



Assessing the Effectiveness of Hotel Training Programmes in Developing Industry-Relevant Employability Competencies: Evidence from Arusha, Tanzania

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Abstract

The hospitality industry requires a workforce capable of combining technical knowledge with communication, interpersonal, digital and professional competencies. However, concerns remain about whether hospitality training programmes adequately prepare graduates for contemporary hotel employment. This study examined perceptions of trainers, hotel employees and employers concerning the development of industry-relevant employability competencies through hotel training programmes in Arusha, Tanzania. The study adopted an interpretivist philosophy and qualitative case-study design. Data were collected from 24 purposively selected participants: 11 trainers from the National College of Tourism (NCT), Arusha Campus, and the VETA Hotel Training Institute; 10 employees who had graduated from the two institutions and were working in selected five-star hotels; and three hotel human-resource managers representing employers. Data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach. The findings indicate that employability is multidimensional, incorporating technical and operational competence, communication, customer service, problem-solving, digital competence, foreign-language proficiency, adaptability, teamwork and professional attitudes. Strong convergence across stakeholder groups revealed a persistent



theory–practice gap. Academic qualifications were not consistently perceived as evidence of workplace competence, and employers reported that some graduates required additional training after recruitment. Practical training, internships, field attachment, role play, and workplace exposure were regarded as important mechanisms for developing readiness, although their implementation was constrained by inadequate facilities, equipment, technology, student numbers, and training capacity. Communication and English or foreign-language proficiency emerged as particularly persistent competency gaps. Stakeholders differed in how they explained these gaps: trainers emphasized institutional and resource constraints, employees highlighted both institutional weaknesses and graduate attitudes, while employers focused on demonstrated workplace performance and retraining costs. The two institutional cases experienced similar challenges but in different forms. VETA's principal constraint was practical-resource capacity, whereas NCT showed relatively stronger exposure to hotel systems while continuing to face language, soft-skills, and capacity challenges. The study concludes that the employability gap is systemic and requires more competency-based, experiential and industry-responsive hospitality education.

Keywords: Employability Competencies; Hospitality Education; Hotel Training Programmes; Practical Training; Work-Integrated Learning; Hospitality Industry; Arusha; Tanzania

Introduction

Background Information

The hospitality industry is an important source of employment and economic activity globally. Its growth has increased the demand for workers who can provide efficient, consistent and customer-oriented services in increasingly competitive environments. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2025) reports that travel and tourism support hundreds of millions of jobs globally, illustrating the sector's importance to employment and economic development. At the same time, technological change, changing customer expectations and increasingly internationalized hotel operations have altered the competencies required of hospitality workers. Employers increasingly expect graduates to combine occupational knowledge with communication, teamwork, problem-solving, digital literacy, adaptability and professionalism (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2025). Hospitality education has consequently been expected to move beyond the transmission of theoretical knowledge towards competency-based and experiential approaches. Internships, industrial attachments, practical laboratories, simulations, role play and other forms of work-integrated learning are intended to help learners translate classroom knowledge into workplace performance (Patrick et al., 2008; UN Tourism,



2023). Nevertheless, the literature continues to identify a mismatch between the skills developed through formal education and those expected by hospitality employers. Graduates may possess academic qualifications while lacking sufficient practical experience, communication skills or familiarity with contemporary hotel technologies (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Jackson, 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2020). This issue is particularly relevant in developing tourism destinations, where expansion of the hospitality sector can increase demand for skilled workers while simultaneously exposing weaknesses in training systems. In Tanzania, tourism contributes to employment, foreign-exchange earnings and national economic development (Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism [MNRT], 2023). Arusha occupies a particularly important position because of its role as a tourism gateway to destinations including the Serengeti National Park, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Mount Kilimanjaro and Tarangire National Park. The growth of hotels and other tourism businesses in the region creates continuing demand for workers capable of meeting international standards of service.

The Tanzanian training system has sought to respond to this demand through institutions such as the National College of Tourism (NCT) and the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA). Hospitality programmes are intended to develop occupational knowledge and practical skills in areas including food production, food and beverage service, housekeeping, front office and related operations. However, previous research has identified continuing concerns regarding practical facilities, instructor capacity, curriculum relevance, industry collaboration and graduate preparedness (Anderson & Sanga, 2018; Mbagga, Malusu, & Lyamtane, 2021; Mgaiwa, 2021).

Employability itself is broader than employment acquisition. Yorke and Knight (2006) conceptualize employability in terms of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that increase an individual's capacity to obtain employment and perform effectively. More recent literature similarly treats employability as dynamic and context-dependent, changing with employer expectations, technology and labour-market conditions (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). For hospitality graduates, employability therefore involves not only possessing technical competence but also being able to apply that competence in service encounters, work collaboratively, solve problems, use technology and adapt to changing circumstances.

The present study responds to a limited body of context-specific evidence concerning how hospitality training programmes in Arusha develop these competencies. Rather than examining employability exclusively from the perspective of students or graduates, the study brings together three stakeholder groups: trainers who develop competencies, graduates who experience the transition into hotel work, and employers who evaluate workplace performance.



This triangulation provides a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between training and employment.

Statement of the Problem

Hospitality employers require graduates who can combine technical expertise with communication, teamwork, customer service, problem-solving, digital competence, adaptability and professional behaviour. Yet the existence of formal hotel training programmes does not necessarily guarantee that graduates will possess these competencies at the level expected in the workplace.

In Arusha, the problem is particularly important because tourism and hospitality form a major part of the regional economy. Despite efforts by government and training institutions to strengthen skills development, concerns persist about graduate preparedness. Employers and hotel employees have reported weaknesses in practical knowledge, communication, language proficiency, problem-solving and adaptation to actual hotel operations. These concerns suggest a continuing gap between educational preparation and workplace expectations.

The problem cannot, however, be attributed automatically to curriculum content. The effectiveness of training depends on the resources available for practical learning, trainer competence, opportunities for industry exposure, access to contemporary hotel technologies, the duration and quality of workplace placements, student motivation and the degree of industry involvement in curriculum development. There is therefore a need to understand how these factors interact from the perspectives of those directly involved in hospitality education and employment. This study consequently examines the development of employability competencies through hotel training programmes in Arusha, Tanzania. It is guided by the following research question:

What employability competencies do trainers identify as being developed through hotel training programmes in Arusha, Tanzania?

Although the research question focuses specifically on trainers' perceptions, the study uses employee and employer perspectives to triangulate and contextualize the training institutions' accounts.

Literature Review

Employability in Hospitality

Employability has evolved from a narrow focus on obtaining employment towards a broader conception of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and attributes required to obtain, retain and perform effectively in employment. Yorke and Knight (2006) argue that employability incorporates achievements, skills, understanding and personal qualities. Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) further emphasize that



employability is shaped by geographical, occupational and temporal contexts and must be understood as a continuing process of learning and adaptation.

Hospitality provides a particularly strong example of this multidimensional conception because service delivery requires the simultaneous application of technical and interpersonal competencies. A front-office employee may need to understand reservation procedures, use hotel software, process payments and follow operational procedures while also communicating effectively with guests, handling complaints and maintaining professional composure. Similarly, food-production workers require technical culinary competence alongside hygiene awareness, teamwork, time management and the ability to respond to operational pressures.

The literature identifies technical competence, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, customer service, digital literacy, adaptability and professionalism as important components of hospitality employability (Razak et al., 2016; Pranić et al., 2021; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Language competence is also important because hospitality employees routinely interact with customers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Aysu & Özcan, 2021). The growing use of information and communication technologies further means that graduates increasingly require familiarity with digital systems used for reservations, property management, point-of-sale operations and communication (Bilotta et al., 2020; Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2024).

Hospitality Training and Practical Learning

Hotel training programmes are designed to combine theoretical knowledge with practical preparation for hotel operations. Practical training allows learners to apply knowledge under supervised conditions and to develop confidence and occupational competence. Work-integrated learning similarly connects classroom education with authentic workplace experience (Patrick et al., 2008).

The importance of practical preparation has long been recognized in hospitality education. Raybould and Wilkins (2005) identified the problem of graduates being academically qualified but under-experienced. This distinction remains important because hospitality competence is developed through repeated performance of tasks rather than through theoretical understanding alone. Internships and industrial attachments can provide opportunities for students to interact with guests, use hotel systems, follow service standards and experience workplace routines.

However, work-integrated learning is not automatically effective. Its value depends on the quality and structure of the placement. Where students are given limited responsibilities or inconsistent supervision, the placement may contribute less to competency development than intended. Likewise, institutions with



inadequate laboratories, equipment or technology may struggle to provide meaningful practical experiences before students enter the workplace.

Technical, Digital and Soft Competencies

Technical competence remains fundamental to hospitality work. Graduates are expected to possess occupational knowledge in areas such as food production, food and beverage service, housekeeping, front-office operations and hotel administration. They may also require familiarity with property management systems, reservation platforms and point-of-sale technologies (Christou & Sigala, 2002).

Technical skills, however, are insufficient when separated from interpersonal competence. Pranić et al. (2021) identify conceptual, leadership and interpersonal soft skills as important dimensions of tourism and hospitality employability. Communication, listening, teamwork, adaptability, time management and customer interaction influence the extent to which technical knowledge can be translated into effective service.

Digitalization has expanded this competency profile. Hospitality organizations increasingly use digital technologies in reservations, guest management, marketing, communication and operational control. Consequently, hospitality education must expose learners to technologies that resemble those used in actual workplaces. Bilotta et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of integrating industry technologies into tourism education, while more recent work identifies digital competence as an increasingly important component of hospitality employability (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2024).

Industry Alignment

The literature consistently identifies collaboration between education providers and industry as an important mechanism for improving graduate employability. Employers possess current knowledge of workplace practices and emerging skill requirements, while training institutions provide the educational foundations for those competencies. Stronger collaboration can therefore support curriculum renewal, internships, guest lectures, staff development, equipment provision and competency assessment (Anderson & Sanga, 2018; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017).

Tanzania's National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) 2016–2027 provides a broader policy context for strengthening demand-responsive skills development and public–private linkages. Tourism and hospitality are identified among the priority sectors. The policy emphasis on responsiveness, results, inclusion, partnerships and continuing skills upgrading is consistent with the need to strengthen the relationship between hospitality education and employment.



Nevertheless, the existence of policy frameworks does not necessarily guarantee effective implementation. Resource limitations, differences in institutional capacity and weak or inconsistent industry engagement can prevent curriculum objectives from translating into workplace competence. The present study therefore examines these issues empirically through stakeholder perspectives in Arusha.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy and a qualitative case-study design. An interpretivist approach was appropriate because the research sought to understand how different stakeholders perceive employability competency development and the relationship between hospitality education and workplace requirements. Rather than measuring competence through standardized tests, the study examined participants' experiences, interpretations and assessments of training and employment.

The cases comprised two hospitality training institutions in Arusha: the National College of Tourism (NCT), Arusha Campus, and the VETA Hotel Training Institute. The study also included graduates working in selected five-star hotels and human-resource managers representing employers. This design enabled comparison across institutional and stakeholder perspectives.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were purposively selected because of their direct experience with hospitality training or employment. The study involved 24 participants: 11 trainers, 10 hotel employees who had graduated from the two training institutions, and three HR managers.

The 11 trainers comprised six from NCT and five from VETA and represented departments including food production, food and beverage service, housekeeping, front office and reservation, bakery and pastry production, and laundry services. The 10 employee participants were graduates of the two institutions working in front office, reservations, housekeeping, food and beverage, laundry, culinary and restaurant roles. The three HR managers represented selected five-star hotels in Arusha: Mount Meru Hotel, Gran Melia Hotel and Arusha Serena/Lake Duluti Serena Hotel.

Rather than reproduce extensive demographic tables, the article reports the characteristics relevant to interpretation. Participants varied in age, educational level, occupational area and years of experience, providing perspectives from both relatively new and more experienced hospitality personnel.



Data were collected through focus group discussions with the 11 trainers and semi-structured interviews with hotel employees and HR managers. The trainer focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and were conducted at the respective institutions. Discussions were conducted in English and Kiswahili according to participant preference. Where Kiswahili was used, material was translated into English during transcription and analysis.

The focus groups were audio-recorded with informed consent, and field notes were taken. Transcripts were produced verbatim and checked against the recordings. Attention was given to group dynamics, including dominant and quieter voices, disagreement and possible institutional influence. Participation was voluntary, institutional authorities were not present during discussions, and participants were assured of confidentiality.

The employee interviews explored competencies developed through training, skills used in current jobs, perceived gaps, experiences during the transition to employment, curriculum–workplace alignment and recommendations for improving training. Employer interviews addressed experiences with graduate recruitment, expected technical and soft competencies, observed competency gaps, practical experience, technology, industry expectations and possible improvements to hospitality education.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. The transcripts were repeatedly reviewed for familiarity, initial codes were generated, related codes were grouped into candidate themes, and themes were reviewed and refined. The analysis considered both common and contrasting patterns across VETA and NCT and across trainers, employees and employers. The analysis generated five themes from the trainer focus groups:

1. Employability requires a combination of technical, digital and interpersonal competencies.
2. Practical and experiential learning is central to workplace readiness.
3. Communication, English and soft skills remain major employability gaps.
4. Resource and capacity constraints limit competency-based training.
5. Stronger industry alignment requires curriculum, institutional and system-level reform.

Four themes emerged from employee interviews:

1. Theory–practice disconnect and limited workplace exposure.
2. Inadequate development of technical and interpersonal competencies.
3. Curriculum and training responsiveness to industry requirements.
4. Graduate attitudes, professional identity and employability readiness.

Employer interviews generated four related themes:



1. Qualification–competence disconnect and uneven graduate preparedness.
2. Multidimensional employability involving technical, digital and interpersonal competencies.
3. Workplace learning as a bridge to graduate readiness.
4. Industry-responsive hospitality education and stronger employer–institution collaboration.

The analysis then integrated these themes to identify areas of convergence and divergence across stakeholders.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

The researcher obtained authorization from Moi University and a research permit from the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH). Participants provided informed consent and were informed of the study purpose, confidentiality arrangements and their right to participate voluntarily. Participant identities were protected through codes such as TRN, TRV, P and HR rather than personal names.

Credibility was supported through triangulation across trainers, employees and employers and through member checking of selected summaries. Dependability was supported by maintaining a consistent analytical process and an audit trail of coding and theme development. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexivity and by grounding interpretations in participant accounts.

Findings

Employability Is Multidimensional

A strong point of convergence among trainers, employees and employers was that hospitality employability cannot be reduced to technical occupational competence. Trainers at both institutions described employability as a combination of technical knowledge, digital competence, communication, interpersonal skills and professional attributes.

VETA participants emphasized technology, communication, foreign languages, hotel operating standards, punctuality, hygiene and attention to detail. They also highlighted the need for familiarity with hotel software and operational procedures. NCT trainers similarly identified ICT, technical knowledge, communication, problem-solving, cultural awareness, teamwork, flexibility, hygiene, confidence and willingness to learn.

One NCT trainer summarized the expected competency profile:

“They should be competent in communication, both oral and written... and the use of ICT and technical know-how in their particular departments.” (TRN2)



The employee accounts reinforced this multidimensional understanding. Participants identified technical knowledge, problem-solving, communication, English proficiency, customer interaction, complaint handling and social skills as important areas of workplace performance. Employers similarly emphasized customer service, technical skills, communication, interpersonal competence, foreign languages, hotel systems, problem-solving, professional attitude and basic hotel knowledge.

The findings therefore suggest that the hospitality graduate is expected to possess a hybrid competency profile. Technical skills provide the occupational foundation, but digital, communication and interpersonal competencies enable graduates to apply that knowledge effectively.

The Theory–Practice Gap

The most consistent finding across the three stakeholder groups was a gap between theoretical preparation and practical workplace competence.

Trainers regarded practical learning as essential. VETA participants described hands-on learning as a means of developing confidence and helping students understand what occurs in actual hotel environments. NCT trainers referred to competency-based education and training, role play, apprenticeship, internships, field attachment and practical exercises as important forms of preparation.

However, trainers also identified constraints that limited the amount and quality of practical learning that could be provided. At VETA, shortages of equipment, materials and practical space were particularly prominent. One reported example was a demonstration kitchen that could accommodate only 12 students at a time despite approximately 200 culinary students. This mismatch illustrates the difficulty of implementing competency-based training at scale.

Employees encountered the same problem after entering employment. P2 explained that many institutions provide limited practical preparation because they have insufficient facilities, including limited access to hotel systems and authentic hotel environments. P3 similarly observed that the absence of institutional practical facilities makes it difficult for students to become familiar with actual hotel work.

Employees also reported that institutions often depend on hotels to provide practical experience during field training. P7 described a system in which institutions provide substantial theory while expecting hotels to supply practical experience. Although industry placements are valuable, employees suggested that relying too heavily on external hotels creates variation in students' exposure and means that workplace placements may have to compensate for weaknesses in institutional preparation.

Employers provided an important external confirmation of the theory–practice gap. They reported that some graduates possessed qualifications but demonstrated weak practical knowledge and required retraining after recruitment.



HR1 described substantial variation in preparedness and referred to graduates who had certificates but displayed “very poor knowledge.” From the employer perspective, the issue is not whether graduates have completed a programme but whether they can perform occupational tasks with an acceptable level of independence.

The convergence can therefore be summarized as:

limited practical preparation → weaker operational competence → greater workplace adjustment and retraining requirements.

This finding suggests that the employability problem is not simply a deficiency of theoretical knowledge. It is a problem of translating knowledge into performance.

Communication and Language as Employability Bottlenecks

Communication and language proficiency emerged as persistent areas of weakness. VETA participants reported feedback from industry concerning poor communication and foreign-language proficiency. NCT trainers similarly identified English and general language proficiency as continuing challenges.

TRN5 summarized the concern directly:

“They are hard-working, but in communication skills, they lack language proficiency.”

Employees independently identified similar difficulties. Participants described weaknesses in English, communication with guests and handling complaints. They argued for greater emphasis on communication, interpersonal skills and foreign languages. Employers also identified communication and language proficiency as important competencies for hotel employees, particularly because hospitality involves continuous interaction with diverse customers.

The significance of this finding extends beyond language instruction. Communication is a mechanism through which technical competence is converted into service. A graduate may know how to perform a front-office procedure but still struggle to serve a guest if they cannot communicate clearly, respond appropriately to a complaint or explain information professionally.

The findings also reveal some disagreement about the teachability of soft skills. One NCT participant viewed soft skills as partly innate and difficult to teach, whereas another indicated that communication behaviour, appearance, hygiene and interpersonal conduct could be incorporated into training. This divergence is analytically important because it suggests that trainers do not necessarily share a single understanding of employability attributes. Some are perceived as personal qualities, while others are viewed as behaviours that can be developed through practice, modelling and feedback.



Digital and Hotel-System Competence

Digital competence emerged as an increasingly important component of employability. Trainers identified ICT and hotel operating systems as relevant competencies, while employees and employers reported gaps in graduates' exposure to contemporary hotel technologies.

Employers expected graduates to understand systems relevant to their departments. Front-office graduates, for example, were expected to receive telephone calls, check guests in and out, process bills, allocate rooms and use hotel software. The expectation was therefore not merely that graduates understand hotel operations theoretically but that they can work with the technologies supporting those operations.

The institutional comparison revealed an important difference. VETA participants described limitations in access to software and reservation systems, whereas NCT participants reported practical exposure to systems such as Opera. This does not establish that NCT graduates are categorically more employable than VETA graduates, but it indicates differences in the technological environments available for competency development.

Employees similarly recommended incorporating globally used reservation software into hospitality training. Employers argued that graduates who have not encountered industry technologies may require additional workplace training even when they possess relevant theoretical knowledge.

Institutional Resources and Capacity

The findings indicate that training effectiveness is strongly influenced by the conditions in which training takes place. At VETA, trainers emphasized shortages of practical training materials, kitchen and restaurant equipment, reservation and point-of-sale systems, demonstration facilities and space. The reported mismatch between enrolment and available practical facilities illustrates a structural challenge: increasing the number of students without proportionately increasing practical resources reduces opportunities for repeated hands-on practice.

NCT participants also identified institutional constraints, although the nature of the problem differed. They referred to student numbers, programme duration, differences in students' educational backgrounds and variation in trainer competencies. NCT participants reported stronger access to certain hotel systems and described trainers as industry-oriented, but language proficiency and soft skills remained difficult to develop within the available time.

The cross-case comparison therefore should not be understood as a simple ranking of one institution above the other. Instead, both institutions experience the same broad employability challenge under different conditions. VETA's challenge is more strongly associated with practical-resource capacity, while NCT's challenge



involves language, soft skills, student preparedness and programme capacity despite comparatively stronger exposure to hotel systems.

Graduate Attitudes and Professional Identity

Employees introduced an additional dimension that was less prominent in the trainers' accounts: graduate agency. Participants did not attribute all competency gaps to institutions. P5 questioned whether some shortcomings reflected students' attitudes, perceptions of hospitality employment and motivation.

Participants argued that students need a positive mindset towards hospitality careers, commitment to their studies and willingness to learn. P9 similarly recommended developing positive attitudes towards hotel employment, while P10 emphasized effort and concentration on coursework. This finding does not remove institutional responsibility. Rather, it suggests that employability develops through interaction between institutional conditions and individual agency. Students require appropriate facilities, relevant instruction and meaningful industry exposure, but they also need motivation and commitment to take advantage of those opportunities.

Employer Perceptions: From Qualification to Demonstrated Competence

Employers provided the clearest distinction between qualification and competence. Their accounts suggest that certificates and diplomas may demonstrate educational attainment but do not necessarily demonstrate the ability to perform independently in a hotel.

HR1 identified differences in graduate preparedness and reported that some graduates require substantial retraining after recruitment. VETA and NCT graduates were perceived as possessing basic hotel knowledge, but this did not necessarily mean that they were fully prepared for independent performance.

Employers described specific expectations. Culinary graduates should possess basic knowledge of soups, sauces and cooking methods. Front-office graduates should understand guest reception, check-in and check-out procedures, billing, room allocation and hotel software. These examples demonstrate that employability is ultimately judged through the ability to perform occupational tasks. Employers also valued multiskilling. Hospitality workers may need to perform different but complementary tasks, respond to guest problems and collaborate across departments. Safety and security, professional behaviour and customer-service competence were likewise considered important.

Workplace Learning as a Bridge to Readiness

Employers distinguished between graduates with meaningful industry experience and those with limited exposure. Graduates who had completed useful



internships were perceived to adapt more quickly, understand operational procedures better, require less supervision, demonstrate greater confidence with guests and apply theoretical knowledge more effectively.

This finding reinforces the importance of internships and industrial attachments. Workplace learning exposes students to real customers, service standards, operational routines, technology and organizational expectations. It also creates opportunities to practise communication, problem-solving and professional behaviour. However, the findings indicate that simply placing students in hotels is insufficient. Employers called for well-organized internships and extended industrial attachments. Workplace learning needs clear learning objectives, meaningful participation and opportunities to practise relevant competencies.

Industry Alignment and Curriculum Responsiveness

All three stakeholder groups identified the need for closer alignment between hospitality education and hotel-industry requirements. Some collaboration already exists. VETA participants reported industry involvement in curriculum preparation and field training, while NCT participants described industry-oriented trainers, practical exposure and hotel-system training. However, stakeholders did not consider the existing relationship sufficiently systematic.

Employees recommended greater employer participation in curriculum review and stronger incorporation of technologies used in contemporary hotels. Employers similarly called for training that mirrors actual hotel operations and stronger relationships between hotels and training institutions.

The implication is not that industry involvement is absent but that it is not sufficiently continuous to ensure synchronization between curriculum, technology and workplace requirements. Given the pace of change in hospitality, industry–institution collaboration needs to be treated as an ongoing process rather than an occasional curriculum-review activity.

Discussion

The findings support a multidimensional conception of hospitality employability. Across trainers, employees and employers, technical knowledge was considered necessary but insufficient. This is consistent with Yorke and Knight's (2006) broader understanding of employability and with literature emphasizing the importance of soft skills, communication and adaptability (Pranić et al., 2021; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

The strong convergence between stakeholder groups is particularly significant. Trainers identified the competencies they attempted to develop; employees described the difficulties encountered when those competencies were applied in hotels; and employers evaluated the consequences of competency gaps



in workplace performance. The same pattern therefore appears at three points in the education-to-employment pathway.

The theory–practice gap is the central issue linking these perspectives. Trainers recognize the value of practical learning but face resource and capacity constraints. Employees enter workplaces and discover that theoretical preparation does not always provide sufficient operational competence. Employers subsequently invest additional resources in supervision and retraining. The problem is therefore best interpreted as a translation gap between knowing and doing. This finding is consistent with the longstanding concern that hospitality graduates may be academically qualified but under-experienced (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005). It also supports the work-integrated learning perspective, which treats workplace experience as a mechanism through which students integrate knowledge and practice (Patrick et al., 2008; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). However, the study does not establish that any single form of practical training is superior. Rather, it indicates that multiple forms of experiential learning need to complement classroom instruction.

Communication and language are another important finding. Rather than being peripheral soft skills, they function as operational competencies in hospitality. Guest interaction, complaint handling, teamwork and service recovery all require effective communication. The convergence across stakeholder groups suggests that language and communication weaknesses can constrain the value of otherwise adequate technical preparation.

The findings also demonstrate that digital competence has become inseparable from hospitality employability. Hotel employees increasingly operate through reservation, property-management, billing and communication systems. Where students have limited access to these systems during training, they may enter employment with a knowledge gap that employers must address. This reinforces the argument of Bilotta et al. (2020) and Adeyinka-Ojo et al. (2024) that technology needs to be integrated into hospitality education rather than treated as an optional addition.

The VETA–NCT comparison provides further insight into the nature of the problem. The findings do not support a binary interpretation in which one institution succeeds and the other fails. Instead, they reveal different manifestations of a shared structural challenge. VETA's primary difficulty is the availability and scale of practical resources, while NCT demonstrates stronger exposure to certain hotel systems but continues to experience language, soft-skills and capacity challenges. This suggests that improving employability requires attention to the entire training ecosystem rather than focusing exclusively on curriculum content.

The stakeholder differences concerning responsibility are also important. Trainers tend to emphasize the structural conditions under which they provide education. Employees recognize these institutional limitations but also emphasize



graduate motivation and attitudes. Employers focus on demonstrated performance and the organizational consequences of competency gaps. These perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory.

The resulting model can be conceptualized as a continuum:

Academic knowledge → Practical training → Industry exposure → Competency application → Workplace adaptation → Employability performance

Weakness at any point can disrupt the transition. Inadequate facilities reduce practice; limited practice weakens operational competence; insufficient technology exposure constrains digital readiness; language difficulties affect guest interaction; and weak professional attitudes may further restrict performance.

The findings therefore support a systemic interpretation of the employability gap. The responsibility is shared among training institutions, students, employers and policymakers. Institutions must provide relevant knowledge, practical resources and contemporary technologies. Students must engage actively with learning and develop professional commitment. Employers should provide meaningful workplace learning and communicate changing competency requirements. Policymakers must create conditions that support adequate training capacity and sustained industry–education partnerships.

Conclusion

This study examined perceptions of employability competency development within hospitality training programmes in Arusha, Tanzania, using perspectives from trainers, hotel employees and employers. The findings show strong agreement that hospitality employability is multidimensional. Technical and operational competence remains fundamental, but it must be combined with communication, language proficiency, digital competence, customer service, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, adaptability and professional attitudes.

The most important finding is the persistence of a theory–practice gap. Training institutions recognize the importance of practical learning, and employees and employers confirm its importance through their experiences of graduate transition and workplace performance. However, inadequate facilities, equipment, technology, training capacity and opportunities for authentic workplace exposure constrain the translation of theoretical knowledge into operational competence.

Communication and language proficiency emerged as particularly persistent bottlenecks, demonstrating that communication should be treated as a core hospitality competency rather than a peripheral soft skill. Digital competence is also increasingly important as hotel operations become more technology dependent. The comparison of VETA and NCT indicates that the employability challenge takes different forms across institutions. VETA faces stronger constraints related to practical resources and equipment, while NCT demonstrates relatively stronger



exposure to hotel systems but continues to face language, soft-skills and capacity challenges. The evidence therefore does not support a simple institutional ranking; instead, it points to the need for systemic improvement.

Overall, the findings support an understanding of employability as a continuum extending from academic preparation to workplace performance. Qualifications provide an important foundation, but graduates become work-ready through opportunities to apply knowledge, practise occupational skills, use industry technologies, interact with customers, solve authentic problems and develop professional identities. Strengthening hospitality employability in Arusha therefore requires coordinated action among training institutions, students, employers and policymakers. Competency-based education, meaningful practical learning, industry-responsive curricula, appropriate technology, language development and sustained industry–academia partnerships are central to this process.

The study does not claim to establish the comparative effectiveness of individual training approaches. Rather, it provides evidence that employability development depends on the integration of academic, practical and workplace learning. Future research should directly assess graduate competencies and examine the outcomes of different training approaches across a broader range of Tanzanian hospitality institutions and employers.

Implications for Hospitality Education and Workforce Development

The study has several implications for hospitality training in Arusha and similar tourism destinations.

First, employability competencies should be embedded across hospitality curricula rather than treated as separate subjects. Communication, problem-solving, customer service, digital competence, teamwork, adaptability and professional behaviour should be practised alongside technical skills.

Second, practical learning requires greater institutional support. Training facilities should reflect the scale of student enrolment, and students should receive repeated opportunities to practise occupational tasks. Where institutional resources are limited, structured partnerships with hotels can supplement but should not entirely replace institutional practical preparation.

Third, hotel technologies should be integrated into training. Learners should encounter relevant reservation, property-management and point-of-sale systems before entering employment. Technology training should reflect actual industry requirements and be periodically reviewed.

Fourth, internships and industrial attachments should be more deliberately structured. Placement should involve clear learning objectives, appropriate supervision and meaningful participation in hotel operations. Training institutions



and hotels should jointly monitor whether students are developing the intended competencies.

Fifth, language and communication need greater attention. English and other relevant foreign languages should be connected to realistic hospitality situations, including guest reception, telephone communication, complaint handling, email communication and service recovery.

Finally, curriculum development should involve employers more systematically. Regular interaction with hotel practitioners can help identify emerging competency requirements and prevent curricula from becoming disconnected from workplace practices.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed.

Strengthen Competency-Based Training

Hospitality programmes should explicitly integrate technical, digital, communication, interpersonal, problem-solving, language and professional competencies into learning outcomes and assessment. Competency development should be demonstrated through practical performance as well as written or theoretical assessment.

Expand Practical and Workplace Learning

Institutions should increase opportunities for simulations, role play, practical exercises, internships and apprenticeships. Where feasible, training institutions should establish or strengthen demonstration hotels and realistic practical laboratories. Industry placements should be structured to ensure that students actively practise relevant competencies.

Improve Practical Facilities and Equipment

Investment should be directed towards facilities and equipment that correspond to student numbers and contemporary hotel operations. Particular attention is needed for kitchens, food and beverage facilities, front-office laboratories, reservation systems, point-of-sale systems and other digital technologies.

Integrate Technology into Hospitality Education

Training programmes should provide practical exposure to relevant hotel-management, reservation and operational technologies. Technology content should be reviewed periodically in collaboration with hotel employers.

English and relevant foreign-language skills should be developed through hospitality-specific activities rather than solely through general language



instruction. Communication should be embedded in practical guest-service scenarios.

Develop Trainers through Continuous Professional Development

Trainers should have opportunities for continuing exposure to hotel operations, emerging technologies and changing industry standards. Industry attachments and collaboration with hotel practitioners could help maintain the relevance of instruction.

Institutionalize Industry–Academia Collaboration

Training institutions and hotels should establish sustained mechanisms for collaboration in curriculum review, internships, assessment, guest lectures, staff development and identification of emerging competencies. Industry participation should be continuous rather than limited to occasional consultations.

Address Student Motivation and Professional Identity

Training programmes should help learners develop realistic and positive perceptions of hospitality careers, professional attitudes, confidence, commitment and willingness to learn. These attributes should be reinforced through mentoring, practical experience and feedback.

Avoid a One-Size-Fits-All Training Model

The findings do not establish that internships, role play, simulations, apprenticeship or competency-based training is individually the most effective approach. Rather, the evidence supports combining complementary forms of learning according to institutional capacity and workplace requirements.

Limitations and Future Studies

The study has several limitations. First, its qualitative case-study design and purposive sample of 24 participants mean that the findings are context-specific and should not be statistically generalized to all hospitality institutions or hotels in Tanzania.

Second, the study relies on participant perceptions and self-reported experiences rather than direct competency testing, workplace observation or quantitative performance indicators.

Third, only three HR managers participated, limiting the range of employer perspectives. The study also focused on two training institutions and selected five-star hotels; therefore, the experiences of private training institutions, lower-category hotels and other regions may differ.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design does not show how competencies develop over time or establish the causal effectiveness of particular training



approaches. Finally, stakeholder responses may have been influenced by their professional roles and institutional contexts, despite measures taken to protect confidentiality and encourage critical discussion.

Future research should therefore use larger and more diverse samples, include additional training institutions and hotel categories, and combine qualitative inquiry with direct assessment of graduate competencies. Longitudinal research could also examine how competencies develop from training through internship and into employment. Comparative research could investigate the conditions under which different forms of experiential learning contribute most effectively to workplace readiness.

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