



# Closing the Gap between Hospitality Industry and Academia Research Agendas: An Exploratory Analysis Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

The research needs, timelines, and priority gaps between the hospitality industry and academia are well documented in the literature, with limited actions taken by either side to bridge this research disparity. By exploratory analysis, we used the novel approach of organizing an academic seminar with research presentations, hosted for approximately 80 senior industry executives – to firstly demonstrate academic research relevance to industry, and secondly to survey attendees on how to create greater academic and industry research collaboration. The findings confirmed a lack of research cooperation and contrasting research agendas, reinforcing previous literature of industry requiring research that was timely, confidential, easy-to-read, and practical – all of which could run contrary to academia research priorities. Importantly, the industry practitioners expressed a wish to engage and work on research with Macao's hospitality academics. This exploratory analysis is a first in the literature to use a real-life seminar to present hospitality academic research to industry, and act as a stimulus for future research communication and collaboration between academia and industry.

## KEYWORDS

Academic and industry research collaboration; the Cotai Strip; Macao

## Introduction

Collaboration and partnership between the tourism and hospitality industry and universities has been found to be a crucial part of building a knowledge-based economy (Sobaih & Jones, 2015). Yet, there is an ongoing tension to balance theory with practice, to have the skills and knowledge required by students upon graduation to work in the tourism and hospitality field (Ruhanen, 2005). One principal aim of bridging or closing this gap is to create actions where curriculum design connects educators and industry, thereby helping prepare students adequately with the skills and knowledge sets needed for a career in the hospitality industry (Alhelalat, 2015).

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While there have been attempts to bridge the hospitality industry and academia in terms of curriculum development, there is limited discussion on academic research being aligned to the needs of industry – particularly on how to convince industry that academic research, often conceptual, can provide timely and relevant research insight into hospitality in practice. As such, commercial research enterprises are oftentimes approached for tourism research, as these organizations are perceived as able to relate and engage with the industry in understandable language, action-oriented solutions, and relevant research (Walters & Ruhanen, 2019).

In order to address this gap in the literature on creating greater attention and use of academic research in the real-world, this study had the key goal of determining approaches in which industry would embrace and use academic research in the future. To ascertain this, a novel real-life ‘bridging’ event was arranged – in this study, this was a seminar hosted by academics, but sponsored and attended mostly by senior industry executives. Hospitality academic research was presented at the seminar to show applied and practical uses for the hospitality industry. Through interviews conducted after the seminar with industry executive attendees, this study importantly showed the industry willing to bridge the gap and build greater collaboration and connection with academic research. The findings present a significant contribution to the literature given this is the first time in the literature such a method was used to investigate academic and industry research collaboration possibilities.

### ***Connecting industry and academia research challenge***

The challenge of forging a greater connection between the priorities of hospitality and tourism academia, and the real-world needs of industry, is not a new one. Jenkins (1999) surmised that academic and scholarly work could have limited impact on the practicalities of tourism. The industry may perceive that tourism and hospitality academic research does not address practical business needs. Practitioners may be unaware that the research exists as these are published in journals and not disseminated to industry (Sobaih & Jones, 2015). While concluding there is a level of confusion on the roles and perspectives of that academia and practitioners of each other, Leiper et al. (2007, p. 50) underscore that academics and industry professionals are not always required to collaborative; ‘Essentially, they work in different industries, for very different types of organizations, and their work has different purposes and objectives. The appropriate context for cooperation is when their interests overlap, which may occur on a range of issues.’ However, even with an active hospitality research culture at universities, the industry may be unaware of these studies. With academics prioritizing journal publication, research may not be communicated to the industry (Cobanoglu & Moreo, 2001).

Academics, it seems, may understand little of the realities of business with the industry oftentimes turning to consultants who know the actual business environment (Ankers & Brennan, 2002).

While there is often a call for greater collaboration, literature on actions to narrow the research gap remain scarce. This study was conducted on a sample of senior industry executives who attended the annual Mastering Cotai event, the only major master thesis research-to-industry seminar in Macao. This innovative and novel approach also provided validation to postgraduate students on the applied relevance of his or her thesis research. One presentation thesis was published in *Journal of China Research* (McCartney & Chen, 2019), while another presentation on sports betting was quoted in the media as a future gambling policy consideration for the Macao Government (Inside Asia Gaming (2019). The seminar was also presented as an exemplar case in innovative thinking on education by ICHRIE (CHRIE, 2020).

### ***Current state of industry to academia collaboration***

Research for industry needs to be timely and business relevant. The cooperation needs to establish trust between academia and industry given the commercial sensitivity of data (McCartney, 2018). Reviewing peer-reviewed hospitality journals for the past 30 years, Khan (2019) highlights six significant industry-to-academia research gaps that persist: that academia did not provide timely nor value adding research; there was a communication lag and between academia and industry and a lack of understanding of terminology used by academia; there was a substantial gap between educational and practical experience; there was lack of understanding by academia to provide timely and value adding research, as well as a lack of trust on issues of copyrights, confidentiality and transparency between academia and industry; and lastly, that there was limited understanding by academia on how to add value to their research compared to independent research consultants.

A consequence of the gap was that most hospitality industry practitioners did not use academic research (Cobanoglu & Moreo, 2001). This mismatch will have further consequences. It can lead to hospitality and tourism curricula with limited input from industry, including a shortage of qualified graduates for the hospitality industry (Anderson & Sanga, 2019). Barron (2008) warned that a reduction in any practical focus within the hospitality programs could deter students from studying hospitality at university. The students may bypass formal university education and simply join industry to work their way upwards from this. Students being 'industry ready' must be established between the universities offering hospitality degree programs and industry to keep curricula useful and relevant (Green, 2007).

### ***So why does the research gap persist?***

A factor contributing and maintaining the gap can be attributed to area focus. Tourism science examines the theoretical understanding of tourism while tourism studies looks at application and management of destinations (Ritchie et al., 2008). Being a major component of their work, academics may spend considerable time on research. They are curious about the research area, without a pressing timetable, and in the end willing only to publish in a public journal. This is in contrast to the business needs and confidentiality of research within industry (Leiper et al., 2007). There are limited business reasons given for faculty doing research. Assistant and Associate Professors conduct research primarily for tenure and promotion, lecture materials, and new knowledge (Cobanoglu & Moreo, 2001). As such, the industry is largely unaware of academic research which rarely appear in trade publications.

### ***Benefits from closer collaboration***

The perceived benefits from cooperation and interactions will differ between academia and industry. For researchers, these benefits can be linked to the development of new ideas, publication, intellectual and discovery, and research funding. Industry benefits look to innovation and efficiencies in production (Fuentes & Dutrénit, 2012). The challenge is on how to marry the expected benefits from closer cooperation. One solution is on research output. Closer collaboration between academia and industry can increase research for two key reasons. The cooperation expands the pool of research ideas and gains greater insights from the application of theoretical concepts. Additional funding can also be secured (Banal-Estañol et al., 2015). Investigating collaboration benefits between club management and academia, Barrows and Walsh (2002) explain that from subjects being completely absent from the research literature, the collaboration stimulated new studies in areas such as member demographics, revenue management, HR practices, and strategic planning.

In discussing the paradox of academic to practitioner relationships, Bartunek and Rynes (2014) showed that research relevance is often equated to industry while academia focuses on rigor. Connecting both can provide more chances of new and interesting research and chances for both influential academic and applied research (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). King et al. (2011) similarly agreed that hospitality industry can benefit from the rigor of academic research while the industry can help to fund costs.

### ***Research areas of mutual benefit***

Research questions and academic-practitioner collaboration can be established if the research interests, or overlaps the interests, of both academics and industry practitioners (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). While advocating that research should be impactful and useful, Baum (2019) discusses where research impact could be sought, in areas such as policy making, public discourse, environment and sustainability, community life, education, and economic prosperity. In terms of Macao, impactful research is related to the continued success of the casino, tourism, and hospitality sectors. Profitability, solvency, and liquidity are key performance indicators of casino success for institutional investors and operators, commonly shown as EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxation, depreciation, and amortization; Zheng et al., 2016). One of the largest Macao IRs, Sands China, has almost 13,000 hotel rooms, 850 luxury and high street shops, a 15,000-seat arena, 1.2 million square feet of exhibition space, and 150 restaurants, and 3 theaters. The operating expenses of this IR property was US\$6.5 billion in 2018 (Sands China Ltd, 2018). Sands China also employs nearly 30,000 staff. Multiple research opportunities could be applied to finance, operations, human resource management and marketing, in gaming and non-gaming areas.

Previous published and therefore publicly available academic research on Macao's hospitality and tourism industry has looked at issues such as social and economic impacts (Wan, 2012); the destination competitiveness of Macao (Greenwood & Dwyer, 2017); environmental awareness (Wan et al., 2017); destination festivals and events (McCartney & Ip, 2018); tourism destination image of Macao (McCartney et al., 2008), and heritage tourism (Huang et al., 2012). As Macao is the only jurisdiction with legalized casino gambling within China, some research advocates that destination focus should be on attracting the strong demand from risk-taking Chinese gamblers to maximize casino and tax revenues (Gu, 2004). It is largely unknown how relevant and useful present academic research output is perceived by the Macao's hospitality, tourism, and gaming sectors – a key issue examined in this study.

### ***Actions to establish collaboration***

Limited interaction can occur between academia and industry, although this could be resolved fairly straightforwardly by actions such as academics writing for trade magazines, workshops provided for industry, and get-togethers such as round tables (Barrows & Walsh, 2002). Cobanoglu et al. (2004) similarly concur there should be some form of medium between academics and industry to share research in a meaningful and understandable manner, such as trade magazines or a shared Internet site. Yet even these forums can be

challenged as academics are rarely recognized internally by their peers for trade publications (Cobanoglu & Moreo, 2001). Industry professionals in turn will have limited time to access journal data.

Investigating the transfer of technologies between universities and industry, Siegel et al., (2003) recommended viewing industry as ‘customers’ who can potentially commercialize their academic output. The researchers advocated for greater recognition and reward incentives for academia who build relationships with industry. Fuentes and Dutrénit (2012) also encouraged recognition at national level for those researchers who actually interacted and collaborated with industry. Knowing that academic research is overshadowed by industry consultants, a practical action for academia is to ensure that research agendas are more aligned to industry needs, which will require a communication process at individual and institutional level (Walters & Ruhanen, 2019). A key issue though will be on identifying who is responsible for taking the first set in establishing cooperation (Leiper et al., 2007).

## Methodology

This study was exploratory in nature. The annual seminar was named ‘Mastering Cotai’ and was hosted for the fourth time in October 2019. This event is also an experiential learning approach. Five master students presented abridged versions of applied insights from their completed thesis to approximately 80 invited senior executives from the Cotai Strip IR properties (CHRIE, 2020). The audience also included around 20 post-graduate students and faculty. Executives from all the six casino concessions were present. The five students from the same faculty were approached based on the relevance of their recently completed thesis that year to Macao’s hospitality and tourism development, and particularly the Cotai Strip. While research on experiential learning in hospitality education is limited, this approach can identify the needs of the industry while ensuring the instructional design of the curriculum matches these needs (Green & Erdem, 2016). Role-playing hospitality scenarios as part of introducing students to applied thinking and ‘real-life’ situations in a simulated hospitality environment has been used as part of experiential learning. These are conducted in the safety and comfort of the classroom environment (Ruhanen, 2005). Kiser and Partlow (1999) found that while experiential learning is accepted as beneficial to students by hospitality educators, in reality there is limited scope in its use. The Master Cotai seminar was a real-life event, with academic research presented to an audience of senior industry leaders at an IR ballroom.

Due to the time constraints on industry practitioners, a half-day seminar was held. As such, only five presentations could be considered. The senior executives who attended became the sampling frame for this study. Thirteen senior executives who had been particularly active in promoting the

**Table 1.** Profile of industry executive participants.

Executive [E]	Position	Areas of expertise	Gender	Years of management experience	Highest educational level
1	Senior Vice President	Casino operations, lodging, marketing, strategic analysis, project management, financial control	M	20	Masters
2	Senior Vice President	Casino operations, marketing, strategic analysis	M	More than 25	Secondary School
3	Senior Vice President	Casino operations, marketing, human resource management, Information technology	M	16–20	Masters
4	Senior Vice President	Operation management	M	More than 25	Secondary School
5	Director	Food & beverage	F	10–15	Masters
6	Executive manager	Lodging, food & beverage	F	6–10	Masters
7	Consultant	Casino operations, lodging, financial control, food & beverage, strategic analysis	M	More than 25	Bachelor
8	Executive manager	Marketing	F	6–10	Masters
9	Director	Marketing	F	3–5	Masters
10	Senior Vice President	Lodging, food & beverage, strategic analysis, conventions, events	M	21–25	Masters
11	Director	Financial control	F	6–10	Bachelor
12	Director	Lodging, marketing, strategic analysis, conventions, events	M	10–15	Masters
13	Senior Vice President	Casino operations, marketing, financial control, strategic analysis, project management, conventions, events	M	More than 25	Secondary

seminar to their colleagues across the various IRs, were approached to request their voluntary assistance to answer follow-up questions. The executives represented a mix of roles in the hospitality industry (see, Table 1). The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded at their offices a few weeks later. This approach is similar to King et al. (2011) who interviewed hotel management to assess the gap between industry and hospitality research. To determine the benefits and use of hospitality research, Cobanoglu et al. (2004) conducted a focus group of 12 industry professionals. In questioning 11 senior hotel executives on ways to address the gap between the hotel industry and academia, King et al. (2011) used semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was also employed by Sobaih and Jones (2015) to investigate the view and perceptions of the level of university to industry collaboration in Egypt. Sobaih and Jones (2015) later used coding to identify the themes and patterns within the transcripts.

As promised to the respondents the responses were kept anonymous with only some industry profile used. The open-ended questions were sent in advance to the senior executives when securing the interviews. Each interview lasted for around 40 to 45 minutes. This time limit is in keeping with previous literature (Walters & Ruhanen, 2019). The lecturer involved in the experiential research removed himself from questioning the industry so as to avoid

possibly influencing the answering or bias. This approach is supported in the literature (Walters & Ruhanen, 2019). Verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews were read carefully to identify potential coding and emerging themes.

## **Findings**

### ***Profile of the executives***

Table 1 shows the profiles of the 13 executives across the integrated resort properties on the Cotai Strip. Most were high-level executives at director and senior vice president level. One of the respondents was a consultant for the casino industry. The majority had been in the casino industry for over 10 years with 6 executives having over 20 years of industry experience. Eight of the executives had obtained a master's degree. The areas of expertise ranged and included casino operations and non-gaming operations such as lodging, food and beverage, conventions and events. Five of the executives had expertise with the area of strategic analysis.

### ***State of current Cotai Strip industry to academic research relationship***

The executive respondents were first asked on their opinion on the current situation between academic research and industry. There was general consensus that much more could be done to link the integrated resort industry with academia. A lack of collaboration was reported by the executives between the industry and academia. 'Overall, I would say that it is currently disjointed. Secondly I would say it's inconsistent' [E7]; 'I think the current status is in a very infancy stage' [E12]. For 2 of the senior executives the Mastering Cotai was the first industry to academia collaboration event they had attended [E4, E13].

Commenting on the limited information available on university courses, one executive expressed a lack of knowledge on what research academia did at present;

[E10] Honestly speaking from an operator's point of view. We know very little. I think we need to get more information about course structures, what the course information is about and what the students goes through.

Potential for greater collaboration was mentioned, but also concerns on the handling of sensitive information, the academic's awareness of corporate internal pressures, as well as the university being too academic with limited applied insight [E5, E6]. Handling sensitive data and producing timely research is in line with challenges highlighted in the literature (McCartney, 2018). An interesting perspective was that the industry already produced



regular research, so the onus was on academia to provide research value. The issue of producing research of value to the industry is a common theme on bridging the research gap (Khan, 2019);

[E9] In our department, what we do is very similar to academics. We are an in-house market research department. End users are from different departments. They might be marketing, operation or gaming. The reason why this does not involve academics is because this may contain some sensitive confidential information. The University may be too academic, lacking practical or commercial experience, and academic also lacks awareness of companies' present issues. Additionally, we are already producing research on a professional consultancy level.

The responses from the E4, E14, and E10 executives, some of the most senior management within the IRs, mentioned limited interaction with academia. For a few executives, the Mastering Cotai event was the first industry and academia collaboration event they had attended. There was concern from executives in food and beverage, lodging, and marketing (E5, E6, and E9) on engaging academia given the commercial sensitivity of industry data, as well as the pressure to produce timely and practical research.

### ***Factors that contribute to the gap between industry and academia***

A common sentiment between the respondents was the limited communication between industry and academics. Part of the reason given was the time and resource constraints to create the communication process. Communicating academic research output to industry has been highlighted in the literature (Cobanoglu and Moreo (2001). The industry also recognized the need to react quickly to daily business pressures [E1, E2, E13]. As E1, E2, and E13 were either in Senior or Executive President roles, the ability for timely data and rapid production of research with strategic outcomes and advice, would be key considerations on engaging research partners. As well as communicating research ability, academia may need to consider how quickly research could be conducted and scripted.

One issue that created the gap, and agreed by several of the executives, was the relevance of research needs, and research that directed company decision-making. Industry must find research to be relevant (Cobanoglu & Moreo, 2001) The production of in-house reports 'serve to gain a full understanding and resolve particular problems for the company, whereas academics tend to be more theoretical' [E9]. The issue of applied research requirements resonated among the executive respondents;

[E8] There are different requirements and standards in which market researches are being conducted between industry and academia, as the in-house market research department has a better understanding in what actual practical data and specifications are relevant to the end-users.

[E10] The professors may not have practical experience in a casino. Also, data confidentiality is another concern.

E9, E8, and E10 all have marketing roles, while E10 in addition oversees strategic analysis. Undertaking and providing regular applied market research with recommendations to top management is a key factor for these positions, and hence their concern that academic research could provide adequate practical insight. Although both the industry and academics produced research on the hospitality and gaming industry the strategic directions of the two differed. While the integrated resorts main goal was to be operationally successful, universities prioritized world rankings and recognition of the best academic researchers [E7].

### ***What are the benefits from closer collaboration between academia and industry?***

Some of the executives in casino operations and marketing advocated for greater collaboration, acknowledging that a commonly agreed research agenda and sharing of internal resources and data access could lead to greater benefits for both parties [E3, E7, E8]. One executive, a senior vice president of casino operations, suggested that a key benefit from academia collaboration was the possible influence that academia could have on government policy [E2].

In addition, one executive reflected that academic papers were often used as references in the corporate market research, and seen this as an opportunity for academia to discuss a research agenda further with the industry;

[E9] There is recognition that academic source materials are already used by government and industry and as casino may not have an in-house market research department, this could be an opportunity to receive research assistance from the university.

One approach suggested to stimulate a new research agenda and to question those who have been in the same role for a long time, was through the recruitment of more university students sparking new perspectives and ways to tackle the problem;

[E11] Sometimes the lack of experience can work as an advantage as students have learnt new techniques through University and have not yet been contaminated with the mindset or normal thinking from those who simply tell you that this cannot be done.

Several executives recognized the potential for research collaboration with academia, given that academic research was already referenced by government and in their corporate reports. An executive in financial control [E11] also highlighted the benefit of considering the new techniques that fresh graduates brought to the workplace.

### ***Research areas of greatest benefit to the casino industry?***

Reflective on the gaming and non-gaming backgrounds of the executives, the research areas to collaborate on varied. An executive from lodging and food and beverage [E6] and an executive vice president of casino operations, marketing, and conventions and events [E13] drew attention to the potential for coordinating research on service delivery and understanding the guest experience more to stay competitive;

[E6] It is important to understand the criteria to increase the amount of returning customers, also the service level: friendliness, knowledge, convenience. How acceptable are services provided by AI [artificial intelligence] for customers and why some would prefer human service?

[E13] Guest experience and service satisfaction, how social media and apps can improve business and the expectations of the casino from different segments.

Some of the executives in operations management, food and beverage, and casino operations felt that research collaboration with academics could be done at a macro level, researching the city's infrastructure needs [E4], corporate social responsibility [E5], and how to diversify the tourism economy beyond gaming [E3]. Behavior and data for gaming were also deemed very important research areas with one marketing executive respondent suggesting that academics could act as a third party and consolidate information and data on visitor behavior from different casino operators to share with the whole industry [E9]. Another marketing executive respondent suggested that the university's capacity to conduct research with larger sampling was an advantage;

[E8] Corporate in-house market research departments lack resources to conduct large statistical sampling research which may require 500 or more samples. Therefore, those types of research would be beneficial for corporates to use as references.

### ***Ways academia could establish better research collaboration and communication***

The executives were asked to provide ways in which the industry could establish connections with academia. Various methods were suggested such as having certain individuals appointed within the integrated resort and university to maintain the relationship and communication with both parties [E9, E12]; organizing more networking, round-table events, brainstorming events, and joint seminars [E1, E2, E4, E10, E11, E13]. One executive thought it would be helpful if there was a channel to inform industry of newly published papers from academics [E8]. While some executives suggested informal 'coffee' chats, a senior vice president of casino operations advocated to formalize the meeting with more structure, appointing individuals from

each side, and providing an agenda that focused on research needs [E3]. Interestingly, there was no indication in the responses on who would be responsible for initiating this cooperation.

All the executives supported greater communication between their side and academia, with one executive suggesting the possibility of financial backing for academic research;

[E5] Casino operators are likely to be keen to fund a topic that is in their interest and receive updates and feedback, receiving in return a copy of the research.

The response from E5, a food and beverage executive, acknowledges the funding potential from the casino sector, the hospitality industry's largest revenue provider. There was consensus from all the executives that collaboration between academia and industry practitioners could be of mutual benefit. The executives felt that given academia's access to numerous journals and research opportunities, this could be of benefit to the industry. Various benefits were given. A senior executive from casino operations [E2] mentioned that the government may listen more to academic research outcomes. Another senior executive from casino operations [E1] suggested that academic research could be conducted at a lower cost and being perceived as more neutral [E1]. An executive in financial control felt academic research could handle greater levels of data [E11]. Most executives suggested regular meetings to exchange research ideas and work on research collaboration;

[E13] Collaboration in researches will not only provide the answers both industry and academics are searching for, but it will also create synergy to enhance the performances for both. A regular meet up and opportunity to exchange ideas and sharing updates will fill in the gaps of the information that is lacking. Value will be created when researches are done with shared interests and objectives.

[E3] As I already work in a marketing research team, we conduct our own research. However, if there was a potential interesting and useful collaboration research project, which does not involve a tight timeline we could involve the experience and quality of the academic researcher. It is vital to hold regular meetings to discuss the progress of the research and review the work that has already been done. Data and practical information from the industry and the theory and analysis expertise from University will add value and take the quality of the research to the next level.

## **Discussion of emerging themes**

Several themes emerged from the responses from the executives, which in turn could provide a bases for developing a collaborative framework between industry, academia, and academic research. A prevailing theme and industry requirement was the ability to provide timely research to deliver strategic insights, providing practical actions and solutions to real-life commercial challenges at the IR. Aligned to this was the need for academia to produce

research at a professional consultancy level, including a greater awareness of the present-day needs and challenges of the industry. A general concern expressed by several of the executives was on the handling of commercially sensitive and confidential data, and hence why research is often conducted inhouse.

With executives working in operations, marketing, and back-of-house functions such as finance, the responses revealed the potential for academic research to be strategically aligned to particular IR department needs such as marketing, casino operations, and non-gaming areas, taking in the food and beverage and lodging sectors. Various methods were also mentioned on how to establish a research alliance.

### **Practical implications**

While this study affirms the research gap and limited research interaction and between industry and academia (Barrows & Walsh, 2002; Cobanoglu et al., 2004), the industry executives interviewed showed a willingness from the industry to close this gap – several possibilities were presented such as networking events, roundtables, and joint seminars. The industry acknowledged that there were several benefits and research possibilities by establishing this research relationship. While the literature has provided some suggestions on how to bridge this research gap (Barrows & Walsh (2002); Cobanoglu et al. (2004), the Mastering Cotai event presented a real-life stimulus to begin collaboration and communication between Macao's hospitality practitioners and academia.

A few of the executives mentioned that Mastering Cotai was the first time they had witnessed a sharing of research from academia, with applied outcomes related to the Cotai Strip and hospitality industry. The presentations convinced them that there could be benefits in collaboration. Key concerns centered around timely, applied, and industry relevant research – issues which have underscored previously in the literature as obstacles to collaboration (Walters & Ruhanen, 2019). Academics need to recognize that there is a research competitive landscape and the need to compete with industry consultants on commissioned research projects (Walters & Ruhanen, 2019). With the Cotai Strip properties, the executives also alluded to the fact that their in-house strategic analysis departments and external consultants were also producing regular research to produce critical business and marketing decisions. Walters and Ruhanen (2019) suggested greater rigor and objectivity and the ability to provide real-time solutions and actionable research outcomes as determinants for academics to win research projects. In this study, the executives suggested several possible research areas to cooperate with academia within the IR such as service quality and the implication of AI, including external issues such as destination policy creation.

The challenge of collaboration will not be resolved without actions to actually link the two. Siegel et al. (2003) found that bureaucratic intransigence and poorly designed incentive programs limited university-to-industry collaboration. Academics have different priorities on research, part of which is connected to promotion and tenure. The primary goal of academics does not rest with industry research or dissemination of studies in trade magazines (Cobanoglu & Moreo, 2001). Industry research is often confidential as the data can be competitively sensitive. The executives in this study highlighted the restrictions to publishing industry data, but all agreed that research cooperation was still possible, particularly in research that was shared across the industry. Given the feedback from the industry, including suggestions in previous literature, the following are summarized as actions to strengthen cooperation between industry, education, and research:

- For hospitality research to be disseminated through an accessible and widely recognized medium platform by industry such as trade magazines, e-newsletters, or dedicated website or social media platform. Questioning the relevance of academic research to industry needs, and ways academia and industry could communicate better, Cobanoglu et al. (2004) suggested disseminating hospitality research in an easy to understand language on the Internet or trade publications. Referred journal papers or research presented by academics for further examination and debate, are oftentimes lengthy with convoluted language (Leiper et al., 2007). The dialog on a research agenda should be initiated by academia, with any disseminated research to the industry using plain and concise language (Cobanoglu & Moreo, 2001). Universities could benefit from the market positioning achieved through a better promotion to industry of the research conducted by academia (Walters & Ruhanen, 2019). Therefore collecting, summarizing, and then disseminating research in brief and succinct language should be conducted by the academic institute.
- The hospitality industry has regular at-a-glance research dashboards that present key metrics, data analytics, and algorithms as part of predictive monitoring and business analysis (Lamest & Brady, 2019). Macao's IRs have in-house strategic analysis departments providing daily reports for executive decision-making, and will reach out to commercial research enterprises to conduct research. In this study, the industry acknowledged that academia had a greater capacity to examine larger amounts of data. Including circulation research to industry, academia could advance a mutually beneficial research alliance with IRs. Academia will focus on research publications as key criteria for promotion (Cobanoglu et al., 2004), while Macao's hospitality industry requires research to determine

ongoing decision-making strategy – the challenge being to find common ground between these research aims, and especially, as commented by some executives, on the management of confidential data.

- Most executives agreed in the study that regular networking and knowledge sharing forums would provide opportunities for future research collaboration. Regular networking events with academia and industry professionals in attendance could be held either at a hotel resort or university campus.
- Some hospitality institutes actively provide academics to speak at conferences, as well as providing professional development and applied research for the industry (Barrows & Walsh, 2002). Executive training could be provided to the IRs by Macao's academia, providing a formal and structured environment for the exchange of ideas and data, and to agree on future research collaboration.
- The Mastering Cotai seminar or other Cotai Strip research seminars could be expanded to include faculty research. A longer format could permit further research presentations in more hospitality, gaming, and tourism areas, including workshops on research collaboration. Literature has suggested that academia reaches out to the industry to understand real-life needs (Green & Erdem, 2016). The Mastering Cotai was initiated and planned by academia and could serve as a template for future events.

## Conclusion

The interview results indicated that executives felt academia had the ability to work with large amounts of data, larger samples, and have access to government on policy research issues to steer the direction of the industry. The Mastering Cotai seminar stimulated the possibility of having regular face-to-face and round-table meetings between industry and academia. As with the Master Cotai seminar, the academic institute would be responsible to initiate the first steps to advance future research collaboration with industry. As research collaboration policy must strike a balance and not be to the detriment of scientific output, advancing scholarly activity, and diminishing journal publications (Banal-Estañol et al. (2015), academia would be better placed to gauge this.

While not investigated, there can be other benefits through this experiential learning technique. Providing an environment with real-life learning experiences can also assist in student employment (Ball, 1995). There has been some discussion on immersing undergraduate study within a practical learning environment to garner a greater understanding of the real-life challenges of industry (Ball 1995; Ruhanen, 2005). Another innovative feature of this case study was that postgraduate research presentations were used as a method to

close the gap between the hospitality industry and academia – thereby helping to keep the curricula and particularly the research component germane to industry needs.

While this case study was location-specific to Macao, given that closing the gap between the hospitality industry and academic is a global issue, the themes and findings will have implications on tourism regions outside the city. While a preliminary investigation of industry and academic research collaboration, future research should consider the challenges and actions identified in this case study to produce an ongoing agenda to narrow this gap.

### **Limitations**

The research is exploratory with an aim to provide an understanding of why there a gap exists between Macao's industry practitioners and academia. It explores for the first-time possible areas to collaborate in the future, and tactics to enable communication between the two parties. While the responses were from a group of some of the most senior executives within the Macao IR industry, larger research would be needed across the industry to further understand the important issue of narrowing the research gap. The convenience sampling of senior executives at the Mastering Cotai events may have selection bias. Future research could be enlarged to study the views of those individuals in various levels of management within different gaming and non-gaming departments across the multiple IR properties.

As this was an exploratory research, only qualitative data was provided, and from a small group of industry executives. While verbatim transcripts of the interviews were carefully coded with subthemes emerging, there is always the risk of interruption bias. To overcome this uncertainty, future research should enlarge the sample interviewed, including integrating quantitative research to cross-reference and provide greater insight on this topic of establishing a greater industry, academic, and research collaboration.

As part of experiential learning in hospitality, it is rare that postgraduate students are able to present research to hospitality professionals. It provided a means to interact with industry and show applied research relevant to the Cotai Strip development. While the research was positively received by the audience of senior executives, the event could be enlarged to include faculty presentations across a wider range of research areas. The half-day seminar meant only five presentations could be chosen. A longer seminar would mean more presentations could be considered over several areas in hospitality and gaming. More views on academic research could be collected. The seminar event could become a more important channel to communicate academic research. However, the event needs to be mindful of the daily time constraints of industry practitioners.



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## Ethics statement

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