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## **The Nexus between Sustainable Practices in Hotels and Future Gen Y Hospitality Students' Career Path Decisions**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study explored tertiary hospitality students' attitudes and overall perceptions about green and sustainable practices; and how these may impact their future career paths in the hotel industry. A thematic analysis with data from 12 semi-structured interviews with students in a hotel management school in Australia was used to identify patterns and interpretive themes. Results revealed positive attitudes among Generation Y hospitality students towards working in a green and sustainable hotel environment. Implications highlight the need for sustainability education in the curriculum of tertiary education providers and strong emphasis on sustainability practices in employee training programs. The results also suggest possible impacts of sustainability practices in recruiting and hiring in the hospitality industry and how this may affect future hospitality employees and leaders.

### **KEYWORDS**

Sustainability practices; attitudes; hospitality and tourism; future workforce; sustainability in education

## **1. Introduction**

The hospitality and tourism industry plays a significant role in the economic environment contributing approximately 5% to the worldwide gross domestic product (GDP) (Sloan, Legrand, & Chen, 2013). In Australia, the rapid growth of the hospitality industry sees rich employment opportunities worth 14 billion Australian dollars per year, with the industry comprising of 380,000 employees working across 6,807 hotels (Australia Hotel Association, 2015). According to The Australian Tourism Labour Force Report, the demand for hospitality workers is forecasted to grow by 123,000, including 60,000 skilled workers by 2020 (Deloitte, 2015). Based on these figures, the magnitude of human and natural resources associated with this industry is significant and faces many challenges, particularly the labour intensity and the requirement of a continuous flow of well-educated staff (Baum, 2007; Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016; Lee-Ross & Pryce, 2010).

At the same time, tourism and hospitality education providers are confronted with demands to design curricula to undertake higher efforts to make graduates more employable and to meet the industry's working standards (Eurico, Da Silva, & Do Valle, 2015; Rae, 2007). In a recent study, Eurico et al. (2015, p.39) found that "employability was revealed to be a dimension that influences the image that graduates form about higher education institutions, which has an impact on their intention to return to continue their studies and on their recommendations to potential candidates".

There is a strong argument that the hospitality industry needs to better understand the attitudes and values of their workforce in order to secure future competitiveness in talent management (Robinson, Kralj, Solnet, Goh, & Callan, 2014, 2016; Solnet, Baum, Robinson, & Lockstone-Binney, 2016). One area that needs development in the future workforce through higher education is education in sustainability (Deale & Barber, 2012; Wals & Jickling, 2002). Through learning about sustainability, students are able to develop ethical values with broad concerns about the environment (McFarlane & Ogazon, 2011; Wals & Jickling, 2002). The hospitality industry is in need of future leaders capable of addressing environmental challenges critical to its success (Barber, Deale, & Goodman, 2011; Deale & Barber, 2012). In light of the growing scarcity of hospitality staff and the changing values of a future workforce contributed by Generation Y

entering the workforce, it is crucial to unmask students' perception towards sustainability and understand how their attitudes of sustainable practices in hotels impact their future career decisions. Furthermore, there is an overall negative employer image that often prevents graduates from entering the tourism sector upon completion of their studies (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge, & Ogden, 2007; Richardson, 2009).

Set within the context of environment management, this study examines student's attitudes towards sustainability and the subsequent role of sustainability in choosing potential employers' attitudes towards sustainability and their career decisions with the hospitality industry. Students' current attitudes are of high importance, as these predict the future behaviour or action of students (Altmann, 2008; Fatima, Khan, & Goh, 2015; Goh & Kong, 2016; Goh & Scerri, 2016; Krosnick, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2005).

Despite the importance of this research area, there has been a paucity of studies that examined hospitality students' attitudes towards the idea of sustainability. As a consequence, few studies have shed on attitudes towards sustainability, and if those attitudes influence students' future career decisions. For example, one study in the United States found hospitality students little aware of sustainability issues (Deale & Barber, 2010). Sloan et al. (2013) posit that students in tourism and hospitality demand that topics on sustainability be included into the curriculum as they recognize the importance and relevance of sustainability for their future careers. This is alarming since the hotel industry has been identified as one of the key stakeholders to have the most negative impact on the environment. It is estimated that on average each hotel releases between 160 to 200 kg of carbon dioxide per square meter of room floor per year (Sloan et al., 2013). This problem is prevalent and large hotel chains such as Hilton, Accor and Marriott have tried to address sustainability issues and decrease the negative impact by implementing sustainable management plans in their operations (Accor, 2017; Hilton, 2017; Marriott, 2017).

The majority of research about managing sustainable practices in hotels are directed towards the benefits of implementing green practices, attracting customers, improving the triple bottom line and profit maximization. For example, Blose, Mack, and Pitts (2014) analysed the linen re-use practices in hotels and found hotels with green certifications reporting a 4% higher return on investment, 9% higher sales growth and 17% higher operating income growth as compared to non-

certified hotels. These numbers are very attractive for shareholders and several large hotel chains have now developed their own sustainable development plans and used it as part of their corporate social responsibility operational strategy (Accor, 2017; Hilton, 2017; Marriott, 2017). This is a win-win strategy as being socially responsible improves a hotel's brand image by presenting themselves as integrated companies that are not only concerned about their bottom line, but for the environmental health of the planet (Assaf, Josiassen, & Cvelbar, 2012).

Therefore, the purpose of this study seeks to examine the attitudes of Generation Y hospitality students – the future industry leaders. Specifically, the research examines (a) the importance that students give to curriculum inclusion of sustainability issues in their education, (b) the general attitude of Generation Y students towards hotels' green practices, and (c) students' perception of the impact environmental knowledge and sustainability management will have on their career decisions.

**RQ: What are hospitality students' attitudes towards sustainability and how do those attitudes impact upon career decisions?**

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Attitudes and sustainability***

As a concept, attitude is still somewhat elusive in definition, is viewed in diverse ways and comes in varying shapes and sizes (Altmann, 2008; Fazio & Petty, 2008; Zanna & Rempel, 2008). Rooted in social psychology, the concept of attitude has evolved from being understood as a mental and neural state of readiness exerting influence on an individual's response towards objects or situations to being understood as simply an individual's evaluation of an object of thought (Fazio & Petty, 2008; Vogel & Wanke, 2016). An attitude is also multi-dimensional in nature (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Altmann, 2008; Krosnick et al., 2005). The Tripartite model of attitudes (Allport, 1935; Breckler, 1984) summarizes the multi-dimensional nature of the concept by specifying that attitudes comprise affective, behavioural and cognitive responses (Altmann, 2008; Breckler, 1984;

Fazio & Petty, 2008; Vogel & Wanke, 2016).

From a social psychological perspective, the study of attitudes is useful due to the access it provides to the understanding and explanation of human behaviour and actions (Ajzen, 1987; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Maio & Olson, 2000). One of the significant benefits of attitudinal research is the prediction of behaviour through attitudes (Ajzen, 1991). Past studies have also reported empirical evidence on the strong correlations between attitudes, intentions and behaviour (Goh, 2011; Goh, Ritchie, & Wang, 2017).

Sustainability refers to a system's ability to be continued, and is the dominant concept in environmental policy and research (Brown, Hanson, Liverman, & Merideth, 1987; Shearman, 1990). The field of sustainability "can be divided conceptually into three constituents: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and socio-political sustainability" (Barber et al., 2011, p. 6). Since the interest of this paper is set within the context of environment management, sustainability represents the continued functioning, productivity and protection of ecosystems to enable future generations of human beings to survive (Brown et al., 1987). Sustainability efforts in hotels can be grouped into four areas: energy conservation, water conservation, waste and infrastructure. These areas are concerned with the scarcity of non-renewable resources but more importantly potential profit margin areas where hotels can increase profits by implementing green practices (Kirk, 1995). There are many ways in which hotels can reduce the amount of water and energy usage. For example, technological advances in these areas go hand in hand with this process since the development of dual flushed toilets, low energy light bulbs, and flow restriction showerheads were only introduced in recent years. All of these small changes add up to significant resource savings without disrupting guests' satisfaction levels.

Since attitudes are behavioural in nature, and environmental sustainability practices are behaviourally driven, attitudes towards environmental sustainability is worth studying. A paucity of research has investigated hospitality students' general attitudes towards environmental sustainability and its impact on their job-seeking behaviour. Studies indicate that students do show interest in environmental sustainability (Barber et al., 2011; Benckendorff, Moscardo, & Murphy, 2012; Tuncer, Ertepinar, Tekkaya, & Sungur, 2005). The challenge is "to make sustainability in hospitality education meaningful for students" (Barber et al., 2011, p.15).

## ***2.2. Generation Y attitudes towards sustainability***

The definition of Generation Y varies across authors and there has been no definitive agreement on which age groups form Generation Y. In this research paper, we adopt and define Generation Y, otherwise known as Millennials, as people born between 1979 and 1994 (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Solnet & Hood, 2008; Solnet, Kralji, & Kandampully, 2012). Generation Y is known to have work-related characteristics, attitudes and motivations that are distinctly different from previous generation and incongruent with conventional thinking (McGuire, Todnem By, & Hutchings, 2007; Muskat, Muskat, Zehrer, & Johns, 2013; Solnet & Hood, 2008; Solnet et al., 2012). Born in an era of relative affluence marked with global prosperity, individuals belonging to Generation Y tend to have propensity for issues relating to socialization, and feelings of accomplishment and connectedness (Noble, Haytko, & Phillips, 2009; Solnet & Hood, 2008).

The inclination for Generation Y towards socialization and connectedness provide relevance to understanding their attitudes towards issues related to sustainability. Younger, educated and politically liberal people are seen to be more concerned about the environment than other age groups (Benckendorff et al., 2012). Similarly, Gigliotti (1992) reported an increasing concern for sustainability practices among the younger generation who were more willing to make sacrifices with life's choices in order to contribute to the environment.

There are claims that Generation Y is a “green” cohort; concerned with environmental and social justice issues, especially with sustainability practices in a range of areas (Benckendorff et al., 2012; Hanks, Odom, Roedl, & Blevis, 2008). In a study across 27 countries, Oreg and Katz-Gerro (2006) found that post-materialistic values affected environmental concern, which, along with perceived threat and perceived behavioural control, influenced willingness to sacrifice. They recommend values as useful variable for predicting environmental behaviour. However, some researchers (Goh et al., 2017) have dismissed the role of pro-environmental values in the prediction of pro-environmental behaviours. Therefore, it depends on whether individuals associate these values with the actual behaviour. Given that Generation Y is more socially connected and conscious, they tend to better relate sustainability with their values in live as compared to the other generations (Berg & Koole, 2006).

### ***2.3. Hotel employees' attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability***

Employees' participation and commitment play a significant role in the success of green practices adopted by hotels. Sustainable practices such as energy conservation and waste reduction are intrinsically related to employee participation (Kim & Choy, 2011). Previous studies have found a strong correlation between employee engagement in green initiatives and level of interest and participation in the hotel's environmental policies (Cantor, Morrow, & Montabon, 2012; Chan, Hona, Chan, & Okumus, 2014). Kim and Choy (2011) collected data from 220 employees working in green certified hotels in Florida examining employees' perceptions towards green initiatives developed by their hotel. Their study reported a strong correlation between success of green practices implemented and how important the employees perceived this particular green practice was. An interesting finding of their research reported employees expressing that their hotels could be doing more to implement sustainable measures. The importance and impact that employees can have in an organization when implementing sustainable practices is pivotal for the overall success of environmental initiatives. Cantor et al. (2012) reported the role of employees in the development of green practices to be associated with proper organizational support and correct motivation from supervisors. Similarly, Chan et al. (2014) found the ecological awareness of employees to be an important factor when determining the rise of favourable green measures in hotels. Lastly, the right organizational culture can also contribute to the success of green initiatives. For example, Bohdanowicz (2005) showed employees who were proud of their organization's environmental behaviours were more likely to engage in green initiatives.

### ***2.4 Importance of sustainability in education***

Sustainability education is key to guiding educational responses to the threats of tourism to people and the environment (Bonnie, Sonmez, Hsieh, & Byrd, 2012; McFarlane & Ogazon, 2011). Universities have the obligation to be at the forefront of the movement to prevent global ecological collapse (Fatima et al., 2015; Moore, 2005). In relation to tourism, sustainability education encompasses "any level of education or training related to environmental, social-cultural, and

economic issues in the conduct of tourism enterprise and tourism development” (Bonnie et al., 2012, p. 4). Moreover, due to the complex nature of socio-ecological reactions, the development of sustainability literacy through sustainable development education requires multi-disciplinary involvement of major stakeholders, and an approach beyond traditional environmental education (Barber et al., 2011; Dale & Newman, 2005).

Barth and Rieckmann (2016) posit that research on sustainability in higher education commenced with the United Nation’s Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. Since then, several researchers and universities have looked into the need of continuous higher education regarding sustainability (Barber et al., 2011; Benckendorff et al., 2012; Dale & Newman, 2005; Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009; Fatima et al., 2015; Kelly, 2009; Moore, 2005). “Education for sustainable development (ESD) is expected both to make people more aware and better qualified to take part in shaping future developments responsibly, and to raise their awareness of the problems related to sustainable development and bring forth innovative contributions to all economic, social, environmental and cultural issues” (Barth & Rieckmann, 2016, p. 100). Student’s learning about sustainability included includes reflecting upon values and performing concrete practices; that way learning outcomes lead to awareness and deep understanding of both, short- and long-term consequences of sustainable behaviour (Kelly, 2009). Given the massive growth of the hospitality industry and its impact on the environment, incorporating sustainability within the curriculum of hospitality education is necessary to secure a more sustainable future (Barber et al., 2011). As a consequence, education providers need to be a higher establishment of sustainability within education programs; further these programs require sound understanding of the values and attitudes of students (Benckendorff et al., 2012).

In summary, adding sustainability practices will have many benefits for students, and their prosperous hotel employers alike. First, students will benefit from learning about sustainable management. Systematic and cohesive higher education curriculum will allow students to be more employable as they meet national and international demands of economic, social and environmental responsibility upon graduation (Barber et al., 2011; Bonnie et al., 2012; Dale & Newman, 2005; Deale et al., 2009). These benefits extend to those who teach them, and the generations to come (Barber et al., 2011).

Second, current students are the future of the hotel industry. Hence a student's knowledge about sustainability hotels will benefit the hotel's future operations for a number of reasons; for example, though introducing and establishing sustainable practices hotels will reduce emissions, save energy and waste, as well as related costs (Chan, Yueng, Chan, & Li, 2013). Moreover, hotels will be prepared to adhere to the increasing number of environmental laws (DiPietro, Cao, & Partlow, 2013). Above all, hotels will have the potential to increase brand value through emotional and functional positioning of their brand by means of "green brand positioning" brand (Assaf et al., 2012; Hartmann, Apaolaza Ibáñez, & Forcada Sainz, 2005). This is particularly important as the current and prospective guests are increasingly "concerned about environmental issues, green management is rapidly becoming a strategic tool that can enhance a hotel's competitive advantage" (Lee, Hsu, Han, & Kim, 2010, p. 901).

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Data collection***

This study adopted a qualitative research design as this topic was exploratory in nature and there has been a major concern on the over dependence on statistics in early stages of the development of a topic area (Ballantyne, Packer, & Axelsen, 2009). Semi-structured interviews (See Appendix for full interview questions) were used to gather data, consisting of four broad areas (1) student's engagement in environmental practices during work placements, (2) personal concern with environmental issues, (3) student's feelings about the importance of sustainability education in the hotel school's curriculum and (4) perceptions on the need to be involved with sustainability and its impact on their future career paths.

Purposive sampling (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) was adopted to suit the contextual setting of the hotel school selected for this study. We purposefully selected six undergraduate and six postgraduate students, having completed at least one industry placement in hospitality. This comprised of different four and five star hotels in Australia. This allowed the researchers to evaluate perceptions and attitudes of those students, who already had work experience, and explore what they think about hotel green practices, and how they involved themselves with the cause. A total of 12 interviews were conducted.

The number of participants was determined through data saturation where no more interviewees were interviewed once there is no new information or themes are observed; Data saturation served as validity criteria for quality of the research and considers the depth of the grained data over the mere numbers of interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Kwortnik, 2003).

### ***3.2. Data analysis***

The analysis of the data was made by using content analysis as recommended by Goh (2009, 2010) and Goh and Ritchie (2011). Kwortnik (2003) also suggested that in qualitative analysis it is important to look for key categories, patterns, themes and meanings both across and within the quotes of participants. First, data was prepared for analysis such that all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, similar responses were grouped into themes to answer the main research questions. The interviewees' responses were also analysed and compared to identify similarities and differences in attitudes and/or beliefs. In order to ensure that the themes identified in the analysis were appropriate representations of the data collected from the semi-structured inter- views, interview responses were assessed for content validity and construct validity (Song, 2013; Tribe, 2005; Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013).

## **4. Analysis and discussion**

Findings from the semi-structured interviews were grouped into the main topics; common themes were identified in the responses and grouped together with specific data that supported each theme. The four main topics asked students about their attitudes towards (1) practical experience in real working environment, (2) personal involvement in the subject, (3) perception of relevance of sustainability in their future career paths, and (4) perceptions of importance of sustainability in their education. The results are presented in Tables 1-3. Table 1 shows themes that were identified around students' practical experi- ences during their internship in hotels. Three themes were identified in relations to the research question. The data revealed that students experienced very little sustainable exposures during their daily activities. Furthermore, students reported the lack of

training provided by hotels around sustainability issues. The majority of interviewees stated that they have not received training in sustainability in the hotel workplace.

In addition, interviewees were interested in learning how to manage resources. For example, solar energy, water, and waste. However, despite their keen interest in being trained on how to sustainably manage food, including waste management, and local food resources, little or no training was offered. Moreover, students were very critical and noted a discrepancy between the images of sustainability that their respective

**Table 1. Experiences in practice based sustainable knowledge**

| <b>Themes Identified</b>  | <b>Selected interview transcripts</b>  |
|---|--|
| Student’s experiences of sustainable practices during the hotel’s day-to-day operations     | <p>“I was the green representative for the finance department. . . . My job was to present different initiatives to recycle more in the front office operations” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“The only thing I’ve heard about is ‘Clean Up Sydney’, it was one day but I didn’t go” (Interviewee 5)</p> <p>“I saw on social media that the hotel manager was doing a public demonstration on how to reduce food waste in kitchen by cooking something, but I never encountered any of this done while I worked there” (Interviewee 12)</p>  |
| Student’s experiences of sustainability trainings in hotel workplace                        | <p>“None whatsoever” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“No, at the hotel I can see many resources being wasted everyday (Interviewee 7)</p> <p>“I did not receive any training even though I know that the company brags about it in their core values” (Interviewee 4) “very limited” (Interviewee 4) “non- existent” (Interviewee 5)</p> <p>“just mentioned during orientation” (Interviewee 10)</p>  |
| Student’s demand for training: sustainable food management, non-renewable energy management | <p>“Proper food management, water and energy conservation, activities that benefit the community” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“I would like the hotel to talk to us about solar energy and how it can be used especially in a hot place like Darwin.” “They should teach about wasting less food and local food sourcing implemented in hotels” (Interviewee 6)</p> <p>“I would like to be trained about being more sustainable in the front office area, we always print things that we don’t use and the paper is thrown away, not even recycled” (Interviewee 9)</p> <p>“Actually they teach us about the recycling process the hotel supposedly does, because no one believes it happens and people don’t care and throw away lots of paper” (Interviewee 11)</p> |

**Table 2. Personal involvement in the subject**

| <b>Activities students do on their own</b> | <b>Analysis</b> |
|--|-----------------|
| Water conservation                         | 50% (6/12)      |
| Energy conservation                        | 50% (6/12)      |
| Recycling                                  | 50% (6/12)      |
| Sustainable lifestyle                      | 33% (4/12)      |

**Table 3. Perception of relevance of practice based sustainable knowledge.**

**Identified Topics      Selected interview transcript**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Perceived impact on career</b>      | <p>“In future, knowledge about sustainability will be top criteria for recruitment” (Interviewee 8)</p> <p>“Will show an employee who is highly qualified and also cares about the environment” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>(. .) not impact whether which jobs are available, but make the hotel or me look better if I practice it” (Interviewee 5)</p> <p>“( . .) sustainability will probably impact their future career path, as they can see tangible effects when these practices are implemented” (Interviewee 2)</p> |
| <b>Perceived level of preparedness</b> | <p>“I feel averagely prepared” (Interviewee 8)</p> <p>“I think I need more information because I don’t even really understand what the subject is about” (Interviewee 10)</p> <p>“quite prepared but it is essential to keep learning about it and looking out for technologies” (Interviewee 2)</p>   |

hotels were trying to portray versus the actual experience. These findings corroborate the areas of sustainability hotels usually implement (Kirk, 1995), but contradicts many hotels’ statements about their employee involvement and awareness of these practices. It does however, support Kim and Choy’s (2011) claim to further understand how employees perceive the implementation of green practices in hotels.

The results also indicated that hotels do not educate their interns in sustainable management. This result however contradicts prior research showing that hotels understand the importance of employee participation in sustainable practices, since there is a very strong correlation between a company's green practices and their employees' commitment (Kim & Choy, 2011). Furthermore, employees are a key part of the process because they are the ones utilizing the resources and can make small but significant contributions to sustainable hotel practice (Kim & Choy 2013). It is not surprising that hotels advertise these sustainable practices as a reflection of corporate social responsibility duties and appeal to certain customer segments. A stronger environmental culture demonstrated by the hotel's vision and hotel leaders can encourage employees to engage in environmental behaviours such as thinking about improvements and making suggestions to become more environmentally friendly (Cantor et al., 2012).

With regards to the research question on sustainability practices of personal concern, Table 2 shows the student's main focus areas when thinking about practicing sustainability on their own. These four areas include water conservation, energy conservation, waste reduction and recycling, elicited the same areas that Kirk (1995) mentioned in his research.

The majority of the interviewees explained that modern technology was very easy to implement to save resources in the hotel industry. For example, interviewee number 3 and 4 mentioned the importance of shower heads, dual flush toilets and different water appliances to reduce wastage. These same technologies were mentioned in many of major hotel brands' sustainable development plans (Accor, 2017; Hilton, 2017; Marriott, 2017).

The motivation to adopt sustainability measures was also driven by financial gains. Interviewees 6 and 12 were more concerned with how technology can save resources, and provide more personal monetary savings. Interviewees 6 stated "I do care about the environment and I try saving resources, but to be honest I only started doing it because it reduces my utility bills". An important point that this question surfaced was the difference in perspective between undergraduate and postgraduate students. All students who mentioned saving money as their motivation to practice sustainability were undergraduate students. This is supported by past research that reported how attitudes and perspectives about environmental behaviour vary between junior and senior university students (Fernández-Manzanal, Rodríguez-Barreiro, & Carrasquer, 2007). The

difference in viewpoints may be due to the situation that many undergraduate students are learning to be financially independent and live away from home. On the contrary, postgraduate students are generally older and more mature. Thus, they are able to look at the bigger picture as compared to undergraduates when motivating themselves to adopt sustainability measures. However, the findings generally concur with Fernández-Manzanal et al. (2007) findings that all students showed a certain level of worry about the environment.

Four students also mentioned different sustainable practices in addition to the four highlighted earlier. These additional practices were grouped into a “sustainable lifestyle” category because the students reported that sustainable practices are not constrained to the four main areas mentioned earlier, that is, water conservation, energy conservation, waste reduction and recycling. For example, interviewee 7 mentioned “I try to use public transport as much as I can because that reduces the amount of pollution I contribute to the environment. I also avoid plastic bags and containers”. Interviewee 5 thought transportation was a very important part of sustainability practices. It was mentioned that “I started walking, instead of driving as much as I can and for longer distances I try using my bike because it doesn’t hurt the environment”. However, interviewee 2 believed that sustainability can be implemented on many activities, including buying groceries. During the interview, interviewee 2 showed strong opinions towards how sustainability practices include buying local food, organic encouraging people to eat seasonally and locally. These students are a representation of some of Generation Y’s points of view, feelings and perspectives about sustainability today. All students who mentioned lifestyle choices were postgraduate students. This result concurs with the theory that postgraduate students presented a more mature viewpoint of this subject. Nonetheless, the interviews revealed a general overview of how Generation Y perceives sustainability practices. These conclusions are supported by past research (Benckendorff et al., 2012) stating that younger, educated, and liberal people are more concerned about sustainability issues.

In relation to perceptions of sustainability in students’ future career paths, results are presented in Table 3. Two themes were elicited on their perception of being prepared in terms of sustainability knowledge, and their feelings towards how this practical knowledge impacts their future career paths. Results show there is a dichotomy between a strong belief that practical knowledge on sustainability management is important for career success, and not being well-prepared in terms

of understanding sustainability.

With regards to the overall importance of sustainability practices, results show that majority of interviewees (11 out of 12) feel that sustainability must be a mandatory subject in all degrees (undergraduate and postgraduate). The reasons varied slightly but many interviewees relate it to their future careers paths in the hospitality industry. This argument is further strengthened by the findings presented in Table 2, indicate that students are aware how sustainability practices and their own personal viewpoints can influence their career choices as working with sustainable companies gives applicants a competitive advantage and also show a certain level of knowledge and education (Cantor et al., 2012; Chan, 2008). This is evident in research by Cantor et al. (2012) who foresees future organizational policies requiring job applicants to know about environmental behaviours during the job recruitment process. Furthermore, industry partners and educators will benefit with the provision of information regarding the guidance of sustainability education in the future (Deale et al., 2009) to bridge industry gaps and graduate outcomes. A curriculum that includes the learning of sustainability will allow students to become effective agents of change and also to be prepared for national and international demands regarding sustainability (Barber et al., 2011). Future leaders will be made accountable for their actions and therefore need to anticipate social and environmental impact of their behaviours (Benckendorff et al., 2012). To further strengthen the argument for the subject on sustainability to be mandatory in the curriculum for hospitality student, it is worth highlighting that many interviewees to the semi-structured interview also mentioned that those who had not taken the class on ethics and sustainability felt confused and overwhelmed by the subject. Two prospective interviewees, found by snowball sampling, declined to be part of the interviewing process because they felt they did not “know anything about sustainability”.

## **5. Conclusion and Limitations**

The objective of the research was to explore hospitality students' attitudes towards sustainability topics and how these attitudes impact upon career decisions. We presented important results and contribute to theory with key findings supporting the argument that hospitality industry needs to better understand attitudes and values of their workforce. Our findings provide an understanding of the attitudes and perceptions on sustainable behaviour and practices of the future industry; particularly how much they think this will impact their career decision and the workplace they will operate in. With this contribution, we advance the understanding and add to the paucity of research about Generation Y and their attitudes towards sustainability at the workplace in the hotel industry.

In conclusion, this research paper identified four key topics discussed in the interviews and detailed viewpoints about each one of them: (1) practical experience in real working environment, (2) personal involvement in the subject, (3) perceptions of importance of sustainability in their education, and (4) perception of relevance of sustainability in their future career paths. We found that despite student's great interest in being trained in sustainable practices (e.g., food, waste management), hotels offered hardly any training – even though the hotel advertised sustainable practices being part of their corporate social responsibility management. The study also shows strong motivation among students towards being personally concerned and involved with sustainability issues and practices. The motivation to adopt sustainability measures was also driven by financial gains as well as making sustainable lifestyle choices. Students' motivation stemmed from being well-informed about the various forms of sustainability efforts they can be involved in, financial benefits from being involved, and their sustainable lifestyle perspectives. In terms of student's perception of their own employability and career prospects, our findings also show a positive argument for strengthening sustainability education. The vast majority of students felt that a dedicated course on sustainability should be essential subject in all degrees, both undergraduate and postgraduate. Beside the practical sustainable knowledge, students also perceive that this subject would allow them to practice change management skills and become effective agents of change.

Moreover, results suggest that the content of sustainability should be a mandatory subject in the curriculum of all hospitality institutions since some students may not have previous qualifications related to hospitality and may lack knowledge about the subject. The study demonstrated this by interviewing undergraduate and postgraduate students. A good knowledge about sustainability will increase students' competitive advantage when entering the workforce since sustainability will probably become much more perennial issue when recruiting and hiring. Not only will people be assessed in their knowledge about the subject, but also their ecological behaviours on their everyday life. Implementing an ethics and sustainability unit could also potentially change students' attitudes towards academic misconduct and reduce plagiarism cases (Goh, 2013, 2015). This research recommends the over-arching benefits for the hospitality industry, academics, and student community. Moreover, it could strengthen the ties between the learning institution and their industry partners.

The results and conclusion provide useful information but there are limitations that need awareness. A limitation of the study arises due to the qualitative methodology, and the non-generalizability of the results (Patton, 1999). However, it needs to be highlighted, that generalizability is not sought for in qualitative research, as it is "highly context and case dependent" (Patton, 1999, p. 1197). Further, this study used a single sample group of hospitality students from one institution which limits the generalizability of the findings. Qualitative sampling practices, however, often seek to "ensure that the sample is as diverse as possible within the boundaries of the defined population" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 83). In our case however, we targeted a rather homogenous and narrow sample of students. We therefore acknowledge that the hospitality industry has many employees possessing different backgrounds and could potentially have varied viewpoints about this subject.

In order to overcome some of the limitations and increase the research knowledge, future research will need to increment the validity of the findings and broaden the scope of the study. The study will have to be conducted at other universities and if possible in different locations to see the similarities and differences in the views of Generation Y. Further, future research could explore the gap between environmental communication and actual behaviour of hotels. As our findings showed that there is a discrepancy of what hotels communicate in terms of their engagement in green practices and what they actually do. Exploring this gap between environmental

communication and hotel's behaviour, has further research potential since it would be important to find out why the hotels' sustainability programs are not translating into employee action.

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## **Appendix. Semi-structured interview guide**

(1) Did you come across any green practices while on industry placement or during your own work experience?

Sub questions:

Did you actively participate in any of the hotel's sustainable practices? Which ones?

If you didn't receive any training or participate in any activities, which areas of your work or sustainability would you like to be trained in?

Which sustainability practices would you like to see in your workplace?

Did you receive any training about sustainability in the work place?

Was this subject ever discussed or were you asked to follow any of the green initiatives by following the example of your more experienced co-workers?

(2) As an individual, are you personally concerned for the environment?

Do you practice any actions to help reduce waste or help with resource conservation?  
What is it that you do?

Do you believe that sustainable practices in hotels will gain more importance as people become more aware of possible resource shortages?

Which ones and why do you think this will occur?

(3) Do you think

How prepared and knowledgeable do you feel about sustainability practices to go into the Work?

Do you think this is a subject that you will have to think about when managing an establishment or a hotel?

How do you think these issues could potentially impact your future career path?

(4) How present do you think the subject of sustainability is in your education and the hospitality industry?

Is it discussed in other subjects that you have taken?

How often do you think about the hospitality industry and the impact it has on the

environment?

What is your opinion about your generation's attitudes towards green practices, do you think it is a trend or it's something that people are actually concerned about.

Do you believe that it is important to include the subject in the school curriculum as mandatory classes or it should be an elective and why?