expectation of many students that institutes help them with confidence of developing communication skills specially pertaining to public speaking. But these students were worse hit by pandemic and need more than remedial classes and regular counselor (Chen et al., 2021).

Institutions should also have an active alumnus with regular senior-junior interaction. Senior can always guide the juniors with common mistakes or mis-perceptions about hospitality education as many students felt that they did not took training very seriously and lose out on honing their basic skills (Cha et al., 2013).

Amongst soft skills, the main attributes as acknowledged by respondents were attitude, conflict management, negotiation skills, stress management, team management and time management.

As youngsters are more aware of physical fitness, hotels can think of creating gyms or indoor games or any other means towards fitness for staff. It can act as talent retention factor. A good thing is that youngster believe that situation will recover much sooner then it is expected and are keeping them ready for it (Shah et al., 2020).

Most of syllabus in F&B division concentrates on fine-dine operations but institutes can include basic knowledge of institutional catering like armed forces, hospital and sports diets etc.

COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to hospitality training institutions to relook to their education and training

system and brace for changes, students strongly pitched their opinion that apart from training of four revenue generating departments, training of marketing and HR as skills-based subjects can also be included as core subjects. It should be specific to functions as carried out in hotel industry. Similar opinion was given for financial management and accounting as subject where concepts of stores control, food cost calculations and control, revenue management (specific to hotel industry) in hotels etc. are inducted. Students wanted personality development and communication skills as practical based interactive subject with minimal of theory component.

The batch under study missed their Industrial Training because of lockdown and with that missed an opportunity to have hands-on experience and gauge their personal traits and that of requirements of each department and decide as in which department they should make their career in (Kumar, 2014). The course should be made more meaningful (Nachmias, 2017). These students were worse hit by pandemic and need more than remedial classes and regular counsellor (Chen & Ming-Hsiang, 2021). Senior can always guide the juniors with common mistakes or mis-perceptions about hospitality education as many students felt that they did not took training very seriously and lose out on honing their basic skills (Cha et al., 2013). A good thing is that youngster believe that situation will recover much sooner then it is expected and are keeping them ready for it (Shah et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Hotels can take a note that freshers' want to work in a place wherein there is impartial environment, fair scope of growth and development and favorable staff policies. However, another important dimension was opportunities of honing trade specific skills. During interaction with students, it was expectation of many students that institutes help them with confidence of developing communication skills specially pertaining to public speaking. Institutions should also have an

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COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to hospitality training institutions to relook to their education and training system and brace for changes, students strongly pitched their opinion that apart from training of four revenue generating departments, training of marketing and HR as skills-based subjects can also be included as core subjects. It should be specific to functions as carried out in hotel industry. Similar opinion was given for financial management and accounting as subject where concepts of stores control, food cost calculations and control, revenue management (specific to hotel industry) in hotels etc. are inducted. Students wanted personality development and communication skills as practical based interactive subject with minimal of theory component.

The study was conducted only for students enrolled under three years hospitality studies degree or a like programmes. The study concentrated on educational institutes situated in or near the city of Mumbai on a very small group of respondents so the result may/may not be applicable to large group. A similar study can be carried out for students enrolled/ freshly passed out from four years degree programmes, post-graduates or enrolled in short term diploma and under different

courses under skill India programme. Studies can also be undertaken for other metros, tier-II and tier III cities. The survey was carried out on small group, result may/may not be same for entire population.

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