



PROFESSIONAL COOK'S  
COMPETENCE ENTITY AND  
ROLE: A REVIEW OF THE  
CHALLENGES FACING  
PROFESSIONAL COOKS 2019  
Report

The CORE project aims to explore the future dynamics of culinary education across Europe. The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and includes a project team with members from Finland, Estonia, Spain and Ireland.

**CORE – Cooking for the future**  
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## **CORE – COOKING FOR THE FUTURE**

### **Report on professional cook's competence entity and role: a review of the challenges facing professional cooks 2019**

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## Introduction

There are two key issues that the majority of people involved in the tourism and hospitality industries within the European Union (EU) agree upon today – firstly, that there is a severe shortage of professional cooks<sup>1</sup> and secondly, it is an acute problem as of now.

A review of the project partner countries reinforces this issue; As an example of the current recruitment and retention problem, the Restaurants Association of Ireland (RAI) alone has said that at least +5,000 new professional cooks and qualified food service staff would be required each year by 2020 to meet the current Irish industry demands (Woods, 2017). Ireland is by no means a heavily populated country – 4.784 million citizens (Central Statistics Office, 2017) – yet it requires +5,000 new staff just to manage what is current practice. Apart from Spain, with a population of 46.722 million citizens, Estonia and Finland are by no means large populated countries either, 1.316 and 5.503 million citizens respectively, yet they are also experiencing a critical shortage of professional cooks and qualified food service staff (García, 2017; ERR News, 2018; Åberg, 2018).

According to the OSKA report in Estonia, there is approximately 23,880 people employed in the catering sector with an increase of 2% annually. Estonian also reports a shortage of cooks nationwide with approximately 400 unfilled positions in cooking and catering in 2019 and expect this to continue for the next 12 months according to the Unemployment Office.

The hospitality sector in Finland employs over 140,200 professionals all over Finland with 30 % of the employees working in the hospitality industry under 26 years of age. The hospitality industry's workforce increased by 46 % between 1995 and 2017, while traditional manufacturing industries reduced their workforce.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Cook' is used throughout this paper as per the ESCO classification of a professional chef. In Ireland the term 'Commis Chef' is generally used to describe a professional chef, albeit, training.

The Basque Institute of Statistics reported that the tourism sector employed over 57.700 people, growing 7,7% in 2016 and growing 10% in the last 5 years. All countries demonstrating a vibrant growing tourism sector with future challenges as the demand for trained cooks continues.

With an overall increase in European tourism, which has grown to +743 million international visitor in 2018, and the increase therefore in food service businesses to accommodate this increase, it could be said to be a key contributing factor. However, the growth in international visitors is only one of a myriad of reasons as to why there is such a shortage of professional cooks and qualified food service staff. 'Cooks' as a general category for the European Network of Public Employment Services (ENPES) Annual Report, A Comparison of Shortage and Surplus Occupations Based on Analyses of Data from the European Public Employment Services and Labour Force Surveys, shows that it occupies the number one shortage category across all research indicators across the majority of EU countries (European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2018).

Research by various food service industry experts indicate that the potential solution(s) is quite complicated and even possibly contentious, particularly as regards small to medium size (SMEs) businesses, of which the majority of food service businesses are. The main findings suggest increased remuneration and substantially better terms and conditions for professional cooks and food service staff could help to negate the crisis, and furthermore, prevent, or at least reduce, the current estimated 45-50% career drop-out rate across the EU (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018).

However, there appears to be a lack of willingness on behalf of the tourism and hospitality industries, EU wide<sup>2</sup>, to change overall working conditions and the associated perceptions of professional cooking and the food service industry. This is also an issue for the majority of developed countries internationally, with shortages

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<sup>2</sup> Not only is this an issue within the European Union member states, but is an overriding issue amongst the majority of developed countries internationally, particularly western-styled countries e.g. Australia, Canada, Japan, and United States of America (US Department of Labour, 2017).

being recognised in Australia, Canada, and the United States of America (Pinder et al, 2018).

In the United Kingdom<sup>3</sup> (UK) the tourism and hospitality industry expresses its dismay at the lack of qualified food service staff, yet at the same time prefer its industry to be exempted from national wage standards and working time / employment protection legislation (Lewis, 2018).

As mentioned, Estonia, Finland, Ireland and The Basque Region / Spain are not in a unique situation when it comes to the difficulties of recruiting and retaining cooks and qualified food service staff into their respective hospitality and food service industries. It appears that many developed countries across both the northern and southern hemispheres are facing the exact same issue (Independent News, 2018). There are an array of factors prohibiting both the recruitment, training and the retention of professional cooks and qualified food service staff, and all of these are the factors will need to change if the sector wants to ensure a sustainable and viable service for the future. (Harford, 2019).

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding the United Kingdom: in this case the United Kingdom includes Northern Ireland, albeit Northern Ireland and Ireland are marketed as the Island of Ireland internationally from a tourism perspective, but are separate jurisdictions thereafter.

## Professional Cookery: Key Issues

### Working Hours and Pay Equivalence

The research undertaken indicates that the reason why recruiting and / or retaining professional cooks and qualified food service staff is an ever-growing issue may be due to the long working hours and the associated relative low pay<sup>4</sup> (Woods, 2019). In reviewing the rates of pay across project partners (Table 1 below), it is evident that the rates of pay are still relatively poor given the training and years of experience required at each position.

Table 1: Sample of pay rates by job title across participating countries 2019

	<b>COOK</b>	<b>COOK DE PARTIE</b>	<b>SOUS COOK</b>	<b>HEAD COOK</b>
Typical years of experience required	2-3 years experience	3-5 years experience	5-7 years experience	7-10 years experience
ESTONIA	€10,704	-	-	€16,260
FINLAND	€24,908	€27,000	€31,200	€42,500
IRELAND	€21,673	€30,000	€36,000 +	€65,000
SPAIN	€21,000	€25,000	-	€32,000

This is mirrored across the EU, where working conditions and relative pay or pay equivalence are highlighted as chronic issues for recruitment and retention (Lewis, 2018). To further expand upon the pay issue, and according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2018) the average earnings for employees within the hospitality /

<sup>4</sup> It is understood that each EU member country will have variable rates of pay associated with each jurisdiction, thus the examples given throughout are based on each individual country only. Training rates of pay also vary widely. However, for the purposes of the research, all indications suggests the key issues are remuneration and terms and conditions, regardless of the rate of pay from the particular country.

hotel industry in 2017 were the lowest of any employment sector by over \$5k / annum. This is particularly true when migrant workers are the dominant sector of employees (Weinz, 2017). A research based article also published in The Journal.ie in 2018 showed, that while the wages for upper management positions within the tourism and hospitality industry are growing, albeit still below average for an equivalent position within other sectors, the mid-lower positions are consistently below the average industrial wage for positions requiring similar experience in other fields / sectors, and this is replicated internationally (World Tourism Organisation 2016).

Hours and pay equivalence should go hand-in-hand, however, there is now a clear need for a sensible debate on pay for cooks and qualified food service staff commensurate with their qualifications, experience and most importantly working conditions / employment terms and conditions. The pay rate for agency professional cooks and agency food service staff will need to be included within that, due to the ever-increasing numbers of potential tourism and hospitality employees choosing this as their preferred method of employment (People First, 2018).



## Business Costs<sup>5</sup>

Increasing business operating costs will naturally eat into already tight margins. The dilemma tourism and hospitality businesses face is that, by not improving terms and conditions and / or increasing pay, comes with its own financial business costs as it increases labour turnover and can thus increase the reliance on temporary agency staff. The reliance of agency staff is always much more expensive and generally unvested in the business. As a result of this scenario, tourism and hospitality businesses are looking at productivity gains to reduce other costs and increase outputs, which is self-defeating in the long-term.

Regardless of the above it should be acknowledged that restaurants and hotels are among the costliest businesses to open, and, extremely costly to maintain to a required standard (International Hotel and Restaurant Association, 2017). It could be said that EU regulators are also potentially hindering tourism and hospitality businesses by the immense amount of governance, laws and regulations being imposed upon the tourism and hospitality industries. However, it is still no solace for an employee, regardless of how altruistic an establishment may want to be and / or realistic they may be, the profit margins are limited.

## Expectations

Another factor is the tourism and hospitality industries expectations of a cook. It is not uncommon that a cook would be working +60hrs / week, restricted time off (including split shifts and annual holidays), non-adherence to even basic standards of EU and national Employment Laws<sup>6</sup> and Regulations i.e. rosters, working time, and official breaks, and most commonly, non-payment for extra working hours (Dewhirst, 2018).

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<sup>5</sup> As with working hours and pay equivalence, it is understood that each EU member country will have variable business rates / costs associated with each jurisdiction, however, for the purposes of the research, all indications suggests the key issues for businesses are the ever increasing business costs and the expectations of the consumer.

<sup>6</sup> While employment laws and regulations are defined by the EU centrally, each jurisdiction within the member states still have the right to apply various amendments, exemptions or restrictions within their said jurisdiction

The changing nature of the cook's role, along with the breadth and variety of food outlets within the contemporary tourism and hospitality sector, has meant the emergence of two very different types of 'cook'. The distinction between cooks (professional cooks) and general food production personnel is vitally important. The former require a very broad range of culinary competencies and skills to prepare and cook from scratch. This is generally attained through attendance at an approved culinary programme which is also integrated with work-experience. The latter tend to work with pre-prepared food and do not need intensive culinary skills as such or potentially no culinary skills at all (McLaughlin, 2019). Across the tourism and hospitality industry, it is estimated that about 60% of cooks are trained cooks and 40% are untrained employees assigned the role of food preparation and delivery.

Brian McDermott (2018) suggests, *"...such is the shortage of qualified cooks, the reality is that kitchen porters are becoming cooks. If an employee shows any ability or awareness, they are given cook duties within a couple of days. That is addressing a short-term solution for employers, but does not address the long-term"* Both roles are critically important to the tourism and hospitality sector, but it is failing to highlight the distinctive career pathways that both / either roles offers, and is only a temporary, short-term solution to the problem as suggested.

## **‘Burnout’ and Career Exit**

‘Burnout’ is another key issue and related to the terms and conditions a professional cook and qualified food service staff may endure. In Ireland, it can be typical to work a 60+ or more hours per week, combined with non-guaranteed days off i.e. often a 6-day week, there is a high burnout rate amongst cooks. This means a cook reaches a level of exhaustion where they can no longer function properly – neither physically nor mentally (Duffy, 2019). It has no benefit to either the individual or the employer, and, naturally, results in standards being over-looked and poorly maintained, thus resulting in poor customer experiences, and ultimately deterioration in business in the long-term.

The knock-on effect is that cooks leave their place of employment, and often their careers and the tourism and hospitality industry altogether, to seek better options elsewhere, particularly the retail sector or food service sector (McLaughlin, 2019). New employment is often found within retail and contract catering whether in retail, health or corporate canteen services where there is a better guarantee of commensurate terms and conditions being on offer, and the long-term availability and sustainability of a work / life balance for the employee.

While employees terms and conditions of pay and employment are based on labour laws across Europe, working in the catering sector is still a demanding job, requiring strong physical endurance and stamina with a constant expectation of working overtime which sometimes goes unreported and causes bigger problems in the longer term. In Finland, while there is still a shortage of cooks the experience reported is different, generally cooks work 5 days a week and have their 2 days off, unless by choice, however, it still remains a physically and mentally challenging profession. Many fine dining restaurants will close 2-3 days a week which helps manage their labour.

In Spain and the Basque Country, the cook’s job tends to be a 5 day week with split shifts featuring due to the culture of dining late at night, a shifts varying between 10:00 – 16:00 and 20:00 to 00:00. A new trend of working in restaurants with a large brigade includes a 7/2 – 7/5 working week, seven days in a row and two days off and seven days in a row and five days off.

## Marketing and Promotion

The tourism and hospitality industry as a national entity, of whatever country, need to collaborate on promoting the positives of the industry, and in particular, the potential career of a cook. *“It seems evident that the industry needs to promote itself and its range of careers better to schools and to young people.”* (The Caterer, 2018). Of the 1,500 Irish professional cook ‘cook’ graduates entering the work force each year, less than 50% remain within the tourism and hospitality industry 5 years later. This is replicated throughout the EU, and in some instances, such as the UK, it is above 50% (Lewis, 2018). Estonia reports that turnover in the catering sector as significantly higher than in other sectors with a higher than average percentage leaving the sector which poses constant challenges for recruitment and training. In Finland, as in other European country the number of students choosing to study hospitality related courses is declining by 50% in four years, this is a similar trend in Ireland and in the UK some colleges have closed their catering departments. In Spain, high turnover is also a feature of the sector and it is also true that due to this high level of vacancies, the quality of the jobs has decreased which is related to the lack of skills. There is high demand of skilled cook but the reality is the sector employs lots of low skilled people with lower salaries.

A serious, in-depth and honest internal review and reflection of the tourism and hospitality industry is required to understand why this is the case, and what is required to help change this situation. All quality food service businesses and employers fully understand the need for employee skills investment – training instils standards and standards instil good business practice, which all going well, will lead to improved and sustainable business prospects not only for the business owner, but also for the employee, and yet the lack of commitment to training is evident<sup>7</sup>. In the Basque Country a dual system is becoming more popular in the hospitality companies. There are also lot of people who has been working in the sector for many years seeking recognition for

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<sup>7</sup> The numbers entering training as professional chefs has reduced year on year in the last 10 years....

prior experience and catering schools are offering alternative education in the evenings for employed people looking to gain the further competences and achieve a qualification.

The EU average staff turnover of the tourism and hospitality sector, in particular the hotel and restaurant sector, can be as high as 44% on an annual basis, which is clearly unsustainable and feeds into the negative image now associated with working within the tourism and hospitality sectors (European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2018).

The career attractiveness of the tourism and hospitality industry has also been traditionally disregarded at secondary school level within the EU member states especially. This is often the case with developed countries – the richer and more developed they become, the less likely school-leavers take up trade and craft careers.

The tourism and hospitality industry has often been viewed as a last resort career choice for a young person who has been deemed '*not academic enough*' to attend university / 3<sup>rd</sup> level or a non-hospitality career after their secondary schooling (Flanagan, 2015). This is where the tourism and hospitality industry needs to target if they are to recruit for the future. Continually going abroad to non-EU countries on recruitment drives indicates the need for a 'quick fix', which will address the issue in the short term but does not solve the problem. Contemporary celebrity cook programmes such as '*Gordon's Kitchen Nightmares*' and '*Hell's Kitchen*' do not do the industry any favours either – it is not reality, and the behaviour is certainly not acceptable in a modern-day society, never mind a place of work / employment. Nor should it be. The image is false and this also needs to be addressed. However, it should also be noted that there are significant positive images also being portrayed on TV and in magazines in all partner countries.

There are many excellent places of employment available who regard the staff / employees as being the first consideration of their business<sup>8</sup>. The tourism and

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<sup>8</sup> Again, the tourism and hospitality sector is not prominent enough in advertising the quality work-places and ensuring that these establishments are given as best-practice when marketing the industry as a whole.

hospitality industry will need to set more attractive remuneration packages, including definitive terms and conditions, to gain a better chance of retention, let alone new recruitment. An immediate root and branch review of the tourism and hospitality industry has to be undertaken, properly analysed, and thereafter recommendations need to be produced. If it requires businesses to reassess and / or reinvent their business practices and assumptions, then so be it. The alternative is closure. Tourism and hospitality are recognised as being pillar industries amongst many EU countries, particularly, Ireland, Estonia, Finland and Spain. It is thus vital that an EU wide approach to problem solving this issue is undertaken (European Commission, 2017).

A number of career promotion initiatives are underway to encourage young people in particular to consider a career in the culinary profession. In Ireland, the apprentice cook programme. [www.theapprenticecook.ie](http://www.theapprenticecook.ie) encourages young students by running competitions across second level schools and another programme called 'Tourism Insight' is an open source online programme for transition year students to complete to educate them about the tourism sector and explore careers in the sector [www.tourisminsight.ie](http://www.tourisminsight.ie)

The Basque Country leads the way in innovation in the field of gastronomy, The Basque Culinary Centre, located in San Sebastian <https://www.bculinary.com>, is the first Gastronomy University in Europe.

In Estonia there has been a significant branding campaign for VET but not specifically for cooking and in Finland a number of websites and blogs from professional cooks encourage employment in the sector

<https://www.lapland.fi/live-work>

[http://www.ammattinetti.fi/ammattit/detail/621\\_ammatti](http://www.ammattinetti.fi/ammattit/detail/621_ammatti)

<http://www.ammattiosaaja.fi/asiasanat/kokki>

<https://hannag.fi/miten-minusta-tuli-kokki/>

## Conclusion

The shortage of cooks is neither inevitable nor unsolvable. But it is complex, and there is no simple, single remedy. Change will not come about if tourism and hospitality businesses and the sector as a whole do not alter some practices and, more importantly, start to build on best-practice and remove barriers that have prevented a joined up approach across the sector, and across the EU as an entity.

The '*old ways*' of thinking will not successfully tackle the multifaceted issues driving the shortage. It requires action at a business level primarily, by government, through a supporting role, and by education providers in a modern educational approach. It also needs a holistic approach that does not just focus on careers, but also on why we continue to lose talented professional cooks and food service personnel.

## Careers Campaign

As a starting point, there is a critical need for a cross-sector and cross-border careers campaign that brings together all interested organisations (trade associations, cook associations, learning providers, careers organisations and employers), puts competing agendas aside and unites around a central message and campaign.

Key recommendations include:

- Distinguish between the different career pathways of the differing professional cooks / cooks roles.
- Link to existing apprenticeships, part-time and full-time college / educational providers programmes.
- Be delivered for a sustained period of time.
- Target all age groups.
- Integrate with the national and EU government's existing information, advice and guidance.
- Integrate, connect and upscale current initiatives.
- Be completely industry / employer-led.



## Early Age Interventions

Almost all of the students on full-time professional cook programmes in further education were stimulated to cook at an early age. But many children do not have the chance to cook at home and so it is important that the initiatives that give young people the opportunity to experience food and cooking are encouraged and supported by the education providers with government support, either nationally or EU level. Finland is an exemplar in this where it is compulsory for everyone to take a cooking course (Home Economics) at upper secondary school. Increasing the number of students who actually go on from college to work long-term in the industry would have a significant impact on alleviating the cook shortage.

More employers need to establish links with their local education providers and colleges to ensure they are delivering relevant and quality professional cookery and food service provision.

Key recommendations include:

- Sponsoring the educational providers or colleges' restaurants, brasseries and / or coffee shops.
- Helping to deliver classes
- Providing quality work placements
- Examples of innovative school programmes include

## IRELAND

Transition Year Programmes include [www.theapprenticecook.com](http://www.theapprenticecook.com) and [www.tourisminsight.ie](http://www.tourisminsight.ie),

Cook Ambassador Programme, Cook Network, Cook Collab, Taster Days.

## **ESTONIA**

There are mentorship programs for young talent - for example preparing for international competitions

for students such as AEHT a mentor from outside the school is provided to the student. Also for the Bocuse D'or, a programme for young professionals to train with professional cooks.

In Tartu VEC, a cook's assistant course is provided to high school students as an auxiliary course in their programme.

## **FINLAND**

Hella Food is a free project for young people aged 18-29. The aim is to open a direct path to work or study in the field. At the same time, Hella Food gives its participants a lifelong skill that is reflected positively in their daily lives and social relationships. During the four-month course, young people will learn how to cook raw materials under the guidance of top cooks.

HellaFood <http://www.hellafood.fi/>

## **Creating a Quality Workplace**

The dilemma for many tourism and hospitality businesses is that they are operating on thin margins, with rising food and staff costs and a highly competitive marketplace. But without competitive salaries, realistic hours, tangible development and a good working environment, the shortage will only get worse. The Performance and Talent Management Revolution Report highlighted some practical steps that tourism and hospitality businesses can take to improve retention, engagement and productivity.

## **Recruitment**

HR professionals and recruitment agencies consistently believe that the recruitment of cooks needs to change by moving away from short-term firefighting to building a longer-term approach which will enable them to develop their careers in a more sustainable way. Many businesses are also reviewing their methods of recruitment to ensure that they are as effective as possible. They are professionalising the process by making the job offer more attractive, by highlighting development and progression opportunities and speeding up the process between an initial enquiry and an interview. Recruiting full-time cook students when they have completed their course and offering cook apprenticeships are two practical steps that employers can take as part of this approach.

## **Maximising Apprenticeships**

Changes to the apprenticeship system mean that employers have much greater flexibility in how they develop the skills and knowledge of apprenticeship cooks. For example, offering cohorts of cook apprenticeships periodically rather than recruiting just one or two each year. Create in-house cook academies in conjunction with a recognised educational provider to help market cook apprenticeship opportunities and built structured development programmes to meets their needs.

## **Retention and Engagement**

Boosting retention is key to addressing the shortage. However in order to do this, tourism and hospitality businesses need to offer a holistic package of a competitive salary, realistic hours, tangible development and a good working environment – and while many establishments are operating with margins so slim that they may be unable to alter the pay, it makes the other components even more important.

## **Culture and Management**

One critical area for attention is examining the culture of the kitchens and the management skills of senior cooks. The issue of poor management, and intimidating, aggressive and sometimes sexist cultures comes up time and again and is one of the key reasons professional cooks leave a business. These must be addressed, which is why many businesses are striving to improve their professional cooks' people management skills and improve the physical environment in which they work. Addressing the issue of long and anti-social hours is another key piece of the retention puzzle.

## **Learning and Development**

One result of the shortage is that too many professional cooks/cooks are in positions where they do not possess the required level of skills. There needs to be a renewed emphasis on learning and development in order to develop the culinary skills and knowledge of existing cooks, to develop softer skills and management skills. A solid learning and development programme can also act as a strong incentive to aid retention.

## **Job and Operational Re-engineering**

Some businesses have begun to de-skilled subtly by buying in more prepared items and some multi-site businesses are increasing the use of centralised production kitchens.

## **Conclusion**

When you look at the number of professional cook/cook and food service staff students it is clear that the industry should not have a cook/cook shortage at all. However, as this report / research highlights, there are a number of factors that conspire to make a career in the contemporary kitchen unattractive for even the most dedicated professional cook/cook and this means the issue is a very complex one to solve. The

old ways of thinking will do nothing to address these multifaceted issues – indeed, they are what contributed to the problem in the first place. Disruptive propositions are sweeping other sectors and continuous change is now the norm. There is no room for complacency, and if the wider tourism and hospitality sector cannot transform this does not bode well into the future. What is happening right now cannot be changed, only managed. If the passion with which everyone speaks about the cook/cook profession can be channelled positively, then there is no reason to think it cannot be solved.

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