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**Acquisition of Essential Hospitality Industry Skills: Looking Through the Lens of Hospitality Graduate Employees and Lecturers**

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**Abstract**

Hospitality students in Kenya have to consider their skills carefully to comply with the never-ending demands of the hospitality industry, which is characterised by stiff competition. Although institutions of higher learning providing hospitality programmes have begun to focus on narrowing the gap between hospitality graduate employees' skills and the industry expectations of the skills they should possess, rarely has research dealt with the acquisition of industry skills from the perspectives of hospitality lecturers and hospitality graduate employees already working in the industry following their graduation. This study examines the perceptions of hospitality lecturers and hospitality graduate employees of the acquisition of much-needed skills in the industry. Questionnaires were administered to hospitality lecturers (45) and hospitality graduate employees (191) to measure their agreement concerning the acquisition of industry skills. The results showed that hospitality graduate employees lack confidence, particularly in the acquisition of three essential industry skills: adequate practical skills, communication skills and problem-solving skills. Suggestions are made to hospitality educators for facilitating the acquisition of important industry skills among hospitality graduate employees in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Acquisition of industry skills, hospitality undergraduate curricula, hospitality graduate employees, hospitality lecturer.

**1. Introduction**

The hospitality industry—one of the subsectors in the tourism sector—is integral to the global economy and contributes immensely to the gross world product (GWP) (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2023; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). Likewise, the hospitality industry is among the important sectors of the economy of Kenya. On this note, the hospitality and tourism sector in Kenya recorded a commendable performance in 2022, catalysed by an upsurge of international tourist arrivals from 871.3 thousand in 2021 to 1,541.0 thousand in 2022 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2023). Additionally, Kenya's GDP grew by 4.8%

in 2022 compared to 7.6% in 2021, thanks to the enhanced performance in the hospitality and tourism sector.

The hospitality industry is not only a multifaceted sector that contributes to a variety of economic activities but is also labour-intensive and, thus, a major generator of employment, supporting approximately 9% of total formal employment (over 2 million jobs) (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). The hospitality and tourism industry has been reported as one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, and quality and dependable employees are of great importance in the industry (Rahimi et al., 2018). For firms in the hospitality industry to thrive in the face of competition, there needs to be a crucial evaluation of hospitality education. Driven by the rapid growth of the hospitality industry post-COVID-19 pandemic and given its labour-intensive nature, there exists a need to maintain relevant curricula that meet the dynamic industry skills requirements, which could be accomplished by enhancing academia-industry collaboration for curricula development. Consequently, there has been an increase in the number of public and private universities and tertiary colleges that offer hospitality programs.

In Kenya, for instance, universities began offering undergraduate and graduate courses in the hotel industry in the mid-1990s to respond to the growth of the country's hotel industry. As a result, hospitality is now a leading activity in Kenya and a significant employer for hospitality management graduates (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). Many universities and colleges offer graduate programs in hospitality, and the number has grown tremendously. Established over 44 years ago, Kenya Utalii College is Africa's leading hospitality education institution. The college has trained over 50,000 graduates worldwide, most of whom have worked in the local and international hospitality industry.

In general terms, the purpose of hospitality programs offered at universities and colleges is to prepare learners for various careers in the vast hospitality industry (Ezeuduji et al., 2017). However, research has demonstrated that the industry is short of educated and skilled employees—those educated do not wish to join the industry and pursue the careers for which they are trained (Amissah et al., 2019). Given the dynamism of the hospitality industry, hospitality graduates are expected to have specialised knowledge and skills, act proactively, and detect and work on problems creatively and independently (Griffin, 2022). To introduce students to the hospitality industry and gain experience, many universities require students to undertake work experience through internships or industry linkages to allow students to work part-time (Anthony et al., 2023). However, previous studies have demonstrated that hospitality academia produces graduates with skills that fall short of the industry requirements and that the gap between hospitality academia and industry is still wider (Amissah et al., 2020; Anderson & Sanga, 2019; Anthony et al., 2023; Ferdian et al., 2023; Ivkov et al., 2020), indicating that institutions providing hospitality undergraduate programs are not producing graduates with relevant skills to take up careers in the industry (Anthony et al., 2023).

Several researchers have underlined the importance of having a symbiotic relationship between hospitality practitioners and academia due to the important role played by the industry (Anderson & Sanga, 2019; Anthony et al., 2023; Griffin, 2022). A rapid change in the hospitality industry creates the necessity for the hospitality academia to keep up with these dynamics to meet the industry's expectations. Unfortunately, the hospitality industry in Kenya suffers from a lack of adequately qualified and trained staff for the hospitality job market (Kabii et al., 2019). The incoherent nature of hospitality academia and practitioners has resulted in the need for strategic repositioning and coordination of hospitality curricula and standards to meet market demands (Ndiuni & Baum, 2021). Matching training to employers' expectations in the industry has been the biggest challenge for trainers and hospitality employers (Anderson & Sanga, 2019; Anthony et al., 2023; Griffin, 2020; Kabii et al., 2019).

In light of the preceding, rarely have studies in Kenya considered the perceptions of the acquisition of industry skills between hospitality graduate employees and hospitality lecturers. Consequently, this study sought to compare the perceptions of hospitality graduate employees working in star-rated hotels and hospitality lecturers in public universities offering hospitality undergraduate programmes to provide valuable insights on which skills hospitality curricula should focus more on in the spirit of bridging the skills gap between academia and industry.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Responsiveness of Hospitality Undergraduate Curricula*

There is a growing demand for professionally educated and trained staff in the hospitality sector; however, the literature reveals a significant disparity between the hospitality education provided by institutions and the skills required by the industry (Anderson & Sanga, 2019). Morozov and Morozova (2020) opine that the biggest challenge facing institutions offering hospitality education is identifying industry needs and requirements, and the involvement of industry in curriculum design. The issue of employment preparedness arises from a clear notion that the job of higher education is to prepare students for the world of work.

According to Ghani and Muhammad (2019), there are frequently differing expectations between educators and industry in that employers emphasise practical skills and general transferable skills. In contrast, educators are concerned with developing more conceptual and hospitality-specific knowledge. This point of view suggests that stakeholders have conflicting interests, which may lead to opposing views regarding their perceptions of education programme preparedness and industry skills needs. Nusrat and Sultana (2019) suggest that soft skills such as formal letter writing, personal skills and transferable skills must be considered when formulating education programmes by institutions of higher learning. Some educational institutions use work-integrated learning (WIL) as a solution to bridge the divisions between theory and practice. However, Divan et al. (2022) point out that the whole area of work placement is controversial since the problem extends to the quality and type of placement the industry offers and the range of opportunities experienced by students. The concern here is managing this component between

education and industry to provide the student with the maximum benefit from the experience (Bennett, 2019).

A study conducted by Dellova (2019) indicated that a possible concern that arises from the graduate perception of a mismatch between the hospitality curriculum and industry skills needs could be related to the fact that many academics who lecture within the hospitality programmes do not have a hospitality qualification and may also lack industry experience. Mohd Yusof et al. (2021) suggest that a lack of properly qualified lecturers employed to present hospitality courses at universities, technical colleges and several private colleges offering hospitality programmes and add to this problem is the application of broadly stated outcomes when the curriculum is designed.

According to Najar and Bukhari (2017), students deserve better representation in the industry for which they are being prepared and, through their educational experience, need to develop impressions and contacts in the industry. On the other hand, educators should focus on providing quality education that prepares students for working life and furnishes employment opportunities appropriate to their level of qualification. A relationship exists between the providers of education (institutions) and the end users of this process (students, industry) (Seraphin et al., 2017).

## *2.2 Hospitality Industry Skills*

The hospitality industry comprises three main areas of activity: accommodation, restaurant services and tourism planning, management and marketing. The hospitality industry boosts the development of other sectors, such as land and air transport and the cultural and leisure industries. The hospitality industry is one of the fastest-growing industries in today's globalised world, and tourism professionals face different challenges daily. The acquisition of skills in higher education has become a growing concern worldwide regarding the need to enhance students' employability in the hospitality industry; great efforts are being made to close the gap between industry expectations and what academic studies offer.

The hospitality industry is a dynamic and competitive industry that requires the ability to constantly adapt to customers' changing needs and desires, as the customer's satisfaction, safety and enjoyment are particularly the focus of hospitality businesses (Najar & Bukhari, 2017). Hospitality company managers have been confronted with several challenges; among the most significant are the changes in tourist tastes and needs, concerns over quality and the environment, new tourist typologies and the internationalisation of tourist companies. The exponential and continuing growth in the hospitality industry reveals a demand for efficient professionals, where hospitality companies' human resources hold the key to this process.

The acquisition of skills in higher education has become a growing concern since the 1990s in a worldwide context of the need to enhance students' employability. According to McCartney and Kwok (2023), great efforts are being made to close the gap between industry expectations and

what academic studies offer. Since the hospitality schools created by most of the world's universities in recent years are designed to deliver a holistic industry-oriented education, the employability of future professionals and the training to acquire the necessary skills have become key elements in higher education institutions (Amissah et al., 2020; Anderson & Sanga, 2019; Lee et al., 2022).

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Research design and study population*

A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted in which data were collected and analysed quantitatively. This study was conducted in Kilifi, Mombasa, and Nairobi Counties in Kenya. It targeted 344 hospitality graduates working in star-rated hotels and 49 hospitality lecturers teaching in three major institutions of higher learning providing hospitality undergraduate programs. These cumulative numbers were provided by human resource managers and chairpersons of hospitality departments in three public universities, respectively.

#### *3.2 Sample Size*

Data in this study were collected from star-rated hotels and public universities providing undergraduate hospitality programmes situated in Kilifi, Mombasa and Nairobi counties of Kenya. Based on the target population figures, the sample size for hospitality graduate employees was computed using Yamane's (1963) formula, which yielded a sample size of 185. All hospitality lecturers were considered to participate in the study.

#### *3.3 Research Instruments and Measurement*

This study used an online survey created and hosted in Google Forms®. The questionnaires comprised two parts: the first one comprised participants' biodata, and the second one comprised questions designed to collect data about the acquisition of skills needed for employees to thrive in the hospitality industry. Consequently, the second part encapsulated eleven skills deemed important for hospitality students to succeed in the hospitality industry. It comprised adequate practical skills, a professional code of conduct, appropriate work ethics, proper time management, good communication skills, a positive attitude towards work in the hospitality industry, proper personal grooming, good hygiene practices, teamwork, problem-solving, and multi-tasking. In the hospitality graduate employees' questionnaire, participants were requested to rate their agreement on whether hospitality courses had imparted them with the skills mentioned above. In contrast, hospitality lecturers were asked to rate their level of agreement on whether hospitality undergraduate curricula imparted to students the said skills. In both instances, this study employed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### *3.4 Data Collection Procedures*

This study was conducted from June to August 2023. The participants were hospitality graduate employees from star-rated hotels and hospitality lecturers from public universities providing hospitality undergraduate programmes situated in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kilifi counties. A convenience sampling was utilised to select hospitality graduate employees working in the classified hotels. The target population of hospitality graduate employees constituted a specific subgroup that was more readily accessible than the broader graduate population. Therefore, convenience sampling allowed the researchers to efficiently identify and reach participants who were both relevant and available (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Besides, the irregular working hours and shift-based staffing patterns in the hospitality industry (Baum, 2008) made it difficult to implement a fully randomised sampling strategy. Convenience sampling helped address these operational difficulties by ensuring flexibility in identifying participants during field visits (Saunders et al., 2019). Two approaches were used to collect data from hospitality graduate employees: a pen-and-paper survey and an internet-based survey questionnaire. Through well-trained hospitality students, a pen-and-paper questionnaire was distributed to hospitality graduate employees in hotels where human resource managers permitted physical data collection. A pen-and-paper data collection was conducted in 10 hotels (i.e., two in Kilifi County, six in Nairobi City County, and two in Mombasa County).

The second option included conducting an online survey, which was created and hosted using Google Forms®, and emails were used to distribute the survey. The procedure included contacting and issuing invitations to human resource managers of hotels that permitted online data gathering. The email invitation included a link to partake in the survey and an informed consent document for participants, outlining the objectives, the rights to participate and withdraw from the survey, as well as the assurance of confidentiality and privacy rights. To guarantee accurate participation, human resource managers were requested to distribute the link to only hospitality graduate employees and invite them to complete and submit their surveys online. To collect data from hospitality lecturers in this study, permission was sought and obtained from the Heads of the Department of Hospitality Management of the public universities participating in the current study. During the process of obtaining approval, the Heads of Department were asked to propose the most effective method for gathering data from lecturers, and they all agreed on using an online questionnaire for administration. Consequently, an online survey was developed using Google Forms®, and a link was established. This link was then sent to the Heads of Department, who were instructed to forward it to the hospitality lecturers in their respective departments. Completed surveys were submitted and stored in the Google Forms® survey responses management system and later exported as an MS Excel spreadsheet during data analysis.

Regarding hospitality graduate employee respondents, 191 questionnaires were completed and submitted. After removing 23 incomplete questionnaires, the final sample comprised 168, representing a response rate of 88.0%. For the hospitality lecturers, 45 questionnaires were

completed and submitted, of which two were eliminated, yielding 43 useful ones, for a response rate of 87.8%.

### *3.5 Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were performed for categorical data using frequencies and proportions to summarise the samples' profiles. The study used an independent samples t-test to examine whether the means of the perceptions of acquisition of hospitality industry skills differed between hospitality graduate employees and hospitality lecturers. Significant mean differences were established at a 0.50 significance level. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, SPSS® (version 27.0). All assumptions of independent samples t-tests were examined and ascertained. The results of skewness were from -1.63 to 1.78 and from -1.53 to 1.67 for the hospitality lecture respondents' construct. Those of kurtosis were from -5.88 to 6.92 for the hospitality graduate employee respondents' construct and from -5.11 to 5.88 for the hospitality lecture respondents' construct, which revealed that the latent scales depicting perceptions of acquisition of hospitality industry skills were under acceptable ranges (i.e., skewness limits of  $\pm 2$  and kurtosis limits of  $\pm 7$ ), confirming the assumption of normality (Hair et al., 2010; West et al., 1995). In addition, the assumption of equal variances was examined with *Levene's* test, with non-significant results ( $p > .05$ ), demonstrating that this assumption was met; otherwise, this assumption was deemed to be violated. Consequently, t-test results for equality of means were considered in both instances when the assumption of equal variances was met and when it was not ([Sauder & DeMars, 2019](#)).

## **4. Results**

### *4.1 The Samples*

The majority of hospitality graduate employee respondents were 66.7% females, aged below 30 years (72.6%), working as waiters/waitresses (59.8%), and with a work experience of less than 2 years (57.7%) (*Table 1*).

Table 1: Socio-demographic Profile of Hospitality Graduate Employee Respondents

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	56	33.3%
	Female	112	<b>66.7%</b>
Age	Below 30 years	122	<b>72.6%</b>
	30 to 39 years	36	21.4%
	40 to 49 years	7	4.2%
	50 years and above	3	1.8%
Work experience	Below 2 years	97	<b>57.7%</b>
	5 to 7 years	36	21.4%
	Over 7 years	35	20.8%
Job position	Waiter/Waitress	100	<b>59.8%</b>
	F&B Manager	17	9.8%
	Chef	23	13.7%
	Front Desk Agent	7	3.9%
	Front Office Manager	3	2.0%
	Guest Relations Officer	5	2.9%
	Housekeeping Supervisor	3	2.0%
	Sales Executive	7	3.9%
	Accounts Manager	3	2.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>168</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Concerning the hospitality lecturers’ sample, the majority of the respondents were females (58.1%) and 41.9% aged 50 years and above (*Table 2*). Additionally, approximately 46.8% were holders of doctorate degrees, and 86.0% had a university teaching experience of over 7 years.

Table 2: Socio-demographic Profile of Hospitality Lecturer Respondents

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	18	41.9%
	Female	25	<b>58.1%</b>
Age	30 to 39 years	10	23.3%
	40 to 49 years	15	34.9%
	50 years and above	18	<b>41.9%</b>
Level of education	Undergraduate Degree	4	8.5%
	Masters Degree	21	44.7%
	PhD	22	<b>46.8%</b>
University teaching experience	2 to 4 years	6	14.0%

	Over 7 years	37	<b>86.0%</b>
Total		102	100.0%

4.2 Hospitality Lecturers and Hospitality Graduate Employees' Perceptions of the Acquisition of Industry Skills

The results of the independent sample t-tests are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Differences in the Acquisition of Industry Skills Between Hospitality Graduate Employees and Hospitality Lecturers

Acquisition of Industry Skills	Hospitality Graduate Employees		Hospitality Lecturers		MD	t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
<b>Adequate practical skills</b>	<b>3.05</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>3.91</b>	<b>1.13</b>	<b>-0.86</b>	<b>3.91**</b>	<b>0.010</b>
Professional code of conduct	4.20	0.73	4.33	0.64	-0.13	1.01 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.316
Appropriate work ethics	4.34	0.48	4.35	0.69	-0.01	0.06 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.954
Proper time management	4.30	0.59	4.14	0.77	0.16	1.39 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.168
<b>Good communication skills</b>	<b>3.53</b>	<b>0.54</b>	<b>4.28</b>	<b>0.59</b>	<b>-0.75</b>	<b>2.48*</b>	<b>0.014</b>
Positive attitude towards work	4.30	0.66	4.35	0.65	-0.05	0.38 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.707
Proper personal grooming	4.55	0.54	4.44	0.67	0.11	1.02 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.310
Good hygiene practices	4.68	0.47	4.56	0.50	0.12	1.36 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.177
Teamwork	4.57	0.64	4.47	0.74	0.10	0.85 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.395
<b>Problem-solving</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>4.12</b>	<b>0.98</b>	<b>-0.63</b>	<b>2.43*</b>	<b>0.016</b>
Multi-tasking	4.28	0.70	4.16	0.79	0.12	0.93 <sup>n.s</sup>	0.356

**Notes:** N (Hospitality graduate employees) = 168. N (Hospitality lecturers) = 43. SD = Standard Deviation. MD = Mean Difference. Significance inferred when t-test  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \* $p < 0.05$ . n.s. – non-significant.

The results of the mean differences between hospitality graduate employees and hospitality lecturers in the acquisition of professional code of conduct, appropriate work ethics, proper time management, positive attitude towards work, proper personal grooming, good hygiene practices, teamwork, and multi-tasking skills were statistically non-significant ( $p > .05$ ). However, the results revealed significant differences in the acquisition of industry skills between the hospitality graduate employees and hospitality lecturers regarding three specific abilities: adequate practical skills, good communication skills and problem-solving.

Specifically, the findings showed that hospitality graduate employees ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ) reported a significantly lower mean ( $t=3.91$ ,  $p=0.010$ ) on the acquisition of adequate practical skills compared to hospitality lecturers ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ). Similarly, the results revealed a

significant mean difference between hospitality graduate employees ( $M=3.53$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ) and hospitality lecturers ( $M=4.28$ ,  $SD=0.59$ ) concerning the acquisition of suitable communication skills ( $t=2.48$ ,  $p=0.014$ ). Furthermore, the findings revealed a statistically significant disparity between hospitality graduate employees ( $M=3.49$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ) and hospitality lecturers ( $M=4.12$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ) regarding the acquisition of problem-solving skills ( $t=2.43$ ,  $p=0.016$ ).

### *5. Discussion and Conclusions*

The significance of this study is that hospitality academia will benefit by understanding that hospitality programmes do not always meet the skills needed by the industry. Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Alexakis & Jiang, 2023; Ferdian et al., 2023), the outcome of this research indicated that hospitality graduate employees perceived inadequate acquisition of practical skills, contrary to the perceptions of hospitality lecturers. In other words, hospitality lecturers perceived that hospitality undergraduate curricula are designed to incorporate adequate practical skills, a view that stands in contrast to the perceptions of hospitality graduate employees. The results underscore the gap between hospitality graduate employees and hospitality lecturers concerning the adequacy of practical skills.

Additionally, the results showed that hospitality lecturers believed that the prevailing hospitality undergraduate curricula imparted hospitality undergraduate students with commendable communication skills, yet those already working in the hospitality industry held less assurance as to whether they received such skills. This outcome resonates well with the findings of Espellita and Maravilla's (2019) study, which found that important skills such as communication were inadequate among hospitality graduates in the Philippines, as seen from the lens of hospitality supervisors. Consistent with the results of Espellita and Maravilla (2019), the findings reflected a subtle perception held by hospitality graduate employees pertaining to the development of problem-solving abilities and raised doubts about the efficacy of existing hospitality courses in equipping graduates with these essential skills. Conversely, hospitality lecturers maintain that hospitality undergraduates are adequately equipped with problem-solving skills.

### *6. Implications for Practice*

This study found that hospitality graduate employees lack confidence in their acquisition of adequate practical, communication and problem-solving skills. The study results revealed that hospitality lecturers perceived hospitality undergraduate curricula as effective in equipping students with the skills mentioned above, contrary to the belief of hospitality graduate employees. These differing opinions may mask crucial information needed when reviewing curricula, as the major curriculum review stakeholders are lecturers who believe the existing hospitality undergraduate curricula are adequate and effective. Consequently, hospitality education should focus not only on cultivating adequate hands-on skills but also on reinforcing communication and problem-solving skills. Driven by the ultimate goal of preparing learners to be competent employees who meet the requirements of the hospitality industry, hospitality lecturers should revamp hospitality programmes and upgrade teaching approaches to maximise

the effectiveness of hospitality undergraduate curricula while addressing the skills mentioned above.

### 7. Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the significant contributions made by this study, there are suggestions for future research. First, this study examined the differences in perceptions regarding the perceived acquisition of industry skills between hospitality graduate employees and hospitality lecturers. Future research can include the perceptions of other stakeholders, such as industry practitioners, to provide a three-dimensional perspective regarding the effectiveness of the hospitality undergraduate curricula. In addition, the present study collected data from hospitality graduate employees working in four and five-star hotels in Mombasa, Kilifi and Nairobi City counties. Future researchers can further address this limitation by collecting data from different hospitality sectors, such as themed restaurants, fast-food restaurants, fine-dining restaurants, Airbnb, and lodges and from other categories of hospitality workers, such as those with diplomas and certificate qualifications. Doing so would help curriculum reviewers and hospitality educators with insights on areas to revamp the existing curricula to address the important industry skills and, if need be, form a basis for harmonising various hospitality curricula into a standard curriculum designed and sculptured for the hospitality industry. To compare and validate the results. Second, this study used a single set of cross-sectional data. Lastly, the focus of this study was to examine the perspectives of hospitality graduate employees and hospitality lecturers regarding the acquisition of industry skills. Therefore, future researchers could expand this study by including issues that influence the acquisition of industry skills among various categories of hospitality students in Kenya and beyond to build on the results of the current research and form a base for effective hospitality curricula review and development.

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