

# Analysing the implications of hospitality and culinary educators' tacit knowledge utilization

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## Abstract

The current study examines the workplace issues that affect hospitality and culinary arts educators (HCAEs) in fully utilising personal tacit knowledge gained from their working experience in the industry in a vocational education setting. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the factors impeding HCAEs' tacit knowledge utilisation and determine their consequences on the teaching and learning process. Sixty-two HCAEs were interviewed face-to-face. Through the data analysis, four significant factors were identified that affect tacit knowledge utilisation within a vocational educational institution. These factors are related to forces that affect HCAEs at an individual level, and they are divided into four categories: (a) knowledge issues, (b) employment issues, (c) training and learning issues, and (d) organisational issues. The consequences have a serious impact on the innovation process in teaching and learning, while opportunities to capitalise on the knowledge exchange process are lost. The lack of a learning organisational culture and ineffective organisational structures in relation to operating standards results in HCAEs being unable to effectively stimulate their students' absorptive capacity. Thus, the learn-by-doing approach to support the learning outcomes of a course and improve the professional/vocational aspects of the program focuses only on the dry teaching dimension and the assigned curriculum.

## Keywords:

Tacit knowledge; hospitality; culinary arts; education; knowledge sharing; problems

## **1 Introduction**

The effective use of tacit knowledge is an important factor in supporting good-quality teaching, learning, and operating standards (Anastasiou, 2017; Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2015; Guchait, Namasivayam & Lei, 2011). Tacit knowledge, as a valuable and intangible organisational asset, may lead to a unique knowledge-based competitive advantage and accelerated internal organisational growth, by engaging individuals in a long and multifaceted learning process for mutual benefit (Mahapa, 2013; Skinnarland & Sharp, 2012). In such a learning process, a person's tacit knowing, expertise, and know-how advances and innovates teaching and learning by exposing students to unique professional wisdom. Thus, it supports the organisational culture by building a collective and a cohesive team of learning and knowledge-based–practicing stakeholders (Geisler & Wickramasinghe, 2015).

Although various knowledge management programs have been developed in the hospitality and tourism industry, particularly in international hotel chains, in a hospitality and culinary arts higher education setting, little is known on the topic. Along with the demand and complexity of the teaching and learning process in higher education, the operating and profitability standards of a college, and the interactions between educators and students, there is a need to secure learning outcomes achievement and to comply with the quality criteria set by the quality assurance agency. Consequently, the diversification of tasks and people within a hospitality and culinary arts higher education setting impedes educators' tacit knowledge utilisation (Anastasiou, 2017).

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Defining tacit knowledge**

For the current study, tacit knowledge utilisation is defined as the effective use of skills, knowledge, and experience that have been developed by a person while performing particular duties (Bennet & Bennet, 2008) in the hospitality or culinary arts industry. Such tacit knowing is expressed through the capability of an individual to reflect, think critically, solve problems, and make an effective decision based on personal knowledge, skills, and experience. This is observed now when a person is practising or implementing formal organisational procedures in order to achieve operating and quality standards (Anastasiou, 2017). Consequently, educators' tacit knowledge is an important organisational asset and a compulsory element in improving the teaching and learning process (Alosaimi, 2016; Mohajan, 2017), and, hence, a crucial element as well in complying with the criteria of the quality assurance agency.

### **2.2 Background**

The literature presents a plethora of cases and organisations that have developed both explicit and implicit knowledge management programs related to service quality and productivity standards (Kim, Lee, Chun & Benbasat, 2015; Nicely, Palakurthi, &

Gooden, 2011; Parayani, Masoudi, & Cudney, 2010). This was the finding of a workplace observation concerning the unpredictable attitude and different requests in a service- and human-intensive industry (Anastasiou, 2014). At an operational level, an individual may not be able to respond successfully to the change and react appropriately by following only explicit and formal procedures (Mahapa, 2013). Operating and service consistency and productivity were found to be related to the degree to which individuals utilise their tacit knowledge (Banu, Muthyal, & Desai, 2013; Kim et al., 2015; Sigala & Chalkiti, 2007; Skinnarland & Sharp, 2012).

By exploring the factors that prevent and affect the utilisation of educators' tacit knowledge, it may be possible for hospitality and culinary arts educators (HCAEs) to advance best practices and achieve sustainable development and innovation in the teaching and learning process of a professional or vocational program of study. Tacit knowledge management, however, can be seen as a new concept in hospitality and culinary arts higher education (Anastasiou, 2017; Banu et al., 2013; Mahapa; 2013; Skinnarland & Sharp, 2012). As such, there is a need for an increased understanding of the factors that prevent and affect educators' tacit knowledge utilisation in enhancing the teaching and learning process.

Those factors have not yet received a similar level of research and academic interest as in other service-oriented industries (Cheng, 2008; Gomez, 2011; Guchait et al., 2011; Idrees, Vasconcelos, & Cox, 2011; Sigala & Chalkiti, 2007; Zehrer, 2011). HCAEs' tacit knowledge utilisation in the teaching and learning process in higher education has become crucial as competition, and the quality assurance process of higher education institutions has changed the nature of professional and vocational education into a knowledge-intensive business (Mahapa, 2013). HCAEs' tacit knowledge could be utilised as training and learning tools in a work-based learning process, assisting students in learning more effectively about corresponding service procedures and standards.

For example, students would be able to learn from HCAEs' tacit knowledge and better understand when, for what reason, and in what way they should set aside scheduled duties and go for extra miles in order to adapt to service changes and requests (Sanchez-Hernandez & Francisco, 2011; Usoro & Majewski, 2011). As a result, HCAEs could contribute to the development of future organisational knowledge experts by preparing students for career advancement with highly competitive employability skills. Therefore, the effectiveness of HCAEs in infusing the teaching and learning process with their personal tacit knowledge is imperative to innovate and sustain learning outcomes achievement (Anastasiou, 2017).

However, the utility of tacit knowledge as an input in the hospitality and culinary arts industry is only beginning to be acknowledged (Holste & Fields, 2010; Mahapa, 2013; Sanchez-Hernandez & Francisco, 2011; Usoro & Majewski, 2011); hence, it has received no particular attention in hospitality and culinary arts higher education. There are three major reasons for the limited awareness concerning the utility of HCAEs' tacit knowledge in hospitality and culinary arts higher education. The first reason for

inadequate understanding has to do with the limited connection between the industry and academic research.

The second reason concerns the direct involvement of the investors in the daily operations of higher education institutions. In these cases, most of the managerial positions are fulfilled by the investors themselves (Cheng, 2008). Investors focus on financial outcomes and cost efficiencies and so, about their lack of direct involvement in academics, the knowledge exchange process may be thwarted (Kandampully, Juwaheer, & Hu, 2011; Marvel & Droege, 2010). As a result, HCAEs' interactions are focused mainly on executing their duties as per the job description, and thus, the lack of interpersonal actions may prevent or affect the knowledge exchange process. Knowledge sharing and utilisation mechanisms require extensive time and money investments, but the investors may not be willing to spend on these, and as such, do not acknowledge their operational importance.

The third reason, according to Cheng (2008), concerns confusion about the applicability and utility of tacit knowledge in the service delivery process. The concept of knowledge management was primarily developed by information technology-related industries, multinational companies, and manufacturing organisations. Human interaction, multifaceted aspects, and the perishable nature of hotel services were not considered. Consequently, not much attention was given to the utility of HCAEs' tacit knowledge in the teaching and learning process and in supporting students to advance professionally. Hence, limited understanding exists concerning the factors that prevent and affect HCAEs' tacit knowledge utilisation. Since no adequate information exists regarding this topic, this study focused on the factors that prevent and affect HCAEs from utilising their tacit knowledge in the teaching and learning process in the Cypriot hospitality and culinary vocational institutions.

### **2.3 Problem statement**

The problem in this study concerns the various factors in the operating, teaching, and learning process that prevent HCAEs from utilising their tacit knowledge within higher education institutions. HCAEs are forced to effectively complete their assigned courses' curricula and achieve the pre-set learning outcomes of assigned courses within a strict time limit. Thus, standardization of the teaching process with respect to the quality criteria, standards, and requests of DI.P.A.E. (Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education) limits any opportunity to fully utilise personal tacit knowledge and enrich the learning experience, particularly for a vocational program such as a hospitality or culinary arts program. Consequently, an opportunity to infuse the students' learning environment with real and actual work-based wisdom in order to advance future employees' professional knowledge, skills, and expertise in the context of the program's curriculum is missed.

## **2.4 Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore HCAEs' perceptions regarding factors that prevent them from utilising their tacit knowledge, and the associated implications, in higher educational settings and particularly in hospitality and culinary arts vocational programs. It is then followed by the consequences of the factors impeding tacit knowledge utilisation which were to be examined in order to understand their impact on the teaching and learning experience in hospitality and culinary arts higher education settings.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Descriptive qualitative case-study**

A descriptive qualitative case-study research design was employed to examine the opinions and perceptions of HCAEs working in various higher education and private hospitality and culinary arts institutions in Cyprus. Full-time and part-time faculty members working in different higher education institutions were invited to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit individuals who could provide information-rich data (Patton, 2015). For selecting all participants, the criterion sampling strategy was used. The participants were selected based on prior work experience, education, and expertise in the field (Flick, 2008; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2017). The sample size was determined by data saturation point. Sixty-two HCAEs were interviewed face-to-face. A validated interview instrument was used to reduce all internal and external threats.

All in-depth interviews took place during participants' free time, away from their workplace and at a place of their convenience in order to maintain the appropriate environment to disclose important information. All interviews were recorded on an MP4 player and then transferred to a password-protected file to ensure confidentiality. NVivo 10 software was used to transcribe and code the collected data. Then, the five levels of data analysis suggested by Denzin (2001) were adopted. Emerging themes and thematic areas were compared to the literature to explain the research questions of the study.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Four factors affecting HCAEs in utilising their tacit knowledge**

The findings from the data analysis revealed four factors that affect HCAEs in utilising their tacit knowledge in hospitality and culinary arts higher education settings. These factors affect them at an individual level and are divided into the following categories: (a) knowledge issues, (b) employment issues, (c) training and learning issues, and (d) organisational issues. At an individual level, the identified factors affect teaching effectiveness, individual productivity, and compliance with the respective organisations'

operating and quality assurance standards. From the organisational perspective, no efforts are made to utilise HCAEs' practical intelligence, benchmark the expert-to-peer tacit knowledge exchange process, create a learning culture, and/or connect tacit knowledge utilisation with human resource management functions and quality standards.

In the case of knowledge issues and at a personal level, HCAEs seem to be biased in the free exchange of their personal tacit knowledge. The emerging theme indicated that HCAEs 'refuse to share' due to fear of losing unique employment and professional advantage. Participants stated:

HCAE1: *'Do you know what I have been through to learn what I know & to share it just like this?'*

HCAE8: *'Spent too much effort to share it just like this.'*

Similarly, participants underlined the fact that it is very hard to transmit tacit knowledge to students. Students are at the beginning of their professional life, and they lack professional experience, expertise, and good judgment. Due to this issue, tacit knowledge is too advanced to be utilised in class and during the teaching process, as time constraints and a pre-assigned course content apply. This was highlighted by most participants, some of whom stated:

HCAE12: *'I do not think students are ready for this.'*

HCAE23: *'Students do not understand the importance and are not interested in what you can offer them.'*

HCAE42: *'Too advanced to be used in class. Students need prerequisite knowledge.'*

HCAE61: *'Students lack the social experience to understand dimensions of service & importance of tacit knowledge.'*

However, the findings from the study revealed that various vocational aspects of the program help in the tacit knowledge transfer process. The vocational aspect of the program creates many 'tangible moments or learning activities'. These learning activities create the conditions and the pre- or co-requisite knowledge for the students to understand and assimilate such an asset. Thus, the technical requirements of the program can be used to ease the tacit knowledge transfer process. This was evidenced by the participants' following statements:

HCAE34: *'Technical aspects in the curriculum can be used as a means to tangibilize and ease the tacit knowledge transfer process.'*

HCAE57: *'The vocational nature of the program helps a lot in the transfer process.'*

Therefore, the study revealed many employments and organisation-related issues. Participants underlined the lack of a reward system, monetary or not, that could bind any effort with promotion or salary increment. No actual recognition exists, nor are there mechanisms to detect and reward such efforts. It appears that all efforts to infuse the teaching process with the shaping power of tacit knowing depend solely on the HCAEs' empathy and self-fulfilment:

HCAE48: *'Most times not considered by the employer.'*

HCAE30: *'Beyond students' respect & appreciation, no other reward.'*

HCAE41: *'No incentives to support tacit knowledge utilisation.'*

The analysis of the findings indicated that within the higher education hospitality and culinary arts institutions, weak learning and knowledge is sharing organisational cultures such as the lack of an organisational infrastructure in supporting an integrated approach and collective mechanisms to use it. This prohibits the development of learning and practising organisation. Hence, the notion of tacit knowledge seems to be at a premature stage for exploitation:

HCAE22: *'Most people are not aware of the benefits.'*

HCAE9: *'I did not notice any organisational efforts to support tacit knowledge utilisation within the organisation.'*

HCAE18: *'For such an issue, an organisation must develop internal mechanisms & appropriate infrastructure to support it.'*

Another theme that emerged from the participants' responses showed that higher education hospitality and culinary arts institutions are also not ready to capitalise on HCAEs' tacit knowledge. The corporate philosophy concentrates on short-term profit implications rather than on long-term profitability. There is a clear necessity for break-even and profit-making success to accomplish business purposes. At the same time, the findings of the study revealed an ineffective approach in capitalising on human capital through which a knowledge-based competitive advantage could be maintained, and hence sustain academic growth and success. This is reflected in the participants' opinions:

HCAE59: *'Lack of any efforts in achieving sustainable development & continuous improvement.'*

HCAE13: *'Organisations miss opportunities to capitalize on human capital.'*

The study revealed training and learning issues emerging from the ineffective operating procedures of the educational institutions. Participants acknowledged the highly standardised curriculum and the topics needed to be covered as serious barriers

in utilising tacit knowledge. Although the standardised curriculum for accreditation purposes is essential and is considered a major prerequisite, creativity and the opportunity to enhance the teaching process with professional wisdom is eliminated. This is also happening due to task diversity and failing flexibility and organisational best practices. Participants stated:

HCAE44: *'Operating structure & standardisation of procedures do not allow any flexibility.'*

HCAE52: *'Organisations fail best practices.'*

HCAE21: *'Lack of team & interdepartmental cohesiveness.'*

HCAE26: *'Organisations fail to secure HCAEs' emotional engagement in the process of achieving learning outcomes.'*

HCAE39: *'Curriculum high standardisation dries the teaching process, turning HCAEs to focus on required topics rather than being creative.'*

HCAE1: *'Different positions requiring high & low specialisation skills.'*

HCAE22: *'Students' diversified demographics along with various practical skills to be developed.'*

Finally, the findings showed organisational issues as factors impeding HCAEs' tacit knowledge utilisation within a higher education setting. Participants underlined budget constraints and the availability of scarce financial resources as a major reason, prohibiting the formation of organisational infrastructure to support tacit knowledge utilisation mechanisms. Thus, the organisational issues altered the economic parameter of a higher education institution to impact teaching effectiveness. Participants indicated the following:

HCAE57: *'Scarce economic resources & budget constraints prohibit integrated effort.'*

HCAE3: *'No financial efforts to support collective mechanisms to sustain tacitly knowledge utilisation within the teaching process.'*

## **5 Discussion**

The study revealed four essential factors that prevent HCAEs from utilising their tacit knowledge: (a) knowledge issues, (b) employment issues, (c) training and learning issues, and (d) organisational issues. The findings from the study show that all four factors may impact the teaching innovation process. According to the participants, the teaching innovation process is connected to the HCAEs' ability to infuse their teaching responsibilities, in line with the course curriculum and consideration of the students' learning experience, with their unique professional wisdom gained from their experience in the industry. Additionally, participants underlined the inability of utilising tacit knowledge to effectively impact the quality level of the skills learned from a specific



vocational course. Participant HCAE40, for example, emphasised 'the difference between the training task to set up a table for a fine dining restaurant and be ready for service and to go for the extra mile and show students extra touches in setting up a table and be ready for service by having an appropriate professional mood'.

Indeed, the findings of the study indicated a failure to convert higher education organisations into learning organisations. Participants HCAE9, HCAE37, and HCAE52 expressed a personal surprise due to their recent employment in the educational sector. Educational institutions failed to promote internal learning and to be converted into learning organisations. HCAE26 and HCAE44 underlined that at an operational level, HCAEs miss opportunities to capitalise on the expert-to-peer knowledge exchange process and develop a knowledge-based practising community. As a result, individual or collective efforts to achieve a high level of performance and productivity or the organisational capacity for innovation failed.

HCAE2 and HCAE61 added as well that at an academic level, a unique opportunity is lost to fertilise the program's learning outcomes achievement with professional wisdom and competency completeness. Hence, the multifaceted teaching process is simplified to the content indicated in the course syllabus, ignoring the benefits of the multidimensional concept of empathy in the learning experience. This is happening due to the lack of a learning culture and knowledge sharing community within the organisation's structure. Ineffective and unsupportive communication channels downgrade the quality standards of the operating and academic processes respectively, failing to fulfil the fruitful outcomes of tacit knowledge utilisation in day-to-day operations (Banu et al., 2013; Mahapa, 2013; Skinnarland & Sharp, 2012).

The lack of a supportive learning culture results in the inability of HCAEs to effectively stimulate their students' absorptive capacity and infuse the learning process with their professional wisdom. As a result, the expert-to-student tacit knowledge exchange process slows down. Also, the learn-by-doing approach to support the learning outcomes of a course and improve the professional/vocational aspects of the program focuses on the dry teaching dimension and the assigned curriculum. Priority is given to the responsibility emerging from the assigned syllabus. The efforts to achieve high productivity and academic standards remain solely on HCAEs' drive for personal excellence (Kandampully et al., 2011). This fact does not motivate HCAEs to become knowledge transferors in the teaching process and emotionally engage them through empathy in teaching

## **6 Conclusion**

The findings from the study have shown significant implications for failing to utilise personal tacit knowledge within higher education institutions at an operational or academic level. Although HCAEs work in educational settings, it seems that educational institutions lack a learning culture. No collective learning and knowledge sharing communities of practice exist, slowing down any potential for innovation infusion in the

operational, teaching, and learning process. As a consequence, practical intelligence or benchmarking best practices become useless due to the highly standardised curriculum. Hence, the presence and the direct involvement of the institutional investors in the daily operations of higher education institutions tend to focus strictly on budget constraints and cuts. In many cases, their insufficient academic background and understanding thwart the organisational development process. More significance is placed on the organisation's profits than the long-term profitability gains and the development of a knowledge-based practising community in advancing innovation in teaching and the students' learning process.

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