

Competencies Gap between Education and Employability Stakes

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This paper sets out to report on the study that assessed the gap between the competencies perceived to have learnt through hospitality graduate studies against what the graduates really possess when they begin their career in the industry. This study adopted one of the employability skill models proposed by the Australian Training Authority (2003) with nine generic competency groups and 52 descriptions of skills. The data was collected through a sample survey of 125 fresh hospitality undergraduates both from private institutions and public universities and 50 Malaysian hospitality managers. The findings show a lower ranking by managers for 3 skill clusters out of 9 and 25 skill descriptors out of 52 than that of the graduates. These findings are good indicators of the gap between education and employability stakes. This study was limited by the poor response rate from the industry. The study also did not evaluate the level of the relevance of the skill descriptors rated low by the industrialists. Further study can be carried out in evaluating the level of relevance of the descriptors for entry level managers in the hospitality industry. Most of the previous studies emphasized on the comparison between expectations and perceptions regarding the competencies and many of these studies were carried out in the United States of America, United Kingdom and a few in Australia. However, this study was carried out in Malaysia where graduate studies in Hospitality and Tourism are gaining popularity. This study also rated and compared the competency levels of the graduates through their self evaluation and from the point of view of the industry.

Key Words: hospitality, education, competencies, generic skill, skill descriptors, gap and employability.

Introduction

Malaysia's advantage as a centre for conferences, event organisations, sports facilities, exhibitions and conventions as well as its wealth in nature, culture, gastronomy, arts, crafts, shopping and recreation has demanded a momentum for the tourism industry to propel forward. Hospitality and tourism programmes gained momentum in the mid-1980s when rapid expansion in the tourism industry created a demand for skilled staff. Rapid expansion in the industry during the last decade of the twentieth century translated into increased opportunities for graduates of hospitality and tourism (HT) programmes. Demand for better educated, more knowledgeable and multi-skilled workers capable of holding managerial and supervisory level positions increased.

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The complex nature of the industry has significantly intensified the complexity of the role of supervisory or managerial staff. The staff need to work virtually through others as well as hands-on. However, the profit margins are slim and subject to risk from a wide variety of uncontrollable costs. Therefore, staffs are challenged with an expectation of making money out of each and every action and activity. This expectation demands innovative, effective and resourceful personnel, who are not only good in technical competencies but also in generic competencies. According to graduate prospects in Raybould and Sheedy (2005), nearly two thirds of vacancies on offer are open to graduates from any discipline. This reflects the fact that employers are looking for vital soft skills in graduates which are obtained during study or periods of work experience rather than degree-specific knowledge. Recent statistics on graduate employment in Europe suggests that fewer Hospitality, Leisure, Sports and Tourism (HLST) students than previously thought (64.7% as opposed to 94.2%) are entering graduate-level employment (Kingston, 2003). A research report (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001) provides clear evidence that demand for Hospitality related courses is very strong and recommends that students be encouraged to develop realistic expectations of and recognise the opportunities for employment in the industry.

Statements from employers' organisations comment on the difficulty employers experience in recruiting 'work-ready' individuals. Therefore, it is relevant to consider whether graduates have the opportunity to develop these work related skills through education. Furthermore, education will only achieve its purpose when it produces graduates with competencies the industry demands. When there is a gap between the competencies required and possessed, the graduates become less attractive to the industry and vice versa. Most often curriculum developers are caught in between. They try to balance between educational requirements and industry needs. Standards of professionalism for occupations at all levels of the HT sector continue to rise dramatically. Keiser (1998) mentioned that as programmes in the HT industry seek greater legitimacy as a profession, it is necessary that educators be very specific to which constituents they serve. The author refers to HT industry and graduates as the constituents or stakeholders. However prospective students are more likely to compare graduate employability prospects. Viability of courses is based predominantly on student demand.

At this point, it is also crucial to know the extent to which graduates themselves feel prepared for work, although this area is not researched well. Therefore, there is a need for a study to create an awareness of the needs of the industry among students, help academic curricula to cater to the industry needs, demonstrate the level of competence of the graduates in different generic skill areas both from their own point of view and that of industrialists'. This paper aims to explore the employability competencies demanded in hospitality graduates, assess graduates' perceived gain of competencies through education, study practitioners' perception on the level of competencies graduates possess and identify any gaps that need to be addressed.

Literature Review

A number of studies have been done on the changing needs of the HT industry and competencies expected from graduates for employment purposes. This review of literature below comprises of the current demands of the industry, role of education, student expectation, industry perception, need for right competencies and employability skills. It concludes with an overview of the employability skills model, which was adopted as an underlying framework for the current research.

Current Demands of the Industry

Powell and Wood (1999) mention that economic growth; greater affluence and increased leisure time made the hospitality industry one of the fastest growing industries in the global economy. Hospitality businesses have become a most complex operation, with each local unit functioning as both a manufacturing and service delivery operation. As a result, the complexity of the role of a staff (supervisory or manager) is significantly intensified and diversified. They must be competent to handle issues ranging from food inventories, preparation, safety and presentation to equipment operation, maintenance and repair to customer reception, interaction and satisfaction. They also need to deliver a consistent brand experience to customers who are diverse in different ways in terms of region, gender, ethnicity, education and also generation. Besides the demands of the industry, the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006 to 2010 also directs the management of the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board to adopt the private sector business practices in order to become more dynamic. This leads to a dire need of qualified personnel with the right competencies. However, Dittman (1997) argues that finding qualified hospitality workers who demonstrate a combination of desire, personality, intelligence and technical proficiency makes the recruitment process tougher.

Role of Education

Whilst the role of education in contributing towards economic development and student employability may have been implicitly assumed for many years, it is only recently that this has become an explicit requirement for institutions. There is a need to ensure the academic curriculum not only meets educational expectations but also industry and student expectations regarding the skill sets needed at the workplace (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005). Barron and Maxwell (1993) stated that the more exposure a student has to the (hospitality) industry, the less commitment he or she demonstrates. Their statement was confirmed in a study done by Jenkins (2000) in United Kingdom. His study revealed that many hospitality students, through exposure to the subject and industry, become considerably less interested in selecting hospitality as their career of first choice. This may have serious repercussions, both for the educators and industry. John and McKechnie (1995) stated that only just over half of all hospitality graduates choose careers within the industry.

It is quite common to have a classical gap or conflict between the theory and practice that is normally found in almost any field of knowledge. However, as the higher education environment becomes increasingly competitive, prospective students are more likely to compare graduate employability prospects of different universities and courses. The viability of courses is being increasingly challenged with market viability based predominantly on student demand, which is often based on their perceptions of workplace requirements. Students enrolling in degree programmes in hotel or hospitality management are motivated by anticipated vocational and career outcomes (Purcell and Quinn, 1996; O'Mahony et al., 2001). However, the serious challenges involved in recruiting the best talent to the field are low pay and demand for low-skill, hard work and long sporadic hours (Jones and Pomona, 2005). For graduates, there is also increasing competition from other industries (Dermody and Holloway, 1998; Powell and Wood, 1999). According to the Learning and Teaching Support network in Raybould and Sheedy (2005), graduate numbers are expanding faster than the market for traditional graduate jobs. Research in graduate skills has focused on management expectations and has been criticised for adopting a one-sided perspective that ignores graduate perceptions (Christou, 2000). More importantly, students themselves are able to more clearly identify and articulate those skills they have developed that make them

more attractive to potential employers, and this may help them make the transition to work more easily (Knight and Yorke, 2004).

Need for Right Competencies

Employers generally require and anticipate graduates with transferable skills including strong written and oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, team work and problem solving skills (DEETYA, 1998; Williams and DeMicco, 1998). Employers have long argued that they are more interested in what students can 'do' rather than what they 'know' (Jackson, 2000). Many authors have highlighted the problems of recruiting suitable entry level managers. Recruitment of qualified entry level managers remains a problem for the hospitality industry (MacHattan et al., 1997; Dermody and Holloway, 1998; Powell and Wood, 1999). Front-line managers are numerically the largest category of managers, they have the most immediate impact on the productivity and quality output of the workforce and evidence would suggest the majority of them are not being prepared for the challenges of the Asia-Pacific century (Karpin, 1995).

Hospitality Training Foundation (HtF, 2000a) continues to report employer demands for improved generic skills as a priority. According to Baum (2002), skill shortages in hospitality are increasingly seen in terms of generic rather than specific technical competencies. A dominant issue in relation to educational provision to emerge in the last decade is the notion of student employability. Key or transferable skills, relevant professional skills and personal qualities, formerly seen as by-products of the educational process, are now regarded as a core part of studying for a degree. It is crucial that students are equipped with skills that enable them to maximise their potential for a successful career. As the number of graduates entering the workforce increases, so competition for jobs intensifies. The speed of industrial change and the fluctuations in the economic cycle mean that graduates are likely to move jobs more often and will seek work in different industrial sectors (Maher and Kevin, 2005). According to McNair (2003), successful graduates will need to have greater ownership of their employability skills and the confidence to cope with economic upheavals in order to identify and capitalise on career opportunities over a lifetime.

According to Quinn et al (1996), competency includes both the possession of knowledge and the behavioural capacity to act appropriately. To develop competencies one must both be introduced to knowledge and have the opportunity to practice the skills. As the industry becomes more professionalized and organised, competency building has become more important. Many HT researchers mention that 'soft' human relation skills including oral and written communication and interpersonal communication are essential for graduates and trainees to possess (Walo, 2001). From the literature, it is obvious that the skills or competencies hospitality industry demands from the graduates are not generally industry specific. They are very common skills learnt in most of the academic disciplines. This fact leads to a situation or job market in which hospitality graduates have to compete, not only among themselves, but also with the graduates from other disciplines. Therefore, it is crucial for the graduates to acquire the employability skills or key competencies for employment through the academic curriculum to be marketable in the industry. Most of the HT educational institutions provide careers service to support graduates in gaining employment. According to Harris (2001), such services in isolation may not address the more complex issue of enhancing employability. Employability is about much more than the acquisition of a first job and relates to a broader set of achievements that enhance students' capability to operate in a self-sufficient manner within the labour market (Hillage and Pollard, 1998).

Employability Skills

According to Maher and Neild (2005), employers have sometimes been critical about graduates and their preparedness for work. Leon (2002) surveyed new graduates and reported that the graduates agreed that they experienced difficulty with verbal communication, time management and task juggling. There seems to be a paradigm shift over time regarding the competencies requirement for HT staff. According to Walo (2000), early studies tended to concentrate on technical aspects of competence while later studies emphasised more soft skills such as communication, interpersonal and human relation competencies. The term 'employability skills' is used here to refer to 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the community and the economy' (Yorke and Knight, 2006). In general, employability skills are skills and personal attributes identified by employers as important for employment. The employability skills identified are relevant to both entry level as well as established staff. Employability skills have also been referred as 'generic skills' and 'key competencies'. Therefore, this paper considers both employability skills and competencies as one though they are defined differently by different authors.

According to Boyatzis (1982), managers in all industries need to apply different skills to different situations and effective managers will possess both generic and specific skills. The generic or employability skills model was developed in an educational context to aid curriculum design (Dunne, 1999). A competency or skill model is a list of competencies, often organised into a few groupings or clusters, attributable to satisfactory or exceptional employee performance for an occupation (e.g. managers, auditors, etc.) or group of titles. Despite all the efforts taken by academics and students in developing and improving competencies, many studies have highlighted the lack of employability competencies in HT graduates. Therefore, it was realised that there is a need for a greater understanding between education and its stakeholders regarding the skills or competencies requirement. This paper sets out to study the competencies possessed by graduates from the viewpoint of the industrialists and also through self assessment by the graduates themselves. Students were purposely chosen for this study instead of curriculum developers or academicians. This is because the self evaluation of their competencies would be a better measurement to evaluate the gap between education and employment. Empirical evidence depicting the gap between competencies acquired through education with that of employers' viewpoint on graduate-acquired competencies would be of worth to all the stakeholders involved.

Methodology

The objectives of the study were to assess the competencies possessed by graduates from the viewpoint of the industrialists, through the self assessment of the graduates and to identify the differences between the views. The aims of the study were investigated by surveying samples of both the population of graduates and also hospitality industrialists. For the purpose of this study, graduates were considered as anyone who is pursuing the final semester or term in a hospitality undergraduate programme or a recent graduate. This is to ensure that they remember the educational content. The sample of industrialists consisted of middle or upper level managers working in the hospitality industry and had subordinates with undergraduate qualification. The survey was also limited to the hospitality sector of the tourism industry.

Instrument Design

This study adopted one of the generic or employability skill models proposed by Australian Training Authority (2003) with nine generic skill groups. The instrument comprised of the following skill areas: oral communication (OC), written communication (WC), problem solving (PS), conceptual and analytical (CA), information management (IM), team work and leadership (TL), interpersonal skills (IS), adaptability and learning (AL) and self management (SM). There were 52 descriptions of competencies covering the skill areas mentioned above. These descriptors were developed by Raybould and Wilkins (2005) and checked by academicians and industry managers. Therefore, the validity of the survey instrument was assumed. Two versions of questionnaires were prepared for graduates and industrialists. Both versions were with the same skill descriptors with a five-point itemised ranking scale ranging from very poor (1) to excellent (5). The version for graduates requested for self evaluation of the competencies perceived to be learnt in their course of study. There are many arguments over self evaluation of the skills by students. However, Knight and Yorke (2004) suggest that students themselves are able to more clearly identify and articulate the skills they have developed that make them more attractive to potential employers and this may help them make the transition to work more easily. Therefore, self evaluation of skills or competencies is justified.

Sampling Administration

The instruments were self-administered to 125 graduates from both public and private institutions in a proportion of 2:3. The higher proportion of graduates from private institutions was chosen to represent the higher number of graduates from private colleges. The questionnaire meant for industrialists requested them to rate the average competency levels of their recent graduate subordinates. Here, non probability judgement sampling was employed. The respondents were chosen to fill in the questionnaire only if they had worked with fresh graduates. 50 questionnaires were self-administered to managers in the industry.

Findings

This section presents the demographic profiles of the respondents followed by their skills rating.

Demographic Profile

Responses received from 102 graduates (81.6% response rate) and 25 hospitality managers (50% response rate) were usable. Summary profiles of graduates and industry respondents are presented below in Table 1 and 2.

Table1: Demographic Profile of Graduates

Profile	Graduates			
Gender	Male	Female		
	37%	63%		
Age (years)	< 20	20 to < 25	25 to < 30	30 and over
	2%	84%	14%	0%
Institution	Private	Public		
	74%	26%		

Industrial Experience	Less than 6 months	6 months - 1 year	More than 1 year	
	25%	45%	30%	

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Managers

Profile	Managers				
	Gender	Male	Female		
48%		52%			
Age (years)	< 25	25 to < 30	30 to < 35	35 and over	
	16%	24%	36%	24%	
Academic Qualification	Diploma	Degree	Masters		
	36%	48%	16%		
Work Specialisation	Rooms Division	Food and Beverages	Cuisine	Sales and Marketing	Human Resources
	8%	48%	8%	32%	4%

A high proportion (63%) of the graduate respondents was females. Most of the respondents were between aged 20 to 25 years (84%), have 6 months to 1 year (45%) of industrial experience and 74% graduated from private institutions. However, there was a good spread of gender, age and academic qualifications in the case of managers. In terms of work experience, a higher percentage of them were in Food and Beverage (48%), followed by Sales and Marketing (32%). 44% of them also had a work experience of 10 years or more.

Skills or Competencies Rating

The responses to each of the 52 competency descriptions and also the nine generic skills were standardised for each respondent. This was mainly done to address a common concern in a number of studies that individuals with different life experiences and cultural backgrounds use scales in subtly different ways (Vasiopoulos et al, 2000). The standardised means were ranked both for graduates and managers. The differences or gaps between their rankings were evaluated. The probability (p) of the gap to be true was estimated with the help of an independent sample t-test (2 tailed) on students and industrialists' ratings. The level of significance considered was 0.05. However, the estimated p value does not guarantee that the other results were untrue. A comparison of graduates' and industry managers' responses to the 52 skill descriptions are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparison of graduates' and managers' competency ranking of skill descriptions (P-value of t-test with * represents significance of the result)

Table 3a: Skill descriptors for which both agreed on the high level of competency

Skill Descriptions	Standardised Mean (student)	Rank (Student) (S)	Standardised Mean (Manager)	Rank (Manager) (M)	Gap (S-M)	P-value of t-test
Conceptual and Analytical (CA)						
Plan an employee duty roster	0.26	13	0.23	15	-2	0.96
Information Management (IM)						
Use standard Ms-office applications (Ms-Word, Excel, PowerPoint, access etc.,)	0.84	1	0.53	1	0	0.27
Use electronic communication and	0.80	2	0.44	6	-4	0.23

Internet for data searching						
Demonstrate file management and data management skills	0.28	10	0.08	22	-12	0.61
Design and implement basic and primary research	0.40	5	0.45	4	1	0.43
Demonstrate information search skills	0.43	4	0.29	12	-8	0.92
Use tables, graphs and charts to communicate information	0.64	3	0.46	3	0	0.99
Interpersonal Skills (IS)						
Maintain professional and ethical standards in the work environment	0.28	12	0.52	2	10	0.15
Demonstrate empathy in dealing with customer and staff	0.16	17	0.12	20	-3	0.96
Demonstrate listening skills	0.34	7	0.14	19	-12	0.41
Give and receive feedback on performance	0.30	8	0.40	7	1	0.64
Demonstrate culture awareness in dealing with staff and guests	0.18	15	0.16	18	-3	0.89
Adaptability and Learning (AL)						
Apply knowledge in different context	0.11	22	0.38	8	14	0.31
Adapt creatively to change	0.08	23	0.35	10	13	0.28
Undertake 'off-the-job' learning experiences	0.18	16	0.27	14	2	0.47
Learn independently and as a member of a team	0.35	6	0.44	5	1	0.34
Self management (SM)						
Develop a personal career plan	0.21	14	0.31	11	3	0.53
Set personal objectives	0.28	11	0.20	16	-5	0.98
Work without a close supervision	0.29	9	0.29	13	-4	0.72
Demonstrate time management skills	0.13	20	0.38	9	11	0.25

Table 3b: Skill descriptors for which both agreed on the low level of competency

Skill Descriptions	Standardised Mean (student)	Rank (Student) (S)	Standardised Mean (Manager)	Rank (Manager) (M)	Gap (S-M)	P-value of t-test
Oral Communication (OC)						
Defend and argue a case convincingly	-0.14	37	-0.50	49	-12	0.27
Conduct staff briefing	-1.40	52	-0.27	40	12	0.00*

Conduct and/or facilitate interview	-0.25	42	-0.53	52	-10	0.30
Make a business presentation to internal and external stake holders	-0.34	46	-0.28	41	5	0.95
Written Communication (WC)						
Interpret or summarise a business or industry report	-0.16	39	-0.36	46	-7	0.56
Write effective business letters, memos, e-mails etc.,	-0.06	28	-0.23	39	-11	0.90
Write a Standard Operating Procedure	-0.16	38	-0.22	37	1	0.91
Write a simple business report	-0.11	33	-0.15	33	0	0.49
Problem Solving (PS)						
Systematically trace and identify operational problems	-0.07	30	-0.06	30	0	0.97
Operate effectively and calmly in crisis situation	-0.13	35	-0.22	38	-3	0.64
Conceptual and Analytical (CA)						
Develop business unit goals that are congruent with the organisational goal	-0.22	41	-0.42	48	-7	0.43
Understand and interpret legislation relevant to the business	-0.34	47	-0.38	47	0	0.71
Plan a business project including scheduling and recourse allocation	-0.31	45	-0.01	26	19	0.33
Prepare an operational budget for a business unit	-0.64	51	-0.52	51	0	0.75
Understand and interpret business performance measures and operating reports	-0.45	49	-0.34	45	4	0.52
Understand and interpret business or economic forecast data	-0.54	50	-0.33	44	6	0.39
Teamwork and Leadership (TL)						
Provide one-to-one staff counselling	-0.06	27	-0.29	43	-16	0.33
Provide one-to-one staff coaching	-0.11	34	-0.52	50	-16	0.17
Ensure compliance with health and safety, hygiene, licensing and other regulations	-0.03	26	-0.04	29	-3	1.00
Delegate responsibility	-0.07	29	-0.14	32	-3	0.44

and authority						
Handle employee grievances and manage employee problems	-0.13	36	-0.28	42	-6	0.59
Provide effective small group training	-0.20	40	-0.01	27	13	0.36

Table 3c: Skill descriptors for which graduates' rated towards low level of competency while managers' rated towards high level

Skill Descriptions	Standardised Mean (student)	Rank (Student) (S)	Standardised Mean (Manager)	Rank (Manager) (M)	Gap (S-M)	P-value of t-test
Problem Solving (PS)						
Implement internal control systems in response to an identified problem	-0.28	44	0.06	23	21	0.20
Conceptual and Analytical (CA)						
Identify facts relevant to a particular issue or problem	-0.08	31	0.01	24	7	0.76
Conduct a simple strategic analysis for a business unit	-0.42	48	0.10	21	27	0.01*
Understand and interpret simple cost benefit analysis	-0.27	43	0.18	17	26	0.06
Teamwork and Leadership (TL)						
Manage meetings to ensure productivity	-0.11	32	0.00	25	7	0.77

Table 3d: Skill descriptors for which graduates' rated towards high level of competency while managers' rated towards low level

Skill Descriptions	Standardised Mean (student)	Rank (Student) (S)	Standardised Mean (Manager)	Rank (Manager) (M)	Gap (S-M)	P-value of t-test
Oral Communication (OC)						
Communicate effectively and professionally	0.14	19	-0.04	28	-9	0.58
Problem Solving (PS)						
Anticipate client need	0.06	25	-0.18	35	-10	0.67
Deal effectively with customers' problems	0.06	24	-0.19	36	-12	0.31
Teamwork and Leadership (TL)						
Communicate appropriately with other members of a work group	0.14	18	-0.17	34	-16	0.45
Motivate and encourage employees	0.11	21	-0.11	31	-10	0.43

The positive standardised mean values in the tables represent the relative level of high competence of the skill while the negative values represent the relative level of low competency. The descriptors with both positive standardised means represent that both of them agree that the graduates are competent in those items, while negative values for both represent that both agree that the graduates are less competent in those skills. There are a few descriptors in which graduates see themselves as being less competent whereas the managers see the said graduates as competent. Graduates and managers contradict in their rating of competency levels for certain competencies. The skills involved are ‘implement internal control systems in response to an identified problem’ (PS), ‘identify facts relevant to a particular issue’ (CA), ‘conduct a simple strategic analysis for a business unit’ (CA) and ‘understand and interpret simple cost benefit analysis’ (CA). ‘Communicate effectively and professionally’ (OC), ‘anticipate client needs’(PS), ‘deal effectively with customer’s problems’(PS), ‘communicate appropriately with other members of a work group’(TL) and ‘motivate and encourage employees’(TL) are some of the skill descriptors that managers rated as less competent while the graduates rated themselves as competent.

The absolute size of the gap is an indicator of the level of agreement between the two samples involved. Positive gap value indicates that the particular skill was ranked very high in terms of competence by the managers than the students while the negative values represent the reverse. A negative value for the gap is a crucial indicator because it notifies the fact that the managers ranked the skill descriptions lower than the graduates. This is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Ranking of the negative gap between managers and graduates

Skill Descriptions	Rank (Student) (S)	Rank (Manager) (M)	Gap (S-M)	Ranking based on the width of the gap
Provide one-to-one staff coaching (TL)	34	50	-16	1
Provide one-to-one staff counselling (TL)	27	43	-16	1
Communicate appropriately with other members of a work group (TL)	18	34	-16	1
Defend and argue a case convincingly (OC)	37	49	-12	4
Deal effectively with customers’ problems (PS)	24	36	-12	4
Demonstrate file management and data management skills (IM)	10	22	-12	4
Demonstrate listening skills (IS)	7	19	-12	4
Write effective business letters, memos, e-mails etc., (WC)	28	39	-11	8
Conduct and/or facilitate interview (OC)	42	52	-10	9
Anticipate client need (PS)	25	35	-10	9
Motivate and encourage employees (TL)	21	31	-10	9
Communicate effectively and professionally (OC)	19	28	-9	12
Demonstrate information search skills (IM)	4	12	-8	13

Develop business unit goals that are congruent with the organisational goal (CA)	41	48	-7	14
Interpret or summarise a business or industry report (WC)	39	46	-7	14
Handle employee grievances and manage employee problems (TL)	36	42	-6	16
Set personal objectives (SM)	11	16	-5	17
Work without a close supervision (SM)	9	13	-4	18
Use electronic communication and Internet for data searching (IM)	2	6	-4	18
Operate effectively and calmly in crisis situation (PS)	35	38	-3	20
Delegate responsibility and authority (TL)	29	32	-3	20
Ensure compliance with health and safety, hygiene, licensing and other regulations (TL)	26	29	-3	20
Demonstrate empathy in dealing with customer and staff (IS)	17	20	-3	20
Demonstrate culture awareness in dealing with staff and guests (IS)	15	18	-3	20
Plan an employee duty roster (CA)	13	15	-2	25

Mostly all the clusters except the ‘adaptability and learning’ (AL) cluster have negative gap values. The skill descriptors with negative gap values are three in OC, two in WC, three in PS, two in CA, three in IM, seven in TL, three in IS and two in SM. Altogether there were 25 skill descriptors that were ranked much lower by managers than graduates when rating the competency levels of the graduates. The skill descriptors were also arranged based on the size of the gap in descending order in Table 4. When the generic skill clusters are considered (Table 5), both the samples agreed on the poor level of competence in OC, WC, PS, CA and TL. The clusters IM, IS, AL and SM were noted for their high level of competence. When the gap in their rating is considered, competency clusters TL, IM and IS were ranked lower by the managers compared to that by students.

Table 5: Comparison of graduates’ and managers’ competency ranking of generic skills

Generic Skill	Standardised Mean (student)	Rank (Student) (S)	Standardised Mean (Manager)	Rank (Manager) (M)	Gap (S-M)
Oral Communication	-0.63	9	-0.56	9	0
Written Communication	-0.22	7	-0.33	7	0
Problem Solving	-0.10	6	-0.16	5	1
Conceptual and Analytical	-0.48	8	-0.19	6	2
Information Management	0.76	1	0.41	3	-2
Teamwork and	-0.08	5	-0.34	8	-3

Leadership					
Interpersonal Skills	0.28	2	0.31	4	-2
Adaptability and Learning	0.20	4	0.42	2	2
Self Management	0.28	3	0.43	1	2

Discussion

The findings show that 3 skill clusters out of 9 and 25 skill descriptors out of 52 were ranked lower by managers than that by the graduates. The sample considered the possession of good competence in Information Management, Interpersonal Skills, Adaptability and Learning and Self Management. The competence level in Oral Communication, Written Communication, Problem Solving, Conceptual and Analytical, and Teamwork and Leadership is lower. However, there is a gap in the perceived level of competence by the students and what they actually possess. Problem Solving, Conceptual and Analytical, Adaptability and Learning and Self Management are the areas where managers' ratings were better than what graduates perceive to have themselves. Information Management, Teamwork and Leadership and Interpersonal Skills were the areas where students perceived a higher level of competence compared to what they possessed. These findings are good indicators of the gap between education and employability stakes. Eventhough graduates learn all the generic skills through academic curriculum, educational curriculum emphasise on some skill descriptions more than others within particular generic competency clusters. The fact is that the educational curriculum does concentrate on all the generic skill areas concerned. However, the gap in the perceived level of competence in the skill descriptors within the generic competency clusters between graduates and employers might contribute towards lowering the employability chances of the graduates.

If HT industries and educational institutions hope to grow, strengthen and maintain a high profile in the international arena, graduates' demand, both in the industry and academic programmes, should be met to make the industry and education a preferred one. Jobs should meet the expectations of graduates by being sufficiently challenging and offering appropriate exposure to the management of the organization, people and processes. The academic curriculum needs to be dynamic with the development of industry and market needs. All these are possible only with the active involvement of industry in curriculum development. Curriculum development for hospitality will be successful if the industry specifies the level of competence demanded for each skill descriptors for different levels or courses. These competencies and the level of competence required for each skill descriptor should be made known to the graduates. By doing this, educational curriculum and the industry would meet the students' expectations in terms of preparing them to be employable within the industry.

An educational institution's success lies in producing employable graduates, a process which is complex and crucial. Graduates need to be consistently trained through formal courses or trainings to improve their employable skills such as Interpersonal Skills and Teamwork and Leadership. Networking sessions between professionals from the industry, graduates and academics in the form of seminars, workshops, career talks, forums and guest lectures would enhance the mutual understanding among the three stakeholders and match the expectations. Industrial trainings and internships should be a necessary part of the curriculum for HT courses. At the same time, graduates also need to be willing to develop the personal and professional skills relevant for the working world to improve their chances of employment and success. By enhancing the employability of the graduates, hospitality education would increase the value of graduates' contribution to national economic growth and also help to ensure the viability of the courses.

Conclusion

There is a demand for hospitality staff in Malaysia especially for front line managerial positions. Since, hospitality graduate studies are gaining popularity in Malaysia; there are a considerable number of graduates out in the job market. However, the industry quite often comments on their work readiness or employability. This paper explored the employability competencies demanded from hospitality graduates, assessed the graduates perceived level of competence in 52 crucial skill descriptions through education and studied practitioners' perception on the level of competence graduate possess in the same descriptors. The gap analysis of the study revealed a gap in 25 skill descriptors out of 52 and 3 out of 9 generic skill areas where the managers rated the level of competence lower than the graduates while the educational curriculum covers all the generic skills the industry demands. The gap in the perceived level of competence in the skill descriptors within the generic competency clusters between graduates and employers might contribute to lower the employability chances of the graduates.

Active involvement of industry in curriculum development, specified level of competence demanded for each skill descriptors for different levels or courses, getting the graduates know about the industry requirement of the level of competence might minimise the gap. The findings of the paper have implications for curriculum developers, graduates and also the industrialists. Curriculum developers could make use of the findings to understand the gap between competencies perceived to have learnt through education and the actual competency levels, make efforts to bridge them and ensure the viability of the programmes in addressing the needs of both the industry and the students. It would also be an eye opener for graduates to realise what is expected from them and what they possess. It would help industry practitioners to realise the need for their involvement in curriculum planning.

Most of the previous studies emphasised on comparison between expectations and perceptions regarding the competencies and many of these studies were carried out in United States of America, United Kingdom and a few in Australia. However, this study was carried out in Malaysia where graduate studies in HT are gaining popularity. It also rated and compared the competency levels of the graduates through their self evaluation and from the industry point of view. However, this study was limited by the poor response rate from the industry. The findings of the study cannot be generalised because it was carried out with students and practitioners located only in Malaysia. The study also did not evaluate the level of the relevance of the skill descriptors rated low by the industrialists. Further study can be carried out in different countries to assess the gap and also to evaluate the level of relevance of the descriptors for entry level managers in the hospitality industry.

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