

**Sustainable development and hospitality education :  
employers' perspectives on the relevance for graduate  
employability**

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# **Sustainable Development and Hospitality Education: Employers' Perspectives on the Relevance for Graduate Employability**

## **Abstract**

*This paper examines hospitality employers' perspectives of sustainable development and the implications for hospitality education, particularly graduate employability. An exploratory approach is used in this research where semi-structured interviews were conducted with employers of hospitality graduates. The results established that respondents had mixed understandings of the meaning and relevance of sustainable development. These employers are, however, gradually recognising the value of sustainability for their business. Though it is not currently a priority in terms of a critical employability skill specifically for the hotel sector, related industries seem more mindful of the implications of sustainability credentials. Thus, hospitality educators need to take appropriate actions in subject specific areas where sustainable development is critical to employment opportunities, creating more industry ready graduates who are also globally aware citizens.*

**Key Words** sustainable development, hospitality education, employer perspective, graduate employability

## **Introduction**

Higher education (HE) plays an immense role in encouraging and delivering sustainable development (SD) paradigm change at academic and wider policy levels (Tilbury, 2011; Filho, 2015). Given the

advanced rate at which society is developing, HE is in a tumultuous position of guaranteeing that future graduates have a progressive perspective of SD to foresee future challenges and demands (Huq & Gilbert, 2013; Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2014). Sustainable development is defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43) and addresses the economic, environmental and socio-cultural issues. A recent UK study by Drayson (2015a) conducted for the National Union of Students (NUS), the Higher Education Academy and Change Agents UK identified that an overwhelming majority of students (8 in every 10) expressed that SD should be integrated and promoted by HE institutions.

Furthermore, SD is also a crucial issue for businesses, particularly the hospitality industry (Alonso & Ogle, 2010; de Grosbois, 2012), due to the resource-intensive and self-indulgent nature of the industry. Similar to HE providers, the hospitality industry has an important stake in SD as the impacts of their decisions and activities can have detrimental and sometimes irreversible impacts on the economic, natural and socio-cultural environments, which directly links back to the survival of their business activities. Given this shared vested interest, both HE and hospitality should be partnering on curricula design and ensuring graduates have the employability skills to meet the changing demands of society with regards to SD. According to Barber, Deale, & Goodman, (2011), in hospitality, educators should have a comprehensive understanding of key stakeholders' requirements, particularly potential employers, in driving the curriculum.

The hospitality industry is routinely involved in designing the curricula but rarely consulted in the realm of sustainability education as they are primarily consulted for course design at the more practical level and in the offering of work experience and graduate opportunities. However, SD is a critical skill and competency identified by employers (Rawlinson & Dewhurst, 2013; Jackson, 2010; 2013) and integration of SD into the hospitality education is now gaining traction in the literature (Barber, Deale, & Goodman, 2011; Boley, 2011; Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009). Moreover, Drayson (2015b) found that one in five organisational leaders have identified SD skill gaps in the transition to a sustainable economy.

There has been little academic investigation into the industry evaluation of the importance of SD for hospitality graduates' employability, particularly at a time where hospitality industry professionals grapple with compliance with environmental initiatives, for example, in construction, waste and energy (HVS, 2012) and strive to integrate sustainable practices into operations (Sloan, Legrand, Chen, & Chen, 2013). This paper addresses the hospitality employer perspective on SD skills, as they are a key stakeholder in the hospitality education process and investors in the future of our graduates. It also attempts to discover if SD is of critical importance when it comes to employability. Thus, the main research question is; how do hospitality graduate employers' perceive sustainable development as a critical graduate skill in terms of employability?

## **Literature Review**

### **The value of sustainability to the hospitality industry**

Hospitality businesses are heavily reliant on energy and natural resources (Melissen, 2013; Bohdanowicz, 2005), which leads to considerable environmental impacts based on its consumption of food, energy and water and the creation of hazardous and solid waste (Wijesinghe, 2014). de Grosbois & Fennell (2011) estimate that the accommodation sector is accountable for 21% of tourism's total carbon footprint. Wijesinghe (2014) comments that the hedonistic nature of hospitality leaves little thought to the impacts on the environment as the industry is largely driven by the economic gains. Kasim (2007) observes that guests' needs takes precedence over environmental issues due to economic motivations. Such complacency relating to the importance of the environment poses a grave challenge for the sustained prosperity and survival of the hospitality industry.

Engaging in sustainable behaviours can have positive results for hospitality operators. Benefits include improved perceptions from pursuing environmentally friendly practices (Cvelbar & Dwyer, 2013; Graci & Dodds, 2008; Henry, 2013), lower costs (Butler, 2008), increased profits and greater employee commitment (Tzschentke, Kirk, & Lynch, 2004). These strategies leads to higher customer satisfaction

and loyalty (Tzschentke, Kirk, & Lynch, 2004) and research demonstrates that travellers are considering the environment when deciding where to book their accommodation (Henry, 2013; Han, Hsu, Lee, & Sheu, 2011) and expect that hospitality operators will prioritise their environmental impacts (de Grosbois, 2012).

The hospitality industry is responding to this challenge by adopting “greener” business practices as evidenced in the research by Enz & Siguaw (1999), Bohdanowicz, Zientara, & Novotna (2011) and de Groisbois (2012). However this is not sufficient and the industry needs to do more in embracing and implementing sustainable development as such efforts have been condemned as being mostly short sighted (Darcy, Cameron, & Pegg, 2010), disparate from the organisation’s goals strategy (Tzschentke, Kirk & Lynch, 2008) and often at the expense of other aspects of the business (Bohdanowicz, 2005). Additionally, the debate on sustainability in the hospitality industry is still viewed as academically flawed (Moscardo, 2008) and difficulties do exist in translating the theory of sustainability into practical applications for businesses (Mihalic, Zabkar, & Cvelbar, 2012; Ali & Frew, 2014).

One approach to effect such changes is through employing people who have knowledge and awareness of sustainability. Human capital is considered a key element in the economic growth process. For the Higher Education (HE) sector to make a valid contribution to society, educators must have a sound understanding of current issues, business drivers and economic policies to facilitate employability and enrich the hospitality sector (Barber, Deale, & Goodman, 2011; Millar, Mao, & Moreo, 2010). Although, for all business related subjects, fundamental competencies such as strategic thinking, communication, leadership, and decision-making skills may remain constant over time, the rapid changes in our society require new, cross disciplinary and softer competences, such as sustainability-related knowledge (Huq & Gilbert, 2013). Hospitality is also an applied subject area and, for the curricula to develop meaningfully towards improved employability, industry relationships and inputs are critical.

## Employability and hospitality graduates

Pressures placed by governments and employers, skills shortages in the labour market and the changing perceptions and questions about the role of higher education have contributed to employability becoming a top priority for higher education institutions (Huq & Gilbert, 2013). This is part of the step change in shifting of the responsibility for career development to employees from employers where the security of employment is replaced by employability (Wang & Tasi, 2014). Moreover, employers are being explicit about other skills they are looking for in addition to a degree when recruiting graduates (Harvey, 2002). Therefore, higher education has a responsibility to prepare graduates for the world of work i.e. employability (Wang & Tasi, 2014).

Halliier (2009) states that the term employability is laden with ambiguity, as little agreement exists with regards to its content and scope. Several definitions of employability, which exist in the literature, are presented in Table 1.

Table1: Definitions of Employability

Authors	Definitions
Yorke & Knight (2004)	A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.
Dacre-Pool & Sewell (2007)	Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.
Wang & Tasi (2014)	A set of knowledge, skills, and attributes that allow one to choose a career, to be employed, to transfer freely in the job market, to grow, to fulfill job duties, to show commitment to work, to feel satisfied or succeed, and to realize personal potential.
The Confederation of British Industry (1999)	The possession by an individual of the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help to realise his or her aspirations and potential in work.
Hillage & Pollard (1998)	The capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work.

McQuaid & Lindsay (2005)	It has three main inter-related components, or sets of factors, that influence a person's employability: individual factors; personal circumstances; and external factors.
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From these various definitions, it can be inferred that employability is about equipping graduates with the knowledge, skills and abilities that allows them to acquire work, perform and excel in their jobs and be able to advance and grow in their careers. It also recognizes the need for flexibility, i.e. that the nature, priorities and conditions of employment are constantly changing, and are moderated by the intrinsic motivations and personal circumstances of employees which will influence their employability.

Given the increasing importance of employability, higher education institutions offering hospitality management degree programmes are making conscious efforts in equipping graduate with the skills and competencies needed by employers. Enz, Renaghan, & Geller (1993) were one of the first to study employability with key hospitality stakeholders to develop a new hospitality curriculum and identify the critical success factors for hospitality careers. Previous research has identified that employability skills are important for HE graduates (Wilton, 2011; Finch et al., 2013) and have narrowed this scope to focus on those that are essential for hospitality students (Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009; Dhiman, 2012; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005). Cheung, Law & He (2010, p. 27) identified the importance of industry-related competences, identifying “eight competency dimensions of (1) self-management (2) strategic positioning, (3) implementation (4) critical thinking (5) communication (6) interpersonal skills (7) leadership and (8) industry knowledge.”

## **Sustainable Development in the Curriculum**

Several researchers have investigated the current stakeholder SD requirements for curriculum development, (Jurowski, 2002; Tesone, 2004; Deale, Nichols & Jacques, 2009; Barber, Deale & Goodman, 2011; Boley, 2011). Indeed, education for sustainable development (ESD) and sustainable education (SE) have been incorporated in the curricula of universities and colleges (Deale, Nichols & Jacques, 2009) but remain “splintered ... strands of SE and ESD in course content are common, while this

is in fact contrary to the holistic nature of SE” (p.39). Nonetheless, the hospitality graduate will increasingly be challenged with sustainability issues throughout their careers (Savitz & Weber, 2006). Barber, Deale & Goodman (2011, p8) commented that, “the sustainability of the hospitality industry is dependent upon industry professionals who accept SD principles as part of their management values including sound environmental stewardship.” This understanding must exceed the limited perception of SD as a cost savings exercise and beyond being a financial business case for all stakeholders (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Peloza et al., 2012).

The literature has highlighted that there are disparities in student and industry perceptions of employability skills (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Chapman & Lovell, 2006; Greene & Saridakis, 2008; Iashkov, 2012). Sustainability has been identified as one of those important skills employers are demanding from hospitality graduates (Rawlinson & Dewhurst, 2013). Employability has been researched from the viewpoint of the organisation (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005) and the individual perspective (Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009). This paper focuses on an understanding the hospitality employers’ perspective, in particular. As the nature and the understanding of SD are constantly evolving, it is critical to scrutinize how employers define and view the current employability value of SD, particularly in the context of the limited teaching time and resources available during a degree programme. Though research has examined SD (Bohdanowicz, 2005; Tzschentke, Kirk, & Lynch, 2008; Darcy, Cameron, & Pegg, 2010) few authors have examined the employability aspects of SD. By examining employability and SD, this study will contribute not only to the literature but also to methodologies and practice. The main contribution to the literature is in a more in-depth examination of the employability factor of SD where a more current review is required. Though this study builds on the literature identified by previous researchers it also introduces an additional facet of investigation in that it includes a range of employers in this research as our graduates are increasingly employed in a wider sector of service industries, e.g. hospitality technology, contract catering and pubs and restaurants as well as the hotel industry per se. Thus, it attempts to contextualize SD within a range of stakeholders who are known to be employers of hospitality graduates. Our contribution, in methodological terms, is in adopting a more goal-directed and

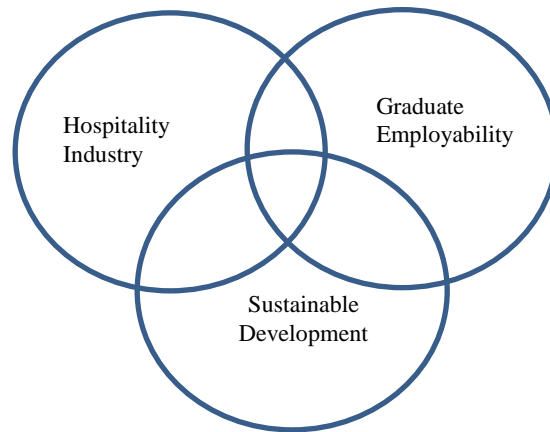
investigative approach to discover current employer perceptions rather than reported or intended ones. This answers the call from researchers (Deale et al., 2009; Barber et al., 2011) to encourage further discussion and to adopt a practical research design that includes discussion with the wider hospitality employer sector. The contribution to methodology is achieved by using in-depth interview sessions to probe into the employability and SD skills required of our graduates. As a contribution to practice, it provides educators with a deeper insight into the employers' perceptions of employability and SD, which should, in turn, inform SD related curricula design.

## **Methodology**

The convergence space of sustainable development, graduate employability and the hospitality industry forms the focal area of this study. In order to develop the research instrument, a review of literature on the converging touch points as illustrated in Figure 1, was undertaken consequently, three key themes on SD were identified for discussion with the industry stakeholders:

1. Definition and understanding of sustainability from the perspective of the stakeholder's organization.
2. Importance attached by stakeholders to knowledge and understanding of sustainability on part of graduating students being freshly hired.
3. Advice to Higher Education establishments on making their graduates more employable with regards to sustainability.

Figure 1: Convergence Space



A qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews were the research method used in this study. Cooper & Schindler (2011, p. 160) describe qualitative research to include “an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world”. As the hitherto identified themes focus on how and what instead of on how many, a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was deemed more appropriate than a quantitative survey (Fylan, 2005). Semi-structured interviews make it possible to gain retrospective and real time insights from respondents “experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest” (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013, p.19). In addition to being the most commonly used qualitative research technique (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Kitchen & Tate, 2000), Qu & Dumay (2011; p. 243) emphasise that semi-structured interviews characterise the ‘localist perspective’ which, in this study, assumes significance, given the stakeholder diversity in terms of the nature of the business and geography. This research included hotel chains, online travel agencies and professional industry associations.

As hospitality graduates are employed not only with hotels but also with strategic partners, getting the inputs from a broad spectrum of stakeholders was deemed necessary to fulfil the objectives of this study. Though some of the businesses identified for the interviews have a global footprint, the geographical

representation of respondents was predominantly from the Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA) region.

This geographical footprint, guided by the institutional affiliations of the authors, facilitated access to peers in the industry operating in the region. Fifteen semi-structured interviews comprising questions based on the hitherto mentioned themes were conducted with the industry stakeholders. Of these, five were interviewed at an international conference and eight at individual appointments in the UK with two in UAE. No new issues emerged from the latter interviews, thereby implying saturation and hence, adequacy of the number of interviews (Veal, 2011). The interviewees selected represented organisations, which employ hospitality graduates in management trainee roles. Nine of the respondents worked in the hotel sector and the other six interviewees worked in a sector related to the hospitality industry. Of these, six participants were in strategic roles and nine in operational roles. The role these interviewees held in their respective businesses had a direct influence on graduate recruitment. The results of the three main areas of investigation are summarized and presented below.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The three principal areas the findings of this study focus on are (a) employers' perspectives on sustainable development (b) the significance they attach to graduates' knowledge of sustainability (c) employers' recommendations to higher education institutions regarding sustainable development and graduate employability.

It needs to be underscored that the stakeholders represent the industry value chain, which includes the core hotel sector (hoteliers) and those from ancillary and support industries, hereafter referred to as non-hoteliers. A synopsis of the responses from hoteliers and non-hoteliers is provided for each of the three focal areas to highlight the contrasts and commonalities where they exist.

- (a) Sustainable Development: With reference to SD, employers were invited to spell out their understanding of the concept from the perspective of their business type (core hotel and ancillary industries) as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Employers Perspectives of Sustainable Development

Hoteliers	Non-hoteliars
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Endorse integration of SD in the business model</li> <li>• View SD from a CSR angle, attributing it as a moral and social responsibility</li> <li>• Appreciate the value of SD for marketing and economic activities</li> <li>• View it as an opportunity to contain cost in operations, particularly expenses on utilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appreciate the value of SD in taking environment into consideration throughout the product life cycle from development to disposal stage</li> <li>• Perceive SD as a facilitator for economic and social development</li> </ul>

Non-hoteliars have a macro perspective and attribute a broader interpretation to SD in comparison, underlined by comments such as “the organization has a team of eight working to reduce environmental impact” and “we are responding proactively to climate change”. Their hotelier peers tend to have a more business centric view on the role of SD with comments such as “from a CSR perspective we are doing everything we need to be doing to protect the local environment, charity, reputation is key to being a good employer” and “sustainability is now built into the business and it is a brand standard like other critical measures such as quality, revenue and service”. The diversity of interpretations attributed to understanding SD range from weak, focussing purely on the economic component, to strong that takes into consideration the environmental and socio-cultural aspects in addition to the economic (Hunter, 1997; Garrod & Fyall, 1998; Millar & Park, 2013). Several studies have argued about the importance of sustainability for the hospitality industry (Alonso & Ogle, 2010; de Grosbois, 2012) and researchers such as Berezan, Raab, Yoo, & Love (2013); Namkung & Jang (2017) and Prud'homme & Raymond (2013) have all demonstrated that customers favour businesses that pursue environmentally friendly practices. These differing views of employers can compromise the future of the hospitality industry because if they

are unclear about the meaning and value of sustainability then they will not be recruiting suitable graduates.

(b) Significance of Graduates' Knowledge of Sustainability: When asked to offer their perspectives on the importance of graduates' knowledge of sustainability, for some hoteliers, acquiring SD skill sets was of importance purely from a commercial perspective i.e. only if it had a tangible positive impact on the business, whilst others regarded this as fundamentally important.

Table 3: Employers Perspectives of Graduates' Knowledge of Sustainability

Hoteliers	Non-hoteliers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider SD is valuable only if it can be used in business development, citing the experiential nature of the industry</li> <li>• Feel SD could be part of hotel's vision and values, but not a skill set unless directly related to job function</li> <li>• Given its growing importance, regard knowledge of SD as future proofing business</li> <li>• View SD skills as a differentiator among peer graduates competing for employment opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• View SD as increasingly impacting businesses</li> <li>• Consider SD to underpin all the activities of the organization</li> <li>• Consider it as good to have at present, though need to have in the future, implying it may not be a priority requirement</li> </ul>

The non-hoteliers acknowledged the growing importance of SD, and hence the necessity for graduates to have a grasp of the subject, but also stressed that at this stage, it is not a priority. This is further underpinned with comments such as "try and minimize negative impacts on destinations" and "we are using brands who are good advocates for sustainability" and "sustainability has to truly benefit employees, guests and the environment and it has to be profitable". Again, there is no evidence of concurrence and the employers and hoteliers tend to voice diverse comments. Despite it not being a top priority, the responses do suggest the importance accorded to graduates knowledge of SD is growing, though the reasons for it may vary and the employers do value the need for graduates to be aware about it when they commence work (Millar and Park, 2013; Barber et al., 2011). The discussion brings into focus

the question whether or not SD on its own can make for a business case, as pointed out by Dyllick & Hockerts (2002).

(c) Role of Higher Education in meeting Graduates' SD Knowledge Requirements for Employment:

Out of the three focal areas of this study, for this attribute, there was a greater degree of homogeneity in the perspectives offered by all employers. Both hoteliers and non-hoteliers, commented on the skill requirements for specific roles, i.e. "the qualification required for a graduate student depends on the position being applied for" and the lack of immediacy, i.e. "it's not a requirement right now, but it will be more important in the future."

With the growing importance of SD in the hospitality business, employers recognise the contribution a broad based learning experience can make in preparing the graduates for job roles in the industry (Caffarella, 2002). It was felt that students should maintain continuous engagement with the industry during the tenure of their study by way of community work or volunteering to be able to comprehend the impact of business activities on the wider environment. Towards this end, all stakeholders were of the opinion that SD should be included in the curriculum in a broader context, which validates the inferences, arrived at by Millar & Park (2013) and Barber et al. (2011).

The findings have identified that employers' understanding of educating hospitality graduates on sustainable development is still emerging and the convergence space (presented in Figure 1) does exist. Employers have knowledge of sustainability and are keen to recruit the best talent for their businesses, however, sustainability is not a priority in the selection of graduates. It appears the sustainable development and graduate employability are considered as divergent, independent considerations. This presents challenges for both hospitality education and the advancement of the industry. Sustainable development is the lifeblood of the hospitality industry and there is agreement that it should be included in the curriculum (Boley, 2011; Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009; Tesone, 2004). Jamal, Taillon, & Dredge (2011) stated that such learning contexts should contain vocational and technical knowledge,

understanding of ethical, stewardship responsibilities, and critical thinking. However, for HE to develop such learning the industry should be recognising and rewarding the value of this with the graduates they recruit.

## **Conclusion**

SD has become a topic of continued exposure in the media and evokes considerable interest in all stakeholders in the hospitality sector. This study investigates, via in depth probing, the viewpoints and opinions of a key stakeholder group, i.e. the employers of our graduates. All the respondents in our sample represent a cross section of the employer population. The diversity of the stakeholders reflects the varied perspectives opined by the hoteliers compared to the non-hoteliers. These non-hoteliers in our sample are mostly suppliers to the hotel industry; appear to express more rounded views on SD. They appear to have an understanding of the wider business imperative, perhaps because they are exposed to a variety of stakeholders beyond the hotel sector. As stakeholder participation in SD is a central requirement for success, these divergent views reveal not only a disparity of opinion on what constitutes SD, but particularly in respect of the impact on the employability of hospitality graduates. This range of views is reflected when discussing SD graduate employability credentials, where the immediacy of SD is recognised but not prioritised as an employability skill. Much of the focus of opinion is certainly dependent on the specific position to be filled. This creates a dilemma for hospitality educators who have limited space in their curricula and must allocate scarce teaching hours to those subjects that are essential skills for employment in hotel management.

There is also some evidence here that employers do not believe that SD can be taught, rather it is a cultural/social predisposition and that environments predominately shape individuals. Though, we would argue that one of the main facets of higher education is to broaden and deepen intellectual and critical thinking not only in an educational context but also in a social and philosophical sense.

While a short-term perspective on SD is voiced here, this may be indicative of the wider perspective where SD is not an imperative, and somehow viewed as a kind of “luxury” item that cannot yet be afforded, particularly in graduate education. This is exacerbated by the continued debate, which is expressed here about the “truth” about SD, possible due to the debate that still rages over the past decades. HE should be more than a place of traditional learning, particularly for applied subjects such as hospitality management and we should have an active engagement about SD awareness from the graduate entry level onwards? The challenge should be on how and where we include SD in the curriculum. Should SD be taught explicitly, i.e. to highlight the critical importance of SD in the hospitality sector or implicitly taught, i.e. within subject areas by drawing allegories that make it relevant to job roles / subject areas? Otherwise, where and when do we encourage students to engage in a wider SD debate if not at their time of university, a time where we encourage critical reflection within a safer environment?

The limitations of this research may lie in the limited number, albeit diverse, group of respondents who were mainly from Europe, Asia, and Middle East and the context in which the interviews were conducted. As such, and in common with similar qualitative approaches, the results may be contradictory, variable and inconsistent in our sample and thus cannot be generalised to all hospitality graduate employers or employers from a particular sector of the industry. However, the results do challenge some preconceptions, particularly about SD and are concerned with the “meaning” that is extracted, even if it does not deliver a clear picture of employer perceptions of SD. Thus, future research will use these findings to develop a methodology that utilises both qualitative and quantitative methods with a wider group of hospitality graduate employers. It will further investigate employers’ perceptions and explore whether the results found in this exploratory study are consistent. Additionally, students and hospitality educators will be included in a wider research project to determine whether these key stakeholders perceive sustainability as an employability skill and provide a more complete picture of graduate employability and sustainability. Nonetheless, this research has laid the groundwork for understanding how hospitality graduate employers view sustainable development and the implications for the inclusion of SD in the hospitality curriculum and the impact on graduate employability.

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