

Why Students Choose a Hospitality-degree Program

An Australian Case Study

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Contrary to some research and common wisdom, few of the students in this study relied on other people's advice when choosing a college and a course of study.

A considerable body of work seeks to explain how students decide which college to attend and what they wish to study. The bulk of this work, however, relied on responses from matriculated college students. This paper reports on the reasons why high-school students chose to enroll in a hospitality-degree course at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia. As we describe in some detail below, our results suggest that students see

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Exhibit 1

Typology of adult-student motivations

Type of goal	Examples
Career	- To carry out present job more effectively - To gain promotion in present job - To change jobs - To be able to re-enter the job market
Social	- To make new friends - To meet members of the opposite sex - To feel a sense of belonging
Escape or stimulation	- To get relief from boredom - To get a break from the routine of home or work
Cognitive	- To learn for the sake of learning - To pursue an interest in a subject for its own sake
Personal fulfillment	- To gain self confidence - To develop one's full potential - To prove some thing to oneself
Role development	- To become a better parent, spouse - To become a better citizen, trade unionist, colleague, manager
Obligation fulfillment	- To comply with instructions from someone else - To carry out expectations of someone with formal authority
Practical skill	For example, to learn how to mend cars or make cakes
Health and well-being	- For example, to keep fit, lose weight, or learn a sport - To further one's spiritual well-being

Source A Woodley, A Wagner, L Slowey, M Hamilton, and O Fulton, *Choosing to Learn Adults in Education* (Milton Keynes, U K Open University Press, 1987), p. 4

the university as a cluster of attributes that includes teachers, facilities, and services. In addition, we found that the students' choice of a university was based on the reputation and availability of a particular course of study rather than the overall reputation of the university.

Student choice. In Australia, many college-level opportunities exist to study hospitality management. Those choices include vocation-oriented technical colleges, government-endorsed universities, and private institutions. Every year about 150 students choose the catering and hotel-management undergraduate-degree course offered at Victoria University. We set out to identify the reasons behind how those choices were made.

Specifically, the aim of our research was to explore the perceptual, structural, personal, and environ-

mental issues that students sifted through to arrive at their final choice of a school. The purpose was to help the university revise and enhance its courses and support mechanisms within the School of Hospitality, Tourism, and Marketing. Our study used a combination of focus-group interviews and a quantitative questionnaire to explore those factors that affected student choices regarding specific hospitality courses. The study was conducted during 1996, and participants included the majority of 1996's first-year students who enrolled in the university's bachelor-degree program for catering and hotel management.

What Others Found

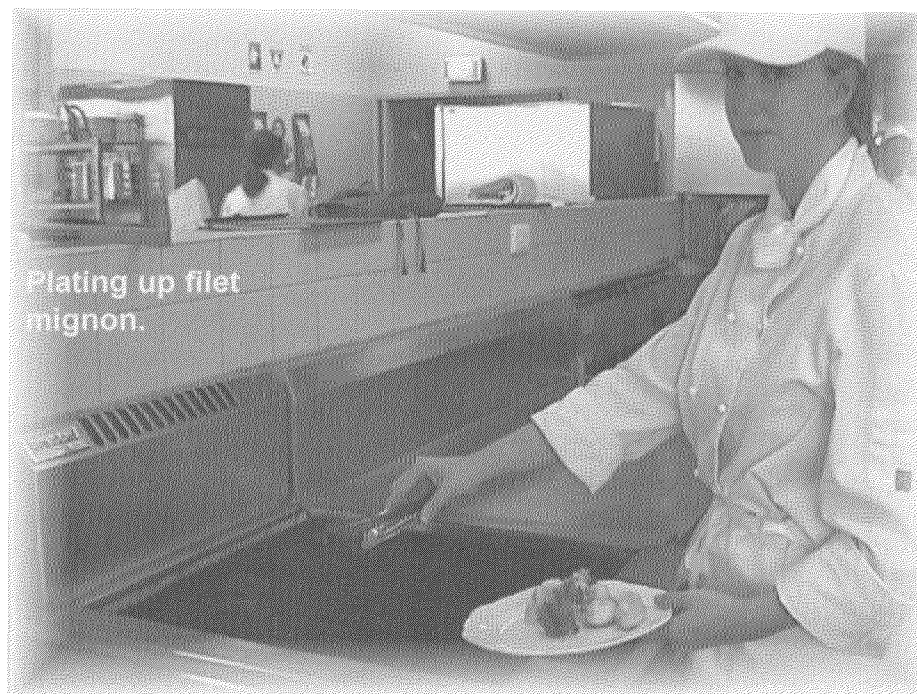
As previously noted, the issue of students' college choice has been the subject of a number of investi-

gations that attempted to develop an understanding of what motivates students to engage in college-level education.¹ Much of that work has been collated and synthesized into a typology of adult-student motivations (see Exhibit 1).² The typology seeks to explain (1) why adults participate in education and (2) why individuals select a particular course of study.

The researchers who compiled the typology found that there are marked differences in the college choices made by different age groups. Students in the 21 to 30 age group, for example, chose to study at colleges that offered specialized courses rather than at conventional universities. That suggests that motivation, in this instance, may have been associated with obtaining the credentials required to obtain employment in a particular profession or industry. Similarly, a 1995 survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics into educational attainment and employment in the state of Victoria found that:

¹See, for example C O Houle, *The Inquiring Mind* (Madison University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), R Boshier, "Motivational Orientations for Adult Education Participants A Factor Analytic Exploration of Houle's Typology," *Adult Education*, Vol 21, No 4 (1971), pp 3-26, P Burgess, "Reasons for Adult Participation in Group Educational Activities," *Adult Education*, Vol 22, No 1 (1971), pp 3-29, J M Peters and S Gordon, *Adult Learning Projects A Study of Adult Learning In Urban and Rural Tennessee* (Knoxville University of Tennessee Press, 1974), B R Morstain and J C Smart, "Reasons for Participation in Adult Education Courses A Multivariate Analysis of Group Differences," *Adult Education*, Vol 24, No 2 (1974), pp 83-98, A Tough, *The Adult Learners Projects* (Toronto Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1979), K P Cross, *Adults as Learners* (San Francisco Jossey-Bass, 1981), A Woodley, A Wagner, L Slowey, M Hamilton, and O Fulton, *Choosing to Learn Adults in Education* (Milton Keynes, U K Open University Press, 1987), and K Purcell, "Managing Change from an Educational Perspective The International Careers and Choices Survey," a paper presented at the International Hotel Association's human-resource management forum, Sydney (October 1984)

²Woodley et al, op cit



Victoria University's teaching facilities include a commercial kitchen, which students learn how to operate from a managerial perspective. Hands-on training covers such topics as the development of menus, creation of standard recipes, food costing, and labor scheduling. Food for Victoria's Cityscape restaurant is prepared fresh each day by the students, who start work at 8:00 AM, to be ready by noon. The students workers are responsible for all aspects of food production.

The most frequently stated reason for people obtaining their most recent qualification was for career purposes. This included those obtaining a qualification in order to get a specific position (61.9 percent, or 693,500) followed by the need to be competitive in the job market (26.1 percent, or 296,400), and then as a hobby or for self interest (22.1 percent, or 247,200). Multiple reasons could be stated.³

In Victoria, Australia, Kidd looked at high-school students enrolled in year 12 and attempted to define how that group would make its college-course selections.⁴ In summary, Kidd maintains that those students made college-course choices based on their aptitude and abilities that emerged during their high-school years. Furthermore, Kidd asserted that students who exhibited high levels of achievement in science and mathematics in high

school, for example, normally went on to study courses of a similar nature in college, such as engineering or science.

Kidd's thesis is predicated on a behavioral model that was posited by Holland in 1985.⁵ Holland theorized that there are six personality types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. There are also six "model environments" that mimic those personality types. Holland claimed that there is an association between the environments in which people live and their personality types, and he further asserted that the pairing of persons and environments can be used to predict and understand behavior based on a knowledge of both personality types and environmental models. That behavior includes vocational choice, vocational stability and achievement, educational choice and achievement, personal competence, social behavior,

and susceptibility to influence.⁶ Regarding Holland's model, Kidd asserts that

it is explicit in the theoretical model of the conventional type that a particular pattern of preferences, competencies, self-perceptions, and values predisposes the conventional person to be "careful," "conforming," "efficient," "inflexible," "methodical," "persistent," and "imaginative."⁷

Some students' course choices, however, were not readily explicable in the terms of Holland's model as applied in Kidd's own study. By way of explanation Kidd suggested that a number of influences external to the student's environment were significant. Those, however, were not measured or examined. He speculated that occupational interest, for example, was a powerful determinant of course choice, in addition to student aptitude and environmental influence.

As a result of Kidd's findings, we decided that our study would solicit

³Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Education Attainment and Employment* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1995), p. 2.

⁴G.J. Kidd, "The Predictive Power of Measured Interests in Tertiary Course Choice: The Case of Science," M.Ed. thesis, Department of Education, University of Melbourne, 1987.

⁵J.L. Holland, *Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments*, second edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985).

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Kidd, p. 16.

information from students about their knowledge of and interest in the hospitality industry; the influence of their parents, career counselors, and peers; and their experiences as customers in the hospitality industry, as well as how those experiences may have affected their decision to engage in hospitality studies. Those issues were included among the questions we asked our study participants.

Focus Groups and a Questionnaire

Our project's first step involved gaining insights into the principal motivating factors behind students' decisions to choose a university-level hospitality course and, more specifically, Victoria University's hospitality courses. To do that we started with a qualitative data-collection method, namely focus groups. According to Patton, "...qualitative methods are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic"⁸ In contrast with the hypothetical-deductive approach of experimental design, this method allows the researcher to begin the research process without specifying a hypothesis.⁹ In this instance, focus-group interviews were used to elicit responses from students. Three separate focus groups were convened, each comprising from six to eight students. Group members were categorized according to the method by which they had entered the university, as follows:

- (1) Students entering directly from high school via the Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre,¹⁰

- (2) Students matriculating from further-education and technical hospitality courses,¹¹ and
- (3) Students transferring from other degree courses, both at Victoria University and at other universities.

Participants in the focus groups provided us with information on the sorts of decision-making processes that they employ when choosing a university and college-level course of study. For example, factors that were identified as important included the role of so-called "influencers" (e.g., parents, teachers, clergy, and peers) and expectations of the course. The techniques described by students regarding how they eliminated certain educational choices (and why) were also interesting and valuable.

Based on the students' responses as well as those related factors that we gleaned from the relevant literature, we developed a five-point Likert-style questionnaire. The questionnaire included 86 items presented as a series of statements that students were asked to rate from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Of the 154 first-year students who matriculated at Victoria University's bachelor-degree program for catering and hotel management in 1996, 143 completed the questionnaire. Most of those new students came from the state of Victoria (127, or 89 percent), of whom 93 (65 percent) had entered the university directly from high school. The sample was predominantly female (110, or 77 percent).

What We Found

Replies to our questionnaire revealed that 76 of the 143 students

(53 percent) had decided to study at the university before selecting a course in hospitality studies. In other words, those students had the goal of attending college even before they decided what particular course they should study. Slightly more than a third of the students (53) reported that they had decided to study at the university at the same time that they decided to embark on a hospitality career. Only 10 percent had made their decision to pursue a career in the hospitality industry before they chose a specific course of study.

Getting advice. The role of parents, teachers, school counselors, and peers was not rated as an important factor by these students. Indeed, the questions that measured those influences were among the lowest scored on the questionnaire. We found that result particularly interesting because "influencers" were identified as being important in all three of the focus-group discussions.

Other responses indicated that the students had been influenced by positive perceptions of the hospitality industry. Those perceptions resulted from (1) personal observations, (2) personal experience as casual or part-time employees, (3) media reports on the projected rates of growth in the hospitality industry, and (4) discussions with other referent groups, such as relatives or family friends who work in the hospitality industry.

Victoria's secret weapon. These students indicated that one of the major strengths of the Victoria University course was its one-year, industry internship, which students complete during their third year. As well as the possibilities for travel afforded by this program, it was seen as providing the opportunity to put theory into practice. The reputation of the

⁸M. Q. Patton, *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation* (Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1987), p. 15.

⁹See *Ibid.*, and S. Merriam, *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

¹⁰The Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre is a government body that administers university entry for high-school graduates.

¹¹Technical and Further Education Institutes are equivalent to US vocational or community colleges.

university's teaching staff was also important—not only in terms of the teachers' talent, but also with regard to faculty members' friendliness, availability to consult with students, and general interest in students' career aspirations. It was also particularly important to these students that the hospitality course was well regarded both nationally and internationally.

In looking at the students' responses, we found that the students generally and consistently acknowledged that a university is not a homogenous entity. Rather it was seen to consist of a variety of attributes ranging from the reputation of the course and course content to the quality of its faculty, facilities, and services.

No “Kidd”-ing. We found no evidence to support Kidd's theory of student motivation (i.e., that students choose to study in courses that are linked to subjects in which they excelled in high school). The entry requirements for the course at Victoria University, however, are likely to have had an impact on student motivation because entry is based on applicants reaching an overall Tertiary Entrance Rank, determined by the combined results of end-of-high-school exams, rather than the scores obtained in specific subjects. Moreover, the links between high-school subjects and the skills required to master hospitality studies are not well defined or easily identified.

There were some similarities, however, between our findings and those of Woodley and his colleagues.¹² In that study, students aged 21 to 30 chose to enroll at colleges that offered specialist courses in preference to conventional universities. Similarly, in our study the choice of college was

based on the reputation and availability of a specialist course (i.e., hospitality) rather than the overall reputation of the university. The students in our study, however, were in the age group 18 to 22.

Choosing a College, then a Career, then the Coursework

In this study a substantial number of students (more than half) chose to attend college even before choosing a career. That is, the decision to pursue a career in the hospitality industry followed the decision to pursue a university qualification. Choosing specific university courses from among the available options followed after the first two choices had been made. That seems to suggest that the choice of a hospitality course at university level was a second or third preference. For example, students who did not achieve the entry requirements to study, say, law may have enrolled in hospitality studies instead.

The timing of students' decisions is seen as important, too. In Australia, students complete their final high-school examinations in November, and it is the results of those examinations that determine their Tertiary Entrance Rank. The test results are published in January of the following year and university classes begin in late February.

As noted earlier, some respondents chose university study and a career simultaneously (53 of 143, or 37 percent). On the one hand, it is feasible that some of those students may have delayed their study and career decisions until their exam results were published in January. On the other hand, it may be that an existing desire to enter the hospitality industry at some level was facilitated by an exam score that enabled them to enter the industry via a degree-level course. (Alterna-

tively, for those prospective students who found that their test scores were too low to allow college admission, there are vocational courses, courses delivered by private providers, and the chance to enter the industry without a formal qualification.)

Johnny-come-latelies. Since 76 of the 143 students in our study entered college without having first chosen their career, it is likely that those students have little knowledge of the hospitality industry or how it operates. This has implications for teaching and the manner by which faculty members convey the nature of the industry to students. Consider, for example, that college instructors may be the first formal point of contact with the industry that many of these students experience. If the teachers do not adequately present and convey an accurate picture of the nature and demands of the industry, then students may develop false impressions that could lead to significant personal dissonance upon graduation and assimilation into the industry. In particular, the issues of hard work, long hours, and the multiple skills required to be successful—all typical of the Australian hospitality industry as well as elsewhere—may provide a rude awakening to the naïve graduate.

Marketing. Finally, since we found that students perceive a university as a collection of attributes rather than as a homogenous entity, it may be possible to identify distinct market segments based on prospective students' relative sensitivities to the delivery and importance of those attributes. As such, some university administrations may need to reconsider the management and presentation of their university's resources to the wider market place of existing and future students. CQ

¹²Woodley *et al.*, *op cit*