
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hospitality Management Competency: Framework to Match Expectations of Academia and Industry in Ghana

Commey Vida¹ ✉ Sarkodie Amoako Noble² and Koko Desere³

¹Senior Lecturer, Department of Hotel Catering and Institutional Management, Kumasi Technical University, Kumasi-Ghana

²Senior Lecturer, Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Sunyani Technical University, Sunyani- Ghana

³Professor, Department of Business Management, Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein- South Africa

Corresponding Author: Commey Vida, **E-mail:** vicom3000@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study was to propose a framework to match the competencies of hospitality graduates with the expectations of hospitality industries in Ghana. The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Overall, 12 educators (five heads of departments and seven lecturers) were purposely selected from five (5) Technical Universities through a forum via Zoom to discuss the outcomes of the study in proposing the framework. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The study results revealed that most of the educators, 10 (83.3%), were females and had worked for more than ten (10) years in the hospitality academic setting. The study revealed that there exists a gap between hospitality educators and the hospitality industry in Ghana. The study revealed that broader stakeholder consultation, student-related measures such as student orientation and specialization, technical/practical education, and lecturer-related measures such as encouraging lecturers to research and gain industry experience included measures to bridge the gap between hospitality academia and industry. Based on the findings and review of related literature, the study suggests a framework that can be implemented by hospitality educators in Ghana to match the competencies of hospitality graduates with those required by the hospitality industry.

| KEYWORDS

Academia; hospitality industry; hospitality educators; hospitality management; competency framework; Ghana

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is one of the largest and fastest growing industries that provide employment and tax revenue and makes a substantial contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of many countries (Lashley, 2016). In Africa, the tourism and hospitality industry continued to record impressive growth before the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2017, the African continent hit a 63 million high in international tourist arrivals as compared to 58 million in 2016, which represents a 9% increase (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2019). This, in general, represents an improvement above the global performance of a 7% rise in 2017, resulting in 1,323 million international tourist arrivals in Africa (WTTC, 2019). Nevertheless, over the past two decades, the size of Sub-Saharan Africa's market of the export share of receipts (defined as spending by international incoming travellers, including payments to national carriers for international transport) from tourism has remained relatively stagnant (Signé 2018). Travel and tourism have contributed a total of 8.1% to Africa's GDP (USD177.6 bn) in 2017. This percentage was expected to rise by 3.7% (to reach 12%) in 2018. In 2019, the tourism sector experienced a 3.5% growth (WTTC, 2019).

In Ghana, the direct contribution of tourism to GDP in 2016 was USD 2.7 billion, representing 3% of the total GDP. This figure was predicted to rise to 5.6% in 2017 (WTTC, 2019). The hospitality industry also created approximately 288,000 direct jobs in 2016.

The figure was predicted to see an appreciation of 4.7% in 2017 (WTTC, 2019). These statistics indicate the essence of the tourism industry to Ghana's socio-economic development and livelihood empowerment. This is confirmed in WTTC's (2018) report that the tourism and hospitality industry is one of the major contributors to economic growth and sustainability in Ghana. As a major contributor, the hospitality industry fulfills a major function in catering for the needs and wants of tourists.

Unlike in the past, when people had the notion that for one to work in the hospitality industry, there was no need to acquire educational and professional qualifications, over the years, much emphasis has been placed on the altitude of professional experience (skill sets) and/or qualification an employee has to offer. The notion of success in the hospitality industry is influenced by three (3) key areas of debate identified by Baum (2019): foremost, the nature of work in the hospitality industry requires a complex skill set despite the traditional view of it being low skilled; secondly, these complex skills are becoming increasingly less technically focused; and finally, the development of these skills involves sound educational engagement and cannot just be achieved through teaching and learning. Bharwani and Jauhari (2017) further argued that working in the hospitality industry requires a combination of unique skills and attitudes because the nature of work and skills in hospitality is evolving, as is the way in which hospitality is defined and studied. Similarly, the tastes and preferences of guests and tourists keep changing, and their needs and wants are becoming increasingly complex, which means that employees within the industry need to be continuously equipped with suitable competencies (International Air Transport Association [IATA], 2020). The low quality of human resources has been identified as one of the factors responsible for the non-attainment of high professional standards by the hospitality and tourism industry in the country (Anthony et al., 2019).

Further, Park and Min's (2020) study found that the tourism and hospitality industry is fraught with inadequately trained staff that often lack practical skills. This leaves a vacuum between labour supply and the competency requirement of the industry. This situation suggests that tourism and hospitality training institutions in Ghana should produce qualified human resources to meet the hospitality industry's demands for skilled labour (WTTC, 2019). In this view, the government's policy on tertiary education should be designed to facilitate access and foster the development of human resources with the aim of accelerating national development (Ministry of Education, 2013). The overall strategic goal for tertiary education is to increase equitable access to high-quality tertiary education, which provides relevant courses to young adults within colleges of education, polytechnics and universities, and for research and intellectual stimulus (Ministry of Education, 2015b). As a result, the Technical Universities Act 2016 (Act 922) was enacted to convert Polytechnics to Technical Universities to facilitate higher education in science and technology-based disciplines, engineering, technical and vocational education and training, applied arts and other related disciplines. Following this Act 922, the various Polytechnics in the country were given approval to be transformed into Technical Universities (Technical Universities Amendment Bill, 2017).

According to the World Development Index (2023), Ghana's gross tertiary education enrolment rate was 17.2% in 2019/2020 and slightly increased to 18.6% in the 2020/2021 academic year. In the 2019/2020 academic year, Public Universities, including Technical Universities, had a significantly higher enrollment than private universities, with 79.5% of students (315,380) attending Public Universities and only 20.5% (64,870) attending Private Universities. For Public Universities, recent information indicates 244,079 enrollments in 2018, increased to 264,994 in 2019; and to 295,335 in 2020 (Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, 2020). Despite the growth in enrollment, little is being done to equip the vast number of graduates with the relevant skills that will prepare them for the job market. In other words, these graduates lack the employable skills required by industry, which is compounding the issue of joblessness among graduates (Alexander et al., 2018). Priority policy interventions to ease the problem include the development of human resources through hospitality education with the skills that the industry needs (Ministry of Education, 2015a). According to the Ministry of Education (2015a), students need relevant education and skills that will enable them to acquire the specific skills needed by the hospitality industry. However, several studies in Ghana (Anthony, Mensah, & Amisshah, 2021; Sadik, Alhassan, Belinda & Abu-Ja-jah, 2021; Commey et al., 2021; Akonga, 2020; Sarkodie, 2018; Sarkodie & Adom, 2015) claim that the syllabus used to train these graduates is outdated and irrelevant regarding contemporary hospitality industry requirements. For instance, while Sarkodie and Adom (2015) demonstrated that there is a gap between hospitality education and the industry in Ghana, Sadik et al. (2021) found that hospitality and tourism educators perceive a gap between the graduates' skills and the expectations of the industry.

Therefore, for tertiary institutions to effectively achieve the goal of equipping people with skills for careers in the hospitality industry, there is the need for well designed and implemented framework (Anthony, 2015) and competency-based curriculum as a means of improving the quality and relevance of hospitality programs (Acakpovi & Nutassey, 2015). Mxunyelwa and Vallabh (2017) stated that such a framework is expected to achieve a balance between 'thinking and acting' (cognitive and psychomotor skills). Hospitality management competencies (HMC) required of graduates by lodging managers are not only critical to the future success of these employees but the overall operation of the business itself (Roberts, Andreassen, O'Donnell, O'Neill & Neill, 2018; Wakelin-Theron, Ukpere, & Spowart, 2019). There is thus the need to ascertain from stakeholders, including employers from the industry and educators from academia, the measures to ensure that the university curriculum addresses the gap between them. It

is also imperative that student opinions are considered to ensure that they remain integral in the hospitality industry. The investigation against this backdrop sought to propose a framework to match the competencies of hospitality graduates with the expectations from industries.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Bridging the competency gaps between hospitality academia and the hospitality industry in Ghana

The reform of the Ghanaian education system suggests a complete redesign and delivery of the curriculum in polytechnics and universities in general in order to bridge the gaps in learning, skills and competencies (Acakpovi & Nutassey, 2015). This is because some of the current curricula are regarded as outdated and unresponsive to the needs of trainees and the demands of industry and the labour market. For instance, Acakpovi and Nutassey (2015) found that the adoption of competency-based education (CBE), which focused on practical education, was challenging due to a limited understanding of the concept by both lecturers and students. In addition, some lecturers were resistant to the idea of CBE, preferring the traditional lecture-based approach. However, those who embraced CBE found it to be a more effective way of imparting practical skills to students, leading to better performance and employability. Based on this, the authors suggest that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions in Ghana require a curriculum that is tailored to the specific needs of the industry. This means that the curriculum should be developed in close collaboration with industry stakeholders to ensure that it is relevant and up-to-date.

The disparity between institutional training and the needs of industry has implications for graduate employability (Acakpovi & Nutassey, 2015; Ezeuduji, Chibe, & Nyathela, 2017) since graduates are underprepared for the world of work. The skills gap, as reported in the literature on hospitality education, includes leadership and managerial competencies, which are important for senior-level managers, relationship management, and change management in hospitality (Shum, Gatling, & Shoemaker, 2018; Alexakis & Jiang, 2019). A lack of teamwork, the right qualification for specific jobs, locations, and perceptions of the industry are issues found among new graduate recruits (Majid, Eapen, Aung, & Oo, 2019). Castañeda, Rodríguez-Molina, Frías-Jamilena, and García-Retamero (2020) found a shortage of numeracy skills, as did Mason (2020). From the experience of the researchers as educators in hospitality management in Ghana, the emerging trend in the hospitality industry will not benefit graduates unless the curriculum is redeveloped to include the required skills and competencies. Hospitality graduates in Ghana have very little access to practical Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, and the few who do, use outdated software (Sadik, Alhassan, Belinda & Abu-Ja-jah, 2017). Recommendations from the current and related studies will contribute towards rectifying this situation.

2.2 Review of competency frameworks

A competency framework can be described as a set of knowledge, skills and attributes required to effectively perform job roles and other duties in an organisation (Harvey, 2018; Sanghi, 2017; Banfield, Kay, & Royles, 2018). Frameworks and models about competencies usually contain a list of skills and behavioural indicators that propel the competency framework into fruition within the context of organisations (Sanghi, 2017). A competency framework must exhibit robustness, dynamism, fluidity, and flexibility in order to move with technological, social, and economic changes, together with the ability to re-evaluate and refine the framework (Wong, 2020; Harvey, 2018; Sanghi, 2017). Studies on the competencies required from hospitality graduates have been presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Review of frameworks of hospitality competencies

Authors	Title of article / Journal	Method	Respondents	Key competencies from the framework
Chung-Herrera, B.G., Enz, C.A., and Lankau, M.J. (2003)	Grooming future hospitality leaders: A competencies model. <i>Cornell Hotel And Restaurant Administration Quarterly</i> , Vol. 44 (3), 17-25.	Survey	Industry leaders	To create successful leaders in the hospitality industry, 99 competencies grouped into eight categories were listed: self-management, strategic positioning, implementation, critical thinking, communication, interpersonal, leadership, and industry knowledge.
Lowry, L.L. and Flohr, J.K. (2005)	No student left behind: A longitudinal assessment of the competency-based framework used to facilitate learning in a capstone tourism course. <i>Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education</i> , Vol. 17 (4), 28-35.	Survey	Tourism students	In order to produce competent graduates to meet industry expectations, tourism education must focus on creating a balance between sector-specific knowledge and general management skills.

Wang, J., Ayres, H., and Huyton, J. (2010)	Is tourism education meeting the needs of the tourism industry? An Australian case study <i>Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education</i> , Vol. 22 (1), 8-14.	Web-based question-naire surveys	Tourism educators and industry professionals	Findings showed that differences exist in skills preferences. Tourism education emphasizes competencies in marketing, research, tourism management and employability, whereas industry experts prioritize skills in marketing, accounting, finance and economics, employment, and business management. Hence, the framework calls for an industry-education cooperation curriculum framework to help bridge the gap.
Felisitas, C., Molline, M., and Clotildah, K. (2012)	The hospitality and tourism honours degree programme: Stakeholders' perceptions of competencies developed. <i>Journal of Hospitality Management And Tourism</i> , Vol. 3 (1), 12-22.	Survey	Hospitality and tourism industry stakeholders	The main competencies listed in the dual conceptual competency framework to fill gaps between hospitality education and industry are: professional knowledge, operational skills, critical thinking, communication skills, ICT, human resources management, and business and entrepreneurial acumen.
Najar, A.H. and Bukhari, S.A. M. (2017)	Gap analysis in hospitality education and industrial requirements. <i>International Journal of Engineering and Management Research</i> , Vol. (4), 170-173.	Review of previous works	Not applicable	Findings revealed variance in skill set ratings. Hospitality education focuses on language skills, presentation skills and computer competencies, while hospitality practitioners emphasize operational skills, management skills and human relation skills. The framework highlights a close link between educators and industry, as well as the improvement of institutional infrastructure and organizing field trips to expose students to industry needs and trends.
Adeyinka-Ojo, S. (2018)	A strategic framework for analyzing employability skills deficits in rural hospitality and tourism destinations. <i>Tourism Management Perspectives</i> , Vol. 27, 47-54.	Critical review of literature	Not applicable	The developed framework looked at competencies and skills deficits to thereby enhance job-securing opportunities in rural hospitality and tourism. Hospitality graduates require employability skills (hard and soft skills) and personal values (attributes and qualities).
Alexakis, G. and Jiang, L. (2019)	Industry competencies and the optimal hospitality management curriculum: An empirical study. <i>Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education</i> , Vol. 31 (4), 1-11.	Survey	Hospitality managers	Industry managers categorized key competencies as critical/reflective, professional/technical, communication/relational, and plasticity/erudition. In relation to these broad skills, competencies in communication and quality assurance are necessary.
Commey, V., Koko, D., & Hattingh, J. (2020)	Innovative human resources management: key competencies expected from hospitality graduates in Ghana.	Survey	Hotel managers	According to industry managers, important competencies for hospitality graduates include strong interpersonal abilities, innovativeness, maintenance of professional standards, customer oriented, critical thinking, self-motivation, friendly and approachable, and excellent communication skills.

Source: Author's construct (2021)

2.3 Conceptual framework

In the quest to supply the hospitality industry with suitably trained graduates, tertiary institutions need to ensure that their curricula address the concerns of the industry (Starkey *et al.*, 2004). In achieving this in the Ghanaian context, this study suggested a framework (Refer to Figure 1) to help bridge the competency gaps. The components of the framework are discussed below:

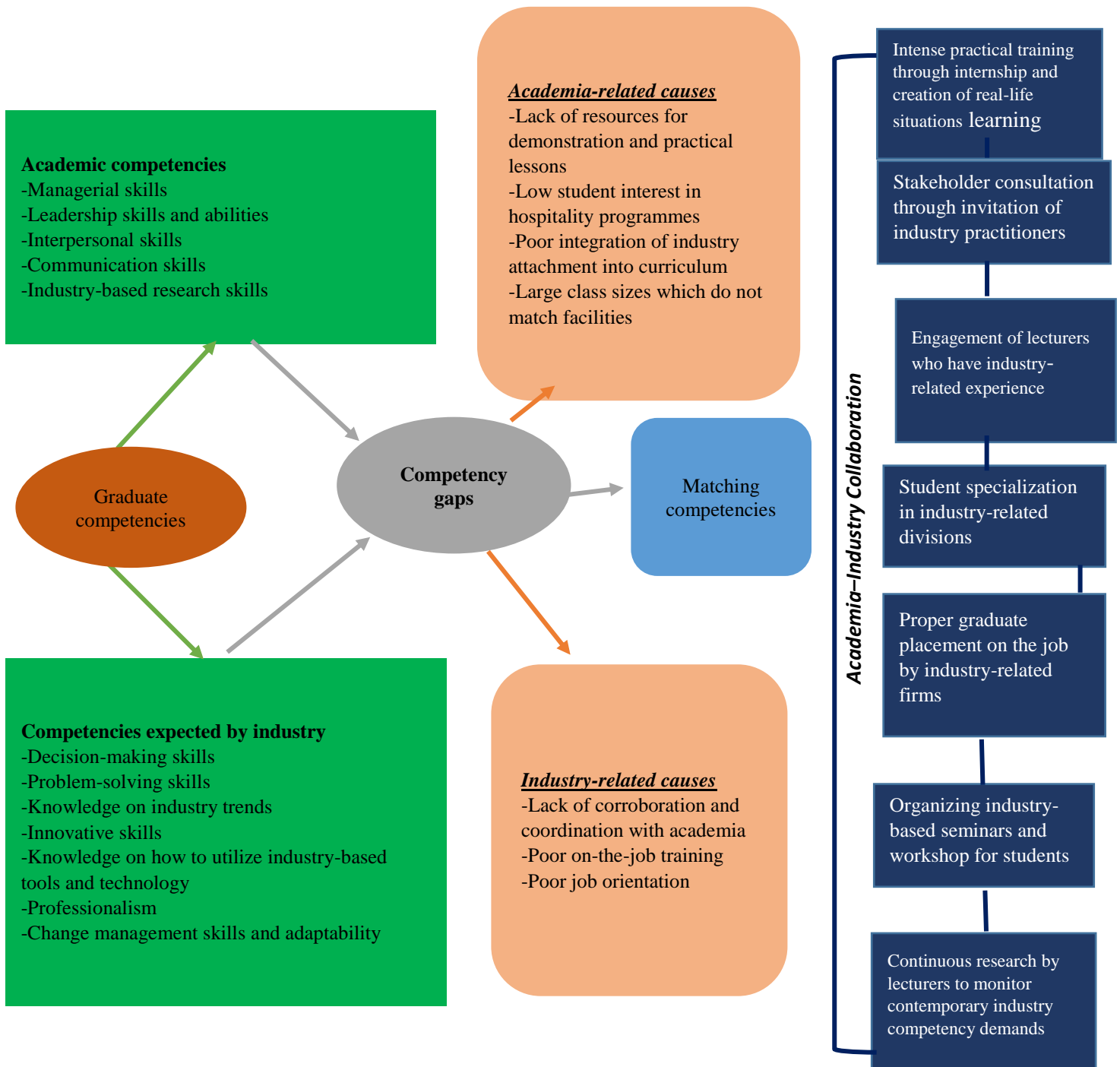


Figure 1: Framework to match hospitality graduates' competencies to hospitality industry expectations

Source: Author's construct (2021)

Industry expectations: These are the competencies that the hospitality industry expects graduates to possess in order to succeed in the hospitality industry.

Competencies of hospitality graduates: These are the competencies that are actually possessed or exhibited by hospitality graduates. These competencies are basically acquired through hospitality education.

Bridging the competency gap: This refers to recommended competencies and measures that will serve as a means to help bridge the identified competency gap. These measures are discussed below.

Stakeholder consultation highlights the collaboration between key players from academia and industry in developing student competencies. This includes engaging the industry via guest lectures, curriculum building and workshops/seminars, among other things. As revealed in the study, the expected and actual competencies uncovered a lack of synergy between proactivity and creativity among hospitality graduates and the industry. Therefore, hospitality lecturers and the industry, as confirmed by Srisangkaew (2018), should cooperate to provide avenues for students through practical sessions and internship opportunities to promote proactive and creative attributes.

Student-related measures: These include aspects such as having self-orientation and a sense of professionalism, being ethically responsible, taking initiative, being decisive, being a team player, having interactive/collaborative skills, and displaying leadership and communication skills. These qualities are critical for professional development in the industry. However, according to Lindsey and Rice (2015) and Bedwell, Fiore and Salas (2014), there is a growing awareness of the skills gap, indicating that graduates in the industry lack the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills needed for success in today's marketplace. In view of this, it is proposed that hospitality abilities and attributes be harnessed among hospitality graduates to further enhance fruitful hospitality encounters.

Technical education: This refers to the aspects required to develop the competency needs of graduates in order for them to perform effectively specific job roles within the industry. Thus, technical education, including digital skills, revenue management and event planning, should feature prominently in the competency training process of hospitality graduates for future success in the industry.

Lecturer-related measures: This aspect emphasizes the encouragement of lecturers to gain industrial experience and research. According to Meerah *et al.* (2011: 632), research abilities/skills require "imaginative and innovative thinking to find new ways to approach a problem, analytical skills to examine the consequences of a particular solution, and reasoning skills to weigh one solution against another". The study, therefore, advocates for lecturers to gain adequate industry experience and research abilities to help impart new knowledge to students in order to keep them up to date with current trends in the industry.

Framework for hospitality competency development: In the end, it is expected that the suggested framework is likely to yield the required results, which, in turn, would help improve the competencies of hospitality graduates to meet industry expectations. Thus, the eventual demonstration of these competencies will enhance the employability of hospitality graduates, as well as help them build successful careers in the hospitality industry. The proposed recommendations can effectively be realized through operational collaboration between academia and industry in order to achieve desired results.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study since it enables the researchers to acknowledge participants' subjective views in their particular social and institutional context. Also, the study employed a case study design. According to Schoch (2020), the case study design is appropriate because it enhances extensive study and drawing of clearer conclusions about the interests of the study from its particular social and institutional context. To effectively ascertain the subjective opinions of respondents, data were gathered from hospitality educators and heads of departments of five Technical Universities purposely sampled for the study (namely, Accra Technical University, Cape Coast Technical University, Kumasi Technical University, Takoradi Technical University and Tamale Technical University). Moreover, the selection of these Technical Universities can be justified based on the need to gather data from a diverse range of respondents and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of hospitality educators and heads of departments in different regions of Ghana. Adding to this, the study assumed that sampled institutions have similar syllabus, courses, programmes and similar characteristics of students. Liaising with hospitality departments of sampled Technical Universities, the accessible population consisted of 40 hospitality educators. This involved a total of 8 hospitality educators from Accra Technical University, 7 from Cape Coast Technical University, 8 from Kumasi Technical University, 10 from Takoradi Technical University, and 7 from Tamale Technical University.

According to Islam and Aldaihani (2022), sampling in qualitative research involves gaining in-depth knowledge about a phenomenon as seen through the eyes of individuals. It is based on the assumption that sampled individuals are typical of the group and will, therefore, provide insight into the group’s perspective on the phenomenon. In view of this, 12 educators (five heads of departments and seven lecturers) from the five Technical Universities in Ghana were purposively and conveniently invited to a forum to discuss the outcomes of the study in proposing the framework. Respondents (hospitality educators) participated in Zoom interviews in groups of two and three to allow for interactive discussion between participants (thus focus groups). All the focus group discussions via Zoom were recorded to enable the researchers to listen to the deliberations again. Detailed notes were also taken during focus group interviews. The information gathered was thematically analysed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic background of hospitality educators

The study investigated the demographic background of hospitality educators sampled. The outcome is presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Demographic background of hospitality educators

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	2	16.7
	Female	10	83.3
	Total	12	100.0
Institutional background	Accra Technical University	2	16.7
	Cape Coast Technical University	2	16.7
	Kumasi Technical University	2	16.7
	Takoradi Technical University	4	33.3
	Tamale Technical University	2	16.7
	Total	12	100.0
Lecturer’s position	Head of department	5	41.7
	Lecturers	7	58.3
	Total	12	100.0
Work experience	1 to 10 years	5	41.7
	More than 10 years	7	58.3
	Total	12	100.0

Source (Field Data, 2021)

From Table 2, most of the lecturers, 10 (83.3%), were females, while 2 (16.7%) of the lecturers were males. Again, 4 (33.3%) were educators from Takoradi Technical University. Subsequently, the study included 2 (16.7%) educators from each of the following Technical Universities: Accra Technical University, Kumasi Technical University, Cape Coast Technical University and Tamale Technical University. This dispersion could be attributed to the purposive sampling procedure adopted for the investigation. Moreover, the study revealed that 5 (41.7%) heads of departments and 7 (58.3%) lecturers were sampled as study participants from five selected Universities. Findings from the study further indicate that the majority of the participants, 7 (58.3%), have worked for more than ten (10) years, while 5 (41.7%) educators had almost ten (10) year experience.

4.2 Bridging the gaps between Hospitality academia/providers and the Hospitality industry

This section considered measures to bridge the gaps that exist between the hospitality academia and the hospitality industry. Specifically, participants were asked: **How can the gaps between industry and academia be bridged?** The themes related to this investigation are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Bridging the gaps between the hospitality academia and hospitality industry

Main Theme	Sub-Theme
Stakeholder consultation	a. Invitation of industry experts to partake in hospitality education
	b. Invitation of industry experts to partake in curriculum building
	c. Workshop/seminars
Student-related measures	a. Student Orientation
	b. Specialization
Technical/Practical education	a. School training centres (hotels and guesthouses)
	b. Industry setting in academia
	c. Weekly industry practice
	d. Extension/longer periods of industry attachment

	e. Effective supervision during industry attachment
Lecturers-related measures	a. Lecturers must be encouraged to research
	b. Lecturers must be encouraged to have industry experience

Source (Field Data, 2021)

4.3 Stakeholder consultation

In finding measures to bridge the gap, 7 out of the 12 respondents pronounced relating to stakeholder consultation in hospitality education, as captured in Table 2. Based on the question: **how can the gaps between academia and industry be bridged?** The study revealed measures such as the invitation of industry experts to partake in hospitality education, invitation of industry experts to partake in curriculum building, and workshops/seminars. Broader stakeholder consultation implies that the hospitality industry should be invited on issues relating to the development of student's skills and competencies. Establishing these measures will go a long way to ensure that the students are provided with the competencies expected by the industry. Some respondents expressed their thoughts with regard to industry inclusion. One participant stated:

"Someone from the industry must come and demonstrate a skill to know the reality they want to see." (Participant K)

Another participant mentioned that:

"Certain topics can also be delivered by the industry experts for the students to understand better." (Participant G)

Relating to the invitation of industry experts to partake in curriculum building, one participant asserted:

"When upgrading the curriculum, the industry must be invited to make input." (Participant L)

Another participant also maintained that:

"The industry must be part of the training. For that matter when planning or developing the curriculum, they should be part to give us the current trends and what they expect from us." (Participant I)

Going forward, it was again made clear that:

"Lecturers sit in their corner and then develop their syllabus or curricula, and they expect the industry to just absorb any product. That is what is happening now. But I believe that if we bring industry right from the development of the curriculum, then industries will be able to feed us with their standards, what they expect the students to know or what they expect the products to be like. Then those of us in academia will be able to design the curriculum in such a way to meet the industrial standards." (Participant D)

Finally, one participant reiterated that:

"The only means by which this can happen is for industries themselves to design a tailor-made curriculum, give it to academia, this is what we want, and this is the group of people we have brought them to you, train them with this curriculum and bring them back to us." (Participant F)

Since the industry expects graduates to exhibit some level of competencies, its opinions are imperative during curriculum development. This will enable graduates to acquaint themselves with the competencies expected by the industry. These findings were in line with those of Ezeuduji et al. (2017), Sarkodie and Adom (2015), and Najar and Bukhari (2017). Ezeuduji et al. (2017) and Sarkodie and Adom (2015) suggested that there should be a collaboration between hospitality academia and industry. In a similar vein, Najar and Bukhari (2017) recommended persistent interaction between students and industry experts to share knowledge on current trends within the industry. Again, these authors argued for frequent interaction to ensure an informed competency development measure. They suggested that it is worth having regular workshops and seminars with the sharing of ideas as the objective. In this way, both students and lecturers will be well informed.

4.4 Student-related measures

As part of bridging the gaps between industry and academia, participants suggested that hospitality students in academia should be oriented and given the opportunity to specialize. This will enable them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and build on them. It was also reported that academia should endeavour to orient students on the opportunities of the hospitality programmes offered in universities. This will help prepare hospitality graduates physically and psychologically as they enter the industry or

corporate world. Again, focusing on and mastering one area in hospitality will ensure higher performance or output at all times. Based on the question: **how can the gaps between academia and industry be bridged?** One participant stated that;

"I think that academia should orient students on the opportunities available in the hospitality industry. This will help prepare them physically and psychologically for their future careers. It will also help them to understand the different paths they can take in the industry and make informed decisions." (Participant G)

Relating to specialization, one participant reiterated that;

"I think one way to bridge the gap is to provide hospitality students with the opportunity to specialize. This will help them identify their strengths and weaknesses and build on them. Specializing in one area of hospitality will also ensure that they have higher performance or output at all times." (Participant C)

Contributing to the discussions, one educator cited an example that;

"A student who, for instance, specializes in culinary arts will have the skills and knowledge to work as a chef or in any other position in the kitchen. This will make them more attractive to employers and also make their work more efficient." (Participant J)

According to Lugosi and Jameson (2017), specialization enables students to gain in-depth knowledge and expertise in a specific field, which can make them more competitive in the job market. For example, a student with a specialization in hotel management can gain a deeper understanding of hotel operations, financial management, marketing, and customer service. Similarly, relating to student orientation, Ahlawat and Rawal (2022), Askren and James (2021) and Zeidan and Bishnoi (2020) maintained that students should be guided on the opportunities available in industry settings and help gain practical experience. By interacting with professionals in the industry, students can gain insights into current trends and best practices, as well as learn about job opportunities and career paths.

4.5 Technical/practical education

Becoming acquainted with basic tools and gaining industry experience while studying give students an upper hand in the field of work. In an attempt to bridge the gap between industry and academia, participants were asked the question: **how can the gaps between academia and industry be bridged?** The investigation revealed that seven of the respondents made recommendations with regard to offering adequate practical on-campus education. The suggestions included the development of school training centres; industry setting in academia; weekly industry visits; extending periods of industry attachment; effective supervision during industry attachment. Extracts from participants' transcripts are reported below. Relating to training centers, one participant stated:

"It is imperative for the schools to have a dedicated facility where the students could go during their practical hours." (Participant E)

Regarding the set-up of industry setting in schools, one participant explained:

"The institution must get touch screen terminal, tools display, digital room keys, kiosk self-check-in, facial technology, etc. If the institution is not having a training centre (2-star hotel or guest house), then it means that they always have to go out. And when they go out, they don't get information about those things they learn in school. Because they limit them in what they can do." (Participant B)

Confirming the study findings, Ahlawat and Rawal (2022) discussed that one effective way to provide technical and practical education is by establishing school training centers in hotels and guesthouses. These centers can be used to train students in practical skills such as housekeeping, food and beverage service, and front office operations. Students can learn from experienced industry professionals and gain practical experience in a real-world setting. Askren and James (2021) highlighted the need to create an industry setting within academia. This can be achieved by building facilities such as simulated hotel rooms, kitchens, and restaurants. Students can use these facilities to practice their skills and gain hands-on experience in a controlled environment. Alexakis and Jiang (2019) and Najar and Bukhari (2017) recommended weekly industry practice sessions, extension/longer periods of industry attachment, and effective supervision during the industry for students to gain practical experience. Longer periods of attachment alongside effective supervision provide students with a more in-depth understanding of the industry and allow them to develop practical skills through hands-on experience.

4.6 Lecturer-related measures

In bridging the gap between hospitality educators and industry, lecturers also play vital roles. Findings from the study recommend that lecturers should be encouraged to research and gain industry experience and skills to be able to offer the required training to students. Extracts from participants' transcripts on the response to the question: **how can the gaps between academia and industry be bridged?** are captured below.

"I believe that lecturers are responsible for preparing students for the industry, and they need to have the necessary skills and knowledge to do that effectively. So personally, I believe that lecturers should be encouraged to research and gain industry experience and skills to be able to offer the required training to students. They need to be up-to-date with the latest trends and technologies in the industry to be able to pass on that knowledge to their students." (Participants H and A)

Another educator also opined that;

"I think lecturers should also be encouraged to network with industry professionals. This will enable them to understand the needs and expectations of the industry and adjust their teaching accordingly. It will also create opportunities for students to be exposed to the industry and make valuable connections." (Participant D)

Contributing to the findings, McCartney and Kwok (2022) emphasised that lecturers with industry experience can provide students with valuable insights and practical knowledge about the industry. They can share real-world examples, case studies, and best practices that can help students understand the industry better. Lecturers with industry experience can also facilitate partnerships and collaborations between academia and the industry. According to Gardella (2020) and Soliman, Di Virgilio, Figueiredo, and Sousa (2021), lecturers can engage in continuous professional development to stay up-to-date with the latest industry trends, innovations, and technologies. This can be achieved through continuous research, attending conferences, workshops, and training programs, as well as engaging with industry professionals and organizations.

5. Conclusion

Relating to measures to bridge the gap between hospitality academia and the hospitality industry, the study emphasised on stakeholder consultation: which encompasses the invitation of industry experts to partake in hospitality education, invitation of industry experts to partake in curriculum building, workshop/seminars, and student-related measures: student orientation, specialization. Again, the study suggested technical/practical education: school training centres (hotels and guesthouses); industry setting in academia, weekly industry practice, extension/longer periods of industry attachment, and effective supervision during industry attachment; lecturers-related measures: research promotion and encouraging industrial setting experience. Based on the outcome, the study impresses on designing and developing the curriculum to ensure that it aligns with the needs and demands of the hospitality industry. Moreover, enormous attention should be given to practical skills and knowledge in terms of customer service, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership. In the end, the study argues for the need to incorporate the latest industry trends, innovations, and technologies in academic activities. Such improvisation will enable students to become better prepared for the demands of the industry and develop the competencies required to succeed in their careers.

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