

Research article

Bridging the gap: Employers' perceptions of hospitality graduates' employability skills in Gauteng, South Africa

Mogomotsi Shaun Thole ¹, Joseph Robert Roberson* ¹ and Malome Prince Shai ¹

¹ Department of Hospitality Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The South African hospitality sector faces a disconnect between the graduate outputs from higher education institutions and the expectations of industry employers. This study aims to explore employers' perspectives on the employability skills of hospitality graduates in Gauteng Province, South Africa, offering context-specific insight into employer expectations within the hospitality sector. Grounded in a positivist paradigm, the research adopted a deductive, quantitative approach, using structured questionnaires to collect data from purposively selected hotel and restaurant managers and supervisors across Gauteng Province. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test. The findings reveal adequate technical training among graduates, but significant deficiencies in soft skills, including communication, adaptability, professionalism, initiative, and customer-service orientation. Recommendations include embedding experiential learning, involving employers in curriculum development, and adopting assessment strategies to enhance holistic employability within higher education institutions. This study provides employer-driven, context-specific evidence from Gauteng that may inform curriculum review, work-integrated learning, and future research on hospitality graduate employability.

KEYWORDS

Graduate employability; employers' perspectives; hospitality industry; soft skills; South Africa

Introduction

The hospitality industry remains a significant pillar of South Africa's economy, contributing substantially to gross domestic product (GDP) and employment. However, despite its economic significance, limited empirical research in South Africa directly examines employers' perceptions of hospitality graduates' employability skills, particularly within province-specific hospitality contexts such as Gauteng, creating a gap in context-specific understanding (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023a). While universities aim to deliver graduates with solid theoretical foundations and technical expertise, employers increasingly express concern regarding graduates' readiness for professional settings, particularly regarding soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and initiative (Chweu et al., 2023). This misalignment has tangible operational consequences. In regions such as Gauteng, where service delivery and client satisfaction are integral to business success, a deficiency in key employability traits can hinder performance and reduce organisational competitiveness (Mhlongo & Daya, 2023). Potgieter et al. (2023) highlight a growing demand for non-technical capabilities, including critical thinking, teamwork, and interpersonal acumen. Despite this, many hospitality graduates continue to enter the workforce lacking essential competencies such as adaptability, initiative, and professional communication (Cronin & Zwissig, 2024). Given these challenges, this study investigates employers' perspectives on the employability skills of hospitality graduates in Gauteng, intending to identify key strengths, deficiencies, and actionable strategies to bridge the gap between academic preparation and industry needs.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR'S CONTACT: Joseph Robert Roberson ✉ RobersonJR@tut.ac.za

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Literature review

Employability is increasingly viewed as a dynamic integration of academic achievement and transferable capabilities that enable graduates to obtain, retain, and excel in employment (Ali et al., 2017; Ressia & Shaw, 2022; Sedlan König & Maškarin Ribarić, 2019). In the hospitality sector, employability encompasses cognitive knowledge and interpersonal, emotional, and behavioural traits. According to Healy et al. (2022), employability must be embedded throughout higher education curricula rather than delivered through discrete or optional components. Recent research in South Africa (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023a) emphasises that hospitality graduates often display firm theoretical grounding but underdeveloped interpersonal adaptability, reinforcing the need for curriculum reform. Van der Westhuizen & Kesa (2014) emphasise that strong partnerships between higher education institutions and industry are critical for equipping students with practical skills. Their study highlights that well-structured Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programmes enable students to transition effectively into the workplace. This aligns with the current study, where employers placed strong value on practical training during students' studies, particularly in relation to workplace readiness and applied skills. This has prompted the development of frameworks tailored for hospitality contexts. Frameworks specific to the hospitality sector emphasise emotional intelligence, professional experience, and generalist skills such as problem-solving and client engagement as complements to subject-specific expertise (Wujema et al., 2022). Wujema et al. (2022) argue that employability in hospitality extends beyond conventional academic assessment and must include a well-rounded set of personal and professional capabilities. Gazier (2022) noted that in the mid-20th century, employability was conceptualised primarily in terms of labour market inclusion. However, by the 1980s, the emphasis shifted to the individual's responsibility for developing industry-relevant skills (Sin & Neave, 2016). While soft skills are increasingly prioritised, debates persist on their universal value versus technical expertise. Research by Mohanty (2019) and Bello & Kamanga (2019) highlights persistent skill gaps in hospitality education, where curricula often prioritise theoretical knowledge over practical or industry-relevant skills. Mohanty (2019) notes a misalignment between tourism education content and industry expectations, while Bello & Kamanga (2019) show that insufficient practical exposure limits graduate readiness. Our study extends these findings to the South African context, demonstrating that similar gaps exist in technical and soft skill domains.

Asefer & Abidin (2021) argue that soft skills, such as communication, enhance employability across various contexts, supported by 91.2% of employers valuing problem-solving (NACE, 2015). Conversely, Cheng et al. (2022) contend that technical skills remain critical in hospitality, citing a 65.7% preference among employers for technical proficiency. In South Africa, this tension reflects a need for balanced curricula that align with Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron's (2023a) call for integrated skill development. Razack et al. (2025) further emphasise the importance of digital literacy in hospitality employability, showing that graduates' digital competencies often fall short of industry expectations. This study's findings corroborate their conclusions, with participants reporting limited exposure to industry-relevant digital tools, suggesting that digital skills should be integrated alongside traditional WIL experiences and interpersonal development.

Conceptual framework

This study is grounded in established employability development frameworks, most notably the CareerEDGE and USEM models, as explained in Figures 1 and 2. These theoretical perspectives emphasise that graduate employability extends well beyond technical competence to include essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, and initiative. From this standpoint, employability is conceptualised as the integrated development of academic knowledge, practical abilities, personal attributes, and experiential understanding, which collectively enable graduates to enter and thrive within the labour market (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) (Figure 1). Within this lens, it is anticipated that employers will perceive greater gaps in soft skills than in technical competencies, particularly in the hospitality industry, where service quality and client interaction are central to performance. Soft skills are inherently relational and situational, typically developed through reflective and experiential learning processes rather than through formal instruction alone (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). The frameworks further propose that structured workplace exposure, including internships and industry-based placements, acts as a vital mechanism for bridging these skill gaps. Such exposure enables students to apply theoretical learning in practice, strengthen their self-efficacy, and develop interpersonal skills essential to employability in real-world contexts. Reflection and evaluation processes strengthen these relationships. Molefe et al. (2018) emphasised the model's relevance for demanding environments, emotional intelligence, time management, and confidence, which are particularly critical in the hospitality and food and beverage management sectors.

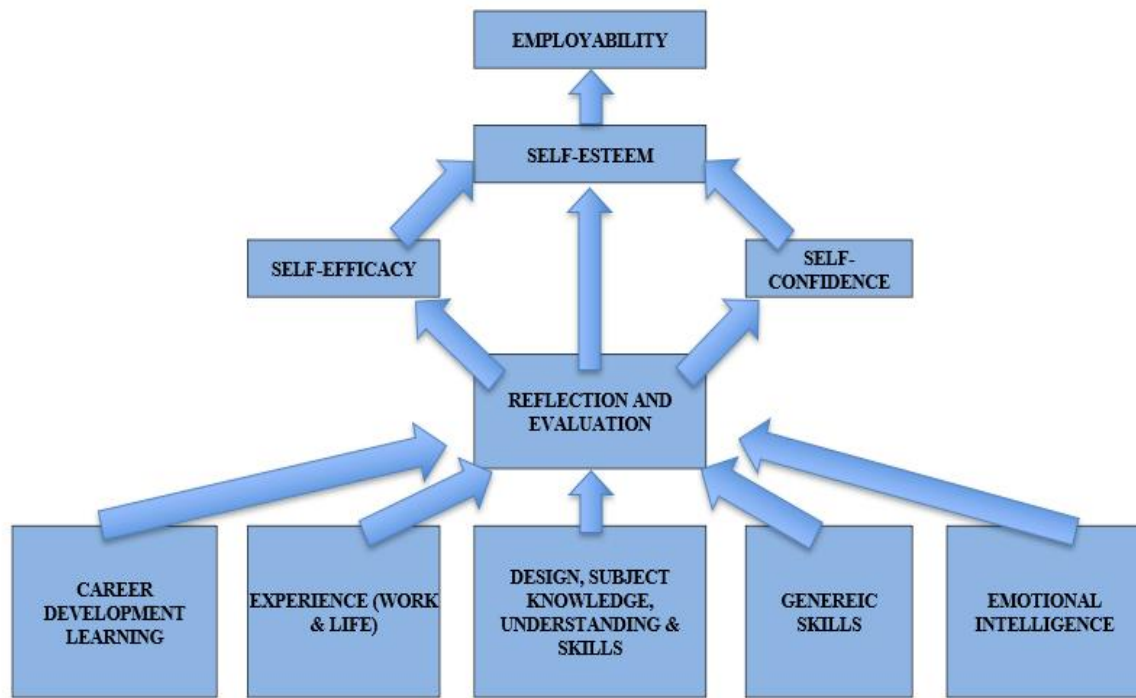


Figure 1. CareerEDGE employability model
Source: Yawson & Yamoah (2023:1021)

Furthermore, the USEM Model, illustrated in Figure 2, conceptualises employability as the interaction between four dimensions: understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs, and metacognition (Thu, 2023). Molefe et al. (2018) highlighted the model's relevance to employability studies, noting that fostering metacognition, understanding one's thought processes, is key to improving creativity, adaptability, and work attitudes.

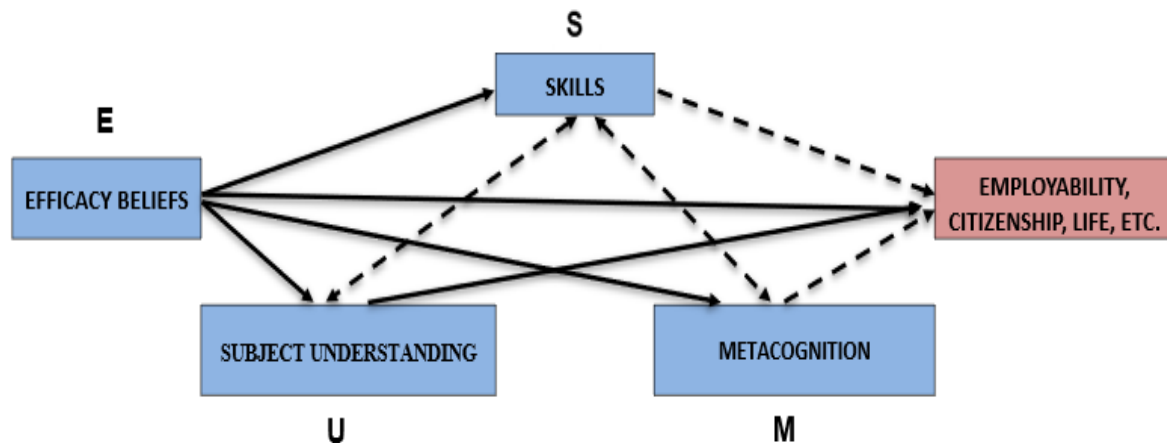


Figure 2. USEM model of employability
Source: Molefe et al. (2018:62)

Employer expectations of graduate employability

Employers typically conceptualise employability as a composite of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal attributes that collectively determine an individual's readiness for work (Sedlan König & Maškarin Ribarić, 2019). Ali et al. (2017) reinforce this definition, emphasising that employability involves not only the capacity to obtain a job but also the ability to function effectively and advance within that role. Ressia and Shaw (2022) further explained that employability includes adapting and growing in dynamic work environments. From the employer's viewpoint, desirable graduates demonstrate not only academic excellence but also practical and transferable capabilities, including leadership, teamwork, resilience, and career self-management (Wallis, 2021). However, Fynn (2016) criticises many South African institutions for treating employability as an adjunct rather than a central curricular aim. Healy et al. (2022) *argue that to address this issue, higher education must take a proactive stance by embedding employability development*

across all levels of instruction. In South Africa's hospitality industry, employers often stress practical work experience and service orientation over purely academic credentials (Brits, 2019). In the hospitality sector, specifically, Wujema et al. (2022) offer a comprehensive model that identifies five core employability domains: generic skills, subject knowledge, emotional intelligence, workplace experience, and career planning. Their framework highlights that hospitality graduates are expected to understand theoretical principles and operate effectively in emotionally charged, socially complex environments, aligning academic preparation with the dynamic realities of hospitality operations.

Employer perceptions of employability skills

Despite recognising the multidimensional nature of employability, employers continue to report dissatisfaction with graduate preparedness globally and within South Africa (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023a). Wang et al. (2024) suggest that such concerns often emerge before university entry, with employers and students questioning whether tertiary institutions effectively foster the development of practical skills. Employers frequently assume that graduates will enter the workforce with the technical knowledge and soft skills necessary to navigate modern, fast-paced work environments (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023). Additionally, studies consistently document a mismatch between academic training and industry expectations, particularly in communication, leadership, and problem-solving (Cheng et al., 2022; Owusu-Mintah & Kissi, 2017). From the industry's perspective, employability includes applying core skills in real-world contexts. This encompasses collaboration, adaptability, and initiative skills. South African hospitality employers consistently report these same gaps, particularly in guest interaction and crisis management skills (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023b). While graduates may prioritise academic performance and their institution's reputation, employers place greater value on practical competence, emotional intelligence, and professionalism (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023; Ressia & Shaw, 2022). Asefer & Abidin (2021) note that recruiters increasingly favour candidates who can contribute immediately with minimal onboarding.

Table 1: Top skills sought by employers

Variable	Percentage
Problem-solving	91.2%
Teamwork	86.3%
Work ethic	80.4%
Analytical ability	79.4%
Written communication	77.5%
Verbal communication	69.6%
Leadership	72.5%
Initiative	69.6%
Attention to detail	67.6%
Technical proficiency	65.7%
Interpersonal skills	62.7%

Source: NACE (2015), cited in Owusu-Mintah & Kissi (2017).

This emphasis on job-readiness is reflected in data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), which identifies the most sought-after graduate attributes. According to NACE (2015, cited in Owusu-Mintah & Kissi, 2017), the most sought-after attributes are problem-solving (91.2%), teamwork (86.3%) and work ethic (80.4%).

Graduate skills deficiencies

Despite clear signals from employers, many universities have been slow to incorporate soft skill development into the core of their programmes. Research by Brits (2019) and Potgieter et al. (2023) indicates that hospitality graduates often demonstrate weaknesses in time management, customer interaction, and collaborative work. These deficiencies can undermine service delivery and disrupt organisational culture. Building on these findings, Chweu et al. (2023) observe that while many students possess adequate theoretical knowledge, they frequently lack the behavioural consistency and practical aptitude required in real-world hospitality roles. Employers continue to report dissatisfaction with graduates' professionalism, initiative, and independent decision-making skills, which are critical in frontline service positions.

Methodology

This research adopts a positivist research philosophy, which supports the use of objective, quantifiable data to explore social phenomena (Saunders et al., 2019). Positivism assumes that reality is external and measurable, and thus it aligns well with the study's aim of analysing employer perceptions of graduate employability in the hospitality industry. While alternative paradigms such as pragmatism offer methodological flexibility (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), this study prioritised consistency with positivist principles to ensure methodological clarity. This paradigm was chosen because it supports objective measurement and statistical analysis, enabling valid comparisons between employer expectations and

graduates' perceived capabilities. The study was exploratory and designed to generate context-specific employer insight rather than to make statistically generalisable claims about the wider hospitality industry in South Africa. This study explores hospitality employers' perceptions of employability within the hospitality industry. Quantitative analysis, conducted through surveys, was employed to collect measurable data, enabling the identification of patterns and trends in employer perceptions of graduate employability. This methodological approach is intended to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings while generating structured, context-specific evidence on employer perceptions of hospitality graduates' employability skills. A deductive approach was adopted, drawing on existing literature regarding the alignment or potential misalignment between graduate attributes and employer expectations (Saunders et al., 2019). More specifically, the study was guided by the expectation that hospitality graduates would be perceived as relatively competent in technical areas but less well prepared in selected soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and initiative. This approach allowed the researcher to examine literature-informed expectations through empirical data collected from hospitality employers.

A quantitative survey strategy formed the core of the data collection process. The instrument was adapted by including additional items on digital literacy and conflict resolution, and by refining wording to reflect current South African hospitality contexts (Mahlare, 2017; Molefe et al., 2019). The survey tool was designed to collect quantitative data on perceived graduate competence across several employability dimensions, including communication, teamwork, professionalism, initiative, and adaptability. A four-point Likert scale enabled respondents to rate their level of agreement, supporting both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Mann-Whitney U tests were employed to examine whether statistically significant differences existed between employer expectations and perceived graduate capabilities, which is appropriate for comparing ordinal data across independent samples. The target population consisted of human resource professionals, managers, and supervisors working in hotels and restaurants across Gauteng Province, South Africa. A purposive sampling method was employed, ensuring the inclusion of only those individuals who met the specified criteria. The employer component of the study comprised 30 purposively selected managers and supervisors from hotels and restaurants in Gauteng Province who were directly involved in evaluating graduate preparedness and workplace performance. A total of 30 employer respondents participated in the study. This approach enabled the survey to gather relevant and insightful responses from professionals with direct experience in evaluating graduate employability (Pallant, 2020). This approach enabled the survey to gather relevant and insightful responses from professionals with direct experience in evaluating graduate employability. Data were collected electronically, and the survey was distributed via email and online platforms. This approach facilitated efficient access to a geographically dispersed sample of employers while maintaining confidentiality and voluntary participation (Han & Anderson, 2020). The survey focused on key employability competencies, including technical skills, communication ability, team collaboration, adaptability, and initiative. These attributes are selected based on literature identifying them as critical indicators of graduate readiness for work in the hospitality industry.

Quantitative data were analysed using both descriptive statistics (mean, median, mode) to summarise trends and inferential techniques, particularly the Mann-Whitney U test, to examine disparities between expected and actual graduate performance (McKnight & Najab, 2022). To assess the instrument's internal reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. A value of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ was accepted as the threshold for satisfactory reliability, indicating the questionnaire's consistency across domains (Pallant, 2020). The Tshwane University of Technology granted ethical approval for the study. Participants were provided with informed consent forms that outlined the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any stage without providing a reason, with no adverse consequences. The study adhered strictly to institutional policies and national data protection standards, ensuring ethical compliance throughout the data collection, storage, and reporting processes (Wani & Sarraf, 2023).

Results

Life skills of graduates

The frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 2 and discussed below. In this section, the respondents were given four possible responses to choose from. The options are Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Life skills encompass the personal attributes and competencies that enable individuals to navigate complex environments, collaborate effectively, and maintain personal productivity. In this study, employers were asked to evaluate how hospitality graduates have developed essential life skills during their studies.

Table 2: Employers' assessment of graduates' life skills

		SA	A	D	SD
Graduates have acquired flexibility skills and can deviate from plans as needed.	Frequency	8	12	6	4
	Percentage	26.67	40	20	13.33
Graduates have acquired leadership skills and can motivate a team to accomplish goals.	Frequency	11	9	6	4
	Percentage	36.67	30	20	13.33
Graduates have acquired the initiative skills necessary to start projects, implement strategies, and make plans independently.	Frequency	11	7	7	4
	Percentage	37.93	24.14	24.14	13.79
Graduates have acquired productivity skills and can maintain efficiency in an age of distraction.	Frequency	10	10	5	5
	Percentage	33.33	33.33	16.67	16.67
Graduates have acquired social skills and can meet and network with other stakeholders for mutual benefit.	Frequency	11	11	4	4
	Percentage	36.67	36.67	13.33	13.33
Graduates have developed planning skills.	Frequency	8	12	6	4
	Percentage	26.67	40	20	13.33
Graduates have developed organising skills.	Frequency	7	12	7	4
	Percentage	23.33	40	23.33	13.33
Graduates have developed entrepreneurial skills.	Frequency	10	10	6	3
	Percentage	34.48	34.48	20.69	10.34
Graduates have developed self-management skills.	Frequency	10	11	5	4
	Percentage	33.33	36.67	16.67	13.33
Graduates have developed problem-solving skills.	Frequency	7	14	7	2
	Percentage	23.33	46.67	23.33	6.67
Graduates have developed teamwork skills.	Frequency	11	10	6	3
	Percentage	36.67	33.33	20	10
Graduates did practical training during their studies.	Frequency	14	9	2	5
	Percentage	46.67	30	6.67	16.67

Note: One employer respondent did not answer the initiative and entrepreneurial-skills items; therefore, percentages for these two items are based on valid responses (n = 29), while all other items are based on n = 30.

Employers' responses indicated that the highest level of strong agreement was for the statement "Graduates did practical training during their studies" (46.67%), suggesting that practical training is highly valued in enhancing graduates' readiness for the hospitality industry. This finding reinforces the argument that exposure to real-world environments during training provides graduates with opportunities to apply theoretical concepts, gain confidence, and adapt to the fast-paced nature of hospitality operations. A strong agreement is also notable for leadership skills (36.67%), social skills (36.67%), and teamwork skills (36.67%), indicating that employers recognise graduates' competence in interpersonal and group-based abilities. These attributes are crucial in hospitality workplaces, where collaboration, guest interactions, and supervisory responsibilities underpin daily operations. Conversely, the lowest strongly agreed responses are recorded for organising skills (23.33%) and problem-solving skills (23.33%), implying that these may require further emphasis within hospitality education programmes. This suggests that while graduates are perceived as socially capable and collaborative, they may face challenges when confronted with situations requiring independent decision-making, multitasking, and strategic planning. Okolie et al. (2020) highlighted similar findings, noting that deficiencies in organising and problem-solving skills among graduates could impact their workplace performance. Addressing these areas could, therefore, enhance graduate employability outcomes. Strengthening such skills through curriculum redesign, case-based learning, and simulated hospitality scenarios could help ensure that graduates are equipped with practical experience and the critical cognitive abilities required to succeed in complex and unpredictable industry environments.

Employers' perceptions of graduate capabilities

Employers in the Gauteng hospitality sector generally assessed graduates' technical skills as satisfactory, with a mean score of 3.8/4 across technical competency items. Notably, 93.33% of employers reported that graduates were prepared for employment in the hospitality industry (Table 3).

Table 3: Employers' preparedness

Employers' preparedness	Frequency	Percentages
Yes	28	93.33%
No	2	6.67%
Total	30	100%

Table 3 summarises the employers' views on whether graduates were prepared to work in the hospitality industry upon completing their qualifications. The results revealed that employers (93.33%) perceived graduates as well-prepared for employment in the hospitality industry. This finding aligns with Jackson's (2016) research, which finds that employers often acknowledge graduates' technical readiness while still questioning their workplace integration skills. Only 6.67% of employers indicated that graduates are not sufficiently prepared for the workplace. Although a minority view, it resonates with Tomlinson's (2017) argument that employability is multidimensional and cannot be measured solely by technical competence. Graduates often lacked professional communication abilities, particularly in managing guest relations and collaborating effectively with colleagues, an issue also observed by Molefe et al. (2019). Previous studies have consistently emphasised communication as a core graduate attribute, with Andrews & Higson (2008)

highlighting its direct link to customer satisfaction in service industries. Secondly, challenges emerged around teamwork, with many employers indicating that graduates struggled to operate efficiently within diverse, high-pressure teams, a standard requirement in the hospitality industry (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023b). Knight & Yorke (2004) argued that teamwork is one of the most transferable skills required for effective graduate employability.

Additionally, there was a noticeable lack of initiative, with graduates demonstrating limited ability to solve problems independently or engage in proactive decision-making (Mahlare, 2017). Harvey (2005) emphasised that initiative and problem-solving are essential for graduates to transition successfully from structured learning environments to unpredictable work settings. Lastly, the results show that employers highlighted a lack of adaptability, especially when graduates faced change, uncertainty, or operational stress. This finding is consistent with the study by Succi & Canovi (2019), which shows that adaptability is one of the most frequently demanded graduate attributes in volatile industries such as hospitality and tourism. The findings reflect a broader employability concern highlighted in the literature, which underscores a disconnect between the competencies imparted by higher education and those demanded by the hospitality industry (Faber, 2023; Saunders et al., 2019). Similar conclusions were reached that higher education institutions often overemphasise disciplinary knowledge at the expense of practical, workplace-relevant skills. This gap underscores the ongoing need for curricula that integrate soft skills, experiential learning, and employer collaboration to ensure graduates are fully equipped to meet industry challenges.

Cronbach's Alpha literacy skills employers

Reliability analysis was conducted on the literacy skills items completed by the employers to determine the internal consistency of this section of the questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated across the three literacy-related items to assess whether they reliably measure the same underlying construct. Table 4 presents the detailed results.

Table 4: Cronbach's Alpha for literacy skills employers

Item	Obs	Item-Test Correlation	Item-Rest Correlation	Inter-item Covariance	Alpha
q21	30	0.9043	0.7977	0.8574713	0.9029
q22	30	0.9340	0.8424	0.7218391	0.8659
q23	30	0.9351	0.8488	0.7321839	0.8596
Test scale				0.7704981	0.9146

The Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.9146 indicates excellent internal consistency among the three literacy skills items. The strong item-test correlations, ranging from 0.9043 to 0.9351, confirm that each item is highly aligned with the measured overall construct. Although Q21 has a slightly lower item-rest correlation (0.7977) than the others, it remains well within acceptable parameters and does not significantly compromise the scale's reliability. The results affirm that the literacy skills section used in the employer questionnaire is highly reliable for assessing perceptions of literacy-related employability skills. The Mann-Whitney U test was applied to examine the differences between expected and perceived graduate attributes. Results revealed statistically significant disparities across all soft skill domains: communication ($p = 0.032$), adaptability ($p = 0.015$), initiative ($p = 0.041$), and teamwork ($p = 0.027$). The outcomes indicate that, although graduates may meet technical academic standards, they achieve technical competency mean scores above 3.5 but underperform in interpersonal and behavioural competencies essential in hospitality roles. The findings thus reinforce the view that soft skills are not being adequately cultivated within current hospitality education frameworks. Open-ended responses indicated recurring concerns regarding graduates' ability to handle guest complaints diplomatically, with 38% of employers citing this as a top area for improvement.

Discussion

The finding shows employers rated graduates' technical competencies higher than their soft skills, suggesting that current curricula prioritise theoretical and operational training over interpersonal skill development. This contributes to the broader employability discourse by offering sector-specific evidence from the hospitality industry, demonstrating that while graduates are technically prepared, they often lack the relational and adaptive capacities crucial for service-driven environments. This aligns with findings by Wessels et al. (2023), who reported similar skill gaps in South Africa's hospitality graduates. Similar trends have been reported in Kenya (Mwendwa & Wachira, 2022) and Ghana (Owusu-Mintah & Kissi, 2017), where employers consistently identify communication and adaptability as the most deficient attributes—indicating a systemic skills-production issue across African hospitality education. The Mann-Whitney U results showed statistical significance in all four soft skills domains, confirming that employers consistently perceive a meaningful and measurable gap between the expected and actual performance of graduates. Consistent with Van der Westhuizen & Kesa (2014), the findings indicate that structured industry

partnerships and WIL opportunities enhance graduates' practical and interpersonal competencies. Internships appear to play a role in bridging the gap between academic preparation and industry expectations, as Van der Westhuizen and Kesa (2014) reported that 64% of surveyed employers gave higher performance ratings to graduates who had completed internships.

A growing critique within the sector is that universities tend to produce graduates who are "qualification-ready" rather than "work-ready", meaning that graduates often lack the interpersonal agility and critical thinking demanded by real-world hospitality settings (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023a). This study advances that critique by demonstrating that the deficit is not simply in skill possession but in the ability of curricula to integrate interpersonal agility, critical thinking, and reflective practice into learning experiences. The findings contribute to theory by refining generic "work-ready" claims and demonstrating that employers in hospitality specifically prioritise soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability, as predictors of job performance and long-term career progression, often more so than technical proficiency (Asefer & Abidin, 2021; Santos, 2024). Practically, this underscores the urgency for curriculum reform, industry-integrated learning, and the intentional development of socio-emotional competencies to produce graduates who meet the evolving needs of the labour market. The study also supports the findings of Mohanty (2019), Bello & Kamanga (2019), and Razack et al. (2025), which show that skill gaps persist in technical, practical, and digital domains. Specifically, graduates report deficiencies in digital literacy and applied hospitality skills, which mirror global patterns identified in these AJHTL studies. These insights highlight the need for curricula to address interpersonal, technical, and digital competencies simultaneously.

Additionally, research by Hussein (2024) indicates that postgraduate students with strong networking abilities and emotional intelligence are better positioned for employment success, highlighting the importance of soft skills in the hiring process. These findings suggest that hospitality programs should integrate soft skills training into core modules, rather than treating them as supplementary. Industry advisory boards could play a key role in shaping curricula that strike a balance between operational skills and interpersonal competencies. This underscores the need for curriculum redesign that systematically embeds practical skill development in line with industry expectations. Interestingly, this study's finding that technical competencies met employer expectations contrasts with findings in Nigeria (Oyinloye et al., 2024), where employers cited significant technical training gaps. This difference may reflect a stronger emphasis on operational training in South African hospitality programs.

Implications

Practical implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for hospitality education providers, industry stakeholders, and policymakers seeking to address the persistent gap between graduate competencies and employer expectations. Recent research highlights that the employability gap is a significant concern in South Africa and a recurring challenge in global hospitality contexts (Mutalib et al., 2022). Specifically, these implications underscore the need for curriculum revisions that align with current industry trends and demands, as well as the importance of fostering stronger partnerships between educational institutions and hospitality businesses to ensure that graduates are adequately prepared for the workforce. This is consistent with Wessels et al. (2023), who argue that joint curriculum planning with industry partners enhances the relevance of graduate training. Investing in professional development opportunities for educators and students can help bridge the gap and improve overall industry readiness. Scholars such as Ngoepe and Wakelin-Theron (2023b) emphasise that internships, mentorships, and work-integrated learning models can effectively cultivate soft skills, including adaptability, initiative, and communication. By focusing on these areas, educational institutions can better equip graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the ever-evolving hospitality industry. This proactive approach can improve job placement rates and overall satisfaction among graduates and employers, a trend also reported in recent international studies where enhanced employability interventions improved labour market integration (Mwendwa & Wachira, 2022). The recommendations outlined below are grounded in empirical evidence and sector-specific challenges, offering actionable strategies to enhance the employability of hospitality graduates.

Integration of soft skills into core curriculum

One of the most significant implications is the need to integrate soft skills, including communication, adaptability, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, into the core hospitality curriculum. These skills are crucial for success in the industry, as they enable professionals to interact effectively with guests, colleagues, and management. Additionally, integrating these soft skills into the curriculum ensures that graduates are well-rounded and prepared for the industry's dynamic nature. Employers consistently prioritise these non-technical competencies for effective service delivery, leadership, and conflict resolution in high-pressure

hospitality environments. As such, soft skills training should not be confined to elective modules or extracurricular workshops, but instead formally assessed as part of programme learning outcomes. Institutions can employ a variety of pedagogical approaches, such as case studies, role-playing, peer evaluation, and reflective journaling, to develop these competencies in authentic contexts. Equipping students with these interpersonal skills enhances their job readiness and contributes to long-term career sustainability in a people-centred industry.

Strengthening university-industry collaboration

A second implication is the need for stronger and more systematic collaboration between universities and hospitality employers. Universities should work closely with hospitality employers to co-develop curricula, incorporate mandatory internship placements, and embed soft skill modules into core programmes, including conflict resolution, cross-cultural communication, and problem-solving. Industry representatives should be engaged as active partners in curriculum development, guest lecturing, serving on advisory boards, and participating in joint research initiatives. Such partnerships ensure that academic programmes remain agile and responsive to industry shifts, including digital transformation, sustainability practices, and innovations in customer experience. Co-designing course content and assessments with employers can also help bridge the misalignment between theoretical instruction and operational realities, thereby improving graduate preparedness.

Implementation of structured, feedback-oriented internships

Thirdly, internship programmes must be re-evaluated and restructured to ensure they provide meaningful, developmental experiences. This can be achieved by incorporating more hands-on projects, mentorship opportunities, and feedback mechanisms to help interns grow professionally. Additionally, companies should establish clear goals and expectations for interns to ensure they gain valuable skills and knowledge during their time with the organisation. Furthermore, incorporating mentorship opportunities and regular performance evaluations can enhance the overall effectiveness of internship programmes. As highlighted by Faber (2023), internships are most effective when they are mandatory, carefully supervised, and include formal mechanisms for feedback from host employers. This feedback helps students reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement and provides universities with valuable data on the effectiveness of their training models. Structured internships can also support the development of workplace behaviours, such as punctuality, customer engagement, and stress management, which are difficult to cultivate in classroom settings alone. Furthermore, ensuring internships are quality-assured and embedded within a credit-bearing framework can help avoid exploitative practices and ensure equitable access to work-based learning opportunities. Priority should be given to embedding soft skills in core modules, expanding structured internship opportunities and strengthening industry advisory board participation in curriculum review processes. The study's findings provide a data-driven foundation for curriculum reform in hospitality education. They should catalyse sustained collaboration between academia and industry to ensure that graduates are fully prepared for the evolving demands of the sector.

Conclusion

This study found that hospitality graduates in Gauteng generally meet employer expectations in technical competencies but fall short in key soft skills such as communication, adaptability, initiative, and teamwork. Recent studies echo this finding, emphasising that while operational training is adequately covered in South African institutions, interpersonal development remains insufficiently prioritised. These gaps highlight a misalignment between academic preparation and the interpersonal demands of the industry. Similar patterns have been noted in other regions, where employers repeatedly cited weak communication and poor adaptability as barriers to graduate employability. This suggests that the challenge identified in Gauteng may also resonate with concerns reported in wider hospitality education literature. The research objectives were achieved by quantitatively assessing employer perceptions and identifying priority areas for skill development, thereby contributing context-specific insight into graduate employability within Gauteng's hospitality sector. Emerging evidence also suggests that integrating structured workplace exposure into curricula can provide students with opportunities to strengthen these critical interpersonal skills, offering practical pathways to bridge the gap between academic instruction and industry expectations.

In this case, Universities offering hospitality management programmes should systematically review and update their curricula to reflect the evolving demands of the hospitality sector. Particular focus must be placed on strengthening graduates' leadership, critical thinking, decision-making, and adaptability skills, which employers highlighted as significant gaps. This can be achieved by integrating leadership modules, essential workshops on critical thinking, and problem-solving case studies into the core curriculum,

rather than treating them as optional extras. This will ensure that graduates are technically competent and possess the interpersonal and adaptive skills essential for success in dynamic hospitality environments. By embedding these competencies into curriculum design, higher education institutions can align more closely with employer expectations and better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of the hospitality sector. Moreover, Employers should clearly and consistently articulate their expectations regarding graduate competencies. Sharing detailed job profiles and skill requirements with universities and students (through talks, webinars, job fairs, and advisory panels) will enable academic institutions to prepare students accordingly and help students self-assess and develop any missing skills.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was limited to Gauteng-based hospitality employers and drew on a relatively small purposive sample, which means that the findings should not be interpreted as statistically generalisable to the broader South African hospitality sector. Secondly, the cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot of employer perceptions at one point in time. Thirdly, the study relied on self-reported employer perceptions, which may be influenced by response bias. In addition, one employer respondent did not answer the initiative and entrepreneurial-skills items; therefore, percentages reported for those two items are based on valid responses rather than the full employer sample. Despite these limitations, the structured questionnaire approach was considered appropriate for generating systematic, context-specific quantitative evidence on employer perceptions of graduate employability skills. Future research may extend the study across multiple provinces, include larger samples, and employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to deepen understanding of hospitality graduate employability in South Africa.

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