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The contemporary hospitality education challenges: The educators' perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article is unapologetically reflective. As hospitality educators, we find ourselves caught in the crossfire between institutional demands, industry pressures, and the everyday realities of teaching students who arrive with their own dreams, frustrations, and quirks. Drawing from joint experiences in over eight universities we reflect on our shared journey, we grapple with four stubborn challenges: the suffocating rise of managerialism in business schools, the relentless inflation of faculty workloads, the awkward tug-of-war between academic theory and industry relevance, and the rather unhelpful persistence of academic snobbery; all complicated by students whose expectations evolve faster than our committees can draft new module descriptors and their attention span is shorter than a Tik-Tok reel. These are not abstract irritations; they are the things that creep into staff meetings, weigh on our teaching practice, and spark both frustration and humour in our classrooms. Yet, despite the challenges, we remain hopeful. In some very few 'fortresses' across the UK and the rest of the world, we have seen examples of curricula that are unapologetically industry-connected, inclusive, and experiential. We have seen some hospitality departments supported and protected. These pockets remind us that hospitality education can be both rigorous and real, respecting scholarship while embracing the messy, people-driven world that hospitality represents. Our call, therefore, is not for the impossible, but for more of the possible: a more balanced model of hospitality education that values vocational relevance as much as academic prestige, and in doing so, better prepares us our students and the sectors we serve for the future.

1. Introduction

Looking back, it is worth remembering that the UK once led the way in hospitality management education across Europe. In the 1970s and 1980s, our programmes were considered models of excellence, with even the much-celebrated Swiss hotel schools sending staff to learn from their British counterparts. By the mid-1970s, the UK was pioneering the very first postgraduate courses in hospitality, an achievement that placed us firmly at the forefront of the discipline. Yet, amidst this success, tensions were brewing. Tourism academics often regarded hospitality as a lesser citizen, an uncomfortable hierarchy that baffled us, particularly when viewed against the European context, where tourism, hospitality, and events were understood as parts of the same continuum. Indeed, many of the

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early developments in events management as an academic discipline emerged from the work of hospitality educators. This history reminds us both of the UK's leadership role and of the unnecessary divisions that weakened our collective voice at a time when unity could have propelled us even further.

This practice paper is both a reflection and a call to action. As hospitality educators, we confront the tensions that continue to define our field, tensions we have lived through in industry corridors and classroom debates alike. While we draw on scholarship, our focus rests firmly on the lived realities of educators whose voices are too often drowned out by institutional noise. We begin by challenging the neoliberal turn in higher education and its all-too-familiar offspring, managerialism, before laying bare the escalating demands placed upon us within business schools. We then examine how curriculum design has been reshaped, with academic snobbery nudging applied fields like hospitality management to the margins, as though theory alone can prepare students for a sector built on practice and people. Finally, we take on the marketisation of education, the rise of the "student-as-consumer" model and the intensification of expectations that threaten meaningful learning.

Taken separately, each of these challenges is significant; together, they paint a picture of a sector wobbling under its own contradictions. Yet, we resist the temptation to despair. Across the UK, and in small but inspiring corners such as Northern Ireland, we have glimpsed examples of hospitality education that are unapologetically human, practice-grounded, and connected to industry in ways that matter. These pockets of resistance remind us that change is not only possible but perhaps already underway. We therefore align ourselves with the growing chorus of critical voices calling for a reimagining of hospitality education, one rooted in humanistic values, grounded in practice, and unafraid to resist reductive trends.

2. The weight of managerialism in business schools

In contemporary academia, career progression tends to follow one of two routes: through excellence in teaching and research, or through the assumption of managerial responsibilities. Yet, as many of us have witnessed, promoting academics into management positions does not always result in effective leadership. Universities are sprawling, bureaucratic institutions where decision-making is slow and politics thrive, particularly in business schools, where questions of status, competition, and resource allocation often dominate (Deem et al., 2007; Parker, 2014). One of the complicating factors is that many academic "managers" are appointed with limited preparation: inadequate training, little practical experience, and underdeveloped people-management skills. Great researchers may often be promoted to academic leadership without having the skills, empathy or knowledge on how to manage others effectively. The irony is not lost on us that highly qualified academics capable of shaping knowledge at the highest levels are often overseen by leaders whose managerial authority rests on shaky ground. Against this backdrop, managerialist ideology has spread rapidly through universities, with business schools often at the forefront of this shift (Ross, 2024).

Managerialism, as we see it, is a product of the neoliberal turn in higher education (Staller, 2022). It brings with it the logics of corporate governance performance metrics, efficiency targets, market responsiveness, and hierarchical accountability (Tight, 2019). Consequently, institutions now privilege measurable outputs such as publication counts, student enrolments, and satisfaction scores over the deeper educational values of critical thinking, disciplinary exploration, and meaningful pedagogy (Deem et al., 2007). Leadership is increasingly reduced to administration, stripping managers of the space to strategise and lead people and instead rebranding them as overseers of spreadsheets and targets (Staller, 2022). Coupled with declining state funding and falling student numbers, this culture creates an atmosphere of suffocation, one in which universities are urged toward "ambitious reforms" (Borrett, 2025).

For hospitality programmes nested within business schools, this climate is particularly damaging. The language of efficiency and competitiveness dominates, while the humanistic and vocational ethos at the heart of hospitality is pushed to the margins (Dunning, 2019). We are asked to deliver on multiple fronts at once: to publish in ranked journals (Lee & Benjamin, 2023), to secure external funding, to engage with industry, and to teach students in ways that are student-centred and relational. These competing pressures are not simply demanding; they risk hollowing out the very essence of hospitality education, which is rooted in service, care, and experiential learning (Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2024). For the sake of efficiencies whole departments which even in business terms successful have been dissected and their once-renowned curricula reduced to ghosts of their former selves.

This concern is echoed across European and international hospitality education networks, such as CHRIE and CHME, where colleagues regularly express unease about the marginalisation of specialised and focused learning and teaching. In too many institutions, the educator's central mission to develop capable, ethical, and employable graduates is overshadowed by the managerialist agenda, with its fixation on quantifiable returns (Dunning, 2019). The result is a professional environment where our passion for the discipline collides with institutional priorities, leaving us torn between what we know hospitality education should be and what the system compels us to deliver. Unless challenged, this trend risks reducing hospitality education across all UK institutions to a shadow of itself, valued not for its social, industry-enhancing and human development contributions, but for its ability to deliver metrics that fit neatly into institutional dashboards.

And yet, we have reason for cautious optimism. Across Europe, and in small but inspiring examples within the UK we see programmes that refuse to be defined by managerialist logic alone. Such places either have not been assimilated in Business schools and retain their identity, or where they exist within business schools, they are lucky enough to have charismatic deans and vice chancellors who understand the importance of hospitality management in higher education and trust and support the academic teams a the true experts that they are. These examples remind us that hospitality education can still be deeply human, practice-oriented, and connected to industry, while also retaining academic rigour. They serve as living proof that alternative models are not only possible but already thriving, offering us hope that the values of hospitality. care, service, and community can endure, even in the most managerialist of times.

3. Increased demands and workloads on faculty staff

The intensification of academic workloads is now a defining feature of the contemporary university (Quach, 2025), and hospitality educators are by no means exempt. In fact, they may be among those most affected (Lee et al., 2024), given the inherently interdisciplinary and industry-facing nature of hospitality programmes. The triple pressures of massification, internationalisation, and digitalisation have reshaped the academic landscape, transforming both teaching and administration into more complex, time-consuming, and emotionally demanding tasks.

With rising student enrolments, class sizes have grown considerably, while the student body itself has become more diverse in terms of academic preparation, language proficiency, and cultural expectations (Altbach et al., 2009). The globalisation of higher education has increased not only the number of international students but also the administrative complexity of delivering inclusive, high-quality teaching across different modalities and time zones (Shahjahan et al., 2025). Alongside this, the acceleration of online and hybrid programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic has created new expectations around digital fluency, hybrid design, and near-constant availability (Sigala, 2021). These changes have opened opportunities for innovation, but they have also imposed heavy cognitive and emotional demands on staff, often at the expense of their wellbeing (Lee et al., 2024).

Hospitality educators are, by necessity, multi-taskers: lecturers, researchers, dissertation supervisors, programme leaders, academic advisers, placement coordinators, and industry liaisons often all at once. The aspiration to be an "engaged scholar-practitioner," balancing academic rigour with industry relevance, remains admirable and central to our field (Ladkin, 2005). Yet the reality is one of chronic overwork, where long hours and competing demands frequently lead to stress, fatigue, and burnout (Wray, 2018). A UCU survey in 2021 revealed that over 80 % of UK academic staff reported workload pressures as damaging to their mental health, with "unrealistic expectations" and "lack of autonomy" identified as key causes (UCU, 2021). Elliott (2024) similarly notes that faculty have been stretched to their limits, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. For hospitality educators, the demands are compounded by industry engagement and placement management, which involve intensive mentoring and coordination rarely reflected in workload models (Christou & Chatzigeorgiou, 2019).

The structural roots of these pressures run deep. University workload models often fail to capture the hidden labour of relationship-building, pastoral support, curriculum upkeep, and community engagement (Lee et al., 2024). Meanwhile, hospitality programmes housed in business schools are frequently tied to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) linked to research outputs and funding, frameworks that rarely align with the applied and pedagogically intensive nature of the discipline (Parker, 2014). This reinforces a hierarchy in which publishing in ranked journals is rewarded more than student-centred teaching or pedagogical innovation.

The cumulative effect is a profession under strain, where institutional conditions increasingly threaten both staff wellbeing and the very qualities that make hospitality education distinctive. Without a more balanced recognition of teaching excellence, relational labour, and vocational identity, we risk hollowing out the essence of our field. And yet, there are grounds for hope. Across small but inspiring programmes, particularly those with strong regional and industry ties, we have seen efforts to recalibrate workload expectations, value the mentoring of students, and celebrate the practice-based ethos of hospitality education. These examples show that alternative models exist models where the work of teaching, caring, and connecting is not treated as invisible but embraced as the cornerstone of hospitality's contribution to higher education.

4. Curriculum design and academic subject snobbery

What might be the purpose of hospitality education? From our perspective (and that perspective is shared by a lot of industry practitioners), is to nurture graduates who can think critically, innovate, and demonstrate resilience within a framework of ethical and sustainable practice. We are here to challenge current industry practices and shine the light on how to improve them for the good of society and business. We are here to prepare the next generation of leaders and equip them with future-proof competencies: adaptability, balanced people and environment-centric thinking, a strong ethical compass, a focus on regeneration and operational excellence. Some see the dichotomy of academic skills versus industry skills (or theory versus practice) but the two are not mutually exclusive in fact, we see them as complementary. More recently, scholars have suggested a "third paradigm shift," one that purposefully integrates theory and practice to meet the demands of the experience economy and the expectations of contemporary learners (Catrett, 2018). Far from repeating old tensions, this shift offers an opportunity to redefine hospitality education in ways that are both academically rigorous and professionally relevant, ensuring that the discipline remains responsive and future-focused.

One of the most persistent critiques of hospitality education is its perceived disconnection from the industry it serves (Lugosi & Jameson, 2017). Hospitality education is operational and service-oriented by nature, requiring strong emphasis on people management, experiential learning, and real-time decision-making. Employers frequently voice concerns that graduates lack both technical skills and the soft skills required for fast-paced, guest-facing environments (Baum, 2019; Brigad, 2024; CEDEFOP, 2023). This gap is not solely the fault of educators; it is structural. Universities tend to reward outputs such as peer-reviewed publications and theoretical contributions (Tourish, 2020), while practice-based teaching and industry engagement remain undervalued. In many cases, experiential components training kitchens, mock reception areas, live-learning environments have been stripped from curricula due to their cost (Lugosi & Jameson, 2017), diluting the applied learning that once defined our field.

The problem is also pedagogical. Hospitality programmes increasingly mimic generic business degrees, often at the expense of the unique operational and service dimensions that give our discipline its distinctiveness (Jones, 2023). This mimicry results in curricula that may satisfy accreditation requirements but leave industry relevance wanting (Airey, 2005). Promising alternatives are emerging: design thinking approaches (Assen et al., 2023), intercultural competence and emotional intelligence training (Liu et al., 2022), and revitalised industrial placements that bridge theory with the complexity of practice (Lin et al., 2017). Yet too often curriculum reforms

are driven by managerial priorities or accreditation cycles rather than authentic dialogue with industry partners or frontline educators. Decisions about content, delivery, and assessment remain top-down, privileging efficiency and standardisation over pedagogical and industry alignment.

Beneath these structural and pedagogical issues lies a deeper cultural tension. Like many applied disciplines, hospitality struggles for legitimacy in an academy that privileges abstraction and disciplinary purity (Martin & Sorensen, 2014). Despite its interdisciplinary richness and its economic and societal impact, hospitality is still often viewed as "soft" or vocationally inferior to traditional academic fields (Lashley & Morrison, 2000). This subject snobbery influences recruitment, funding, and status hierarchies, undermining institutional support (Tribe, 2002).

For those of us who entered academia from industry, this devaluation feels particularly misplaced. We bring practical expertise, leadership insight, and mentoring skills that directly enhance student learning and employability. Yet such contributions remain undervalued in promotion frameworks that prioritise journal rankings and citation metrics over teaching quality, pedagogical innovation, or real-world impact (Lee & Benjamin, 2023). The same bias extends into research evaluation, where studies that address pressing industry challenges, use applied methodologies, or generate practical insights are often dismissed as insufficiently theoretical (Benjamin et al., 2025; Bucher & Lee, 2023; Tourish, 2020).

This culture of hierarchy and exclusion sits uneasily against the collaborative, people-centred ethos of hospitality itself. If our field is to remain relevant, we must reclaim our applied roots, reassert the centrality of experiential learning, and advocate for recognition systems that capture the full breadth of educational contributions.

5. Student expectations and the market oriented university

Over the past two decades, universities have increasingly embraced business logics, with emphasis placed on customer satisfaction, branding, performance indicators, and return on investment (Tomlinson, 2017). Within this context, the "student experience" has become a central currency in rankings and marketing, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when global competition for enrolments intensified (Times Higher Education, 2022). In the UK, for example, National Student Survey (NSS) results now directly affect institutional reputation and, in some cases, funding, creating significant pressure on faculty to manage perceptions as much as pedagogy (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). These dynamics echo George Ritzer's (1998) McDonaldization thesis, which described how higher education was becoming increasingly standardised and efficiency driven. His warning was that, in the pursuit of predictability and control, universities risk hollowing out intellectual rigour, critical thinking, and academic autonomy, the very qualities that once defined higher education.

Students today are far from passive recipients of knowledge. Many are digitally literate, globally attuned, and highly focused on employability outcomes. They bring valuable perspectives and deserve inclusive, personalised, and responsive learning environments. Yet, framing students as "customers" has also encouraged a more transactional mindset in some cases (Benjamin et al., 2025). Tuition fees are sometimes equated with entitlement to grades or particular services, while academic judgment is increasingly challenged on quasi-commercial grounds (Molesworth et al., 2009). A growing number of learners view themselves as clients purchasing a product rather than as co-creators in a shared educational process (Tripkovic, 2025). For hospitality educators, this produces a paradox. We are asked to design flexible, innovative learning experiences aligned with contemporary needs, while simultaneously navigating institutional frameworks that value satisfaction metrics over educational depth (Fleming, 2020). The drive to maintain positive evaluations can create pressure to soften academic standards, especially when teaching challenging content or giving critical feedback. After all, not all subjects lend themselves equally to popularity.

Less frequently acknowledged in these debates is the asymmetry of protections in the system. Universities have rightly invested heavily in student support services mental health provision, appeals processes, personal tutoring, and safeguarding frameworks. Yet academics themselves are often left comparatively exposed, particularly when facing student complaints. In some cases, complaint mechanisms have been used strategically, weaponising the "customer" identity in ways that jeopardise staff wellbeing, reputation, and even job security (Anderson et al., 2023; Fleming, 2020; Loveday, 2018). For educators working in hospitality, where student-facing responsibilities are especially intensive, the emotional toll of this asymmetry is profound.

To navigate this environment requires more than disciplinary expertise. Today's hospitality educators must draw on emotional intelligence, institutional awareness, and the ability to balance expectations with clear boundaries. The role has become hybrid: part teacher, part mentor, part counsellor, and part service provider. The advent of artificial intelligence and the ways students use it to escape plagiarism detection has added even more woes to academic staff, most of whom are not embracing this new technology and may very well be stressed by it. Academic leaders must do better in understanding the stressors of their team members. Supporting staff wellbeing, recognising the affective dimensions of learning and teaching, and creating reciprocal protections for educators should therefore be viewed not as optional enhancements, but as necessary conditions for the sustainability of hospitality education.

6. Conclusion

Hospitality management in higher education is being reshaped by multiple, interconnected pressures: extended managerialism, workload intensification, curriculum drift, academic snobbery, and marketisation. These are not discrete challenges but overlapping forces that collectively test the identity and purpose of our field. To respond effectively, we must resist reductive logics that frame education solely in terms of metrics, efficiency, or consumer satisfaction. Equally, we must avoid retreating into theoretical abstraction that overlooks the lived realities of students, industry partners, and wider society.

The way forward perhaps lies in reclaiming the values that have long made hospitality education distinctive and a leading force,

while adapting them to contemporary realities. Values such as service excellence, professionalism, human connection, cultural sensitivity, focus on regeneration, ethics and the benefit of both society and business and the integration of theory with practice. What is needed are curricula that genuinely bridge scholarship and applied learning; recognition systems that value learning and teaching and industry engagement alongside research; and leadership models that empower educators rather than constrain them. Just as importantly, hospitality must be embraced by universities as a distinct academic discipline, with pathways for leadership and advanced study within higher education, rather than being treated as a subsidiary of business and management. Reviving dedicated Hotel Schools or re-establishing Hospitality Departments within faculties (following the examples of the few remaining fortresses across the UK) could play a pivotal role in preserving the identity and purpose of the field.

Hospitality management education has always been characterised by dualities: academic and vocational, intellectual and practical, global and local. The challenge now is to reframe these tensions as sources of strength rather than fracture. If we succeed, we will not only protect the integrity of our discipline but also equip future graduates to be reflective, resilient, and ethically grounded leaders, qualities that are urgently needed in a world where the ethos of hospitality, of welcoming the other with care and generosity, has never been more vital. Encouragingly, there are already small but significant initiatives, within certain schools, networks, and collaborations, that show what is possible. Building on these examples, our field has the opportunity not just to endure, but to reassert its relevance and leadership within higher education and beyond.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Charalampos Giousmpasoglou: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ioannis Pantelidis:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

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