



# Multidimensionality of HRD in small tourism firms: A case study of the Republic of Ireland

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Human resource development  
Small tourism firms  
Multiple dimensions of HRD  
Evolutionary resource-based view  
Institutional logics  
Republic of Ireland

## ABSTRACT

This case study explores multiple dimensions of human resource development (HRD) in small tourism firms (STFs) within the Republic of Ireland. Underpinned by the evolutionary resource-based view (ERBV) and institutional logics, this study investigates owner-manager/senior manager and employee perceptions of the internal and external STF context and how such contextual contingencies shape their perceptions and experiences of multiple dimensions of HRD. Our study highlights (a) a dynamic interaction between external institutional logics and internal contextual factors, with the owner-manager acting as a key agent in shaping HRD dimensions; (b) actors within STFs are able to reconcile potentially conflicting institutional logics to create a dynamic HRD approach; (c) STFs implement HRD in a coordinated manner, imbued with elements of formality and informality, and (d) significant differences exist between owner-manager and employee perceptions of HRD dimensions. We discuss the implications of the findings for both research and practice.

## 1. Introduction

As one of the world's largest economic sectors, tourism creates employment, drives exports, and generates prosperity across the globe (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). In this paper, we present a case study of the Republic of Ireland and emphasise the particular case of small tourism firms (STFs). STFs are highly represented in the Irish tourism sector, meaning that their numerical and economic significance cannot be exaggerated (ITIC, 2018; McCamley & Gilmore, 2017). Tourism represents one of the most important services sectors in the Irish economy and has played a pivotal role in the resurgence of the economy during the past decade (DTTAS, 2018). Recent data indicates that the sector employs approximately 260,000 people, representing 11% economy-wide employment (IHF, 2019a). Tourism is also Ireland's largest indigenous employer, with more than 60,000 jobs in the hotel industry alone, and strong expectations of increased employment growth are anticipated into the future (IHF, 2019a). More than €9 billion in total revenue was generated by tourism-related enterprises in 2018 and this accounted for in excess of 4% of GNP (ITIC, 2019; Tourism Ireland, 2018). In relation to the competitive landscape, recent years have witnessed an increase in both home-grown business and overseas visits, although significant challenges remain, notably in relation to

Brexit and a decline in UK business (IHF, 2019b; Pappas, 2019).

In order for STFs in Ireland to realise their future potential and to ensure the consistent delivery of a quality product and service, investment in the development of a highly skilled workforce is vital (Diffley, McCole, & Carvajal-Trujillo, 2018). While there has been greater recognition in recent times of the importance of a robust human resource development (HRD) infrastructure for sectoral growth, the emphasis has habitually been on investing in physical capital and destination marketing at the expense of investment in HRD (Fáilte Ireland, 2005). Jooss and Burbach (2017) highlight that the industry's HR practices lack sophistication and innovation, while simultaneously drawing attention to the high demand for skilled employees and the chronic talent shortages that continue to pose challenges. Furthermore, a report by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN, 2015, p.131) states that "there is presently an absence of an overall leadership and coordination function for the skills development of the sector". The EGFSN report also points to the importance of a coordinated and collaborative approach by relevant stakeholders to ensure the provision of a sufficient quantity and quality of skills to ensure the successful development of the sector.

Despite the undoubted importance that HRD plays in enhancing productivity standards, there is significant global evidence to suggest a

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2019.104029>

Received 9 July 2018; Received in revised form 1 July 2019; Accepted 29 October 2019

Available online 7 March 2020

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widespread reluctance amongst tourism firms to invest in HRD (Baum, 2018, 2019; Jaworski, Ravichandran, Karpinski, & Singh, 2018; Solnet, Baum, Robison & Lockstone-Binney, 2016). There is a notable paucity of research regarding HRD in the Irish tourism context. Indeed, Francis and Baum (2018) maintain that the global tourism industry has been ill-served by research which seeks to address strategic HR issues such as the development of talent. HRD manifests and constructs itself in diverse ways according to both the character of the organisation and the wider environmental context within which the organisation operates (Yeo & Marquardt, 2015). HRD is therefore unequivocally context-bound (Holian & Coughlan, 2015) and the dynamics of the tourism context must be afforded greater attention (Morrison, Carlsen, & Weber, 2010).

The particular knowledge gaps that exist in relation to the context in which STF's are embedded and how such contexts influence firm HRD behaviour is highlighted by Thomas, Shaw and Page (2011, p.964), who describe it as "under-theorised and under-researched". In turn, this draws attention to the importance of capturing the perspectives of key stakeholders within the STF and how contextual contingencies shape managerial and employee agency. While owner-manager perspectives have received some attention (e.g. Ateljevic, 2007; Chand, 2010), a more limited body of research on HRD-related constructs has focused on employees, including their motivation to engage in HRD, perceived support for HRD, perceived accessibility of HRD and perceived benefits of HRD (Dhar, 2015; Tsaur & Lin, 2004). The marginalisation of the employee voice in research designs is difficult to justify, given that STF's rely on the discretionary effort of a limited employee base (Li, Sanders, & Frenkel, 2012). Recent studies in the generic small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) literature have shown that working arrangements, including HRD, may not be mandated but rather negotiated through relational means between owner-managers and employees (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2006; Mallett & Wapshott, 2014). However, whether such findings extend to STF's remains unclear. Thus, the aim of this qualitative study is to examine the complexities of HRD in Irish STF's and its multiple dimensions in this distinctive context. We explore owner-manager, senior manager and employee perceptions of important aspects of the external and internal STF context and how such aspects influence their perceptions and experiences of the HRD dimensions that are implemented in STF's.

In order to address the aforementioned gaps, we present a qualitative exploration of HRD in STF's in the Republic of Ireland. We suggest that the integration of the evolutionary resource-based view of the firm (ERBV) and the theoretical perspective of institutional logics may enhance our ability to understand both internal and external contextual factors that shape the multidimensionality of HRD in STF's. Research in this domain is critical as it is widely argued that HRD is a strategically important practice to STF's (e.g. Baum, 2018; Liu, 2018; Sheehan, Grant, & Garavan, 2018), which emphasises the imperative for firms to enhance the quality of their human capital in order to create and sustain competitive advantage.

It has long been argued that STF's represent an area of theoretical distinctiveness in comparison to their larger counterparts (Thomas, 2004). For example, Quinn, Larmour, and McQuillan (1992) point out that small hotels are not simply smaller versions of their larger counterparts, but possess distinct managerial cultures of their own. Burns (2010, p.16) states that "being a small firm is not just about size, defined in simple statistical terms. Small firms also have important defining characteristics." This suggests that HRD may assume an entirely different meaning and character in the small tourism context and mandates that further attention be paid to the characteristics that are specific to STF's beyond that of simple statistics.

While there is no agreed specific definition of what constitutes a STF, Morrison and Conway (2007) suggest the adoption of a grounded approach, utilising a range of qualitative and quantitative definitional criteria. In line with their recommendation, in this paper we focus on an important tourism sub-sector, the hotel industry, and use a size definition of less than 50 letting bedrooms (Ingram, Jamieson, Lynch, & Bent,

2000). We also focus on independent hotels that are directly managed by their owners (Thomas, 2000) and STF's where the dominant business motivation is economic rather than lifestyle (Wang, Li, & Xu, 2019). The latest figures from Fáilte Ireland (2019) reveal that there are 825 registered hotels in Ireland. This represents a small increase on figures from 2016 to 2018 (approximately 2%) (Scales, 2017). Analysis of the regional distribution of hotels reveals that hotel capacity is not evenly distributed around the country (Fáilte Ireland, 2018). Just four counties, Dublin, Kerry, Galway and Cork account for more than half (56%) of hotel bed spaces, where the demand is typically higher. However, of particular significance is that 49% of the total hotels in the country have up to 50 bedrooms (Fáilte Ireland, 2019). This key criterion is widely used through the tourism literature to define the parameters of a small hotel (e.g. Ingram et al., 2000; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004; World Tourism Organisation, 2000). However, as Bridge and O'Neill (2017) have observed, size often represents a proxy for other key distinguishing features of small firms. Hence, we invoke a broader range of definitional criteria to identify relevant study participants.

HRD is a relatively new concept in the literature (Han, Chae, Han, & Yoon, 2017) and its use within the tourism literature is to date uncommon. There is, however, an emerging consensus that HRD involves a number of components including: (a) the management of formal and informal training and development policies, practices and processes linked to the acquisition of work-related skills, learning and knowledge of individuals and groups for current and future organisational roles (Hamlin & Stewart, 2011; Wang, Werner, Sun, Gilley, & Gilley, 2017); and (b) managerial and employee dimensions (Ghosh, Kim, Kim & Callaghan, 2014; Sung & Choi, 2018). Managerial dimensions tend to be quantitative and emphasise metrics such as total expenditure on HRD and the ratio of total expenditure on HRD to total payroll. Employee dimensions include employee perceptions of owner-manager support for and involvement in HRD, the perceived value (relevance/use) of HRD for employee roles and employee perceptions of benefits of HRD. For the purposes of this study we define HRD as a multidimensional construct.

We structure the paper as follows. We first examine the research setting which provides the focus for our case study research. We go on to discuss the research evidence regarding the features of HRD in STF's and draw upon both institutional theory and the ERBV to foreground our study. Next, we describe our case study methodology and present the study's findings. In the final sections of the paper we discuss the study findings and consider their implications for theory, research and practice.

## 2. The research context

Tourism is Ireland's largest indigenous sector that provides a strong regional balance of employment (ITIC, 2018; Soria & Teigeiro, 2019). The sector is predominantly comprised of SMEs and owner-managed and/or family-run STF's are prevalent (Kearney, Harrington, & Kelliher, 2014). The EGFSN (2015) outlines how tourism is relatively more important to the Irish economy in terms of employment contribution than is the case for the majority of other European countries.

Ensuring a high standard of HRD provision remains one of the key challenges facing the Irish tourism sector, now and into the future (Dolan, 2018; Jooss & Burbach, 2017). Numerous policy documents have identified the importance of talent and the development of a dynamic and skilled workforce as vital to delivering sustainable tourism growth (e.g. DTTAS, 2015; ITIC, 2018). A key pillar of national tourism policy stresses the importance of strengthening the capacity of the sector's workforce to facilitate effective competition for business in the international tourism marketplace (DTTAS, 2018). It is vital that the sector has adequate human capital capacity to deliver both a quality product and a quality visitor experience into the future (DTTAS, 2016). From this perspective, HRD represents a key enabling factor driving tourism success. Published data on HRD in the Irish tourism sector is scant. However, studies point to report deficiencies amongst tourism

firms with respect to human capital development, especially within STFs (Carbery, Garavan, O'Brien, & McDonnell, 2003; Connolly & McGing, 2007; EGFSN, 2015; Watson, Galway, O'Connell, & Russell, 2010).

The hotel industry is a key stakeholder within the broader Irish tourism sector, accounting for approximately 23% of total employment (IHF, 2019a). The Irish hotel industry is currently undergoing a strong period of resurgence underpinned by positive economic trends such as rising visitor numbers, favourable exchange rates and an improved economic environment (Crowe, 2018; Finnegan, O'Reilly, & Rothwell, 2016). It plays a vital role in local and regional economic development in terms of facilitating greater labour market participation and sustaining business activity in isolated areas of the country (Kearney et al., 2014; Lai, Morison-Saunders & Grimstad, 2017; Soria & Teigeiro, 2019). While the predominance of small firms is observed, a recent report by Bobek and Wickham (2015) underlines the growing significance of hotel groups and chains. Thus, STFs are facing increasingly competitive pressures that may threaten their viability, as evidenced by the growth of mergers and acquisitions, franchising arrangements and foreign-indigenous partnerships. Nevertheless, while recognising the increase in investment by international hotel groups, a recent report by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (2018) maintains that small, indigenous firms and sole traders strongly represent the backbone of the industry.

In contrast to other tourism sub-sectors, the regional distribution of employment in the Irish hotel industry is fairly evenly spread throughout the country (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). Employers in the South West account for 19% of employment, with shares of 17% and 16% of total employment accounted for by Dublin and the East and Midlands regions respectively. Unfortunately, there is no published data pertaining to the distribution of hotel employment by firm size. However, other data may be used to identify the proliferation of SMEs within the industry and hence provide support for the study of such firms. For example, a recent report by the Houses of the Oireachtas (2019) states that 89% of those working in the accommodation and food service sector (which encompasses the hotel industry) are employed in SMEs. The report also identifies that 16% of those working in SMEs are operating in the accommodation and food service sector, compared with only 4.3% working in large firms. Published data by the European Commission (Muller et al., 2018) highlights that small firms (employing less than 50 people) account for 64% of total employment in the accommodation and food service sector in Ireland. In addition, the Small Firms Association (2016) maintains that small firms are particularly dominant in the tourism sector, which is both labour-intensive and crucial for regional employment. Moreover, they argue that small firms are major employers in the Irish labour market, providing one in two jobs in the private sector. Such statistics therefore point to the significant economic impact held by STFs.

### 3. Theoretical underpinnings

#### 3.1. The evolutionary resource-based view (ERBV) and HRD in STFs

The importance of HRD to successful tourism operations has been borne out by an extensive body of work drawing on the mainstream RBV (e.g. Dhar, 2015; Nieves & Quintana, 2018; Ruzić, 2015; Úbeda-García, Claver-Cortés, Marco-Lajara, & Zaragoza-Sáez, 2017). However, to our knowledge, no studies have applied the ERBV perspective (Mueller, 1996), a variant of the RBV, within the context of the tourism sector. ERBV suggests that truly valuable strategic assets derive from a firm's social architecture, which refers to behavioural patterns and operational work routines that evolve in a slow, incremental and highly uncertain way over time. Akin to the RBV, it also emphasises the importance of internal resources in facilitating survivability and market adaptation in particular industry contexts (Marchington, Carroll, & Boxall, 2003). ERBV proposes that competitive advantage stems from HRD processes embedded in an organisation's distinctive routines and working

practices (Mueller, 1996). Ongoing informal skill formation activities, tacit knowledge and forms of spontaneous, cooperative behaviour between organisational members are thus elevated to strategically important resources (Kinnie & Swart, 2017). ERBV therefore potentially helps us to understand the preference for informal HRD practices such as on-the-job training, experiential learning, tacit knowledge and learning derived from unplanned social interactions that research has indicated are prevalent within the STF workplace (Baum & Szivas, 2008; Butcher & Sparks, 2011; Jaworski et al., 2018; Kyriakidou & Maroudas, 2010).

We suggest that the tenets of ERBV offer strong explanatory power regarding the prevalence of informality within STFs and the strategic advantage it affords. Hubner and Baum (2018) for example argue that informal HRD is adopted by owner-managers for logical reasons rather than of necessity. Informal HRD practices may be perceived as more beneficial as they deliver a more visible and immediate payback on HRD investment and offer the best value for money (Gray, 2004). Methods of HRD such as on-the-job training and shadowing take place in a natural environment, which is deemed to be more conducive to learning, as well as allowing owner-managers to ascertain whether the employee has gained the required level of competence (Martin, Kolomitro, & Lam, 2014). Others thus maintain that the decision not to invest in formal HRD may reflect rational and informed decisionmaking on behalf of the owner-manager (e.g. Pajo, Coetzer, & Guenole, 2010; Storey, 2004). Similar findings are echoed within the tourism literature. Informal HRD approaches may mitigate the high perceived opportunity costs associated with formal HRD, which may take place away from the business (Jaworski et al., 2018; Sobaih, Coleman, Ritchie & Jones, 2011). Scholars also propose that STFs operating in fast-paced, competitive turbulent markets should adopt more flexible and dynamic approaches to HRD (Tsai, Horng, Liu & Hu, 2015; Úbeda-García et al., 2017). Formal HRD may therefore impose rigidity at a time when flexibility and adaptability is required to meet evolving conditions (Heilmann, Forsten-Astikainen & Kultalahti, 2018; Lai, Saridakis, Blackburn, & Johnstone, 2016). The stochastic demand and seasonality that characterises the tourism product market context, may in fact mandate the use of informal, unstructured, on-the-job HRD methods (Ateljevic, 2007).

Mueller (1996) observes how the firm's social architecture is created and re-created through a combination of senior management and front-line employee influence. While the literature emphasises the pervasive role of STF owner-managers (Kelliher, Kearney, & Harrington, 2018; Saxena, 2015), we lack knowledge and understanding of how STF employees perceive, experience and respond to HRD. From an ERBV perspective, the degree of employee influence may carry greater significance in the STF context given their labour-intensive nature, where the individual contribution on employees is more readily visible (Hooi & Ngui, 2014). For example, Pittaway and Thedham (2005) found that while employees in STFs enjoy a high degree of job autonomy and have access to extensive opportunities to develop a wide range of skills, they tend to view training and career development in a negative light. Sobaih, Coleman, Ritchie, and Jones (2011) and Sobaih (2018) also report widespread employee dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of training opportunities provided. However, recent studies illustrate that the provision of on-the-job training and job shadowing exerts a significant and positive effective upon job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Hewagama, Boxall, Cheung, & Hutchison, 2019; Jaworski et al., 2018). Ultimately, such paradoxical findings require further investigation.

Despite the important role of informality, other literature suggests that STFs adopt informal and reactive HRD approaches due to a lack of strategic choice. Informality is often associated with ineffectiveness and an emphasis on the short-term performance agenda at the expense of the long-term development of STF employees (Nickson, 2013). A significant body of work suggests that STFs are widely considered to suffer from considerable resource and expertise barriers (Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016; Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan & Ruyruk, 2010; Nolan, Conway, Farrell, & Monks, 2010; Young-Thelin & Boluk, 2012), resulting in



HRD systems that are 'weak and ineffective' (Shani, Uriely, Reichel, & Ginsburg, 2014, p. 154). In light of the resource-poor context of the STF, the ability to mobilise the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) of employees towards firm objectives is likely to represent a valuable resource (Úbeda-García et al., 2017). However, smallness (or size) in itself may therefore exert a 'pure' constraining effect on HRD in the STF that precludes the adoption of more formal approaches (Sobaih, 2018; Tsai, Sengupta & Edwards, 2007).

Such conflicting evidence suggests that the nature, role and importance of informal HRD may be open to question. Marchington and Suter (2013) suggest that informal and formal HRD may work as complementary practices rather than substitutes and may be deployed to deal with particular issues. While the ERBV may serve to resolve such issues, it is not without flaws. Critics highlight its overly rationalistic approach to the management of internal resources and its neglect of the social context in which decisions are made (e.g. Kaufman, 2015). They stress the particular importance of capturing the external forces that drive homogeneity between firms and the non-rational determinants of HRD that reflect the pluralistic nature of decision-making in organisations. Such tenets are reflected in the institutional perspective of organisations, which when combined with ERBV, can yield a more holistic insight into organisational behaviour. It is to this theoretical perspective we now turn.

### 3.2. Institutional theory and HRD in STFs

Institutional theory emphasises the importance of recognising that firms are embedded in a wider social, political, economic and institutional context which shapes HRD practices (Bailey, Mankin, Kelliher, & Garavan, 2018; Esteban-Lloret, Aragón-Sánchez, & Carrasco-Hernández, 2018). Therefore, firms may adopt similar HRD approaches as legitimising actions to reduce uncertainty, as a means of conforming to social pressures and/or to facilitate survival within a particular organisational field<sup>1</sup> (Farndale & Paauwe, 2018; Scott, 2014).

While institutional perspectives have traditionally emphasised the constraining effect of institutions on managerial choice through, for example, coercive, normative and mimetic mechanisms as advocated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), recent perspectives foreground agency and the ability of managers to navigate the wide range of pressures which lead to isomorphism (Lewis, Clardy & Huang, 2018). This potentially helps researchers to understand the complexities and subtleties involved in managing STFs where there is significant contextual embeddedness of owner-manager actions (Karataş-Özkan, Yavuz, & Howells, 2014). Institutional pressures may therefore produce heterogeneity as much as homogeneity because they are filtered and interpreted by owner-managers according to the firm's unique history, culture, tradition, values, habits and routines (Cardinale, 2018).

The concept of institutional logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) may yield useful insights into how context shapes STF HRD behaviour, specifically how the macro tourism context shapes the decision-making of micro-level actors (e.g. owner-managers). Institutional logics refers to the "socially constructed historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). Studies illustrate that actors may adopt a range of available logics to achieve both individual and organisational goals (Cardinale, 2018; Pache & Santos, 2013). Indeed, McPherson and Sauder (2013) propose that individuals exercise a significant degree of agency and discretionary use of institutional logics to manage institutional complexity. Hence, the institutional context serves to both regularise behaviour and provide opportunities for individual agency and change (Thornton & Ocasio,

2008).

Fong, Wong, and Hong (2018) maintain that 21st century STFs are subject to greater risks and increasing uncertainties than ever before. They argue that this climate of uncertainty provides significant scope for competing institutional logics to flourish. We suggest that STF owner-managers are confronted with multiple and potentially conflicting institutional logics that lead to a context of complexity that creates both tensions and opportunities for HRD (cf. Lewis, Cardy, & Huang, 2018; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) identify seven broad, ideal type logics: state logic, market logic, family logic, religious logic, corporate logic, professional logic and community logic. For example, from a state logic perspective, STFs are required to comply with laws or regulations which may mandate particular HRD approaches (Kitcing, 2016). This may include property registrations, quality assurance standards, consumer protection, food hygiene (e.g. Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point – HACCP) and employment law. Kim, Jeongdo, and Wen (2015) found that when formal training occurs in STFs, it is often driven by legislative requirements rather than by a desire to enhance workforce employability. Haugh and McKee (2004), however, suggested that the manner in which STFs respond to such pressures will be driven by a culture of pragmatism in terms of what works, which may leave the influence of this logic open to question.

The influence of market logic appears significant given the dynamic nature of the tourism sector. Lloyd, Warhurst, and Dutton (2013) found that upper market STFs were more likely than economy or mid-market STFs, to adopt more formal HRD. STFs may tailor their HRD to meet customer service requirements (Dhar, 2015; Liu, 2018; Tracey, 2014). Likewise, the competitive nature of the product market may result in these firms adopting more informal and tactical HRD with an emphasis on short-term rather than long-term performance (Prayag & Hosany, 2015). On-the-job training may also prevail as it enables firms to mould labour to their immediate requirements (Sheehan et al., 2018).

Community logic may be evident in the degree of STF reliance on the labour market for skilled labour, which is often considerable due to high labour turnover rates (Baum, 2015; Ellingson, Tews, & Dachner, 2016). Therefore, HRD may be a risky endeavour, which curtails investment (Coetzer, Redmond, & Sharafizad, 2012). The influence of professional logic appears to be varied. It includes influence from membership of professional networks/bodies, advisory networks and cultural values, norms or traditions within a sector (Tsai, Sen-Gupta, & Edwards, 2007). It may also extend to the diffusion of best practice HRD approaches (Murphy & Garavan, 2009; Sheehan et al., 2018) and the degree of emphasis placed on industry business excellence awards (Tsai, 2010). The culture of the tourism sector has been found to exert a significant influence on HRD. Baum (2002) and Wood (2015) for example emphasise the significance of long standing HR traditions such as the use of multi-skilling, functional flexibility and unstructured apprenticeships. The latter underscores the critical role of co-workers and managerial personnel as influential role models and mentors who facilitate the learning and skills development of tourism workers (Mooney, Harris, & Ryan, 2016).

Such findings intersect with a corporation logic, whereby the unique organisational culture dictates preferred HRD methods. By way of illustration, studies demonstrate that induction methods are typically informal, narrow in scope and focused on the firm agenda, rather than on the psychological and social needs of employees. Giousmpasoglou, Marinajou and Cooper (2018) highlight the role of bullying and banter as the main vehicle for the induction and occupational socialisation of new recruits. Similarly, Poulston (2008, p.421) reports that a sink or swim induction process is common where new recruits are commonly "thrown in at the deep end". Corporation logic also manifests itself with regard to STF owner-managers who are typically 'working proprietors', performing both operational and strategic roles (Baum et al., 2016; Kelliher et al., 2018). This situation can potentially lead to the creation of a dynamic learning environment whereby the owner-manager shapes

<sup>1</sup> An organisational field is identified as one producing similar products and services and having similar customers, suppliers and regulatory bodies.

the development of commercial and technical skills in employees, while also acquiring insights from the idiosyncratic knowledge, skills and abilities these employees bring to the firm (Kearney et al., 2014).

#### 4. Research methodology

Our research design was guided by a qualitative, multiple-case logic advocated by Eisenhardt (1989). Qualitative case studies are particularly suited to exploring the dynamics of context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). As Ragin (2014, p. xii) observes, the "hallmark" of such approaches is their "attention to complexity" and the ability to capture "the heterogeneity and particularity of individual cases". Our approach was deemed appropriate to the research setting on account of the lack of knowledge regarding dimensions of HRD in STFs (Fong et al., 2018). Specifically, we sought to understand the nature of the firm's internal resources and social architecture from the perspective of both owner-managers and employees. We also sought to illuminate the complexity of micro-level action by focusing our attention on how the individuals within STFs reconcile potentially conflicting institutional logics regarding HRD on a day-to-day basis. The study applied a pragmatist philosophical approach and adopted a subjectivist ontological and epistemological stance, whereby the focus was on exploring how individuals make the world meaningful (Van de Ven, 2007).

##### 4.1. Case selection

Our aim was to identify information-rich cases that provided detailed information to study in-depth from a group of participants that shared common characteristics (Gray, 2017). We confined our analysis to the Irish hotel industry, a key sub-sector of the broader tourism sector. We selected our cases utilising a list of firms generated by the authors from a number of published sources and lists prepared for previous studies (Garavan, Watson, Carbery, & O'Brien, 2016). We adopted a purposeful sampling approach whereby the aim was to understand the issues of central importance by bringing together participants with similar characteristics and experiences (Patton, 2015). In adopting this approach, the study participants were, by definition, chosen according to common criteria (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). The case firms shared a number of commonalities that permitted meaningful comparisons. First, consistent with our definition of a STF we sent an invitation letter to all firms that met the size and independence criteria. We gathered data from 55 + STFs, however, for the purposes of this paper we included in our analysis cases where the owner-manager described the motivations for the firm as economic rather than lifestyle. Second, all hotels were members of the Irish Hotels Federation, Quality Employer Programme (QEP) and had therefore made a public commitment to achieving best practice in their approach to HRD. Third, each hotel was run by an owning group that was actively involved in HRD at a strategic and operational level. The cases thus permitted access to key informants with the required knowledge and experience to provide information relevant to the research questions (Anderson, 2013). The application of these criteria reduced the number of cases to 20. We achieved a selection of STFs that reflects the distribution of these firms in the Republic of Ireland. Specifically, four hotels were from the Dublin region, five were from the South West Region, five were from the Midlands and six were from the West and Northwest. This sample profile is therefore in line with the regional distribution of hotel stock in the Republic of Ireland (Fáilte Ireland, 2010). The classification of properties was also in line with national hotel grading patterns (Fáilte Ireland, 2019). We consider both the number of properties and study participants to be at the higher end for a qualitative study, especially for research participants who are traditionally difficult to access (Saunders & Townsend, 2016).

##### 4.2. Data collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 12 owner-managers, 14 senior family/general managers, and 28 employees within the 20 case firms. We had a minimum of two study participants (one managerial and one non-managerial) per STF. We therefore gathered data on managerial and employee perspectives of HRD in each STF. We achieved a very effective balance of managerial and non-managerial employees. The nature and quality of the data collected provided us with sufficient depth and breadth of salient information to address our research questions and was in line with the broad norms regarding interview participant numbers required to produce credible results as recommended by Saunders and Townsend (2016, 2018). Table 1 provides an overview of the study participants, including a profile of their HRD dimensions in each STF. In line with our sampling approach, the characteristics of the interview participants were similar; for example, the owner-managers and senior managers interviewed worked at the highest level of the organisation's hierarchy (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). These similar characteristics provided us with particularly informative data and allowed us to explore dimensions of the internal and external contexts and how they influenced experiences and perceptions of HRD in more depth, as well as facilitating the identification of minor differences between individual firms (cf. Saunders & Townsend, 2016).

We asked study participants a series of semi-structured interview questions directly linked to the two research questions (Table 2). In line with our pragmatist stance, the term 'HRD' was used descriptively and pragmatically, i.e. we encouraged study participants to focus on describing formal and informal HRD processes, their perceptions of the importance of HRD, its value and the benefits derived from it, for both current and future roles. The questions were customised to the level of the study participant and their knowledge to provide replies to the questions posed. Interviews were conducted on-site and typically lasted between 45 min to 2 hours. We also made use of two additional data sources where available: documentation such as employee handbooks, HRD plans, operating manuals and departmental standard operating procedures and observation. We used these additional sources to make judgments about the extensiveness of HRD within the STF and to support and amplify the interview data.

##### 4.3. Data analysis

We followed a number of steps to analyse the data. We first transcribed the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and, consistent with good research practice (Gray, 2017), we completed an individual transcript for each STF and sent them to study participants to check for accuracy. We used the two study research questions to frame the analysis as well as taking cognizance of the theoretical perspectives that informed the research. We identified themes, patterns and extracts relevant to each question. Consistent with the ideas posed by Gray (2017), we identified themes as key when they captured something important in our data with respect to the research questions.

We analysed the data for each question in turn. The first step of our analysis focused on establishing study participants' perceptions on the role of external factors in influencing HRD dimensions. To conduct this analysis, we isolated institutional logics that were repeatedly reported by each study participant. We then coded these factors followed by a categorisation or combination of codes of a similar nature into themes and sub-themes. We interpreted these themes conscious of the requirement not to deviate from what study interviewees initially meant (Yin, 2014). The second step of our analysis involved identifying how study participants described aspects of internal STF context relevant to HRD

**Table 1**  
Profile of case firms.

Property ID	Ownership	Classification	Number of Rooms	Number of Employees <sup>a</sup>	Company Age	HRD Policy/Practice Characteristics				
						Written HRD Policy/Plans	Designated Budget	Individual Development Plans (IDPs)	HRD Expertise	Formal Training Programmes
STF A	Family-run, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	50	60	7 years	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
STF B	Family-run, owner-managed	4 star (upper-market)	46	40	20 years	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
STF C	Family-run, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	26	28	4 years	X	✓	X	X	✓
STF D	Non-family, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	37	60	12 years	X	X	X	X	✓
STF E	Family-run, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	14	50	13 years	X	✓	X	✓	✓
STF F	Family-run, owner-managed	2 star (economy)	15	15	4 years	X	✓	X	X	X
STF G	Family-run, owner-managed	Unclassified	19	25	8 years	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
STF H	Non-family, owner-managed	4 star (upper-market)	27	45	2 years	X	X	✓	X	X
STF I	Family-run, owner-managed	2 star (economy)	47	90	31 years	X	✓	X	X	✓
STF J	Non-family, owner-managed	Unclassified	46	72	3 years	X	✓	✓	X	✓
STF K	Family-run, owner-managed	4 star (upper-market)	40	66	3 years	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
STF L	Non-family, owner-managed	4 star (upper-market)	38	60	4 years	X	X	X	X	✓
STF M	Family-run, owner-manager	4 star (upper-market)	14	24	15 years	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
STF N	Non-family, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	18	16	22 years	✓	✓	X	X	✓
STF O	Family-run, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	26	34	16 years	X	X	✓	X	X
STF P	Non-family run, owner-managed	4 star (upper market)	15	22	8 years	X	X	✓	X	✓
STF Q	Family run, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	26	31	14 years	✓	X	X	X	✓
STF R	Family run, owner-managed	2 star (economy)	16	15	16 years	X	X	X	X	X
STF S	Non family run, owner-managed	3 star (mid-market)	26	31	10 years	X	✓	X	X	✓
STF T	Family run, owner-managed	4 star (Upper market)	12	18	14 years	✓	✓	✓	X	✓

<sup>a</sup> Figures refer to maximum head count employed during the peak season and includes full-time, part-time and casual staff; ✓ present; X not present.

**Table 2**

Research questions and corresponding interview questions.

Research Question	Sample Interview Questions
Q1. What do study participants perceive as the most important aspects of the external context and how do they influence experiences of and perceptions of HRD in STFs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the main external challenges to developing human resources in your firm and how do they influence decisions about HRD?</li> <li>2. Why do you believe these external challenges exist?</li> <li>3. What are you doing in terms of HRD to overcome these external challenges?</li> <li>4. How do you ensure that you have the skills to meet the goals of the firm?</li> <li>5. How difficult do you find it to hire highly skilled employees?</li> <li>6. How do you describe your customer base and what are their expectations?</li> <li>7. Have you received any external awards for training and development?</li> <li>8. How much interactions and involvement do you have with the IHE and other advisory bodies?</li> <li>9. What is the level of competition in your geographic location?</li> </ol>
Q2. What do study participants perceive as the most important aspects of the internal context and how do they influence experiences and perceptions of HRD in STFs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What form does your business planning take? What role does HRD play in business planning? How is it undertaken?</li> <li>2. What is your primary focus – growth, stability or survival?</li> <li>3. As owner-manager/senior manager, what do you see as your role in respect of HRD?</li> <li>4. What are the key internal challenges you encounter in developing employees?</li> <li>5. Where do you see the firm going over the next few years?</li> <li>6. Are there any advantages of being small?</li> <li>7. What activities come within HRD/training and development in your firm?</li> <li>8. Do you seek assistance/advice from external bodies in relation to HRD/training and development?</li> <li>9. How much financial resources do you commit to training and development yearly?</li> <li>10. What are your primary motivations (owner-manager) in providing training to employees?</li> <li>11. What types of HRD/training and development activities are undertaken in the firm?</li> <li>12. What do you see as the key strengths/weaknesses of training in the firm?</li> <li>13. What prompts the firm to train?</li> <li>14. How involved are you (owner-manager/senior manager) in delivering training on a day-to-day basis?</li> <li>15. How much formal versus informal training and development do you have? What is the ratio?</li> <li>16. What are the main benefits to you (employees) of training and development?</li> <li>17. How important do you (employees) perceive training in the firm?</li> <li>18. What types of HRD/training activities have you (employee) being exposed to in the firm?</li> <li>19. How effective do you (employee) believe HRD/training and development is in the firm?</li> </ol>

dimensions. We made a clear distinction between owner-manager and employee perspectives on HRD dimensions throughout our analysis. We coded the interview transcripts of owner-managers and senior managers for dimensions related to resource investments in HRD and owner-manager/senior manager support for HRD. We coded the interview transcripts of employees (junior managers and non-managerial employees) for dimensions related to their exposure to HRD, including specific HRD practices such as induction, on-the-job training and multi-skilling, the perceived value and benefits of HRD. Table 3 summarises the key themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. The external context and its influence on experiences of and perceptions of HRD in STFs

The data revealed that a range of institutional logics exerted a significant influence on the dimensions of HRD and the degree of formality, specifically how HRD was designed, planned and implemented. Beginning with market logics, two key issues emerged as important: customer feedback and the role of the star rating system. Customer feedback frequently acted as the main driver for formal HRD, as well as being a key method of identifying specific HRD needs and priorities and evaluating the success of HRD events. In addition, customer service training was often a central focus of HRD activities. However, the manner in which product market pressures influenced HRD varied across the STFs. For example, lower occupancy rates in the geographical area, combined with lower average room rates had exerted significant downward

pressure on profitability and cash-flow at STF C. However, they had moved to consolidate their market share by focusing on enhancing service standards through a stronger emphasis on HRD. In contrast, STF F curtailed its HRD effort due to severe market pressures that had left the firm with very limited funding. STFs A, D and T owner-managers' emphasised recent growth in their function trade and extensive refurbishments that had taken place, which had prompted them to re-focus on HRD. This included a review of standard operating procedures and the introduction of training manuals in consultation with employees.

The role of the star rating operated as an important external factor that shaped the way in which the STFs approached HRD. This primarily focused on the desire to retain the star rating or classification. For example, a back office staff member highlighted this pressure:

“My senior manager continually justifies why we must do this course, complete this process, etc. and it has all to do with our star rating. I suppose this is our unique selling point. Our customers continually come back to us because of our star rating.” (STF P).

The influence of state logics on the firms was significant and varied. In the case of STFs A, K and T, they utilised external consultancy services to meet statutory HRD requirements. The firms were mandated to provide formal HRD with respect to areas such as food hygiene, as records were often inspected by environmental health officials. However, this formal HRD was frequently supplemented by long-established informal processes such as employee monitoring, which served to reinforce standards and smooth any internal resistance to formality. This informal approach also facilitated the transfer of learning to the workplace and

**Table 3**  
Themes, sub-themes and dimensions.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Key Dimensions
<b>1. The internal context and its influence on experiences and perceptions of HRD in STFs</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Owner-manager/senior manager roles and influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic emphasis given to HRD               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Owner-Manager/Senior manager prioritising and involvement in HRD</li> </ul> </li> <li>STF decision-making about HRD</li> <li>Preference for particular HRD approaches</li> <li>Expenditure/return on HRD</li> <li>Expenditure on different categories of employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceptions of importance of HRD</li> <li>HRD as a strategic priority</li> <li>Perceptions of firm benefits of HRD</li> <li>Tactical and problem-driven approach to HRD</li> <li>Strong senior management involvement in induction and front end training</li> <li>Focus on short versus long-term</li> <li>Focus on pragmatism or what works in practice</li> <li>Use of intuitive/heuristic approach to decision-making about HRD</li> <li>Emphasis on strategic planning</li> <li>Focus on informal versus formal HRD</li> <li>HRD linked to operational routines and realities</li> <li>Limited financial investment in formal HRD</li> <li>Use of external financial supports for HRD</li> <li>Anticipation of immediate benefits</li> <li>Limited investment in senior team</li> <li>Strong focus on operational/front line employees</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resource Types and Value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The role of smallness</li> <li>The family as a resource</li> <li>The scarcity of financial resources</li> <li>Time availability</li> <li>Availability/expertise to manage HRD</li> <li>Geographic location</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informality</li> <li>Flexibility</li> <li>Dependence on a limited workforce</li> <li>Vulnerability to local conditions</li> <li>Requirement to multi-skill</li> <li>Provide a labour market buffer</li> <li>Family politics</li> <li>Lack of managerial capability</li> <li>Tight financial constraints</li> <li>Exercising patience</li> <li>Competing demands for attention</li> <li>Prior experience of formal HRD practices</li> <li>Lack of HRD expertise</li> <li>Geographic location of the firm</li> <li>Perception that formal HRD is only available as an exception</li> <li>Training not talked about in the firm</li> <li>Unequal distribution of training and development opportunities</li> <li>Primary benefit is on immediate task performance</li> <li>Not enough emphasis on long-term career and progression benefits</li> <li>Negative perceptions of quality of training and development</li> <li>Training is too ad-hoc and informal</li> <li>Employees not particularly motivated to develop</li> <li>Perceive firm does not prioritise training over short-term operational priorities</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee perceptions of exposure to HRD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presence of HRD throughout firm</li> <li>Training and development opportunities available</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee perceptions of benefits of HRD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceptions of benefits of HRD</li> <li>Quality of HRD provision</li> <li>Value attached to HRD</li> </ul>	
<b>2. The external context and its influence on experiences of and perceptions of HRD in STFs</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The role of institutional logics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State logic: the external regulation of tourism               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sourcing of external knowledge to address external regulation issues</li> </ul> </li> <li>Professional logic: the role of normative HRD best practice prescriptions               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sectoral traditions and cultural norms within the tourism sector</li> </ul> </li> <li>Corporation logic: the role of organisational culture and firm traditions</li> <li>Market logic: characteristics of the STF's product market               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customer feedback</li> <li>Role of the star rating system</li> </ul> </li> <li>Community logic: external labour market pressures               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The supply of quality labour</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Role of external advisory networks</li> <li>Tick the box functional compliance</li> <li>Opportunity to learn and do the right thing</li> <li>External human resource standards</li> <li>External accreditation of HRD efforts</li> <li>Resistance to change traditional approaches to HRD</li> <li>Value of informal, on-the-job practical approach to HRD</li> <li>Importance of technical and organisational induction</li> <li>Development of task related knowledge</li> <li>Desire to retain quality and hotel classification rating</li> <li>Maintaining and exceeding customer expectations</li> <li>Responding to customer feedback</li> <li>The availability of quality skilled labour externally</li> <li>Restricted labour pool due to competition from other firms</li> <li>Developing employer legitimacy in the labour market</li> </ul>

allowed owner-managers the flexibility to provide ongoing feedback and guidance.

STFs differed in how they perceived these external pressures. Some welcomed the opportunity to learn and update their policies through attending training courses and discussing requirements with external bodies such as the Irish Hotels Federation or Fáilte Ireland (STFs B, J and P). Some owner-managers viewed regulation as a burden and engaged in functional compliance by making sure that they 'ticked the box' (STF E). Other owner-managers highlighted employee resistance to the formality of HRD required to be compliant (STF J). We also found that employees were frequently resistant to the need to participate in mandated

programmes. A front-office staff member described it this way:

"I was often required to come in on my day off to complete these courses. We regularly had to undertake courses on health, safety, hygiene, bullying and harassment. We were not paid overtime to undertake any of this training." (STF P).

However, there was a conspicuous lack of proactivity in seeking advice or information by the majority of STFs. Hence, many were often passive recipients from their external advisory networks. Broader business and market circumstances motivated the firms to obtain professional advice and engage with regulatory information to learn about



new developments in order to ensure compliance. However, the approach taken was largely reactive in nature.

Study participants drew attention to the influence of professional logics in terms of tourism best practice approaches and industry traditions. All 20 STFs indicated that they had achieved QEP accreditation, however, there was considerable variation evident in its implementation. For some STFs (e.g. B & S), the accreditation was perceived as an effective means to comply with employment regulations while simultaneously ensuring that staff were developed according to best practice standards. For others, QEP represented only a basic benchmark and they stressed the need to keep up-to-date with industry trends. The adoption of best HRD practices based on international studies of award-winning STFs conducted and promoted by Fáilte Ireland was viewed as problematical. While owner-managers recognised the potential benefits, they spoke with negative overtones about the bureaucracy involved. For example, STF J spoke about the particular challenges, with the owner-manager claiming that they “simply couldn’t live with” such formality of policy and practice. Study participants spoke about the role of traditions and cultural norms around HRD within the tourism sector and within their own firm. They emphasised dimensions related to resistance to formal approaches, the role of induction and technical training and the importance of tacit knowledge. A hotel restaurant employee referred to two of these traditions and norms very effectively:

“The management are very proud of the tradition and core values of the hotel. I had a very elaborate induction meeting; all key managers and lots of instruction on behaviour and the importance of four-star service. Then after that it was sink or swim. I essentially learned by doing. I relied on asking questions from my direct reports and other employees. I learned more from this process than any class-room activity.” (STF S).

Finally, the influence of community logics on HRD emerged as a strong theme, however, its influence varied across the case firms. Some STFs expressed concerns about a shortage of available skilled staff due to growing competition from other businesses in the local area. For example, STFs D and T expressed concern that only applicants with inappropriate backgrounds had applied for recent vacancies, which required them to invest considerable resources in training people “from scratch” (STF D). In STF A, B and F the workforce remained relatively stable, with many staff employed on a seasonal basis returning annually. Here, the focus shifted to maintaining the currency of skill levels as well as enhancing employee satisfaction by providing them with opportunities to upskill. In contrast, several firms emphasised the importance of recruiting for the right attitude over and above technical skill (e.g. STFs C, D and E). For example, the owner-manager of STF C who commented that regardless of previous experience, there was a need to show employees “how things are done around here”. Such findings serve to illustrate the interaction of professional and corporation logics, which was also evident as regards the motivation for the STFs to apply for the QEP accreditation. Several STF owner-managers and senior managers spoke about their hope that QEP would confer a degree of external legitimacy on them as a good employer, thus enabling them to attract appropriately qualified individuals.

## 5.2. The internal context and its influence on the experiences and perceptions of HRD in STFs

Our data revealed that owner-managers were invariably passionate about the importance of HRD and considered it critical to ongoing viability and long-term success. HRD played a central role in delivery of the strategy and was central to the planning process for the STFs. An informal, emergent approach to HRD was evident but this did not

necessarily imply the absence of a proactive, strategic mind-set. Decisions about HRD were taken in context and directed towards addressing critical business needs and priorities. This helped ensure that HRD was deeply embedded in everyday routines and working practices. While there was broad agreement that the delivery of the product or service was the most critical business imperative, the strategic focus was also evident in the key employee benefits that owner-managers saw to derive from HRD. Thus there was widespread recognition of the direct link between key HR outcomes and service quality standards, whereby HRD was seen to feed directly into the process of enhancing receptiveness to customer needs. For example, in STF C the owner-manager stated the importance of “driving the right service standards with training”.

Formal responsibility for HRD lay primarily with the owner-manager in all but two of the firms in which case an HR manager had been appointed. However, in practice, a devolved approach to HRD decision-making was evident, with other members of the management team and employees able to express their voice via informal daily interactions and formal processes such as performance reviews. Owner-managers took a leading role in setting the vision for HRD and championing its importance, which included acting in an advisory capacity for junior managerial employees. They also assumed principal responsibility for the administrative tasks associated with HRD. Most owner-managers/senior managers were also actively involved in delivering training, however, some acknowledged that they had insufficient time to dedicate to instruction and limited their involvement to particular issues, notably statutory HRD. In contrast, junior managerial employees played a key operational role in analysing HRD needs and delivering training.

There was evidence of limited financial expenditure on formal HRD; financial support tended to be prioritised for the development of front-line and operational employees at the expense of other groups. Several owner-managers had adopted a longer-term developmental view of HRD and spoke about how HRD was used to motivate experienced staff. In this regard, owner-manager decision-making was tempered by the needs of employees. This influence was both implicit and explicit. In STF A, the owner-manager made reference to long-serving staff who may not be motivated to train. She felt it incumbent upon her to be proactive in creating a training culture and encourage employees to engage in ongoing HRD. Other owner-managers in STFs C, J and Q emphasised the importance of being creative in their approach to HRD in order to make training events interesting for employees. For example, one senior manager referred to the situation of a student staff member with an interest in accounting who was due to attend University following the summer season:

“I’ve introduced her to our lower office where we run the business side of things and we have SAGE accounting. It just keeps her interested and it keeps her with us.”(STF G)

In contrast, employees in some cases reported significantly different perceptions of HRD to owner-managers. For example, some perceived that formal HRD was only available as an exception and highlighted the unequal distribution of HRD opportunities available to employees. Employees frequently described the HRD approach as ad-hoc, disorganised and only taking place when the problem had become severe. An employee in STF E commented that training was often directed at “patching things up”, while another in STF Q made reference to the lack of focus on quality:

“Training, when it happens, is often organised at the last minute. The hotel will not spend enough money to hire a quality trainer. Then training gets a bad name... and employees are less motivated to attend.”

Employees also expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of formal HRD

opportunities to prepare them for progression into managerial roles, as well as a lack of development focused on developing general rather than task-related competencies. However, employees did appreciate the tacit knowledge they had gained through experience and from co-workers and managers. Yet, the general consensus was captured by the following comment from an employee in STF M:

“Any development that I have received is all about getting the job done. I never had a formal discussion with my last boss. We never talked about my career and my expectations. I often had to act-up to a supervisor role however this was taken as part of the job. It was never seen as a chance to develop my career.”

The issue of smallness emerged as a major resource issue when it came to HRD. This was typically expressed in terms of having the space and time to manage HRD activities and processes. Competing demands on senior and owner-manager time was a pervasive resource pressure that impacted on all aspects of STF operations, including HRD. This was particularly acute in the case of induction training and often resulted in employees being “thrown in at the deep end” (STF B, I, M, N). Employees at these firms echoed this sentiment. Owner-managers reported the need to be a “jack of all trades” and admitted to neglecting their own learning and development. For example, one owner-manager in STF E raised the issue of digital marketing skills:

“We can’t afford to employ staff that would be skilled in those areas so we need to learn the skills ourselves. So probably our greatest weakness is the training of management rather than staff training.”

As a consequence, on-the-job training was preferred as it involved less disruption to operations. It was also perceived to be cost-effective, tailored and seen to provide a more conducive learning environment due to its social and interactive nature. However, informal HRD was not always used as a matter of necessity. Owner-managers often made deliberate choices to utilise it in preference to formal methods, depending on the focus of a given training event, hence pragmatism prevailed. For example, STFs F, S and T maintained that informal HRD conducted on-the-job was deemed to be the most effective means to acquire much needed interpersonal and tacit skills that were core to effective customer service. In contrast, passive, off-the-job, formal methods were more likely to be used in the case of statutory HRD, whereby the content was not deemed conducive to being taught on-the-job. Induction training was also carried out with significant degrees of formality. STFs K and T had recently introduced formal training sessions on diversity and multiculturalism in order for employees to understand each other’s background and create a more convivial working atmosphere.

Study participants drew attention to issues related to skill and expertise as an impediment to HRD. This included the lack of expertise to conduct development reviews, the lack of expertise in coaching and mentoring and knowledge of best practice HRD approaches. In terms of the professional background of the owner-managers, the majority had undergone limited or no formal HR/training education. In STF C the general manager commented that it was a “side line” that “you had to learn”. However, seven of the owner-managers (STFs A, B, G, J, K, T & S) had undertaken various HR courses including ‘train the trainer’, employment law and CIPD programmes at some point during their careers. A lack of expertise was critical to the degree of formality that infused the HRD process. For owner-managers, formality meant doing things correctly by following set procedures, rules and regulations rather than relying on an ad-hoc or intuitive approach. STF A’s general manager expressed the view that a purely informal approach to HRD could lead to its neglect. Significantly, these owner-managers emphasised their frustration at endeavouring to introduce more formality to the HRD process due to internal resistance from employees and managerial personnel, who preferred more traditional, informal approaches. Thus, there was an ongoing tension evident between owner-managers/general

managers who leaned towards formality and their ability to implement it:

“I go to the Irish Hotels Federation and Fáilte Ireland conferences and so on but the other managers don’t. It’s not really their scene and they think it’s a waste of time. I think really though that the staff are happier with a combination approach. If the whole hotel was about following set procedures, the staff wouldn’t be as happy and at ease, you know.” (STF G)

In practice, formality and informality operated alongside one another. Informality in the management and approach to HRD afforded flexibility to owner-managers to undertake HRD as and when it was needed. It also allowed them to leverage close relationships with skilled employees and appoint them as internal trainers. Additionally, informality facilitated greater employee input to HRD, which was seen to lead to increased satisfaction and commitment. Even where formal policies and plans were in place, informality and intuition often prevailed. This was often driven by the desire to capitalise on the benefits of being small.

Employees were not merely trained for their immediate job but for a range of roles across a number of departments. STFs D, G and H stated that they didn’t always hire for particular posts because every member of staff was expected to be able to turn their hand to a variety of roles. Thus multi-skilling provided the firms with an important source of flexibility and skills that could be deployed as required. Multi-skilling also acted as an important mechanism for cultivating teamwork as owner-managers believed that employees were more likely to listen to each other’s points of view, share ideas and work towards common goals. It also served to meet employee needs for additional training and development in the absence of an internal labour market.

## 6. Discussion

The overarching aim of this study was to produce a more nuanced interpretation of HRD in STFs and to capture its multiple dimensions in the unique case study context of the Republic of Ireland. A particular benefit of our qualitative, case study approach is the unique access it provided to HRD in STFs through the eyes of important actors in these firms: owner-managers, senior managers and employees. Our participants’ descriptions of their perceptions and experiences of HRD in STFs opens the door to a deeper understanding of how HRD comes into being in STFs, the logic behind STF approaches, why informal HRD has strategic value and how HRD is experienced and perceived by owner-managers, senior managers and employees. Their descriptions provide significant insights into the multidimensionality of HRD in the STF context.

Both the ERBV and the institutional logics perspective helped us to interpret the findings. Fundamentally, the ERBV served to explain a range of choices that STF managers make in relation to resource allocation for HRD, the degree of strategic emphasis afforded to HRD and the degree of pragmatism that infuses decision-making. ERBV was particularly valuable in illuminating the emphasis on informality and its importance, the embeddedness of HRD in operational routines and realities, as well as employee influence and perceptions. The institutional logics perspective was equally valuable in that it served to illustrate how actors at the frontline of small tourism operations reconcile potentially conflicting institutional logics regarding HRD on a day-to-day basis. The macro tourism context was undoubtedly important in shaping dimensions of HRD, however, our study has also highlighted the importance of exploring micro-level dynamics and their critical relevance in explaining how and why decisions about HRD are made.

### 6.1. The role of owner-manager agency, employee agency and pragmatism

A key finding of our study concerns the agentic role of the owner-manager and their sense of pragmatism when responding to HRD issues. The combination of the ERBV and recent theorising on institutional logics provides a useful theoretical underpinning to capture the nature and role of this pragmatism. For example, HRD practices were sometimes modified in direct response to short-term operational pressures or circumstances, with owner-managers keen to ensure that customer needs were met (Tsai, Horng, Liuc, & Hu, 2015). This meant that informal, on-the-job training was sometimes the default approach as it was deemed less disruptive and cost-effective (Jaworski et al., 2018; Sobaih, 2018) as emphasised by ERBV. However, it also may reflect owner-manager responses to market logics (Dhar, 2015), as the firms strived to adapt to dynamic market contingencies such as competitor actions or to meet variable customer demands (Ateljevic, 2007; Tracey, 2014). Owner-managers also had to manage employee influence which was manifest informally via daily workplace interactions and formally via HRD processes such as performance reviews (Kearney et al., 2014).

Such fluid HRD approaches should not be read as a lack of coordination of HRD activity; on the contrary, HRD occupied a central niche in the management narrative. We found that HRD was central to strategic goals, as well as performing a more pragmatic role in solving operational problems (Prayag & Hosany, 2015). The degree of embeddedness of informal HRD in everyday work practices could also be taken as further evidence of its importance to business operations (Mueller, 1996). While such a short-term, problem-focused approach may superficially suggest that HRD was not a priority, the logic underpinning such an approach can be understood in strategic terms because of its impact on the viability of the STF (cf. Hubner & Baum, 2018; Watson & Watson, 1999).

The findings suggested that achieving operational efficiency may be key to limiting the resource constraints associated with smallness (Sobaih, 2018). While all STFs may be vulnerable to resource constraints, the extent of the consequences on HRD may be contingent on the ability to manage the implications of limited resources. Owner-managers may achieve control over HRD by utilising whatever approach works best in a given situation. This pragmatic orientation results in HRD embodying dynamic characteristics (Úbeda-García et al., 2017), whereby adjustments are made and adaptation to HRD dimensions occurs in response to prevailing trends, internally (e.g. via employee influence) and externally (e.g. in response to regulation or the product market). Such findings add further support to the holistic analysis of HRD in STFs as suggested by the combining of ERBV with institutional logics.

The STFs were heavily embedded in a variety of market, state, professional, community and corporation logics which shaped decision-making in relation to HRD (Fong et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 2012). This underlines the importance of analysing HRD against the backdrop of key industrial characteristics (Morrison et al., 2010). The degree of owner-manager and employee engagement with these logics reflected their knowledge of and salience of the logics to the individual firm (Cardinale, 2018). Patterns of HRD were therefore complex and heterogeneous as owner-managers and employees exercised agency in the interpretation of institutional logics (Lewis et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, market logic was dominant as firms sought to meet dynamic customer requirements (Liu, 2018). Community logics also mandated the undertaking of HRD due to a lack of available skills in the local labour market (Ellingson et al., 2016). However, industry and individual firm traditions in the form of professional and corporation logics were equally prominent, suggesting that owner-managers had to address a plurality of logics (cf. Kraatz & Block, 2017). Owner-managers appeared to have developed a capability to combine and reconcile these multiple logics by shaping HRD efforts in a predominantly flexible, informal manner. Such findings lie in contrast to much of the traditional literature, which suggests that the presence of multiple logics can lead to

tension and contradictions, which cause dissonance for individuals (Cunha, Giustiniano, Rego, & Clegg, 2017).

We did, however, find some evidence of conflict pertaining to particular logics. For example, owner-managers perceived that state logic in the form of external regulation imposed a requirement to have formal HRD. While they did not overtly resist or reject this requirement, in many cases, owner-managers sought a better fit that did not interfere with their corporation and community logics regarding optimum HRD approaches. Hence, in confronting state logic, they supplemented this formality with informal approaches, thus suggesting that the combination of formality and informality represented a deliberate, pragmatic decision made by the owner-manager (Haugh & McKee, 2004). Employees also expressed dissatisfaction with the sectoral and firm traditions (in the form of community and corporation logics) to rely heavily on informal, on-the-job training as they felt that it compromised their future career development and employability. This resulted in a lack of engagement with HRD events as employees were dissatisfied with the quality of approach adopted by their firm (Sobaih, 2018). This suggests that owner-managers and employees may interpret institutional logics in particular ways that may potentially lead to employee dissatisfaction.

### 6.2. Multidimensionality of HRD

While the pervasiveness of informality may suggest that owner-managers were constrained in their efforts to maintain formality in the face of institutional logics, operational pressures and resource constraints, this was not always the case, with some firms consciously opting for a blended approach (Marchington & Suter, 2013). HRD practices were not unilaterally informal, and owner-managers emphasised different roles for both formal and informal HRD dimensions, often pertaining to the acquisition of particular skills (Úbeda-García et al., 2017). A dynamic learning environment was evident, whereby colleagues and owner-managers played a key role in facilitating the learning and skill acquisition of fellow employees (Mooney et al., 2016). These findings suggest that formality and informality operated as complements rather than substitutes and STFs oscillated between both, as dictated by business requirements (Marchington & Suter, 2013).

Our findings suggest that STFs may adopt informal HRD dimensions for legitimate reasons, to, for example, develop critical skills (Hubner & Baum, 2018), rather than suggesting the lack of resources or opportunities to utilise formal HRD dimensions. Informal HRD dimensions therefore represent an important dynamic resource available to STFs due to their flexibility in unpredictable market conditions (Heilmann et al., 2018). While formality is often viewed as a proxy for a strategic approach, what constitutes strategic in the context of a STF is much more complex and indeed informal approaches may better align with the STF context. These findings contrast therefore with the prevailing literature suggesting marginalisation of HRD in tourism organisations (Baum, 2019; Shani et al., 2014).

Our data highlighted significant differences between owner-managers/senior managers and employees concerning perceptions and experiences of dimensions of HRD. On the one hand owner-managers stressed the existence of a devolved approach, however the findings attested to large gaps between this rhetorical belief and what was actually going on from the employee perspective. Such divergence between the owner-managers' intentions and employees' experience thereof exerted a negative impact on motivation among employees, who often felt unheard (Sobaih et al., 2011). Notably, we also found that employees differed in their perceptions of their exposure to HRD which contrasts with owner-manager perspectives concerning the availability of HRD within the STF (Hooi & Ngui, 2014). Employees did however stress the potential benefits of HRD in STFs where they emphasised opportunities for personal growth and role development. The provision of HRD did provide some employees with the opportunity to learn from others, to seek advice from experienced employees and to have a sense of teamwork (Mooney et al., 2016). In addition, the availability of HRD

without the co-presence of positive employee perceptions of high quality can have important implications for desired STF outcomes such as performance and employee commitment (Hewagama et al., 2019; Jaworski et al., 2018).

## 7. Conclusions and implications for HRD practice

This case study provided new insights into how owner-managers/senior managers and employees experience and perceive HRD in STFs and the key internal and external contextual contingencies that coalesce to produce distinctive configurations of HRD. We adopted a theoretically pluralist perspective, drawing on the key tenets of ERBV and institutional logics to achieve a holistic analysis of HRD within the unique STF context. Our findings suggest that institutional logics in the external context dynamically interact with both STF owner-manager and employee agency and dimensions of the internal context to shape multiple dimensions of HRD. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical exploration of ERBV within the tourism industry. Our study lends further weight to the tenets underpinning ERBV regarding the strategic importance of informal HRD activities. In combining ERBV with an institutional logics perspective, we have also responded to recent calls for greater systematic attention to and appreciation of contextual issues in organisations (Johns, 2017).

We make four significant contributions. First we found a complex and dynamic interaction between external and internal contextual factors, with the owner–manager acting as a key agent in shaping HRD dimensions. The role of the owner-manager in this context is important because it suggests that the form that HRD takes is one based on some form of strategic choice concerning what will pragmatically fit the context (Hubner & Baum, 2018). This lies contrary to much of the literature which emphasises a lack of strategic choice amongst STFs due to resource constraints (Baum et al., 2016). Second, we found that STFs implement HRD in a coordinated manner imbued with elements of formality and informality, which act in a complementary rather than an incompatible manner. Informality in particular plays a strategically important role in maintaining business viability. In their recent examination of possible changing roles and skills of employees in hotels of the future, Solnet, Baum, Robinson, and Lockstone-Binney (2016) concluded that in order to satisfy the demands of increasingly discerning customers, organisations will require employees to demonstrate superior interpersonal skills and be adept at intuitively adapting and capable of emotional transference. This suggests that HRD approaches themselves must be flexible and dynamic in order to meet these needs.

Third, we found that a narrow focus on quantitative dimensions alone obscures the actual reality of HRD as experienced by owner-managers and employees in STFs. In particular, HRD dimensions found in STFs are closely linked to the nature of tasks within these firms, customer expectations and the agency of owner-managers as they respond to multiple institutional logics. Fourth, we found significant differences between the perceptions and experiences of owner-managers and employees concerning HRD. These may stem from the core cultural value of pragmatism that infuses the management of HRD in STFs, leading to inconsistencies in the implementation of policies and practices. In this study, employees pointed to the reactive, task orientation underpinning HRD as a key source of dissatisfaction. A lack of engagement with HRD was apparent due to employee perceptions of haphazard approaches and a perceived lack of investment in formal initiatives. Such findings resonate with recent studies in the broader SME and HRD literatures, whereby limited HRD opportunities are reported by employees (Jeong, Han, Lee, Sunalai, & Yoon, 2018; Panagiotakopoulos, 2015). In contrast, a study by Jaworski et al. (2018) reported positive employee perceptions of on-the-job training and informal shadowing in tourism firms in contrast to more formal, structured methods. Su and Swanson (2019) maintain that the provision of HRD opportunities can satisfy the psychological needs of employees, stimulate them to improve their skill sets and help to create a positive working environment,

thereby enhancing employee well-being. Such mixed findings undoubtedly require further investigation.

For practitioners our results have a number of implications. First, the heavy reliance on informal, on-the-job training may carry risks. For example, scholars have argued that “informality can also co-exist with confusion and uncertainty” (Gray & Mabey, 2005, p. 480). Employees may therefore become vulnerable to owner-manager prerogative regarding what HRD opportunities are made available to them. Recent work by Cormier-MacBurnie, Doyle, Mombourquette, and Young (2015) suggested that tourism employees perceived a lack of support from their organisations when managers did not understand their role as trainers. Hence, positive managerial support is critical to facilitate the creation of a learning environment. There is also a risk that poor role models may be appointed to work with new or inexperienced employees, meaning that improper work habits may be passed on. This may exert potentially damaging effects on employees who are unable to adapt to the frequently used ‘sink or swim’ approach to learning (Cooper, Gioumpasoglou, & Marinakou, 2017; Mooney et al., 2016). Moreover, employees may be placed at a serious disadvantage in the labour market by any form of HRD that lacks external accreditation.

The differences between employee and managerial perspectives on HRD suggest that owner-managers/senior management need to take action to communicate their priorities around HRD and pay attention to the quality of HRD and all the employee benefits of participation in HRD. This may involve more concerted efforts to involve employees in the process of HRD policy-making, proactively soliciting their feedback and using it in the development of new HRD approaches. The benefits of firm smallness may facilitate the development of closer relationships with employees to establish effective mechanisms for surfacing disparities between intended, actual and perceived HRD practices. Ultimately, it may also be critical to determine whether particular formal or informal practices elicit greater employee commitment to deliver a high quality service to customers, as well as bestowing benefits on employees themselves. Recent developments outside the tourism literature may shed light on this issue. A number of studies suggest that employees in SMEs are more satisfied with a combination of informal and formal HRD practices as means of responding to their HRD needs (Coetzer, Susomrith, & Ampofo, 2019; Mustafa, Caspersz, Ramos & Siew, 2018).

## 8. Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations, however, we maintain that they provide opportunities for further research. First, our findings are unique to a particular type of STF. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other types of STFs within the tourism industry. In addition, our findings were derived in a unique country context, with unique institutional and cultural characteristics. These contextual factors may have impacted the study findings. Therefore, future studies need to conduct investigations into other types of STFs such as accommodation businesses, rural tourism organisations and travel firms and in countries where a different set of institutional and cultural factors may be at play.

The findings regarding the complementary nature of the relationship between formality and informality also undoubtedly require further investigation. While it is recognised that degrees of formality and informality are likely to present in firms of all sizes and sectors (Marlow, Taylor, & Thompson, 2010), the nature of the relationship is not well understood. The ability of SMEs to capitalise on the benefits of both informality and formality in order to achieve an appropriate balance between the two is a key issue that merits further research (Lai, Saridakis and Johnstone, 2017; Mustafa, Caspersz, Ramos, & Sim, 2018). This would appear particularly important in the context of STFs, given the deliberate oscillation between both approaches within the STFs in our study.

Finally, we have drawn upon evolutionary RBV and institutional theoretical perspectives, however, there is scope for other theoretically pluralist approaches. For example, recent work by Garavan et al. (2016)



underscores the merits of utilising a multi-theoretical approach drawing on upper echelon theory and the attention-based view to explain why SMEs adopt particular HRD practices in the context of leadership development. The complexity of the STF environment suggests that no single perspective may adequately account for the broad range of factors that shape HRD policy and practice. Pluralist approaches are thus vital as a means to understand the complex nature of the STF and its behaviour and functioning in relation to its environment.

#### Author contributions

Ciara T. Nolan: 40%  
Thomas N. Garavan: 30%  
Paul Lynch: 30%

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2019.104029>.

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