

With Shatec cutting back operations, what's next for the hospitality sector?



The scaling down of Shatec is a critical moment to re-examine the role of industry players in shaping hospitality education in Singapore. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

qualifications that combine hands-on skills with academic rigour.

This demand is already evident in the steady interest in programmes such as the Culinary Institute of America's Singapore campus, which offers a bachelor's degree in food business management, or the expansion of Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne in Singapore.

The success of these offerings suggests that students are keen on pursuing high-level culinary education without having to go overseas.

We're also seeing growing interest in food science, innovation, and sustainability from polytechnic courses exploring plant-based food technologies to university-level research into future food systems.

These developments indicate an appetite not just for technical training but for deeper engagement with the evolving landscape of food and hospitality.

A model like BCC would allow Singapore to build on these trends and take a leadership role in the region. It would position the country not only as a global tourist hub but also as a centre of hospitality knowledge and innovation, advancing work in service design, culinary technology, sustainability, and the science of gastronomy.

By fusing craft with research and embedding education within a broader ecosystem of entrepreneurship and cultural leadership, Singapore could elevate hospitality into a space of aspiration and impact, both for local talent and for the region.

A NEW KIND OF INSTITUTION

To build on its tourism momentum and take hospitality education to the next level, Singapore can consider developing a new kind of institution that fuses practice, research, and innovation.

It is not just about who trains chefs, but who generates hospitality knowledge by creating a more holistic ecosystem in which the culinary arts could thrive.

This could involve establishing a National Culinary and Hospitality Institute, anchored in both craft-based training and academic credibility.

Such an institute could be co-developed with polytechnics and universities, featuring purpose-built training and laboratory spaces such as simulated hotel lobbies, sensory kitchens, and entrepreneurship studios where students learn by doing across service, culinary arts, and experience design.

Beyond facilities, this vision calls for the development of ecosystem hubs connected to the institute. These could include innovation incubators, gastronomy laboratories, and experimental venues that bring together students, chefs, scientists, and members of the public. These spaces would serve as launchpads for new food concepts, hospitality technologies, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The institute should also offer accredited degrees that integrate both craft and science, giving graduates practical skills and intellectual depth while signalling prestige to employers and the broader industry.

Strong industry partnerships will also be essential to ensure sustainability and relevance. Hospitality groups can contribute through scholarships, structured placements, and joint research initiatives, helping to align training with real-world needs and creating clearer pathways from classroom to career.

Ultimately, this is not about replacing existing institutions, but building on current strengths and imagining what a forward-looking, world-class hospitality education system could become.

With Shatec scaling down its operations, it's time for Singapore to pursue more sustainable, human-centred strategies for the hospitality industry. Because robots and automation won't save it.

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Since the pandemic, a steady outflow of hospitality workers has continued to strain a sector already grappling with exceptionally high turnover. Singapore's hotels have turned to technology and job redesign as potential solutions. But when measured against the scale of the problem, these efforts may be insufficient. ST FILE PHOTO

Robots can't solve the industry's woes.
A new kind of education institute might.

**Shane Pereira and
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In 2017, Hotel Jen introduced Jeno and Jena – two robots designed to handle in-room dining orders – at their two properties in Singapore. They can ride elevators and greet guests upon arrival. Other Singaporean hotels, such as M Social and Marina Bay Sands, have also turned to automation.

This is in response to a major problem: an acute recruitment and retention problem in the hospitality industry.

No doubt automation can ease some of the labour pressures. But an overreliance on technology presents significant risks and can be a shortsighted approach.

Take the case of Japan's Henn na Hotel, once celebrated as the world's first robot-staffed hotel. Initially praised for its innovation, the hotel quickly faced problems – malfunctioning robots and poor guest experiences ultimately forced management to dismiss most of its robotic staff.

Besides, if we increasingly rely on automation to meet service demands, what happens to the ethos of hospitality – the human warmth, attention to detail, and culture of care that no machine can replicate?

Automation aside, the struggle to find talented staff is about to get worse in Singapore.

It was recently announced that renowned hotel management

school Shatec had retrenched 42 staff members. The institution had embarked on a "business containment exercise" resulting in a "scaling down of operations".

Over the past 40 years, the institution has trained more than 40,000 graduates, supplying hotels, restaurants and even event venues across the region with skilled service professionals. In fact, back in the 1990s, a Shatec diploma was considered a golden ticket to a career in hospitality and service.

So far, the response from the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and other government agencies has been limited. They have pointed to existing training options at institutions such as Temasek Polytechnic, with the STB stating that it will continue to support the training needs of the tourism sector "to ensure that Singapore maintains its productivity and competitiveness".

While this signals continuity, it does little to confront the deeper crisis hollowing out the Singapore hospitality sector.

Since the pandemic, a steady outflow of hospitality workers has continued to strain a sector already grappling with exceptionally high turnover. Hotels invest heavily in training – up to \$18,000 per employee – only to see many leave within a year.

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problem, these efforts may be insufficient.

A CRITICAL MOMENT

The scaling down of Shatec is a critical moment to re-examine the role of industry players in shaping hospitality education in Singapore.

If Singapore is to maintain its global reputation as a premier destination, it must look beyond tourist arrivals and consider the foundations that support those experiences.

The real risk lies not in declining visitor numbers but in losing ground on the people, expertise, and innovation that underpin the hospitality industry.

In short, Singapore risks ceding leadership not just in tourism traffic, but in the human and intellectual capital that gives hospitality its edge.

Part of the challenge lies in how we value service work in Singapore.

While Singapore ranks highly in global hospitality consumption, with five-star hotels, Michelin-starred restaurants, and MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) events, the service profession remains undervalued domestically.

The 2023 Institute of Policy Studies study on the future of work revealed that compared to professionals, managers, executives and technicians, service-sector workers are less likely to find their work meaningful or upwardly mobile.

Public attitudes towards service work are also often seen as

undesirable, viewed only as a 'fall back' occupation, which contributes to this devaluation.

This stigma further warps student and parent perceptions, draining the sector of aspirational talent precisely when high-end hospitality needs them most.

LOOKING OVERSEAS

Over the past few years, there has been a growing national interest in food science – reflected in research funding, media attention and student demand. The Singapore Government also continues to invest millions in attracting food businesses and supporting food innovation.

Singapore is also already a world leader in cultured meat and vegetable protein research.

Yet, there is still no Singaporean institution that meaningfully links this dynamic to the craft of hospitality.

The lack of a space where rigorous research and practical application meet not only inhibits creativity but also leaves a critical gap in terms of thought leadership and long-term growth of the sector.

If Singapore is to maintain its global reputation as a premier destination, it must look beyond tourist arrivals and consider the foundations that support those experiences. The real risk lies not in declining visitor numbers but in losing ground on the people, expertise, and innovation that underpin the hospitality industry.