

# INCULCATING A SERVICE CULTURE AMONG HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT STUDENTS THROUGH WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL): A CASE STUDY OF DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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## Abstract

Any segment of the hospitality industry, as a service industry, focuses on the customer's total experience. This focus is imperative if organisations are to maintain an edge in an increasingly competitive industry that demands added value. Services, both tangible and intangible, can be considered as a customer experience which cannot be recalled. Therefore, the standards for service operations must be zero defects. The establishment of standards and enactment thereof, is an integral part of the conduct of service employees. This article investigates through a qualitative approach how a service culture can be developed among hospitality management students during work integrated learning to enhance teaching and learning.

The extent to which a quality service culture is advocated within the work integrated learning component by the Department of Hospitality Management at the Durban University of Technology is explored. It is argued that a focus on the service quality aspects of service in the areas of professional cookery, accommodation, catering and; food and beverage management can make a significant contribution to developing attributes like reliability, helpfulness and good communication.

The article further demonstrates that by exposing students to the expected attributes and skills necessary for a service oriented culture, they are made aware of what constitutes "exceptional service quality", thereby contributing to their learning about the importance of service in the hospitality industry. While work integrated learning is a philosophy of education based on the "theory of experience of the customer" within the hospitality industry, it is also an integral part of the students' experience.

**Keywords:** Hospitality, work integrated learning, service culture, customer

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## Introduction

The hospitality industry has a unique culture which is influenced to a great extent on providing a service that not only simply meets customers expectations, but also adds value to customers experiences. The manner in which the service employee provides the service is integral to the customers overall experience, since customer experience is at the very heart of the hospitality industry.

As such, employees who provide exceptional service is of paramount importance for the hospitality industry, since it is a key element of maintaining a competitive advantage in a service oriented

environment. Providing quality service has to be embedded within the organisational culture, so that the behaviour of employees contributes to the organisational goals of predictability, consistency and service to others.

Hospitality management students need to be exposed to the world of work, where exceptional customer service is a critical component of the hospitality product. Such exceptional customer service necessitates an understanding that merely providing service is not as important as the manner in which the service is provided.

This paper examines the work integrated learning model as an effective approach to the

development of service driven graduates in the effort to drive forward a hospitality industry of a high standard. It can be suggested that work integrated learning helps students to acquire not only knowledge, but also skills and attributes that will enable them to adapt to a dynamic industry that is increasingly complex, integrated and inter dependent.

### Conceptualizing service culture

Organisational culture refers to a system of shared assumptions held by members within the organisation, which includes values, attitudes and principles that help to create standards for employees to co-exist (Werner, 2008:26). The organisational culture serves to give employees an identity, establish greater commitment to organisational goals and provide guidance in terms of expected behaviour.

Service in the hospitality industry can be considered as an accepted shared value which provides generalised justification both for appropriate behaviours of employees and for the activities of the organisation (Dawson, Abbott and Shoemaker, 2010:291). Such a shared value is essential for organisational survival because it ensures the organisation as a bounded unit and provides it with a distinct identity, thereby, motivating the performance of routine tasks associated with the hospitality industry.

The cultural make-up or identity of the hospitality industry requires employees with personal attributes and qualities that reflect predictability and a desire to serve others. These characteristics can be considered as important in an industry where quality service is of paramount importance. In a study by Dawson *et al.* (2010:295), it is suggested that employees in the hospitality industry should serve to make their organisation “a home away from home”, “creating memories for their guests” and “helping guests celebrate milestones in their lives”. Creating such a service environment requires employees to make sound decisions when confronted with service quality issues since the nature of production and consumption is simultaneous.

Service can be considered as all the actions and reactions that consumers perceive they have purchased. The focus is on the guests’ total experience, which is influenced to a great extent by the performance of the organisation and its employees. Establishing a service culture in the hospitality industry requires a congruence between what the organisation publicly claims as its service policies and the way service is actually rendered by employees. It can be argued that commitment to the enacted service values by management can serve as an impetus for employee commitment to the quality of service. This necessitate restraining the rules of the operations in favour of satisfying customer request, since the customer is more important than rules in a service organisation that is largely dependent on

customer experiences. This is especially important since service consists of interactions and transactions that results in relationships among customers and employees, which is known as customer relationships (Tesone, 2010:5).

The levels of customer interactions are dependent on the intensity of the interaction with the customer, as well as the duration of time spent with the customer. The complexity of services in the hospitality industry is quite high in terms of intensity and duration levels relative to the interaction with the customer. The service transaction can be electronic, mechanical, indirect, personal and face-to-face. Face-to-face transactions can be deemed to have the most powerful effect on customers. Therefore, employees whose work requires frequent personal contact with customer need to be effective representatives of the organisation.

Personal service transactions include interpersonal and task aspects. The two aspects as shown in figure 1 focus on the following (Barrows and Powers, 2009:655):

- Task - the task side of service is controlled by systems that are supported by written procedures that details how a service is to be rendered.
- Interpersonal skills - these can be considered as “helping skills” which require a friendly attitude that is conveyed to the customer.

Employees whose services exemplify the interpersonal and task aspects show “a high touch” of quality. The service experience is a crucial element in the transaction. Arguably, service that is heavy handed will result in an unhappy customer. However, equally important is the tangible side of the transaction. For example, a good meal can be ruined by a grumpy server, while all the friendliness in the world cannot make up for a hotel room that is physically in poor shape. Therefore, it is important to consider the hospitality product, which includes both tangible goods and less tangible services, since both are crucial to success.

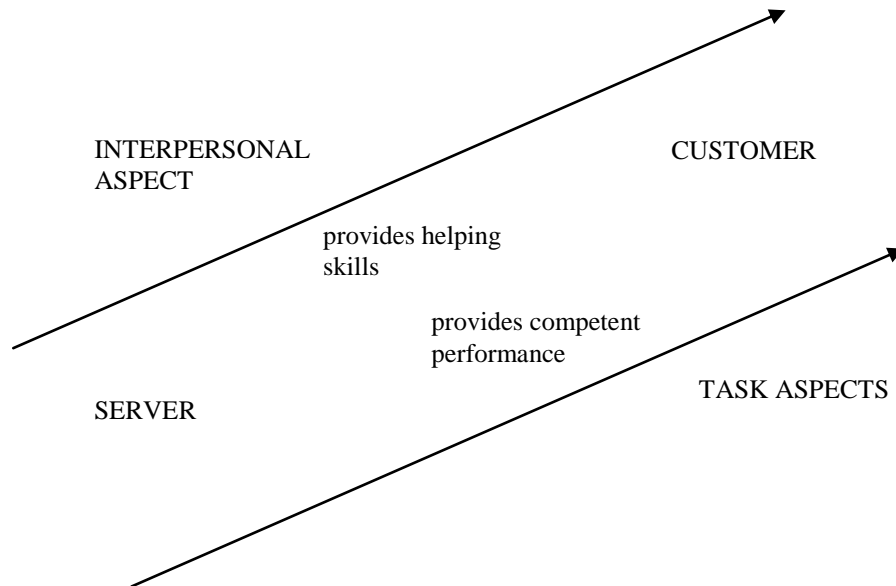
Since service is an experience which “happens” to a customer, there can be no recall of a “defective” service. Barrows and Powers (2009:650) view a customer’s experience as “history” which cannot be changed. Therefore, much of the literature is in agreement that the only acceptable performance standard for a service organisation is zero defects. Institutionalising a culture of zero defects in the service industry necessitates the establishment of standards to help create consistence and to eradicate the margin for error.

A common way of approaching the standard of zero defects is from a statistically based business strategy known as Six Sigma. In the hospitality industry, Six Sigma is used to improve services, by reducing the acceptable range of performance, for example, to improve services for the waiting time for tables at restaurants (Eckes 2001:69). Achieving zero defects based on Six Sigma entails creating and

identifying strategic business objectives, creating core and sub processes, identifying process owners, creating and validating performance measures, collecting data on performance measures and determining prioritising projects for improvement. By

embracing the Six Sigma strategy, organisations attempt to improve their service and service quality.

**Figure 1.** Adapted: Barrows and Powers (2009:655)



### Driving service in the hospitality industry

The Oxford English Dictionary (2006:690) defines hospitality as “the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors and strangers with liberality and good will”. Hospitality would therefore include all institutions that offer shelter, food or both to people to people away from their homes. Segments in the hospitality industry like lodging, food service, culinary and travel, and industry have to provide services and facilities associated with the hospitality industry.

Employees providing services and facilities are expected to fulfil the following objectives (Barrows and Powers, 2009:5):

- A friendly disposition to make customers feel welcome. This translates into an atmosphere of goodwill among all employees in the organisation.
- Establishing a system of work so that expectations of customers like timely services and quality facilities are fulfilled.
- Maintaining an operation that provides service, while being able to recover the costs of its operations and provide a return to the investor.

The above objectives suggest that the hospitality industry as a service industry is unique since all employees are expected by customers and fellow workers to be friendly, care about what happens to customers and generally endure face-to-face relationships with employees and customers. Furthermore, a sophisticated customer base is placing

a major focus on the value of services received in relation to the price paid in the marketplace. With an intensely competitive industry vying to serve them, customers are in a lucrative position to demand good value for their money. In this regard, service is a crucial determinant of good value for money.

According to a study by the Strategic Planning Institution (Barrows and Powers, 2009:648), when all industries are competitively matched, those that stress customer service will win. It can be argued that if customer service is the core business of the hospitality industry, then service is a strong determinant for its success.

### Approaches to managing personal service

Hospitality service comprises transactions that are diverse, whereby simultaneous transactions during specific periods of time can possibly produce different responses. The multitude of transactions, coupled with numerous experiences that differ, is complex to control in any detail.

The product view of service and the process view of service are commonly considered as basic approaches to managing services successfully. Barrows and Powers (2009:657) distinguish between the two approaches as follows:

- Product view of service.  
Service is viewed as a product that the organisation sells to customers. The focus is on rationalizing the service process to ensure that it is efficient, effective and acceptable to the

customer. The tasks that make up the service are controlled by prescribing in detail expected employee behaviours. McDonald's "quick service" formula is an example of the use of the product view, whereby carefully planned use and positioning of technology combined with the systematic substitution of equipment for people produces a specific product line.

This approach supports the view that limiting employee choices in their tasks, order, standardisation and quality are enhanced. However, the approach is often criticised for the control imposed on employees, with little or no room for judgement. Furthermore, customer reactions are ignored.

- Process view of service.

While the product view focuses on control, the process view focuses on empowerment. Employees are empowered to solve problems using their discretion and initiative, since satisfying the customer immediately is considered a first priority. This can entail changing operating and accounting rules and procedures to help employees do what they have to do to render quality services.

The aforementioned approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In practice, some evidence of control in the product view can be identified in a well established service unit. Similarly, focus on the way customers are treated is vital in any operation. It can be argued that the focus should not be on choosing between the two approaches, but rather adapting each approach to the needs of particular hospitality segments.

## Service and quality

Globally, the hospitality industry faces customers who are increasingly knowledgeable and sophisticated, with diverse tastes and experiences. In view of the demands placed on the industry in meeting customers' expectations, employees are expected to satisfy a "stated or implied need" (Davis 2008:372). The "stated or implied need" is provided by the totality of features of a service.

If a product is a good quality, its attributes should match with predetermined standards. However, this simple definition cannot be applied to services, since they are difficult to standardize and are not defined from the customer's perspective. Therefore, Ekinici (2008:317) suggests that quality services must be understood from the customer's perspective of whether quality meets or exceeds expectations, which is a subjective assessment of performance. Customers translate their stated or implied need into several expectations of the service they will experience. It can be argued that if services exceed their expectations, then the customer will feel satisfied and feel that they have received "quality". However, if expectations are not fulfilled, then there

is a gap between customer expectations and features of the service, thereby compromising the achievement of quality.

Although service is frequently thought of as being intangible, tangible elements like actions, process and speed can be easily measured. However, intangible elements like care, warmth and friendliness are difficult to measure, but undeniably do exist as customers can "feel" good service. It is commonly contended that the intangible elements of service are often more important to the customer than the tangible elements of service. It is the intangible element of service that is difficult to influence. In this regard, Davis *et al.* (2008:375) stress the challenge for everyone to deliver to the customer "right the first time every time". This entails applying the value of zero defects, which links quality to reliability of service.

Quality should not be viewed as merely satisfying the customer. Deming (1982:48) suggests that unhappy customers will go to another service segment, but equally so a customer who is merely satisfied can also go elsewhere, because there is no great loss incurred. Therefore, organisations are being driven to move beyond simply satisfying customers and looking to "delight" the customer, by exceeding their expectations. Adding value entails being aware of escalating expectations, individual needs and a dynamic service environment that arouses customers latent expectations (Deming, 1982:60).

Any business has to rely on profit. Therefore, businesses need to satisfy customer demands, while maintaining an edge of competitive advantage. Quality service provides the opportunity for establishing the winning edge over competitors. Organisations that build quality into their standards of service, find it easy to compete in a very competitive hospitality industry. This entails providing services that are not only reliable in meeting customers' expectations, but also adding value to exceed expectations. While quality is being addressed, the added benefits include profit, loyal customers and increased operational efficiencies (Davis, *et al.*, 2008:377).

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## Role of integrated learning in developing a service culture

The emergence of a knowledge economy and challenging societal problems requires a broad based higher education which enables the development of a diverse range of competencies and skills. In South Africa, the Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act 101, 1997) emphasizes the need for higher education to be responsive to the needs of society and industry. There

is increasing pressure on universities to bridge the gap between higher education and industry in the context of local and global issues.

Students of hospitality management must be aware of the important role they will play in delivering quality services which meet the needs of all customers in the hospitality industry. By incorporating work integrated learning within teaching and learning frameworks, opportunities are created to address the challenges facing service provision in the hospitality industry. Working life is about continued learning, skilling and re-skilling to stay ahead. Therefore, higher education has a responsibility to ensure that students graduate with competencies that enable them to work effectively in a service industry.

By exposing students to the world of work where there is high competition and increasing commoditization of service, they will realise the need to provide the customer with a memory of an experience that can they can take away with them, rather than just a good product or service (Brotherton, 2008:129). Such exposure affords students an opportunity to engage in the complete staging of the experience from start to finish and to think of it as an almost theoretical performance, expecting students to act out their roles in a carefully crafted environment (Davis *et al.*, 2008:25).

It is important that students are aware of the importance of customers' attitudes, expectations and experiences in providing quality services that add value. Exposure to the world of work, bring to reality that service products are perishable and not standardised, thereby necessitating a thorough understanding of managing the different elements of service.

### **Work integrated learning (WIL) at the Durban University of Technology**

Further to the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (Republic of South Africa, 1997), the distinction between the curricula of universities of technology and traditional academic universities is gradually being lost as the boundaries between different institutional types become blurred.

Universities of technology are now offering a mix of programmes, including career-oriented and professional programmes; and they all have work integration policies which provide guidelines for the development of experiential learning as a core function and to ensure its effective implementation. The National Qualification Framework, NQF (National Qualification Act 67 of 2008) acknowledges learning as an important feature of a free and democratic nation and imperative for the development of all citizens. One of the objectives of the NQF is to contribute to the full personal development of each student. Therefore, all qualifications and standards registered in the NQF are

underpinned by a system of education and training based on learning outcomes. Experiential learning may occur in commerce or industry (work integrated learning) or it may occur in a community (service learning) or both. On the job learning experiences through experiential learning is a defining element of a holistic educational strategy which advocates the formal integration of structured real-life experiences into the curriculum and highlights the responsiveness of higher education institutions to the needs of industry and the community.

In view of the aforementioned, an hospitality management programme, in meeting the NQF criteria must afford opportunities to students to develop and broaden their skills and competencies to benefit themselves and the industry through WIL. At the Durban University of Technology, WIL is underpinned by the need to develop competencies of students through integration and application of knowledge, skills and values in an authentic context, while ensuring responsiveness to national imperatives, industry and community needs. This has necessitated the provision of high quality practices and procedures for experiential learning through formal credit bearing experiential learning academic programmes offered by the institution.

All WIL modules at the university fulfil the following propositions as identified by Kolb and Kolb (2005:194):

- Students are engaged in the experiential learning process whereby their education is conceived as a reconstruction of experience. Every programme requires reports from students, work place mentors and academic supervisors, which constitutes part of the feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts, thereby contributing to enhanced learning.
- Students are expected to engage with their workplace mentors and academic supervisors on a regular basis; whereby views, ideas, and beliefs are considered for future improvements.
- Students diaries and portfolios are modes of reflection, feeling and thinking; thereby driving the learning process through adaptation.
- The integration of practice and theory contributes to holistic learning, whereby the student thinks, behaves and perceives as an integrated being.
- Learning results from a reciprocal process of assimilating existing theory and accommodating existing theory to new experiences.
- Knowledge is created whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the student.

The above propositions reflect the provisions of opportunities for students to acquire and assimilate knowledge and skills, while applying and managing knowledge and skills in action.

WIL in any academic programme has to be supported by established monitoring and assessment initiatives. Monitoring of students by appropriately

qualified and experienced academic and workplace supervisors at learning sites will ensure that students are meeting the requirements for the satisfactory completion of work integrated learning, while identifying the acceptability and appropriateness of placement sites. Assessments ensures that practices are aligned with the assessment policy of the university. This requires experiential assessment practices to be undertaken through collaborative partnerships. All mentors, both at the work place and higher education institution, and students must be aware of the assessment criteria and procedures. Moderation of assessment ensures the reliability and validity of assessments, as regulated by the specified criteria.

### **Work integrated learning (WIL): Department of Hospitality Management**

The WIL focus on professional cookery, accommodation, catering and food and beverage management are considered the most important components of the National Diploma: Hospitality Management, since these areas are considered as key areas reflecting on satisfying customer expectations through quality service provision. It is envisaged that student performance in WIL constitutes the acid test by which industry judges the course and the department. Such performance is largely dependent on the degree of “goodwill” they succeed in establishing.

The WIL component has a credit bearing contribution of 60 credits for the three year national diploma. The duration of WIL is one year, divided into two six months periods. WIL 1 is from June / July – December in the second year of study and WIL 2 is from January – June in the third year of study. Students are placed locally, nationally and internationally, which is indicative of the high esteem that the hospitality industry has of this programme. The authenticity of WIL is ensured by a progressive programme of exposure, covering the main operational and administrative areas of the segments of the hospitality industry. Students are expected to be exposed to the following areas for specified periods (Durban University of Technology, 2010:20):

- Accommodation : 3 months
- Catering : 3 months
- Professional cookery : 3 months
- Food and beverage management: 2.5 months

During the above period, students are obligated to be dressed in uniforms and wear name badges prescribed by the university. It is envisaged that such a strategy, which has been positively received by students, does not only inculcate positive attitudes toward WIL, but also makes them proudly university students who are recognised from permanent staff.

The WIL module aims to achieve the following (Durban University of Technology, 2010:4):

- Inculcate attitudes of dependability, reliability and helpfulness to add value to the quality of service provision.
- Exposure to diverse customer expectations and experiences.
- Enhancement of service delivery to all customers through learning.
- Stimulation of research by analysing data generated through work integrated learning.
- Providing students with the opportunity to demonstrate their theoretical knowledge.
- Developing collaboration between industry and educational institutions through work integrated learning.

### **Learning outcomes**

The four areas of focus are underpinned by the following learning outcomes (Durban University of Technology, 2010:3):

- Demonstrate the ability to apply basic management theory and understanding of the hospitality and tourism industry in an authentic workplace.
- Identify and plan a sustainable hospitality enterprise.
- Work under supervision and conduct a simple research project and report the findings in an appropriate report format.
- Communicate effectively with colleagues, supervisors and subordinates in the hospitality and tourism industry.
- Function professionally in accordance with student guidelines and the relevant organisational code of conduct within the hospitality industry.

### **Assessment**

The aforementioned outcomes are linked to assessment instruments, comprising of monthly reports and a development portfolio, employers assessment and a WIL project. Since WIL is a major subject in the national diploma, students have to achieve an overall 50 percent pass mark based on the three assessment instruments. In view of assessment being an integral part of the teaching and learning process, the assessment instrument fulfils the following objectives of the universities’ assessment policy (Durban University of Technology, 2008:2):

- Evidence that the student have achieved the stated learning outcomes and met the assessment criteria.
- Assessments aligned to learning outcomes.
- Systematic, regular and formative assessments.
- Valid, reliable and practical assessment process.
- Authentic, current and relevant achievement of learning outcomes.
- By assessing a variety of skills, outcomes and criteria using a combination of assessment

instruments, an integrated assessment approach gives WIL greater authenticity, reliability, validity and relevance.

Student experiences are shared through a formal debriefing after the WIL experience, where lessons learnt are shared with other students. Student diaries and reflective reports provide a good platform for reflective exercises, in an attempt to enhance learning for the world of work.

### ***Incorporating dimensions of service quality***

Literature determines that several dimensions like reliability, responsiveness, empathy, physical environment and reputation are associated with service quality. Bowen (2008:327) suggests that other elements like perceived value, desire congruence and the customers overall attitude to the hospitality industry should be taken into account.

Choi and Chu (2001 in Bowen, 2008:320) identified the following factors that were likely to influence customers intention to return to the same hotel: staff service quality, value and room quality. Cadotle and Turgeon (1988 in Bowen, 2008:320) categorized the trends of complaints and compliments of service into four categories: satisfiers, dissatisfiers, criticals and neutrals. Nikolichard and Sparks (1995 in Bowen, 2008:320) found that good communication skills were an essential element of encounter satisfaction. The studies clearly indicate that customers expectations and responses to service can be diverse and difficult to categorize.

Since it generally agreed that service quality is a key element of success in attracting repeat customers and maintaining a competitive advantage in a service oriented industry, students cannot jeopardise customers' expectations in the work integrated learning environment.

The learning outcomes and areas of focus identified by the Department of Hospitality Management underpin the generic and unique service quality dimensions identified by several empirical studies in the hospitality industry. The learning outcomes acknowledge that attributes of service focuses on output quality and interactive quality. By focusing on output quality (physical quality) and interactive quality (quality of the relationship between customers and service employees), students are made aware that the manner in which the hospitality employee provides the service, as opposed to the service itself, is critical to the customer's overall "experience". This requires employees who provide exceptional customer service that goes beyond simply satisfying the customer.

### ***Quality assurance***

The learning outcomes and aligned assessment instruments reflect the programme's commitment to

promote students achievement through maintaining and enhancing the quality of their total learning experience within a well supported environment that promotes the principle of students as future employees, taking responsibility for their own learning. This is evidenced by the high employment of students in the industry, which is tracked through a departmental database. Maintaining the quality of WIL, is ensured by the Faculty Quality Committee which has an oversight role in monitoring that good practice is sustained. The implementation of improvement plans is undertaken in response to the outcome of the review process for the national diploma in hospitality management. Further, quality enhancement is an integral part of the management of quality, responsibility for which is shared by staff and students at programme, faculty and institutional levels (Durban University of Technology, 2009:5). Through formal contact with other hotel schools in the country, benchmarking constitutes an integral part of module improvement.

The experience of hospitality management students is unique in that their work integrated learning is based in a service industry where the customer is present at the time of both production and service. All four identified areas of exposure required of students is based on little or no time delay between production and service. Davis *et al.* (2008:24) compares this uniqueness to the creation of a manufactured product, where the customer is not involved and there may be a considerable time lag between production and service. Since services cannot be examined in advance and; they are highly perishable and cannot be stored, students are reminded during pre-placement that first impressions are lasting impressions in service delivery. Therefore, students are expected to put "their best foot forward", during the time that the customer spends in the operation and what happens to them during that time.

### **Conclusion**

Work integrated learning is a significant component of educational programmes in educational institutions in South Africa. It is considered as the pedagogical approach which is responsive to the demands of a dynamic external environment while promoting lifelong learning among students.

The hospitality industry is characterised by a unique culture that is service oriented. Establishing a service culture with which employees can identify is vital to meet the challenges of such a demanding environment. Work integrated learning improves instructional training for students by providing them with an opportunity to apply their academic knowledge of hospitality management in the hospitality industry. In this way, students are exposed to the organisational culture of a service oriented industry that is driven by adding value to customer expectations.

By being exposed to a service culture that demands attributes and skills that underpin exceptional customer service, the attention of students is drawn to the following:

- Responsibility to work independently and to develop an awareness of service culture in the hospitality industry.
- Reflect on their sustainability as future employees in a service oriented environment.
- Contribution to employee efficiency by being involved in the production of the hospitality product.
- Acknowledgement of a “zero defects” standard of service.

The aforementioned highlights the notion that “customer is boss”, since customers are valued not just for their money, but as a rich source of customer expectations to add value to service quality. This is an important consideration, since customers are unique in respect of individual characteristics and an integral part of the emerging “experience” economy.

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