

A seat at the table: Can the hospitality industry work together to find a sustainable way forward?

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After working in some of New Zealand's leading restaurants over the past 25 years, Rob is now a lecturer at AUT's School of Hospitality and Tourism, teaching across both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. He is also Programme Leader of the Master in Gastronomy programme. Areas of research interest include exploring cultural and social identity through food, the evolution and adaptation of cuisines, and garden to table teaching principles.



The recent impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry – in particular, the acute shortage of workers – has highlighted the fractured nature of the industry's talent pipeline [1, 2, 3], and emphasised the longer-term issue of an increasing disconnect between industry training providers and the industry workplace. Whilst there remains some demand for trained industry professionals, that demand is declining as the hospitality industry increasingly seeks lower paid, part time, flexible, or temporary employees to fill employment gaps [4]. The hospitality industry is rapidly moving towards having a workforce of transient workers – young school leavers, or travellers on work visas who can be easily trained to accomplish simple hospitality or culinary tasks, but can also be quickly and easily replaced [5].

As COVID-19 exacerbated, or arguably, simply hastened the increasing trend of local job seekers to avoid hospitality work [6, 7], an acute worker shortage is now highlighting a divide that industry training providers are trying to straddle. In trying to respond to the needs of industry, student circumstances and expectations, traditional hospitality training styles, and the Tertiary Education Commission's educational requirements, the decreasing numbers of people seeking hospitality training, indicates that the training sector is not meeting industry's needs [8, 9]. Furthermore, at this critical time for industry connectivity between training providers and an under-pressure industry itself, the training sector is arguably now at its weakest.

Whilst highlighting various negative issues that have been slowly simmering within New Zealand's hospitality industry, COVID-19 could also be seen as an instigator of positive change. As a disconnected industry, the hospitality sector in New Zealand now has an opportunity to turn towards a more sustainable model, but this will require dialogue and honest reflection from all stakeholder parties. One attempt to begin bridging that gap was 2022's AUT Culinary & Gastronomy Winter Series – an event that brought academics, hospitality students, suppliers, and industry members together, to celebrate, debate,

discuss, and enjoy being a part of the industry (see <https://www.aut.ac.nz/events/winter-series-2022>). This was but a start.

The sector itself contains all the resources needed to make change that is positive and permanent, and in this current crisis, it should have the motivation. What it lacks however, is cohesiveness. Right now, the many parts that make up the sector are all frantically pulling in different directions, hoping to reach solid ground. But which direction is the right one, and who is going to lead the way? The ability to research both problems and their solutions is available – AUT has this capability, but it needs to walk alongside the industry, and not be viewed as preaching to it. There are still many kinks left to iron out, but in Te Pūkenga (the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology) there are the beginnings of a better, more connected tertiary training sector – it just needs to know what type of graduate the industry actually needs. The restaurant and hotel associations should have sufficient motivation to help implement sustainable change, and the New Zealand Chef's Association is seeking a role to play. It may take some reconsideration of their own organisation's priorities, but the potential benefits for each party far outweigh a continuation of the status quo. The real question is whether there is willingness among the different groups to sit at the table together, or will everyone select what they believe to be their portion, and leave?

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