

Perceptions of Employability Competencies and Industry Preparedness: A Qualitative Study of Hotel Employees in Arusha, Tanzania

Mziray Filbert Laurent,  Korir Jacqueline and  Burugu Rose

School of Tourism, Hospitality and Events Management, Moi University, P.O. Box 3900–30100, Eldoret, Kenya

Abstract

The hospitality industry increasingly requires employees with technical expertise, communication skills, problem-solving abilities, adaptability, and professional ethics. In Arusha, Tanzania's major tourism hub, concerns persist regarding whether hospitality graduates possess the competencies needed to meet industry expectations. This study examined hotel employees' perceptions of employability competencies and industry preparedness among hospitality graduates. Grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how employees understand professional competence through workplace experience, reflection, and practical application. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 17 hotel employees and human resource managers purposively selected from Mount Meru Hotel, Gran Meliá Hotel, and Arusha Serena Hotel. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that hospitality graduates possess foundational theoretical knowledge in food and beverage service, housekeeping, and front office operations. However, participants consistently reported deficiencies in practical experience, technological skills related to hotel management systems, communication and complaint-handling abilities, foreign language proficiency, and professional attitudes required for immediate workplace performance. Industry preparedness was perceived not as a condition achieved at graduation but as a continuous process of learning, adaptation, and exposure to real work environments. The study further revealed a significant gap between academic training and industry requirements, which participants attributed to the predominantly theoretical orientation of hospitality training institutions and limited industry exposure during education. Structured internships, workplace-based training, and stronger collaboration between educational institutions and hotels were identified as critical mechanisms for enhancing graduate readiness. The study contributes to employability research by highlighting hotel employees' perspectives on graduate preparedness and demonstrating the relevance of experiential learning

in hospitality workforce development within Sub-Saharan Africa. The findings have implications for curriculum reform, competency-based training, industry–education partnerships, and policy development aimed at improving hospitality employability in Tanzania.

Keywords: Hospitality employability, hotel employees, industry preparedness, experiential learning, competency-based training, Arusha, Tanzania

Correspondence: mshombe1972@gmail.com

Copyright © 2026 Mziray et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY).

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article

Data Availability Statement: The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials or upon reasonable request.

Competing interests: The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Introduction

Background of the Study

The hospitality industry is among the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors, making substantial contributions to employment generation, revenue creation, and economic development. Globally, the hotel industry ranks among the leading industries in terms of economic impact and employment opportunities. Recent statistics indicate that approximately 357 million people were employed in the global hotel industry in 2024, generating nearly USD 550 billion in revenue, demonstrating its significant role in the global economy (Hotel Industry Statistics, 2025). The continuous expansion of tourism and hospitality activities has increased the demand for a competent workforce capable of meeting the evolving expectations of international and domestic guests.

In Africa, the tourism and hospitality sector plays a critical role in socio-economic development, contributing approximately 7% of the continent's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and supporting more than 24 million jobs (Ekeocha et al., 2021; ITB, 2025). Countries such as South Africa, Morocco, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, and Tanzania have experienced notable growth in tourism and hospitality activities. Following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector has shown remarkable recovery, with many destinations reaching or surpassing pre-pandemic performance levels (UNWTO, 2024).

Tanzania has emerged as one of Africa's leading tourism destinations, with the tourism and hospitality sector contributing approximately 17.2% of the national GDP (Breakthrough Attorneys, 2022; World Bank Group, 2021). The country continues to record increasing

tourist arrivals due to its world-renowned attractions, including Mount Kilimanjaro, Serengeti National Park, and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. According to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT, 2023), tourist arrivals increased significantly after the pandemic, while by April 2025 Tanzania had attracted approximately 5.3 million tourists and generated about USD 4 billion in tourism earnings, surpassing the government's target ahead of schedule (The Guardian, 2025). This growth has intensified the demand for skilled hospitality professionals capable of delivering high-quality services and enhancing visitor experiences.

Mokhtar et al. (2022) define employability competencies as the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values needed to obtain, retain, and succeed in employment, while Yorke and Knight (2006) describe them as a combination of accomplishments, skills, understanding, and personal qualities that improve graduates' career prospects. Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) emphasize that employability skills vary across regions, time periods, and employer expectations, reflecting the diverse needs of different economic sectors. Understanding these variations can support the design of more relevant education and training programs. Employability is also a dynamic, lifelong process shaped by workplace learning, professional development, and practical experience rather than being achieved only at graduation (Mokhtar et al., 2022; Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). Consequently, employability depends on both formal education and continuous learning, enabling individuals to adapt and thrive in an evolving labor market.

Industry preparedness in the hospitality sector involves aligning graduates' skills with the needs of hotel organizations. Hospitality education institutions aim to develop graduates

who can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations, including front desk management, food and beverage service, housekeeping, and customer service. However, the rapidly changing nature of the hospitality industry driven by technology, globalization, and shifting guest expectations has increased the demand for employees who are flexible, technologically skilled, and capable of providing personalized services (El-Yamani, 2023).

Scholars argue that graduate readiness should extend beyond technical skills to include soft skills, professional attitudes, and lifelong learning abilities (Avleeva, Byrd, Pratt & Gonzalez, 2025). According to current hospitality education research, successful graduates need to demonstrate communication skills, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities in addition to operational knowledge. These skills help employees manage service interactions, resolve guest complaints, and ensure smooth hotel operations (Tavitiyaman et al., 2023).

The increasing complexity of hospitality operations has made employability skills and professional competencies essential requirements for graduates entering the industry. Competence in hospitality encompasses a combination of knowledge, technical skills, interpersonal abilities, attitudes, and professional behaviour necessary for effective service delivery (Baum, 2015; Kandampully, 2002). Studies have identified communication skills, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, adaptability, cultural awareness, customer service orientation, and information technology competencies as critical employability attributes for hospitality graduates (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Dhaliwal & Misra, 2020; Whitmore et al., 2023). Employers increasingly seek graduates who possess both theoretical knowledge and practical competencies

that enable them to contribute effectively in dynamic hospitality environments.

Despite the growing demand for hospitality professionals, many graduates continue to face employability challenges arising from skills mismatches, inadequate practical experience, and rapidly changing industry requirements. The expansion of digital technologies and online travel platforms has further transformed hospitality operations, creating new opportunities while simultaneously increasing the need for digital competencies and continuous professional development (Woods & McDonald, 2017). Consequently, employers place considerable emphasis on soft skills, professionalism, adaptability, and customer-service excellence as determinants of career success in the industry (Mayega, 2024; Cherry, 2024). In Tanzania, hospitality workers are trained through a range of public and private institutions, including the National College of Tourism (NCT), Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA) centres, technical colleges, universities, and other registered private hospitality training institutions. These institutions offer certificate, diploma, and degree programmes based on competency-based curricula that cover areas such as food production, food and beverage service, front office operations, housekeeping, hotel management, customer service, tourism, and industrial attachment to provide practical workplace experience. Vocational and technical programmes generally follow the Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) approach and the National Technical Awards (NTA) framework, while university programmes are designed in accordance with national higher education standards. Quality assurance and accreditation are provided by the National Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training

(NACTVET), which regulates technical and vocational institutions and programmes, The Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU), which accredits and monitors university programmes, and VETA, which develops occupational standards, oversees vocational training, and promotes competency-based assessment in collaboration with the hospitality industry.

In Tanzania, concerns persist regarding the alignment between hospitality education and industry expectations. Several studies have reported a gap between the competencies acquired by graduates and those required by employers, particularly in practical skills, communication, customer service, and problem-solving abilities (Nyahende, 2020; Mmasa & Mwageni, 2020). Although government initiatives and tourism sector development programmes have created favourable conditions for employment and career growth in hospitality, challenges related to graduate employability remain evident (MNRT, 2021). Arusha City, as Tanzania's leading tourism and hospitality hub, offers an ideal context for examining these issues due to its concentration of hotels, tourism enterprises, and hospitality employment opportunities.

Problem Statement

As the hospitality industry grows fast in Tanzania, it plays a significant role in employment creation and economic development, particularly in tourism destinations such as Arusha. As the industry becomes increasingly competitive, employers expect hotel employees to possess not only technical skills but also employability competencies such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, professionalism, and customer service. These competencies are essential for delivering high-quality services and

meeting the evolving expectations of guests.

Despite the growing demand for competent employees, many hotels continue to report challenges related to workforce preparedness. Graduates and newly employed staff are often perceived to have gaps between the competencies acquired through education and training and those required in the workplace. This mismatch may affect service quality, employee performance, organizational productivity, and the competitiveness of the hospitality sector.

Although previous studies have examined employability skills and workforce readiness in different contexts, there is limited qualitative research exploring how hotel employees themselves perceive employability competencies and industry preparedness within the context of Arusha, Tanzania. Existing studies have largely focused on employers' perspectives or on quantitative assessments, leaving a gap in understanding of employees' lived experiences and perceptions of the competencies needed to succeed in the hotel industry.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore hotel employees' perceptions of employability competencies and their preparedness for the hospitality industry in Arusha, Tanzania. By examining employees' experiences, the study aims to generate insights that can inform hospitality education providers, hotel managers, policymakers, and training institutions in developing strategies to strengthen workforce readiness and enhance service quality in the Tanzanian hospitality sector.

The study was therefore guided by the following specific objectives. To examine hotel employees' experiences regarding their preparedness for employment in the hospitality industry, to identify the perceived gaps between the competencies acquired through

education and training and those required in the hotel workplace and to identify the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal attributes that hotel employees consider important for industry preparedness.

Literature Review

The Nature of Hospitality Employability

Hospitality employability is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic, multidimensional construct that transcends technical competence to include communication, interpersonal relations, problem-solving, adaptability, professionalism, and digital literacy (Baum et al., 2020; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Contemporary policy discourse emphasizes that employability is no longer static but rather, it requires continuous responsiveness to technological change, globalization, sustainability demands, and evolving customer expectations (International Labour Organization, 2024; UN Tourism, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2025). Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) argue that employability integrates human capital, social capital, career management skills, and personal attributes, while Clarke (2018) highlights that outcomes are also shaped by contextual labour market conditions. The OECD (2023) similarly notes that automation and artificial intelligence are escalating demand for adaptable workers capable of reskilling.

In Africa, these dynamics are compounded by persistent youth unemployment and education–industry mismatches. The African Development Bank (2024) reports that many graduates lack practical, digital, and entrepreneurial competencies, and the African Union (2019) stresses the need for competency-based education and stronger university–industry linkages.

Empirical research confirms that hospitality employers value a balanced portfolio of hard and soft skills. Dhaliwal and Misra (2020) conducted a scoping review of studies from 1983 to 2018 and found that leadership, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, customer service, and professionalism were the most frequently demanded competencies globally, underscoring that industry preparedness depends on integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience. In South Africa, Ngoepe and Wakelin-Theron (2023) used semi-structured interviews with hotel managers and identified eight knowledge sub-domains and seven skill sub-domains expected of graduates, concluding that employability is a shared responsibility among institutions, employers, and graduates. Adeyinka-Ojo (2018) employed critical review and content analysis to identify 14 employability skill deficits in rural tourism destinations, arguing that destination-based hospitality requires employees who can combine technical and transferable skills to deliver memorable guest experiences.

The importance of adaptability and career competencies has also gained prominence. Ng and Liu (2025) surveyed 566 hotel employees and found that problem-solving, teamwork, and time management influenced career adaptability indirectly through career competencies, while language communication abilities contributed directly to adaptability a finding especially relevant to tourism-oriented destinations such as Arusha, where employees serve linguistically diverse guests.

In Tanzania, concerns about curriculum–labour-market alignment dominate the employability discourse. Boi et al. (2025) adopted a qualitative descriptive case-study design with 41 stakeholders including VETA officials, trainers, graduates, and employers to assess the tour-guide curriculum and

found that collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and entrepreneurship were inadequately covered despite being labour-market priorities. Mayega (2025) used a qualitative phenomenological approach with six Tanzanian employers and found that communication, integrity, independence, and problem-solving were the most valued soft skills among graduates entering the workforce. Mgaya (2024) employed an exploratory qualitative design with 126 respondents and identified systemic barriers to competency acquisition, including inadequate training resources, trainer shortages, and poor English-language proficiency, suggesting that perceived preparedness reflects not only individual ability but also institutional capacity.

Koboli et al. (2024) used a mixed-methods convergent design with 243 respondents and emphasized that curriculum practices must be responsive to labour-market expectations rather than relying solely on academic content. A 2026 study on vocational education curricula and labour-market demands, using a mixed-methods convergent parallel design with 25 employers and five VETA officers, further reinforced that youth employability depends on the degree to which training programmes develop competencies employers actually require. Focusing specifically on Arusha Region, Mbagga et al. (2021) collected evidence from trainers, heads of departments, and hotel managers and found misalignment between hospitality programme design and industry needs, concluding that programmes should be continuously reviewed in collaboration with industry stakeholders.

Research on career intentions complements this body of work. Sanga (2020) surveyed final-year business management students at the University of Dar es Salaam and found that industry exposure positively influenced willingness to enter hospitality employment, even

when perceptions of pay and working conditions were negative. Ngatuni and Ulomi (2021) surveyed 232 certificate and diploma students at the National College of Tourism and, using the Theory of Planned Behaviour, found that positive attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control significantly predicted career intentions in hospitality and tourism. These findings suggest that employability is also shaped by individuals' confidence in their own capabilities and their prior exposure to industry realities.

Despite this growing body of literature, significant gaps remain as much of the available research on hospitality employability in Tanzania and in Arusha specifically has focused on graduates, students, training curricula or employer expectations, leaving the perspectives of current hotel employees largely underexplored. Second, while studies such as those by Mbagga et al. (2021) and Boi et al. (2025) have examined curriculum alignment and programme design from institutional and employer standpoints, few have investigated how employees themselves perceive the adequacy of their competencies in relation to actual workplace demands. This qualitative study fills these gaps and offers an empirically grounded understanding of how industry preparedness is experienced and interpreted by those who occupy the front lines of hospitality service delivery in Arusha, Tanzania.

Competency Domains in Hospitality Employment

Hospitality competency frameworks generally classify employability into technical, interpersonal, cognitive, managerial, digital, and personal domains that collectively enable service delivery under dynamic conditions (UN Tourism, 2024). Unlike many occupations, hospitality

work requires continuous interaction with guests, colleagues, and supervisors, making the integration of technical and behavioural competencies particularly critical.

Interpersonal competencies are widely recognized as foundational. Baum et al. (2020) argue that emotional labour, empathy, and relationship management are central to service delivery, while Robles (2012) identifies communication, teamwork, integrity, and interpersonal skills as the most valued workplace competencies. Nickson (2013) further emphasizes that employees must manage multicultural interactions effectively to ensure customer satisfaction. Alongside these relational capabilities, technical competencies remain essential. UN Tourism (2024) notes that digital skills including property management systems, online booking platforms, and customer relationship management tools are now integral to technical performance due to digital transformation. In Africa, competency frameworks reflect both global standards and contextual needs: the African Development Bank (2024) highlights communication, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving as key competencies, while the African Union (2019) stresses integrating practical skills, leadership, and sustainability into education systems.

Empirical research across the continent confirms that hospitality employment demands a multidomain competency profile. Kamau and Waudo (2012) surveyed 106 human-resource managers, heads of departments, and employees in Nairobi hotels and found significant differences between employer and employee expectations regarding communication, technical skills, computer literacy, work habits, and customer service, with employers placing greater emphasis on conflict resolution and multi-skilling. The study also established a significant relationship

between competency expectations and hotel classification. In South Africa, Khumalo and van der Merwe (2020) examined hospitality-industry stakeholders and found that communication, interpersonal relations, customer orientation, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, and technical knowledge were critical, concluding that competency development must move beyond narrow technical training. Mokgadi et al. (2022) similarly engaged hospitality-sector stakeholders and found that employers valued technical knowledge alongside communication, customer-service orientation, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and professional conduct, emphasizing the need for experiential learning and stronger training–industry interaction.

Digital and sustainability competencies are increasingly prominent. Lukose and Agbeyangi (2024) conducted a case study of 21 small-scale hospitality businesses in South Africa's rural Eastern Cape using face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, finding that ICT literacy and awareness of sustainable practices influenced technology adoption, though not at statistically significant levels. They concluded that digital literacy and sustainability awareness should be integrated into hospitality training. Putra et al. (2022) used a mixed-methods longitudinal design with 1,694 tourism and hospitality graduates across three cohorts and identified three critical domains such as fundamental, functional, and professional competencies arguing that employability requires layered capabilities rather than job-specific technical skills alone.

In East Africa, studies reveal both the importance of experiential learning and persistent competency gaps. Onyuna et al. (2021) adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design with 204 final-year undergraduate hospitality students and

12 heads of departments and lecturers in Kenya, using Kirkpatrick's four-level evaluation model. Their findings demonstrated that experiential learning significantly shaped students' perceived competence in hospitality practice, suggesting that practical competence cannot be developed through classroom instruction alone. Akoth et al. (2025) employed a mixed-methods design with hospitality managers, supervisors, and departmental heads in Kenya and found that workplace attitudes including professional attitude, work ethic, and commitment were important dimensions of employability, with graduates from Kenya Utalii College generally rated more favourably than university graduates.

In Tanzania, Karuguru (2015) used a mixed-method approach involving questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documentary review in graded Dar es Salaam hotels and concluded that continuous staff training is essential for strengthening occupational capabilities, suggesting competency development is ongoing rather than completed at qualification. Msuya et al. (2022) investigated the relationship between tourism education and labour-market requirements in Tanzania and found that employers require communication, interpersonal, teamwork, problem-solving, customer-service, and practical occupational skills, calling for stronger collaboration between education providers and industry. Mashauri and Mhando (2023) used a descriptive research design with hospitality and tourism stakeholders in Tanzania and found that graduates possessed foundational competencies but experienced gaps in practical skills, communication, customer handling, digital competencies, and problem-solving, concluding that practical learning and industrial attachment must be strengthened. In Arusha specifically, Mbaggaa et al. (2021) collected

perspectives from trainers, heads of departments, and hotel managers and found misalignment between hospitality programme design and industry needs, demonstrating the importance of practical, technical, and industry-specific competencies in the local labour market.

Hence, the literature establishes that hospitality competency domains are interconnected and context-dependent, with technical skills providing the foundation for job performance and interpersonal, digital, and behavioural competencies determining service quality. However, several gaps remain as existing competency research in Tanzania and Arusha has predominantly examined graduate preparedness, curriculum alignment, or employer expectations, leaving the perceptions of current hotel employees regarding their own competency adequacy largely unexplored. Though studies such as those by Mbagga et al. (2021), Mashauri and Mhando (2023), and Msuya et al. (2022) have identified training gaps from institutional and employer perspectives, few have investigated how employees themselves experience and evaluate their competency portfolios against actual workplace demands. This qualitative study addresses these gaps and offers an empirically grounded understanding of how industry preparedness is experienced by those who occupy the front lines of hospitality service delivery in Arusha, Tanzania.

The Education–Industry Gaps

The education–industry gap in hospitality refers to the mismatch between the knowledge and competencies developed through formal education and training and those expected by employers in actual hospitality workplaces. The gap may arise when training institutions emphasize theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical experience, when curricula are

not regularly updated to reflect industry changes, or when there is inadequate collaboration between educators and employers. In hospitality, the problem is particularly significant because successful employment requires employees to combine technical knowledge with customer-service skills, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability and professional attitudes (International Labour Organization, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2025). This misalignment arises when curricula emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical experience, fail to keep pace with technological and market changes, or lack meaningful collaboration between educators and employers. Globally, Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) reported difficulties in transferring academic learning into workplace performance, particularly in customer service and decision-making. Employers consistently identify deficiencies in soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and professionalism (Succi & Canovi, 2020). In Africa, structural mismatches are well documented: the African Development Bank (2024) notes systemic disconnects between education systems and labour-market needs, and the African Union (2019) emphasizes competency-based education and stronger industry collaboration as necessary responses.

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that the education–industry gap remains an important challenge affecting graduate employability, workplace preparedness and the quality of hospitality services. Tushabe and Murimi (2024) adopted a qualitative case-study design with 26 graduates, employers, educators, and policymakers in Kabale, Uganda, and found persistent mismatches in practical and interpersonal skills, concluding that coordinated stakeholder collaboration is needed to align training with industry needs. Commey (2021) used a mixed-

methods case-study approach involving interviews with practitioners and lecturers and questionnaires with students and graduates in Ghana, identifying misalignment between university curricula and industry expectations and proposing a competency framework to guide curriculum review. Kokt (2023) similarly employed a qualitative approach with 12 educators in Ghana through a participatory forum and concluded that closer academia–industry interaction is essential to translate industry expectations into educational programmes. In South Africa, Mabaso and Mthembu (2022) used an empirical approach with hospitality stakeholders and found that graduates lacked practical application of knowledge despite possessing technical qualifications, calling for greater emphasis on work-integrated learning. Lukose and Agbeyangi (2024) conducted a case study of 21 small-scale hospitality businesses in the Eastern Cape using face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, finding that ICT literacy and sustainability awareness were inadequately developed in training, though ICT usage differences were not statistically significant. Adeyinka-Ojo (2018) used critical review and content analysis to identify 14 employability skill deficits in rural tourism destinations, arguing that training must respond to destination-specific contexts where technical and transferable competencies are both required.

In East Africa, evidence points to systemic barriers beyond curriculum content alone. Kinyanjui and Waweru (2020) used an empirical survey with hospitality stakeholders in Kenya and found that graduates possessed theoretical knowledge but exhibited gaps in practical skills, communication, customer service, and workplace experience, attributing these deficits to limited exposure to authentic hospitality

environments. Onyuna et al. (2021) adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design with 204 final-year students and 12 lecturers in Kenya, using questionnaires and interviews within Kirkpatrick's four-level model, and demonstrated that experiential learning significantly shaped perceived competence, suggesting that practical exposure reduces the theory–practice divide. Kabii et al. (2025) employed a mixed-methods design with managers, supervisors, and departmental heads in Kenya and found that university graduates' workplace attitudes were perceived as neutral to moderately positive, whereas Kenya Utalii College graduates were rated more favourably, indicating that employers evaluate behavioural and professional attributes alongside technical qualifications.

In Tanzania, Mbagga et al. (2021) gathered perspectives from trainers, heads of departments, and hotel managers in Arusha and found misalignment between programme design and industry requirements, recommending continuous curriculum review in partnership with industry. Karuguru (2015) used a mixed-method approach involving questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documentary review in Dar es Salaam and concluded that continuous staff training is essential for quality service, suggesting that the education–industry gap extends beyond graduation into employees' working lives. Boi et al. (2025) investigated 41 stakeholders including VETA officials, graduates, and employers through a qualitative descriptive case-study design and found that collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and entrepreneurship were inadequately covered in the tour-guide curriculum despite labour-market relevance. Mgaya (2024) used a qualitative exploratory design with 126 respondents, employing semi-structured interviews, open-ended

questionnaires, and group discussions, and identified barriers such as inadequate resources, trainer shortages, English-language difficulties, and inappropriate training methods as root causes of competency deficits. Koboli et al. (2024) adopted a mixed-methods convergent design with 243 respondents and emphasized that curriculum practices including pedagogy, assessment, and entrepreneurship development must be deliberately responsive to labour-market expectations to reduce skills mismatch.

Hence, these studies establish that the education–industry gap in hospitality is multidimensional, spanning technical, practical, interpersonal, digital, and behavioural domains. However, existing research in Tanzania and Arusha has focused mainly on graduates, curriculum designers, or employer expectations, leaving the perspectives of current hotel employees regarding their own preparedness largely unexplored. Though studies by Mbagga et al. (2021), Boi et al. (2025), and Koboli et al. (2024) have documented curriculum misalignment from institutional and employer viewpoints, few have examined how employees themselves perceive the adequacy of their training relative to actual workplace demands. Therefore, this qualitative study fills these gaps and offers an empirically grounded understanding of how the education–industry divide is experienced by those directly engaged in hospitality service delivery in Arusha, Tanzania.

Employee Perspectives on Graduate Preparedness

Experienced employees occupy a unique position for assessing graduate preparedness because they supervise, mentor, and collaborate with new recruits during workplace integration, offering practical evaluations of how effectively graduates translate theoretical knowledge into operational performance

(Baum et al., 2020; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Nickson, 2013). Globally, this evidence suggests that hospitality graduates frequently enter employment with adequate theoretical knowledge yet require substantial workplace support before becoming fully productive. The International Labour Organization (2024) found that employers commonly perceive graduates as lacking confidence, practical decision-making abilities, and workplace experience despite satisfactory academic performance, while Sisson and Adams (2013) observed that immediate application of knowledge in practical situations is valued more highly than academic achievement alone.

Communication and professionalism consistently emerge as the competencies most valued by industry personnel. Baum et al. (2020) found that employees value graduates who demonstrate professionalism, emotional intelligence, teamwork, customer orientation, and adaptability. Robles (2012) identified communication, integrity, responsibility, interpersonal relationships, and positive attitudes among the most desirable employability skills across service industries, and Nickson (2013) argued that graduates must communicate effectively with multicultural guests, collaborate with colleagues, and maintain professional behaviour under pressure. Within Africa, the African Development Bank (2024) attributes graduate unemployment largely to mismatches between higher education outcomes and labour-market expectations, particularly regarding practical skills, communication, innovation, and problem-solving, while the African Union (2024) emphasizes that higher education institutions have been slow to adapt curricula to rapidly changing labour-market demands.

Empirical research across East and Southern Africa reinforces these concerns. Akoth et al. (2025) adopted a

mixed-methods design using questionnaires and interviews with managers, supervisors, and departmental heads in Kenya and found that university graduates' workplace attitudes were perceived as neutral to moderately positive, whereas Kenya Utalii College graduates were generally rated as demonstrating good attitudes, indicating that industry personnel distinguish between graduates based on behavioural readiness rather than qualifications alone. Kamau and Waudu (2012) surveyed 106 human-resource managers, heads of departments, and employees in Nairobi hotels and found divergent expectations regarding communication, technical skills, computer literacy, work habits, and customer service, with employers particularly emphasizing conflict resolution and multi-skilling. Onyuna et al. (2021) used a concurrent mixed-methods design with 204 final-year undergraduate hospitality students and 12 heads of departments and lecturers in Kenya, finding that experiential learning significantly strengthened perceived competence in hospitality practice and underscoring that preparedness is closely linked to the practical application of knowledge.

In Tanzania, evidence points to both curriculum misalignment and the need for continuous workplace development. Mbagga et al. (2021) collected perspectives from trainers, heads of departments, and hotel managers in Arusha and found concerns regarding the alignment between hospitality programme design and actual industry requirements, emphasizing the importance of practical, industry-relevant competencies. Boi et al. (2025) adopted a qualitative descriptive case-study design with 41 stakeholders including VETA officials, curriculum specialists, graduates, and employers and found that collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship, and communication

were inadequately covered in vocational curricula despite their labour-market relevance. Karuguru (2015) used a mixed-method approach involving questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documentary review in graded Dar es Salaam hotels and concluded that continuous staff training is essential for quality service, suggesting that preparedness is a continuum requiring workplace induction and mentoring beyond initial qualification. Mgaya (2024) employed a qualitative exploratory design with 126 respondents using semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and group discussions, identifying inadequate resources, trainer shortages, English-language difficulties, and inappropriate training methods as barriers to competency acquisition, implying that graduates may enter employment with formal qualifications yet still exhibit practical deficiencies. Massi et al. (2026) used a mixed-methods convergent parallel design with 25 employers and five VETA officers and found that employers valued time management, digital literacy, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and teamwork alongside technical knowledge, indicating that preparedness assessments increasingly encompass contemporary competencies beyond conventional qualifications.

Further, Ngoepe and Wakelin-Theron (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with hotel managers in South Africa and identified eight knowledge sub-domains and seven skill sub-domains, concluding that employability is a shared responsibility and that preparedness must be judged across multiple dimensions rather than on qualifications alone. Lukose and Agbeyangi (2024) conducted a case study of 21 small-scale hospitality businesses in South Africa's Eastern Cape using face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, finding that ICT literacy and sustainability

awareness were emerging as important competency areas, though differences in ICT usage were not statistically significant. These studies collectively suggest that employee and employer assessments of graduate preparedness extend beyond technical credentials to include practical competence, professional attitudes, digital literacy, and adaptive capabilities.

Though the literature establishes that graduate preparedness is multidimensional and frequently assessed through workplace performance, several gaps remain. However, existing research in Tanzania has relied heavily on the perspectives of graduates, training institutions, or employers, with comparatively little attention given to current hotel employees as informants on preparedness. This qualitative study therefore addresses these gaps and provides an empirically grounded understanding of how industry preparedness is experienced by those directly engaged in hospitality service delivery in Arusha, Tanzania.

Theoretical Foundations

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory posits that learning is a continuous process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. The theory identifies a four-stage learning cycle consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). In the hospitality industry, employees acquire and refine employability competencies such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, customer service, and adaptability through practical workplace experiences, reflection on those experiences, and the application of newly acquired knowledge. Since hospitality work is highly experiential, ELT provides an appropriate framework for

understanding how employees develop industry-relevant competencies over time.

Complementing ELT, Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the reciprocal interaction among personal factors, behavior, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986). A central construct of SCT is self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capability to organize and execute the actions required to achieve desired performance outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Employees with higher self-efficacy are generally more willing to embrace workplace challenges, adapt to changing job demands, persist when encountering difficulties, and apply their competencies confidently. Within the hotel industry, self-efficacy influences how employees perceive their preparedness for professional roles and their ability to perform effectively in dynamic service environments.

The integration of ELT and SCT strengthens the conceptual foundation of this study by recognizing that employability competencies are not developed solely through experiential learning but are also shaped by employees' confidence in their ability to apply those competencies successfully. While ELT explains the process through which practical experience contributes to competency development, SCT provides insight into the psychological mechanisms that influence whether employees feel prepared to utilize those competencies in real workplace settings. Together, these theories support an exploration of both the development of employability skills and the perceptions of industry preparedness among hotel employees in Arusha, Tanzania

Methodology

This study adopted the interpretivist research philosophy, which

assumes that reality is socially constructed and understood through individuals' experiences and interpretations (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The philosophy is appropriate because the study seeks to explore hotel employees' perceptions of employability competencies and industry preparedness in Arusha, Tanzania. Since these perceptions are shaped by participants' personal experiences and workplace contexts, an interpretivist approach enables the researcher to gain rich, in-depth insights into how employees understand and experience these phenomena, making it well suited to the qualitative nature and exploratory purpose of the study.

The study employed a qualitative case study design focused on five-star hotels in Arusha City, Tanzania. A case study approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth, contextualised exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world boundaries (Yin, 2018). Arusha's five-star hotel sector constitutes a bounded system characterised by intensive tourism activity, multilingual service demands, and a labour market fed by both formal vocational education and informal on-the-job training.

The study was conducted in Arusha City, a hub of tourism and hospitality in Tanzania. The target population comprised staff and human-resource (HR) managers from the operational departments of three selected five-star hotels: Mt. Meru Hotel,

Gran Melia Hotel, and Arusha Serena Hotel.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who could offer rich, information-rich perspectives on employability and graduate preparedness. Specific inclusion criteria were: (a) employment in an operational department (Front Office, Food and Beverage Services, Food Production, Housekeeping, or Reservations); (b) a minimum of two years' hospitality industry experience (with limited exceptions made for recent entrants who had direct, daily interaction with graduate trainees); (c) direct experience working with, mentoring, or supervising recent graduates or VET trainees; and (d) for managerial participants, direct involvement in recruitment, onboarding, or in-service training. Seventeen participants were initially purposively selected to ensure representation across departments and hotels; however, three did not attend, yielding a final sample of 14 participants. This sample was deemed sufficient because data saturation defined as the point at which no new themes or information emerged was reached at the 11th interview (Guest et al., 2006).

Table 1 presents detailed participant information, including pseudonym, hotel, department, age, gender, educational background, approximate graduation or qualification-completion year, total industry tenure, current role, and reported experience working with graduates.

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Professional Profiles

Participant	Hotel	Department	Age	Gender	Education	Industry Tenure	Current Role
EMP1	Mt. Meru	Food & Beverage	34	Male	1-year Certificate	10 yrs	Restaurant Supervisor
EMP2	Mt. Meru	Housekeeping	21	Male	1-year Certificate	1 yr	Room Attendant
EMP3	Mt.	Reservations	34	Male	2-year	13 yrs	Reservation

EMP4	Meru Mt. Meru	Reservations	27	Male	Certificate Bachelor's degree	3 yrs	Agent Reservation Agent
EMP5	Gran Melia	Front Office	31	Female	2-year Certificate	12 yrs	Receptionist
EMP6	Gran Melia	Front Office	33	Female	2-year Certificate	14 yrs	Receptionist
EMP7	Gran Melia	Housekeeping	26	Male	1-year Certificate	3 yrs	Laundry Attendant
EMP8	Gran Melia	Food Production	39	Male	1-year Certificate	24 yrs	Cook
EMP9	Arusha Serena	Food & Beverage	32	Female	1-year Certificate	10 yrs	Restaurant Staff
EMP10	Arusha Serena	Food & Beverage	29	Male	1-year Certificate	12 yrs	Restaurant Staff
EMP11	Arusha Serena	Housekeeping	30	Female	1-year Certificate	5 yrs	Room Attendant
EMP12	Arusha Serena	Housekeeping	26	Female	1-year Certificate	7 yrs	Room Attendant
EMP13	Arusha Serena	Food Production	36	Male	3-year Diploma	12 yrs	Chef de Partie
EMP14	Arusha Serena	Food Production	35	Male	2-year Certificate	14 yrs	Bakery & Pastry Chef
HR1	Mt. Meru	Human Resources	33	Female	Bachelor's degree	3 yrs	HR Manager
HR2	Gran Melia	Human Resources	36	Female	Master's degree	6 yrs	HR Manager
HR3	Arusha Serena	Human Resources	45	Male	Bachelor's degree	16 yrs	HR Manager

Note. EMP = employee participant; HR = human-resources manager. One participant (EMP2) fell below the two-year experience threshold but was retained because he had recently transitioned from a VET programme into hotel employment and offered unique insight into the training-to-work interface.

Data were collected through individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in English over a one-week period. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Interviews were conducted individually rather than in groups to protect participant confidentiality, minimise peer influence on responses, and allow each participant to speak freely about their personal experiences and workplace challenges.

Given the cross-cultural context and the potential power differential between the researcher (an academic

investigator) and participants (senior industry professionals and operational staff), several strategies were employed to manage power dynamics. Interviews were held in neutral on-site spaces (e.g., staff meeting rooms and quiet lounge areas) rather than in managerial offices. The researcher opened each session by restating the voluntary nature of participation, emphasising that there were no employment consequences for any response given, and inviting participants to redirect or decline any question. Open-ended questions were

used throughout to privilege participant voices, and the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record assumptions and positionalities that might shape the interview encounter.

Before the main data collection, the interview guide was piloted with a small group of hotel employees at New Arusha Hotel to assess clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Feedback from the pilot identified ambiguous wording in two questions (relating to graduate preparedness and industry alignment), which were revised to use more contextually familiar terms such as new employees from hotel schools and what you actually do at work versus what you learned in class.

To ensure informed consent, each participant signed a consent form confirming their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was operationalised beyond anonymity codes where all real names and specific hotel brand identifiers were removed from transcripts and are masked in all published outputs. Participants were assigned unique alphanumeric codes (EMP1–EMP14; HR1–HR3) to protect identity. All audio recordings and transcripts are stored in password-protected electronic folders accessible only to the researcher.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. A simple transcription convention was used: pauses were indicated by ellipses (...), overlapping speech was marked where necessary, and non-verbal utterances (e.g., laughter, sighs) were noted in brackets. Non-essential background noises were excluded. Transcripts were reviewed alongside audio recordings to verify accuracy and correct errors. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and files were organised systematically by

participant code and interview date. Before analysis, each transcript was read repeatedly to ensure familiarity, checked for completeness, and formatted consistently to facilitate coding.

Credibility was ensured through the use of probing questions to elicit detailed responses and through member checking, whereby interview summaries and preliminary interpretations were shared with participants to verify accuracy. Transferability was facilitated by providing thick description of the study setting, participant characteristics, sampling procedures, and data collection methods, enabling readers to assess the relevance of findings to similar hospitality contexts. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting every stage of the research process, using a consistent interview guide, and recording all methodological decisions. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the study to surface personal assumptions and biases. Interview recordings, verbatim transcripts, coding notes, and thematic analysis records were retained as part of an auditable trail.

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data while recognising the researcher's active role in meaning-making. The six phases were followed sequentially: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading and listening; (2) generation of initial codes across the entire data set; (3) collation of codes into potential themes; (4) review and refinement of themes against coded extracts and the full data set; (5) definition and naming of themes to capture their essence; and (6) production

of the final report, with thematic narratives supported by direct verbatim quotations to illustrate each theme.

Findings and Discussion

The final thematic framework (Table 2) was constructed by coding all fourteen transcripts line-by-line, grouping

initial codes into candidate themes, and reviewing these against extracted quotations and full transcripts to ensure they captured patterns across the entire data set. Themes were refined through iterative comparison with the audit trail and validated through member-checking summaries shared with five participants.

Table 2: Final Thematic Coding Matrix

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretation
Technical Competencies	Food & Beverage Skills	<i>"I learned food and beverage services and front office operations."</i>	Employees perceive technical operational skills as foundational competencies.
	Housekeeping & Laundry Skills	<i>"I learned housekeeping procedures and laundry operations."</i>	Practical departmental exposure is considered important.
	Food Production Skills	<i>"We studied food production and bakery."</i>	Culinary skills are viewed as an asset to employability.
Soft Skills Development	Communication Skills	<i>"They should be competent in communication, both oral and written."</i>	Communication is perceived as critical in hospitality.
	Customer Service Orientation	<i>"We were taught how to handle guests properly."</i>	Employees associate employability with the ability to handle guests.
	Teamwork	<i>"We worked in groups during training."</i>	Collaboration is seen as preparation for work in hotels.
Industry Preparedness	Internship Experience	<i>"Internship helped me understand real hotel work."</i>	Practical exposure bridges theory and practice.
	Confidence in First Job	<i>"At first, it was challenging, but I adapted."</i>	Some preparedness gaps exist despite training.
	Theory-Practice Divide	<i>"In the Training Colleges we studied theoretically, no practical..."</i>	A structural disconnect between classroom instruction and workplace reality.

Note. Extracts are drawn from the full data set and attributed to specific participants in the narrative below.

Experiences Regarding Preparedness for Employment

Participants described their entry into hotel employment not as a direct transition from qualification to practice but as a prolonged, often fragmented process of adaptation and staged learning. EMP3, a reservation clerk at Mt. Meru Hotel with thirteen years of industry experience and a one-year certificate, recounted: *"First of all, when I graduated, I could not secure direct employment. I started as a field trainee, then an intern, then I worked as a Casual Laborer, then I was employed."* This narrative illustrates what Ng and Liu (2025) conceptualise as career adaptability the capacity to obtain, retain, and progress in employment through the integration of general and professional competencies developed over time. Rather than viewing preparedness as a static attribute conferred by a certificate, EMP3's experience supports Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) argument that employability is an ongoing accomplishment shaped by human capital, social capital, and contextual labour-market conditions.

The emotional and practical texture of this transition was further captured by EMP2, a room attendant at Mt. Meru Hotel in his first year of employment, who reflected: *"At first, it was challenging, but I adapted."* Such accounts emphasize Karuguru (2015) finding that hospitality employees require continuous workplace-based learning and induction before they can meet operational standards. Similarly, EMP1, a restaurant supervisor at Mt. Meru Hotel with ten years of experience, explained that competencies such as operating point-of-sale systems, reservation software, and booking platforms were acquired entirely through workplace exposure: *"As I am now working in this five-star hotel, there are so many skills*

and competencies that I have learned here, which my program did not prepare me for. For example, how to deal with guest complaints, how to interact with guests, interpersonal skills, soft skills, good communication skills, and different hotel systems, reservations, Macros, POS, and booking systems. This, I can say, I did not learn in college." This aligns with Sanga (2020) observation that industry exposure significantly influences employment intentions and readiness, and with Ngoepe and Wakelin-Theron (2023) finding that South African hotel managers view employability as a shared responsibility among educational institutions, employers, and employees themselves.

Yet experiences of preparedness were not uniformly negative. EMP6, a receptionist at Gran Melia Hotel with fourteen years of experience, distinguished between training institutions: *"Few Colleges like VETA and NCT do their best to prepare well graduates for the real work environment, this is because they have hotel training facilities, but they lack problem-solving skills and soft skills, especially communication skills."* This qualified praise corroborates Onyuna et al. (2021) finding, derived from Kirkpatrick's four-level evaluation model with 204 Kenyan students and 12 lecturers, that experiential learning within dedicated training facilities significantly strengthens perceived competence. It also suggests, as Mutimbi et al. (2023) found in Nairobi, that formal qualifications can contribute to task performance when they are coupled with practical infrastructure.

Organisational context also shaped preparedness experiences. Employees at Gran Melia Hotel and Arusha Serena Hotel properties affiliated with international or regional chains described structured in-house programmes in customer care, safety,

firefighting, and first aid that supplemented, and sometimes replaced, pre-service training. EMP2 noted that *"we have regular training here in the hotel, in-house training in which we are trained different skills, customer care, firefighting, first aid, safety and security, something that I did not learn in the college."* By contrast, EMP3's prolonged progression through casual labour at Mt. Meru Hotel, an independently managed property, illustrates how graduates without access to structured organisational remediation must piece together competency development through precarious employment. This differentiation supports Kamau and Waudu (2012) finding that hospitality competency expectations and training infrastructures vary significantly by hotel classification and organisational capacity.

Throughout these narratives, participants exercised considerable agency. EMP1's decade-long ascent from certificate holder to supervisor involved self-directed learning of supervisory communication and digital systems. EMP3's staged entry into permanent employment reflects active navigation of a constrained labour market. These experiences challenge deficit-oriented accounts by foregrounding what Ng and Liu (2025) term career competency the mechanisms through which workers translate training into adaptable workplace performance.

Perceived Gaps Between Training and Workplace Demands

Despite moments of perceived readiness, the dominant narrative across participants was one of misalignment between the competencies acquired through formal education and those demanded in five-star hotel operations. EMP9, a restaurant waiter at Gran Melia Hotel with ten years of experience, recalled that college instruction covered: *"In college, I studied a lot of things. First*

of all, we had almost seven subjects/modules. First was life skills, tourism, mathematics, Food and beverage services, laundry services, front office, and housekeeping; everything was learned theoretically." EMP10, a restaurant waiter at Arusha Serena Hotel with twelve years of experience, affirmed that *"All skills have been very useful, I can say. Only that we did not have practical training in college."* This theory-practice divide reflects the broader education–industry gap documented across Sub-Saharan Africa. Tushabe and Murimi (2024), in a qualitative case study of 26 stakeholders in Uganda, identified persistent mismatches in practical and interpersonal skills, while Commey (2021) and Koko (2023) both found that Ghanaian hospitality curricula required systematic revision to incorporate industry expectations.

EMP2, when asked about industry preparedness, offered a parallel assessment: *"In college, I studied a lot of things. First of all, we had almost seven subjects/modules. First was life skills, tourism, mathematics, Food and beverage services, laundry services, front office, and housekeeping; everything was learned theoretically."* The recurrence of this theoretical emphasis across independent accounts suggests a systemic pattern rather than isolated institutional failure. In Tanzania specifically, Boi et al. (2025) revealed that collaboration, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship were inadequately covered in VET curricula, and Mgaya (2024) traced competency deficits to institutional barriers including inadequate resources, trainer shortages, and inappropriate pedagogical methods.

Several causes emerged from the data. First, faculty industry disconnect was explicitly cited by managerial participants. HR1, the human-resources manager at Mt. Meru Hotel with three years in role, observed: *"The College does*

not have competent teachers who know the system of the hotel... you need someone who is a hotelier." This supports Karuguru (2015) finding that continuous staff training is essential precisely because pre-service instructors often lack current industry experience. It also resonates with Koboli et al. (2024) argument, derived from 243 respondents in Tanzania, that curriculum practices must be deliberately responsive to labour-market expectations through appropriate pedagogy and instructor competence. Second, resource constraints were implicit in EMP6's qualified praise for VETA and NCT, institutions that *"have hotel training facilities,"* implying that the majority of colleges operate without simulated commercial environments. This uneven landscape echoes Mashauri and Mhando (2023) finding that Tanzanian graduates possess foundational competencies but experience gaps in practical skills, communication, and digital literacy due to inadequate training infrastructure.

The most pointed critique came from HR2, the human-resources manager at Gran Melia Hotel with six years in role, who stated: *"Graduates can show you very good certificates, but when you ask them what they learned in the College, they know nothing."* This credentialism where the symbolic value of a certificate outstrips its practical utility mirrors Koboli et al. (2024) finding that hospitality graduates often possess theoretical knowledge but lack operational competence, and the International Labour Organization's (2024) observation that employers frequently perceive graduates as lacking confidence and practical decision-making abilities. Third, the overload of theoretical subjects at the expense of depth suggests that Tanzanian hospitality VET remains shaped by formalistic educational traditions privileging breadth over experiential mastery. Onyuna et al. (2021) addressed

this tension through Kirkpatrick's framework, demonstrating that experiential learning significantly strengthens perceived competence; the present findings suggest that without such experiential anchors, graduates enter employment with theoretical knowledge that managers dismiss as hollow.

Digital competencies revealed a further layer of misalignment. EMP1's post-employment acquisition of POS, Macros, and booking systems points to an evolving gap beyond conventional technical skills. Lukose and Agbeyangi (2024), in a case study of 21 small-scale hospitality businesses in South Africa's Eastern Cape, identified ICT literacy as an increasingly important yet inadequately taught competency. UN Tourism (2024) and the World Economic Forum (2025) have similarly emphasised that digital transformation is reshaping hospitality competency expectations. Massi et al. (2026), in a mixed-methods study of 25 Tanzanian employers, found that digital literacy and time management were among the most valued competencies for labour-market entry. The relegation of systems training to employer-led induction places a disproportionate burden on hotels and delays new-employee productivity, particularly in Arusha's tourism-intensive environment where international guests expect seamless digital service interfaces.

Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes, and Attributes for Industry Preparedness

When participants articulated what constitutes genuine industry preparedness, their accounts converged on a multidimensional competency profile that integrated technical operations, interpersonal capabilities, professional attitudes, and digital literacy. Technical competencies were anchored in departmental functions: food and beverage service, housekeeping

procedures, laundry operations, food production, and bakery skills. This breadth aligns with Dhaliwal and Misra (2020) scoping review, which identified food and beverage knowledge, housekeeping, and front-office operations among the most frequently demanded competencies globally. It also supports Putra et al. (2022) longitudinal tracer study of 1,694 graduates, which identified fundamental and functional competencies as critical layers of hospitality employability. However, participants consistently distinguished between studying these topics and performing them. EMP10's reflection that college skills were useful but lacking practical training underscores Kamau and Waudu (2012) finding that hospitality employment requires multiple competency domains, and Khumalo and van der Merwe's (2020) conclusion that South African employers increasingly require graduates who combine occupational knowledge with transferable skills.

Interpersonal and communication competencies were accorded equal, if not greater, weight. EMP1 emphasised that dealing with guest complaints, interpersonal interaction, and good communication skills were competencies he *"did not learn in college."* EMP6 argued that graduates should be competent in communication, both oral and written, noting that even well-resourced colleges lack emphasis on *"problem-solving skills and soft skills, especially communication skills."* These perceptions corroborate Baum et al. (2020) argument that emotional labour, empathy, and relationship management are central to service delivery, as well as Robles (2012) identification of communication, integrity, and interpersonal skills among the most valued workplace competencies. Nickson (2013) further argues that hospitality employees must manage multicultural

interactions effectively; in Arusha's multilingual tourism context, this capability was experienced as essential yet underdeveloped in training.

Teamwork and customer-service orientation were recalled as college activities *"we worked in groups during training,"* noted EMP9 but participants distinguished between collaborative classroom exercises and the high-stakes, cross-departmental coordination required during peak occupancy or banquet service. This supports Mokgadi et al.'s (2022) finding that South African employers value teamwork and customer-service orientation alongside technical knowledge, and Succi and Canovi (2020) conclusion that soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability are consistently prized by employers.

Professional attitudes and behavioural competence emerged as a distinct domain. HR2's frustration with graduates who *"know nothing"* despite holding certificates, and EMP6's distinction between VETA/NCT graduates and university graduates, echo Kabii et al. (2025) finding that Kenyan employers distinguish between graduates based on workplace attitudes, work ethic, and behavioural readiness rather than qualifications alone. Mayega (2025), in a qualitative phenomenological study with six Tanzanian employers, similarly identified integrity, independence, and problem-solving as central soft skills for workplace effectiveness.

Conclusion

The study concludes that hotel employees perceive themselves as possessing adequate academic qualifications but lacking the practical competencies required to perform effectively in hotel operations. Participants consistently emphasized that hands-on skills in core operational

departments, including housekeeping, food and beverage services, front office operations, and reservations, are critical for successful job performance. These findings reveal a persistent gap between theoretical training and the practical demands of the hospitality industry. This mismatch may negatively affect employee confidence, service quality, organizational productivity, and graduates' employability.

Recommendations

Policy Implications

The findings revealed an urgent need for policymakers and regulatory bodies overseeing higher education and vocational training to establish enforceable standards that mandate competency-based hospitality curricula and systematic industry collaboration. Rather than relying on voluntary partnerships, regulatory frameworks should require training institutions to integrate sustained practical immersion, simulated hotel operations, and structured work-integrated learning as core rather than peripheral components of certificate and diploma programmes. Policymakers should also direct funding toward upgrading training infrastructure, particularly in institutions lacking commercial kitchens, live reservation systems, and digital learning laboratories, so that the gap between classroom conditions and workplace realities is narrowed at the source. Additionally, accreditation criteria should be revised to privilege instructor industry experience, requiring vocational educators to maintain current or recent hospitality practice as a condition of appointment or renewal. Finally, national tourism and labour-market policies should incentivise hotels to participate in curriculum co-design and student placement through tax relief or certification schemes,

thereby distributing the burden of employability development across the education–industry ecosystem rather than concentrating it on individual employees and employers.

Practical Implications

For hospitality training institutions, the findings signal a need to shift from theoretical breadth to experiential depth by reducing the number of disjointed modules in favour of sustained, department-specific rotations that allow students to cycle through concrete experience, reflective practice, and active experimentation within authentic or simulated environments. Institutions should recruit practising hoteliers as adjunct faculty and embed industry practitioners into curriculum review committees to ensure that what is taught corresponds with what is performed.

For hotel employers, the study suggests that structured onboarding and continuous professional development should be regarded not as remedial costs but as strategic investments in workforce quality. Hotels should formalise mentorship pathways in which experienced employees—such as those described in this study are trained to coach new recruits in complaint handling, digital systems, and cross-cultural communication. Employers should also expand internship and industrial-attachment programmes, co-designing assessment rubrics with training providers so that student performance is evaluated against operational standards rather than academic criteria alone.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on employability competencies and industry preparedness by providing qualitative evidence from the perspectives of hotel employees in Arusha, Tanzania. The findings reinforce

the importance of experiential learning and employability competency frameworks in preparing graduates for successful careers in the hospitality sector.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies should examine the perspectives of hotel managers, hospitality educators, and graduates to provide a more comprehensive understanding of employability competencies and workforce preparedness. Comparative studies involving different regions of Tanzania or other sectors of the tourism industry could also be conducted to determine whether similar competency gaps exist. In addition, mixed-methods research could be undertaken to validate and expand upon the qualitative findings of this study.

Limitations of the study

This study has several methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted using a relatively small sample drawn from a single city. While the sample provided valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of participants, it may not adequately represent the diversity of the wider hospitality industry. Consequently, the conclusions should be understood as context-specific rather than universally applicable.

Second, the study relied heavily on subjective perceptions obtained from guests and employees. Individual responses may have been influenced by personal expectations, prior experiences, and situational factors, which can introduce response bias. As a result, the findings primarily reflect perceived relationships and trends rather than definitive causal effects.

A further limitation arises from the exclusive focus on five-star hotels. Luxury hotels generally possess greater financial resources, more sophisticated technological infrastructure, and higher staffing capacities than mid-range or budget properties. These differences can significantly affect the adoption of operational practices, service innovations, and strategic initiatives. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized confidently to hotels operating in lower market segments without additional comparative research.

The rapidly changing nature of the hospitality industry also constrains the long-term relevance of the findings. Technological advancements, evolving customer preferences, economic conditions, regulatory changes, and sustainability requirements continue to reshape hotel operations. Practices identified as effective during the data-collection period may change over time, meaning that the study represents a snapshot of industry conditions rather than a permanent assessment of best practice.

In light of these limitations, future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, include multiple geographic locations, and compare different hotel categories. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining how industry developments influence hotel performance and customer perceptions over time. Such approaches would enhance the generalizability, validity, and long-term applicability of the research findings.

References

- Adeyinka-Ojo, S. (2018). A strategic framework for analysing employability skills deficits in rural hospitality and tourism destinations. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 27, 47–54. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211973618300461>

- African Development Bank. (2024). African economic outlook 2024. <https://www.afdb.org>
- African Union. (2019). Continental education strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25). <https://au.int>
- Akoth, M. L., Ngetich, A., & Wandaka, J. K. (2025). Examination of the attitude of graduates joining the hospitality industry in Kenya. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review*. https://ijssmr.org/uploads2025/ijssmr08_96.pdf
- Alhelalat, J. A., Ma'moun, A. H., & Twaissi, N. M. (2017). The impact of personal and functional aspects of restaurant employee service behaviour on customer satisfaction. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 66, 46-53. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0278431916304236>
- Avleeva, E., Byrd, J. W., Pratt, S., & Gonzalez, V. (2025). The internship experience: Students' self-evaluations of soft skill development during hospitality internships. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 36, 100552. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2025.100552>
- Boi, A. D., Kira, E. S., Athuman, A. K., Athuman, J. J., & Lupeja, T. L. (2025). The perceptions of key stakeholders on the adequacy and relevancy of the employability skills stated in the vocational education and training curriculum for the tour guide occupation in Tanzania. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 77(5), 1480-1501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2025.2461590>
- Cherry, K. (2024). Attitudes and behaviours in psychology. <https://www.verywellmind.com/>
- Clarke, M. (2018). Rethinking graduate employability: The role of capital, individual attributes and context. *Studies in higher education*, 43(11), 1923-1937. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1294152>
- Clarke, M. (2018). Rethinking graduate employability: The role of capital, individual attributes and context. *Studies in higher education*, 43(11), 1923-1937.. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1294152>
- Commey, V. (2021). *Matching the competencies of hospitality graduates with the expectations from the hospitality industry in Ghana: A case study* [Doctoral dissertation, Central University of Technology]. Central University of Technology Institutional Repository.
- Dhaliwal, R. S., & Misra, P. (2020). Employability skills needed in hospitality industry: A scopious review. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 10(1), 18–34. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2020/v10i130258>
- Ekeocha, D. O., Ogbuabor, J. E., Orji, A., & Kalu, U. I. (2021). International tourism and economic growth in Africa: A post-global financial crisis analysis. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 40, 100896. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2211973621001094>
- International Labour Organization. (2024). Global employment trends for youth 2024. <https://www.ilo.org/>
- ITB Berlin. (2025). Global tourism exhibitions report. ITB Internationale Tourismus-Börse.
- Jackson, D., & Tomlinson, M. (2020). Investigating the relationship between career planning, proactivity and employability perceptions among higher education students in uncertain labour market conditions. *Higher Education*, 80(3), 435–455. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00490-5>
- Kamau, S. W., & Waudo, J. N. (2012). Hospitality industry employer's expectation of employees' competences in Nairobi hotels. *Journal of Hospitality Management and Tourism*, 3(4), 55–63. <https://doi.org/10.5897/JHMT.11.022>
- Kandampully, J., Zhang, T., & Bilgihan, A. (2015). Customer loyalty: A review and future directions with a special focus on the hospitality industry. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 27(3), 379–414. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-03-2014-0151>
- Karuguru, J. W. (2015). *The contribution of staff training on offering quality hospitality services in hotels in Tanzania: A case of graded hotels in Dar es Salaam* [Master's thesis, The Open University of Tanzania]. Open University of Tanzania Institutional Repository.
- Koboli, G. M., Ngirwa, C. C., & Manyengo, P. (2024). The best curriculum practices for development of employability skills: Experience from Tanzania. *East African*

- Journal of Education Studies*, 7(4).
<https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.7.4.2386>
- Kokt, D. (2023). Hospitality management competency: framework to match expectations of academia and industry in Ghana. *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Studies*.<https://doi.org/10.32996/jths.2023.1.2.2>
- Lukose, J., & Agbeyangi, A. (2024). Enhancing ICT literacy and sustainable practices in the hospitality industry: Insights from Mnquma Municipality. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2410.02781*.
<https://arxiv.org/abs/2410.02781>
- Massi, J. W., Anangisye, W. A. L., & Sarakikya, A. M. (2026). Examining the alignment of vocational education curricula with labour market demands for youth employability in Tanzania: Bridging the skills gap. *Cogent Education*, 13(1), 2626623.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2026.2626623>
- Mayega, J. L. (2025). What soft skills do Tanzania employers prefer among graduates in the world of work? *Papers in Education and Development*.
<https://journals.udsm.ac.tz/index.php/pe/article/view/8536>
- Mbagga, S., Malusu, J., & Lyamtane, E. (2021). Effectiveness of hospitality programme design in developing skills among the graduates from vocational education and training in Arusha Region, Tanzania. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies and Innovative Research*, 8(11), 5785–5794.
<https://doi.org/10.18535/ijmsci/v8i11.06>
- Mgaya, S. (2024). Challenges facing learners' acquisition of employability competencies under competency-based education and training approach in vocational education and training centres in Tanzania. *African Journal of Accounting and Social Science Studies*, 4(2).
<https://doi.org/10.64717/ajass.v4i2.112>
- Ng, Y.-L., & Liu, C.-H. (2025). Cultivating adaptability and competency through enhancing hotel employability skills and language communication abilities. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 63, 15–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2025.02.008>
- Ngatuni, P., & Ulomi, E. N. (2021). Behavioural predictors of students' career intentions in the hospitality and tourism industry in Tanzania. *HURIA Journal of the Open University of Tanzania*, 27(1).
<https://doi.org/10.61538/huria.v27i1.872>
- Ngoepe, L. L., & Wakelin-Theron, N. (2023). Employability attributes of hospitality graduates and expectations of hotel managers. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 14(1), 88–103.
<https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2023vol14no1art1565>
- Nickson, D. (2013). *Human resource management for hospitality, tourism and events*. Routledge.
- Onyuna, A. A., Korir, J., & Rotich, D. (2021). An empirical study of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model and perceived competence in hospitality practice: Evidence from undergraduate hospitality students in Kenya. *Journal of African Studies and Ethnographic Research*.
<https://royalliteglobal.com/african-studies/article/view/688>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). OECD employment outlook 2023: Artificial intelligence and the labour market.
<https://doi.org/10.1787/08785bba-en>
- Putra, F. K. K., Saepudin, P., & Utami, N. G. M. K. (2022). Preferred competencies for tourism and hospitality graduates: Evidence from longitudinal tracer studies. *Journal of Technical Education and Training*.
<http://repository.poltekpar-nhi.ac.id/2046/>
- Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 453–465.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912460400>
- Sanga, J. J. (2020). Hospitality employment perceptions among non-hospitality management students and their implications for subsequent job hire in the industry. *Business Management Review*, 23(2), 3.
<https://commons.udsm.ac.tz/business-management-review/vol23/iss2/3/>
- Saunders, M. N. K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Sisson, L. G., & Adams, A. R. (2013). Essential hospitality management competencies: The importance of soft skills. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 25(3), 131–145.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/10963758.2013.826975>
- Succi, C., & Canovi, M. (2020). Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: Comparing students' and employers' perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9), 1834–1847. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1585420>
- Tanzania Commission for Universities. (2023). University qualifications framework and graduate employability report. <https://www.tcu.go.tz>
- Tushabe, S. B., & Murimi, N. M. (2024). “Bridging the skill gaps”: Analyzing the mismatch between hospitality education and industry needs in Uganda. *African Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 3(1), 201–213. <https://doi.org/10.37284/ajthm.3.1.2362>
- UN Tourism. (2024). Global tourism education guidelines and competency development. <https://www.unwto.org/>
- United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2022). Tourism workforce development and sustainability. UNWTO.
- UNWTO. (2023). Tourism education and skills development report. UNWTO.
- World Bank. (2021). Transforming tourism toward a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive sector: Tanzania economic update. World Bank Group.
- World Economic Forum. (2023). The future of jobs report 2023. World Economic Forum.
- World Travel & Tourism Council. (2023). Hospitality workforce trends and digital skills report. WTTC.
- Yende, S. J. (2025). Harmonising careers: Hospitality and tourism industries unite to elevate graduate employability. Cogent Education.
- Yorke, M. (2006). Employability in higher education: What it is – what it is not. Higher Education Academy.