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# Chefs' future competencies needs in the UK: the stakeholders' perspectives

Dr. Charalampos (Babis) Giousmpasoglou\* – University of West London

Dr. Evangelia Marinakou – Bournemouth University

Dr. John Cooper – Independent Researcher

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## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the significance of managerial competencies for the future generation of chefs in the UK. The paper presents the preliminary results of a survey conducted with culinary arts students, educators and professional cooks / chefs. All participants agreed on the need for future chefs to acquire the right mix of operational, administrative and managerial/leadership competencies. The starting point for the competencies development occurs in formal education preferably in higher education where future chefs are also exposed to managerial and administrative part of the job apart from operations. The findings of the survey demonstrate that the workplace seems to play a significant role in shaping the competencies of UK chefs. The participants also stress the importance of changing the current culinary arts curriculum both in Higher and Further education (HE & FE), in order to meet the existing and future industry needs.*

**Key Words:** chefs, culinary arts, competencies, UK

**Theme:** Miscellaneous

**Focus of Paper:** Practical/industry

\***Corresponding Author:** London College of Hospitality & Tourism, St. Mary's Road, W5 5RF, London,  
E: [Charalampos.Giousmpasoglou@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:Charalampos.Giousmpasoglou@uwl.ac.uk) / T: 0208 231 2427

## Introduction

The shortage of management skills in commercial kitchen chefs has long been recognised as managerial challenge within the UK hospitality industry in the existing academic literature (Guyette, 1981; Hotel & Catering Training Board, 1989; Mennell, 1996; Rowley & Purcell, 2001; Pratten & O’Leary, 2007; Robinson & Barron, 2007; Murray-Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007; Bloisi & Hoel, 2008; Robinson & Beesley, 2010; Cooper, 2012; Burrow et al., 2015; Nornazira et al., 2016). From the practitioners' perspective, there are also voices that call for a change in the way chefs are trained in the UK. The latest reports by People 1<sup>st</sup> (2013; 2015) highlight the skills, productivity and retention problems in the hospitality sector in general and in the chefs’ occupational group in particular. Overall, it can be argued that despite the importance of managerial competencies for chefs, this is an under-researched area that needs further investigation. The purpose of this research paper is to present the preliminary findings of the UK chefs’ future competencies survey.

## Literature Review

The competencies movement emerged in the late 1980s as a response to the industry’s request for a clear assessment framework in management development programmes (Cheng et al., 2003). Managerial competencies are variously defined in terms of underlying personal characteristics like traits, knowledge, skills and motives of the individual holding the job which have been causally related to superior performance (Stuart & Lindsay, 1997). There are two main approaches in managerial competencies originating from the US and the UK respectively. The first is labelled as the ‘*behavioural approach*’ and is mainly concerned with identifying those behaviours associated with superior or average managerial performance (Boyatzis, 1982). The second, known as the (occupational) ‘*standards approach*’ appeared in the UK in the mid-1980s, and is based upon functional analysis of the job or position; the standards approach describes minimum standards of performance for managerial positions in order to ensure a certain quality of the job outcome (MSG, 2016). The focus here is on the job, not on the individual holding the job. This approach has dominated the competency work in the UK during the last three decades and standards are developed for around 85% of the workforce. However, the standards approach has been criticised (EU Skills, 2015) and many UK firms have preferred to use behaviour based competence models (Matthewman, 1999).

In hospitality context, the competencies movement appeared in the early 1990s, when a growing number of tourism and hospitality courses aimed to meet the demands of a volatile and changing world (Umbreit, 1993) took up the challenge to prepare students by developing and enhancing the management competencies and skills needed to operate successfully. This movement has been supported by the industry’s growing demand for suitable qualified managerial staff. Research conducted to identify the right mix of competencies in hospitality, has use a number of frameworks like Katz’s (1974) hierarchical competency model or Sandwith’s (1993) competency-domain model; a comparison of managerial competency frameworks in hospitality after almost three decades of research identifies six main areas of competencies namely: Intellectual, Personal, Communication, Inter-personal, Leadership and Results / Performance (Giousmpasoglou, 2012).

The majority of existing studies on managerial competencies in hospitality have been conducted in the US (i.e. Chung – Herrera et al., 2003; Kay & Moncarz, 2004; Tas, 1988), whereas a number of studies appear also in Europe (i.e. Zopiatis, 2010) and the UK (i.e. Pratten & O’Leary, 2007). The focus of attention was hospitality managers at all levels of seniority and specialisations (Giousmpasoglou, 2012). Nevertheless, it can be suggested that research focus solely on chefs’ competencies has been almost non-existing (Gersh, 2016). The only exemption is the work of Birdir & Pearson (2000) who explored the managerial aspects of chefs’ work. Their findings suggest (ibid.) that the knowledge of flavours, knowledge of food sanitation, ability to distinguish level of quality in food products, general communication skills, and ability to make decisions were recognised by the participants as the most important competencies. On the other hand, competencies perceived traditionally as important for hospitality managers, such as computer proficiency, mentorship, knowledge of menu engineering and the ability to motivate others were ranked low by the study’s participants.

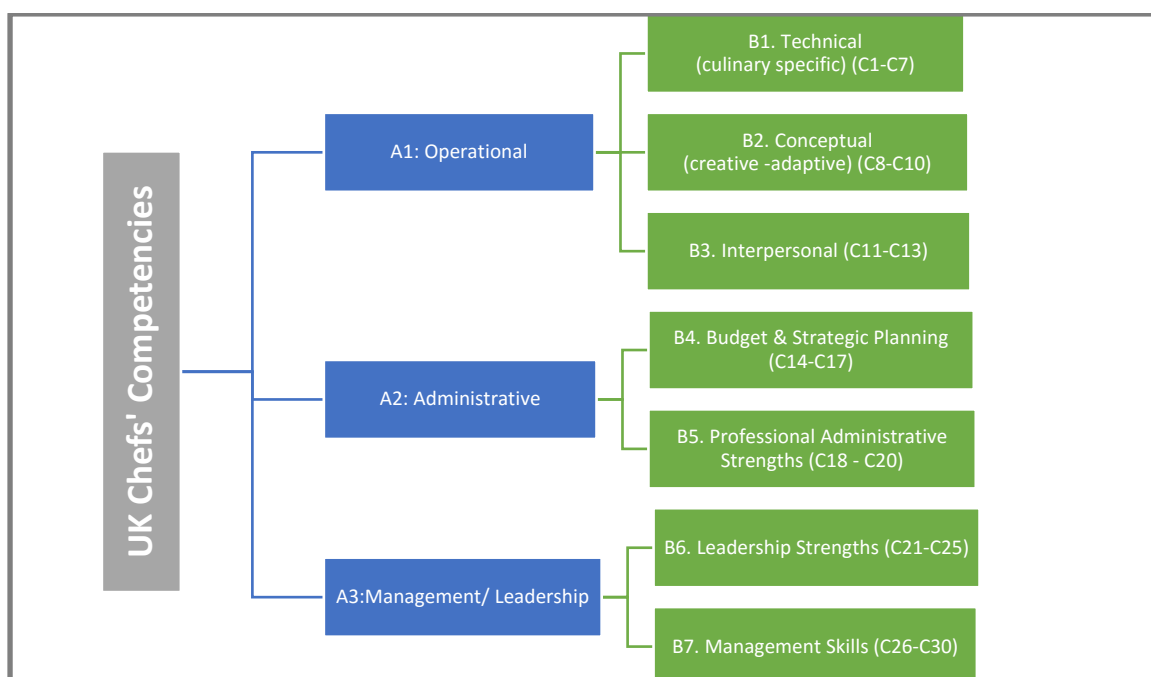
To conclude, the literature provides evidence of the competencies importance for managerial work in hospitality; nevertheless it can be argued that due to a number of contextual factors such as culture, occupational identity and the local sector characteristics, it is difficult to make generalisations (i.e. Cooper, 2012; Giousmpasoglou 2012). Thus, further research is needed in order to identify the right mix of competencies in distinctive occupational groups such as chefs, which is the purpose of this study.

## Research Methodology

This research paper presents the preliminary results of a survey conducted with practitioners, educators and students in culinary arts management. The main aim was to identify the key competencies required for the future generation of chefs in the UK. For the purpose of this paper the first 100 responses are presented. The sample included 29% practitioners who have various positions such as chefs, *commis* chefs etc, 35% are educators, 17% are students who currently study culinary arts management at different levels and the rest 18% were people who work in kitchens at different lower levels. The participants responded to either the online or the paper-based questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire replicates a successful survey sponsored by the Cyprus Chefs' Association (CCA) in the late 2000s (Zopiatis, 2010). The author was contacted by email and he was willing to help by providing all of his research in this field. The survey questionnaire used is divided in three parts: part one aimed to collect the demographic data of the participants; part two (main body) assessed the chefs' competencies; and part three incorporated a qualitative element - a question that asked participants to identify the key characteristics that make a successful chef in the UK. The original competencies framework used, assesses 27 competencies divided in three areas (A1-A3) and 7 categories (B1-B7) (Figure 1). A pilot study was conducted at the University of West London (UWL) with students and staff (n:10); it was decided by the research team that there was a need to make minimum language modifications in the participant profile section for clarity purposes i.e. 'upscale restaurants' were replaced by 'fine dining restaurants'. In addition, three more competencies that were deemed important for future UK chefs, were added in B1, raising the total number of competencies examined to 30 (C1-C30) (see also Appendix).

**Figure 1: Chefs' Competencies Framework**



The project started with the Culinary Arts students and faculty staff (Culinary Arts) at the London College of Hospitality and Tourism (LCHT). The UWL participants were provided with hard copies of the questionnaire in order to be able to increase response rates; a member of the research team gave instructions to the participants before they will be provided with the actual survey. In terms of external participation, the research team contacted professional bodies and organisations such as the Royal Academy of Culinary Arts, the Craft Guild of Chefs, the Chefs' forum and People 1st, in order to maximise access in practitioners across the country. The online version of the survey questionnaire is already available in various closed groups in LinkedIn (i.e. the Craft Guild of Chefs and Hospitality Professionals); in addition the group members used their networks to send personal invitations (through LinkedIn) in executive and head chefs to participate in this survey. This research adopts a mixed methods approach in order to increase the validity and reliability of the findings (Bryman, 2008).

## Findings & Discussion

### *Quantitative data analysis*

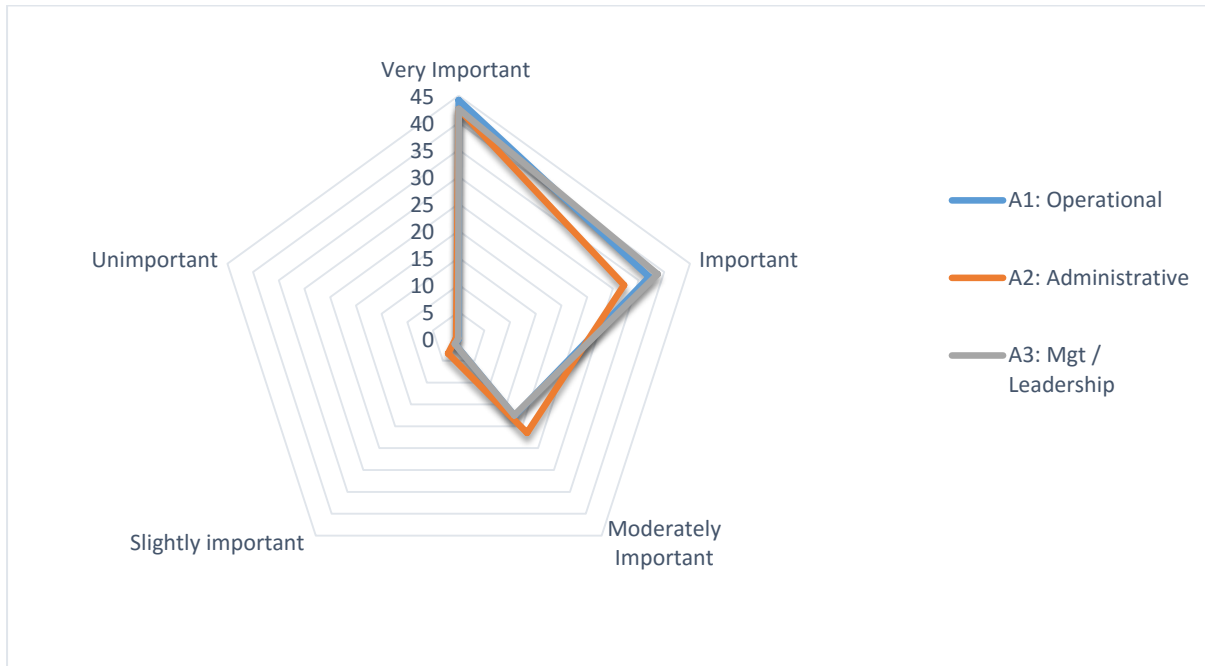
The preliminary results of the survey revealed a few interesting issues and raised questions regarding the UK chefs' future competencies. The findings represent the responses of 100 participants (**n:100**) from all targeted groups (20 students, 35 educators and 45 practitioners). More details on the demographics are presented in the following.

**Table 1:** Participants' Demographics

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	67	67%
Female	33	33%
<u>Age</u>		
Under 20	1	1%
21 - 30	22	22%
31 - 40	15	15%
41 - 50	40	40%
51 - 60	18	18%
60+	4	4%
<u>Years in the industry</u>		
Less than 2	7	7%
2 - 5	10	10%
6 - 10	11	11%
11 - 20	13	13%
More than 20	59	59%
<u>Education</u>		
No Education	0	0%
Secondary School	3	3%
Further Education (Levels 1-3)	30	30.3%
University Degree	59	59.6%
Other	7	7.1%

It is evident from Table 1 that the majority of the participants were male, which was not a surprise as the chefs' occupation is male-dominated. Interestingly, the majority of the participants hold a university degree 59% or had studied in further education 30% which demonstrated the importance of having conducted studies in the sector, which might be a change in the industry 58% of the participants were between 40 and 60 years old, which shows the need to develop the younger people who work in the industry to be ready to take over in the future. This will be an interesting area to explore in the final study and compare the key competencies identified by the younger and the older participants in the study. Figure 2 demonstrates the key competencies areas.

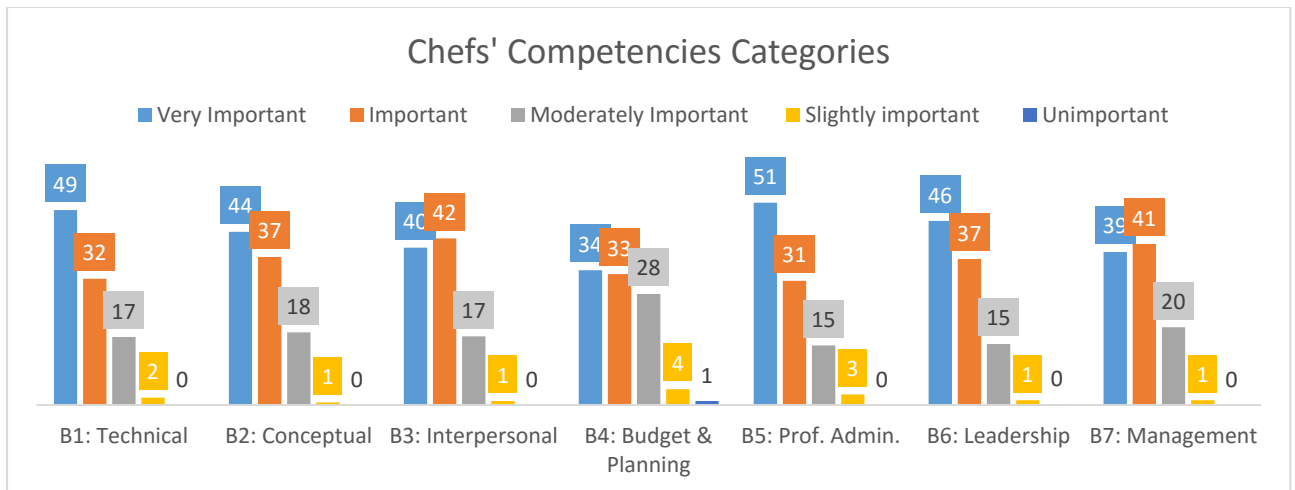
**Figure 2: Key Chef's Competencies Areas**



The first level of analysis demonstrated a balanced approach between all competencies areas. The participants rated Management / Leadership competencies slightly more important than Operational competencies. Although, administrative competencies were rated as important they were lagging behind the other two areas.

A balanced approach in responses is also observed on the second level of analysis, the seven categories of competencies for chefs. More specifically, six out of seven categories (B1, B2, B3, B5, B6, B7) were rated as either important or very important with an average 80% for both options on each category. The highest score (51%) was given to professional administrative strengths, which include competencies such as time management, organisational and computer skills. Many studies propose that chefs' should have very good time management skills in order to be able to manage their kitchens effectively (ie. Balazs, 2001; Allen, & Mac Con Iomaire, 2016). The second highest score (49%) was given to technical skills, which include areas such as technical skills, area specific knowledge such as nutrition, food safety, and food waste among others. Moreover, leadership has been among the top competencies (46%) which includes areas such as professionalism, decision-making, ethics and emotional intelligence. The leadership and management competencies is an area that will be further explored in the final study. Not surprisingly, category B4 (Budget and Planning) was rated by almost one third of the participants as 'moderately important' clearly indicating this occupational groups chronic problem to cope with costing, budgeting and planning (Pratten & O'Leary, 2007).

**Figure 3: Chefs' Competencies Categories**



#### Qualitative data analysis

A number of detailed and well justified responses appeared in the qualitative part of the survey questionnaire that explored the profile of an excellent chef. Many characteristics of this occupational group such as the long working hours, passion and creativity (Bloisi & Hoel, 2008) were repeated in the respondents' answers:

*"All round experience....must know the basics before advanced tasks...be willing to work long, hard hours, have pride in what they do, be committed....Being a chef is a lifestyle not just a job".*

An acknowledgement of the importance of the right balance between hard and soft skills (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, 2015) was also a common response among the participants:

*"Chefs of the future need to have a broad range of food prep and cooking skills across all kitchen areas, a strong foundation which they can build on. Equally they also need a rounded knowledge of communication skills, both spoken and written, coatings and budgets and motivational and leadership skills."*

Managing and leading the kitchen brigade in an effective manner (Balazs, 2002) appeared as one of the top priorities in commercial kitchens:

*"...it is crucial for an Executive Chef to build a reliable team in order to achieve consistency and set the standards in a kitchen. Knowing everyone what has to do takes the stress out from the team. In addition is very important to develop the team members, make them feel they are important on the success of the team and motivate them."*

A strong professional work ethic as part of this occupational group's identity (Cooper, 2012), was also reflected in many responses:

*"If possibly, travel the international scene for culinary opportunities, grow your skills through hard work and learning. Be happy at what you do, try not to move around too much, you need some job tenure, and loyalty to all that you work for. Never stop learning, sharpen your people skills, and build confidence with all that you work with. Being a Chef, is not an easy career, there are many pitfalls, but keep a strong mind, treat disappointments with a positive attitude, that yes, I can have some set-backs, but to bounce back and do better, is key to your on-going success in the Culinary field. Once you have achieved the ultimate success of "Executive Chef" or "Master Chef" stand proud, but do mentor others, so they too, can excel in this wonderful world of Culinary, and feeding the people of the world. After all, you too, began your culinary*

*career with much humility and sacrifice, be a good teacher, and help to grow others on your team.”*

Another important characteristic on the development of future chefs appeared to be the way junior chefs are educated, trained and developed (Pratten & O’Leary, 2007):

*“Attend a good culinary school, or if your country supports a trade school, that offers Culinary Studies. Culinary schools are expensive, when compared to trade, get a job in a restaurant, independent, chain, or part of a hotel operation. Learn Culinary skills on the job, work in every department, it does not hurt you, to start at the bottom, get the confidence of the chef, he/she will move your career forward. Enhance your culinary career in other F&B opportunities, as they present them to you, choose wisely.”*

There was also criticism on the existing culinary arts curriculum in the UK and a call to rethink the way junior chefs are educated (Gersh, 2016; Hu et al., 2016):

*“Investment in back to basic skills and go back to the old school way of teaching. I have worked as an NVQ assessor and I feel the qualification does not teach the correct skills. Employers and training provides are all driven by government grants and the money not the training of the future.”*

The final important characteristic that participants highly valued in their responses is the ability to change and adapt in an ever-changing and demanding working environment following at the same time all the latest trends (Cooper, 2012):

*“All of the above (competencies) stated qualities and characteristics. Chefs of the future will need to be adaptable, have a broad knowledge of cultural differences and trends within food. Chefs will need to be aware of sustainability and environmental impacts of farming and food production.”*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The preliminary results of this survey confirm the need for a balance competencies approach in UK chefs (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013; 2015). More specifically, the results indicate the need for strong managerial and leadership skills and at the same time excellent knowledge of the operational aspects of the job (Balazs, 2002). This confirms previous studies focused on chefs (i.e. Allen, & Mac Con Iomaire, 2016; Bloisi & Hoel, 2008; Cooper, 2012;). As a result, it is not surprising that a very strong orientation towards high standards and professionalism was evident in participants’ responses. The importance of education and training was also highly appreciated in participants’ responses. Nevertheless there were also voices that call for a rethink and redesign of the existing culinary arts programmes curriculum in the UK (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015). The last emerging theme was the ability of chefs to adapt in a fast changing world and follow the latest trends in their profession (Cooper, 2012).

Overall, the results of this study are expected to have a positive impact both in theoretical and practical (industry) level. In theoretical level, this research is expected to be the first to actually look in to the perceived competencies framework for successful chefs in the UK. Despite the importance of this occupational group and the media attention celebrity chefs enjoyed since the late 1990s, there are limited studies so far that focus mainly in the lack of (chefs’) managerial skills. From a practitioners’ perspective this study will shed light in the competencies needed for the current and future generations of chefs in the UK. The results can have a direct positive impact in company policies (especially in the Human Resources Management area) such as recruitment and selection, induction, training & development, motivation and retention. The results can also contribute to the improvement or even redesign of the FE & HE curriculum in Culinary Arts programmes currently offered in the UK. To summarise, this survey is expected to create awareness and discussion (both in theoretical and practical level) regarding the use of competencies frameworks within the occupational group of Chefs in the UK. It is also expected to contribute positively in the debate regarding the existing curriculum in Culinary Arts education and training.

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**Appendix:** The competencies framework structure

<b>A1. Operational Competencies</b>		
<b>B1. Technical (culinary-specific)</b>	<b>B2. Conceptual (creative-adaptive)</b>	<b>B3. Interpersonal competencies</b>
C1. Knowledge of food service operations	C8. Ability to innovate	C11. Communication skills
C2. Knowledge of nutrition & culinary flavours	C9. Ability to change	C12. Verbal & writing skills
C3. Knowledge of recipe & menu development	C10. Adaptation to difficult circumstances	C13. Knowledge of diverse cultures
C4. Artistic culinary creativity		
C5. Food Preparation Skills		
C6. Food Safety		
C7. Sustainability & Waste Mgt		
<b>A2. Administrative Competencies</b>		
<b>B4. Budget &amp; strategic planning</b>		<b>B5. Professional administrative strengths</b>
C14. Appreciation of cost management		C18. Time management
C15. Implementing labour cost controls		C19. Organization skills
C16. Budgeting		C.20. Computer skills
C17. Knowledge of strategic planning		
<b>A3. Management &amp; Leadership Competencies</b>		
<b>B6. Leadership strengths</b>		<b>B7. Management skills</b>
C21. Decision making skills		C26. Managerial skills (Delegating & Organising)
C22. Ethical contact & responsibility		C27. Human skills (People Management)
C23. Emotional control & stability		C28. Ability to motivate others
C24. Emotional intelligence		C29. Effectively handle staff complains