



# Skills gaps and training needs in the tourism sector in Malawi

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## Abstract

Tourism is one of the major industries that contributes to economic development in many countries including Malawi. However, for the industry to reach its full potential in generating growth and employment there is need to ensure that required skills are available for the industry to tap from. The need for skills is even greater now than ever before due to globalization forces. Globalization and increasing competition mean that the ability of the human factor to deliver quality products and services is a key source of competitive advantage worldwide. There is greater need now than before for employees in the sector to possess additional skills that go beyond core hospitality operations. Regardless of this realization there still exists skills gaps between those that students have and those that industry demand. Therefore, this paper aims at assessing the skills gaps and training needs in the tourism industry in Malawi. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used in the study. The results show that tertiary institutions focus more on the theoretical knowledge delivery and provide less practical experiences to the students, yet the industry requires more practical knowledge. There are serious skills and knowledge gaps in the accommodation services, food and beverage services, travel services and attractions and transport services in Malawi. It is recommended that students should be provided with more internship opportunities before their graduation to ensure that they acquire some basic requisite practical skills.

**Keywords:** Skills gaps, training needs, tourism, hospitality, Malawi

## Introduction

Tourism is one of the major industries that contribute to the economy. The tourism and hospitality industry contributes at least 10 percent of global GDP and in Malawi, its contribution stands at 10.4 percent of GDP and 9.9 percent of total employment (WTTTC, 2018). The contribution of the tourism industry to Malawi's GDP and employment is



expected to continue to grow. Despite the fact that the tourism industry is not fully developed in Malawi, there is great potential for its continued contribution to development both in terms of forex earnings and employment creation.

For this growth to be sustained, there is need to improve the quality of products and services offered to customers. This is important considering that today's customers are sophisticated and seek products and services that go beyond merely satisfying their boarding and lodging needs as they show a preference for hospitality experiences which are carefully tailored to each individual's unique tastes and needs (Bharwani & Butt, 2012). This puts employees as the main deliverers of brand promise and key determinants of other performance indicators such as service quality, competitive advantage and organisational performance (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Consequently, Bharwani and Butt (2012) observe that talent management and development play an important strategic and operational role in the success of a hospitality organization.

Despite tourism's obvious contribution and potential to global and national economies, it is an industry that faces a number of chronic challenges (Baum, 1990) including human resources, particularly a dearth of skills. Increasing competition levels and complexity over the recent decades has been evident in the tourism and hospitality industry (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). Hence the skills needed by tourism and hospitality industry reflect these changes (Chung, 2000).

Human resources or the human factor is considered a key challenge for tourism and hospitality due to emerging trends and changing paradigms in the industry (Bharwani & Butt, 2012). According to Bharwani and Butt (2012) globalisation and increasing international competition have placed the ability of the human factor to deliver quality products and services as a key source of competitive advantage world-wide. These trends place demands on the sector's employees to possess additional skills and competencies other than only those related to core hospitality operations.

Additionally, many studies have focused on tourism and hospitality education in relation to industry requirements in terms of skills and competencies required. Most findings show that a gap exists between the skills acquired by students and the skills required by the industry. Little academic attention has been paid on the skills gaps and industry needs in the developing nations, especially in the sub Saharan Africa.

In Malawi, the first group of locally trained students at degree level in tourism and hospitality graduated in 2011 following the introduction of the bachelor's degree programs at one public institution, Mzuzu University in 2007. At present, a number of higher learning institutions have introduced programs in tourism and hospitality management at different levels including certificate, diploma and degree. With this trend, it is important to understand the relevance of the skills obtained from these institutions, to the industry.

This paper therefore examines the relevance of the skills imparted by educators to the industry, and establishes the existence of any gaps.

### **Skills gaps in the tourism and hospitality industry**

The hospitality and tourism industry is a service industry and the characteristics of services including intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, inseparability of production and consumption, means there is a high degree of interpersonal interface between customers and service providers (Kusluvan et al., 2010; Parasuraman et al., 1985). On



the simultaneity or inseparability of consumption and production, the intensity of labour can be attributed to “the irreplaceable role of personal service in service delivery” (Kusluvan, 2003, p. 5). Being service industries, tourism and hospitality are considered human resource-oriented industries and that means they highly depend on organizational employees in delivering quality service in line with the needs and expectations of consumers (Bharwani & Butt, 2012; Yoo & Kim, 2013; Yoon, 2009). This highlights the crucial role that employees play in the tourism and hospitality industry as they project the image of the organization. In the same vein, Harris and Chernatony (2001) point out the profound influence employees have on consumers’ perception of an organization, which in the long run leads to organizational performance and success. In general, employees are considered “key determinants of service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty, competitive advantage and organizational performance” (Kusluvan et al., 2010, p. 172). Furthermore, Chapman and Lovell (2006) note that the quality of human resource plays a crucial role in determining service quality, service delivery efficiency and customer satisfaction. Studies show that the ability of human resources to deliver quality services is emerging as a key source of competitive advantage in the industry worldwide due to the proliferation of international competition and globalization (Baum et al., 1997; Bharwani & Jauhari, 2011). Analoui (2002) indicates that the most vital assets or valuable resources in any organization are people hence they determine the success or failure of an organization.

With the trend of globalization, employees in the tourism and hospitality sector especially the frontline employees need to expand their skill base and acquire competencies that will enable them to develop “a level of engagement and interaction with guests that is significantly better than that characterized by the traditional skills model of the sector” (Baum, 2006, p. 126). According to Riley et al., (2002, p. 143) “skill is always surrounded by controversy because perceptions of skill are highly subjective and relative. Who or who is not skilled is inevitably an issue”. On the same, Bradley et al., (2000) note the distinct criteria used to define a skill, for example they question whether we should consider formal qualifications held by an individual; the amount of training required for a job; and the ability of an individual to perform complex job tasks. On the other hand, competencies are “those activities and skills judged essential to perform the duties of a specific position” and are based on “one’s ability to accomplish specific job-related tasks and assume the role connected to the position” (Tas, 1988).

Employers today are seeking a wide range of skills and competencies in tourism and hospitality graduates in order to maintain competitive advantage despite the shortage of skills in the tourism field (Bagri, 2006; Jauhari, 2006; Mohinder, 2008). Therefore, the tourism and hospitality industry should enhance people development to improve business performance and service quality in order to enhance long-term competitiveness (Tensone, 2004). In economically marginalized regions specifically developing nations the tourism industry has the potential for regional development as well as poverty alleviation (Mayaka & Akama, 2006). And in order to improve the quality of the products and services offered in the tourism industry, employees must be adequately trained to ensure high levels of professional competency. Such training needs to ensure that skills mismatch, which is common in a number of sectors including tourism and hospitality, is minimized. This is important because trained employees are also key to the competitiveness of tourism businesses and would reduce the employee turnover costs. To achieve this, there is need for proper coordination in the design and development of education and training programmes of tourism at all levels. This will further help in matching what training institutions offer with skills required by industry.



## **Human resource challenges in the tourism and hospitality industry**

With the emerging trends in the tourism and hospitality industry, human resource management has become very challenging and is regarded a central concern for professionals in the industry (Enz, 2001; 2009). One of the greatest challenges is the shortage of manpower, in terms of both quality and quantity (Bharwani & Butt, 2012; Sun, Liu, Law, Zhong, 2017). This is mostly attributed to the difficulty in attracting, recruiting and retaining qualified people with the appropriate skills and competencies matching the positions (Bratton & Gold, 2012). However the challenge of recruiting skilled employees is mostly faced by large firms in the industry, as small ones have been perceived to have lower level of need for skilled staff and labour turnover (Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Thomas & Long, 2001). Another reason for shortage of skilled people is that educators do not impart the required skills to the people being trained (Kamau & Waudu, 2012). The poor reputation of the industry, which has its roots in “the origin of hospitality work within domestic service and its consequent association with servility” (Baum et al., 1997, p. 222), is also a reason why it is difficult for hospitality businesses to attract talent. This is further compounded by the perception that the industry offers very few career and promotion opportunities, associated with low wages and hard labour (Enz, 2004; Riley et al., 2002).

Kamau and Waudu (2012) also posit that some employers are not even aware of the importance of some skills. On the other hand, Fjelstul (2007) and Hannam (2004) indicate that employers seek a combination of attributes, skills, and experiences with interrelated elements, both informal and structured. They further note that some operators in the industry would prefer conducting in-house trainings as opposed to sending their staff to educational institutions. The challenge for such a preferred staff development strategy is that the hospitality business operators end up being overwhelmed with the training at the expense of their core business activities (Kamau & Waudu, 2012). Furthermore, Martin, Mactaggart and Bowden (2006) postulate that the service industry is faced with continuous challenges ranging from employee incompetence especially at the managerial level, which may result from lack of employee motivation hence they are not committed to their work.

Other factors leading to lack of employee commitment and high turn-over rates in the industry include poor working conditions which shows their talent is not fully recognized and appreciated by their respective employers. Thus the main human resource areas of concern affecting the industry include poor image of the tourism industry, rewards and benefits, working conditions and hours, availability of skilled staff and education.

## **Tourism education versus industry needs**

As discussed in the previous section, the tourism and hospitality industry is faced with a serious shortage of high-level management workers therefore the nexus between tertiary education and industry needs cannot be overstated. In this case, there is need to consider the perceptions and priorities of the industry in relation to those of trainers and educators. This is to ensure that training institutions produce graduates that are employable by making sure that resources devoted to training and education are optimized to achieve the appropriateness and relevance of the skills exhibited by graduates on their entry into various work places (Baum, 1990). This will help close the gap that exists between the educators and practitioners (Dhiman, 2012). For example, studies by Mayaka and King (2002) and Austra and Asta (2009) confirmed a mismatch between the skills learnt and those required by industry.



The issue of education and training of tourism professionals globally has been the subject of much debate (Airley & Tribe, 2005; Kaplan, 2004; Pechlaner, Zehrer & Raich, 2006; Phillip, 2007). Some scholars have reckoned that many employers in the industry indicate that students are most often not well prepared for the workplace hence call on universities to produce graduates that are employable by providing transferable skills that can be taken to the workplace (Barrie, 2006; Hofmann, 1998; Kember & Leung, 2005; Mohinder, 2008). Furthermore, employers demand a range of skills and competencies from graduates and expect them to be work ready (Defranco, 1992; Mayo, 2003). In view of this, Dhiman (2012) opine that employability skills must be applied throughout the curriculum at all levels rather than being embedded in one module. In relation to this, Umbreit (1992) contends that educators must take a leading role in providing students with a relevant curriculum as far as industry requirements are concerned, and keeping abreast of the industry trends.

There is need therefore for the educators to learn from the industry and vice versa, because understanding how best to educate and develop human capital would benefit the whole tourism industry (Ladkin, 2005). Additionally, Haven-Tang and Jones (2006) highlight that educators and tourism businesses need to work together in order to understand each other's operating environments and need to bridge the existing gap between what learning providers deliver and the industry requirements.

Curriculum has been defined in so many ways but this paper adopts Tribe's (2005) definition that curriculum is the program of educational experiences that is packaged as certificate, diploma or degree programmes. Specifically Gunn (1979) defined tourism education as the study of the elements involved in tourism including research, professional preparation, continuing education and public service tourism training.

Common problems contributing to the gaps in the industry requirements and skills imparted by educators include the shortages of tourism educators, standards in tourism education, accreditation of courses and involvement of the industry in curriculum development. In order to meet the growing demand, there is the proliferation of public and private universities and colleges with varied curriculum (Kamau & Waudo, 2012; Mayaka & Akama, 2006). Despite the increase in training institutions, there is lack of policy guidelines and strategic plans on the development of tourism education and training in many countries especially developing nations (Mayaka & Akama, 2006), and that most developing countries readily adopt available western tourism education models hence unlikely to meet the local industry needs (Theuns & Go, 1992). In the same vein, Ernawati and Pearce (2003) indicate that much literature on tourism education has focused on developed countries with few publications in developing countries.

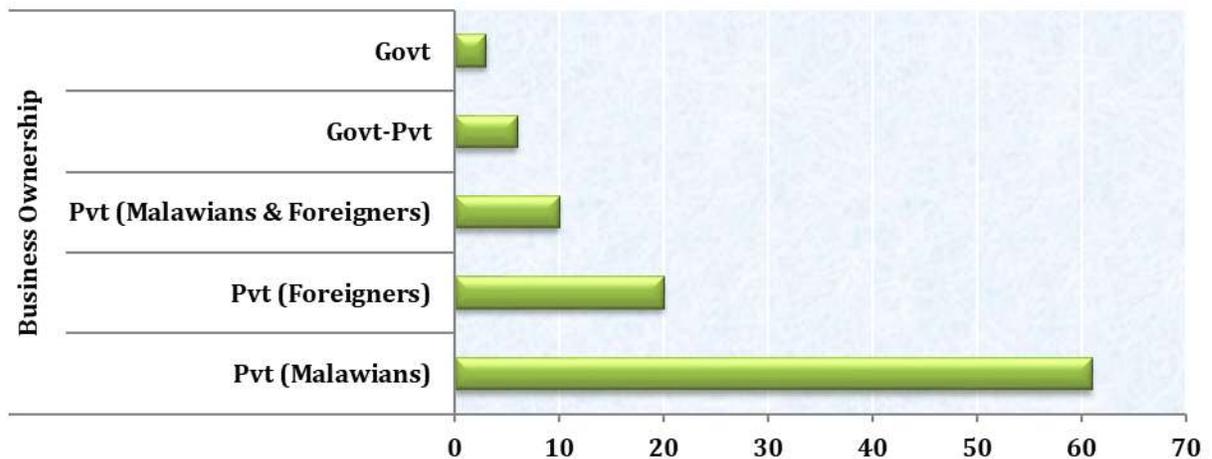
Sadi and Henkerson (2005) indicate that the academia should be knowledgeable about the industry requirements and also be innovative with new ideas and skills that can enhance the delivery of service. Another challenge is that what the industry expects from tourism and hospitality graduates varies from country to country. Furthermore, Haven-Tang and Jones (2006) point out that skills shortages in the labour market and the poor reputation of the industry as an employer encourages employers to recruit people without the appropriate qualifications. With all these challenges, Becton and Graetz (2001) state that it has not been easy for educators to accurately assess industry requirements as a whole and provide specialized programmes.



## Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods design. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through document review, survey, semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussion. Mixed methods research gives a researcher the opportunity to combine qualitative and quantitative data into one large database whereby the results are used to reinforce each other where the qualitative material supports the quantitative results (Creswell, 2009). In the survey, 100 interviewer completed questionnaires were administered to 100 tourism and hospitality establishments resulting in 92 usable questionnaires, representing a 92% response rate. Only one questionnaire was supposed to be completed at each sampled establishment. The service mix in the sampled institutions was diverse though the survey questionnaire categorized the institutions into three broad groups: accommodation, food and beverages; transport services; and travel services and attractions.

Over 70% of the responding institutions were in the category of hospitality services (accommodation, food and beverages). Most of the institutions that responded to the questionnaire (55 representing 61% of the total sample) were private and owned by Malawians and very few (3 representing 3%) were solely owned by the government. Figure 1 below shows ownership arrangements of the responding institutions.



**Figure 1.** Business ownership Source: Authors

With regards to size of the establishments, as determined by the number of employees, the majority (58%) were categorized as small, meaning they had 5 to 49 employees while micro institutions (with 1-4 employees) were the fewest at on 5 percent. A breakdown of respondent institutions by size is provided in table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Size of business

Size	Micro (1-4)	Small (5-49)	Medium (50-99)	Large (100 more)	Total
Frequency	5	53	18	16	92
Percentage	5	58	20	17	100

Source: Authors



For the respondent institutions we disaggregated employees in terms of their age and academic qualifications. As table 2 below shows, most of the employees in the respondent institutions (52%) were aged between 25 and 34 while only 4% were aged 55 and above. In terms of academic qualifications, the majority of employees in the respondent institutions (47%) had professional certificates and only 1% had masters' degrees.

**Table 2.** Age and academic qualifications of employees in respondent institutions

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Age</b>	18-24	464	13
	25-34	1925	52
	35-54	1157	31
	55+	156	4
<b>Qualifications</b>	Master's degree	44	1
	Bachelor's degree	155	4
	Diploma	703	18
	Certificate	1841	47
	Other	1196	30

**Source:** Authors

Fifteen key informant semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion (8 participants) were carried out to complement the survey. As noted by Briggs (1986), key informant interviews gives a researcher opportunities to probe more on various topics relevant to the issues under study.

The key informants and focus group participants included nineteen representatives of tourism and establishments (managers) and four government (tourism) officials. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select the participants for the interviews.

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) steps that include transcription, coding, searching for themes, reviewing of themes, defining and naming of themes and production of a report. Quantitative data was then analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and focused on descriptive statistics such as frequencies and proportions.



## Findings and Discussion

### Critical skills gaps and training needs in the tourism and hospitality industry

The study established the critical skills gaps and training needs in the tourism and hospitality industry. These are the essential skills and knowledge required for effective performance of institutions in the industry. These skills and training needs were identified as the ones that are difficult to find on the market or to train either through tertiary education institutions or on the job. The study focused on the skills required to effectively manage four aspects of the industry, that is, 1) accommodation, 2) food and beverages, 3) Travel Services and Attractions, and 4) transport services.

### Accommodation services

The operators were requested to rate their experiences in terms of how often they face challenges or difficulties in training staff, particularly accommodation managers, room stewards, and house keepers. Only 4% of respondents said they always experience challenges or difficulties in training accommodation managers and room stewards, while 5% said they always experienced challenges in training house keepers. Still only a small percentage (less than 17%) said they experience challenges in training room stewards, while 23% and 21% said that they experience challenges or difficulties in training house keepers and accommodation managers respectively.

On the contrary, 12% indicated that they never experienced challenges or difficulties in training accommodation managers, while 17% never experienced challenges or difficulties in training house keepers and room stewards.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents, 49% for accommodation managers, 38% for room stewards, and 24% for house keepers, said the challenges or difficulties in training of staff in the studied categories were not applicable (See figure 2 below).

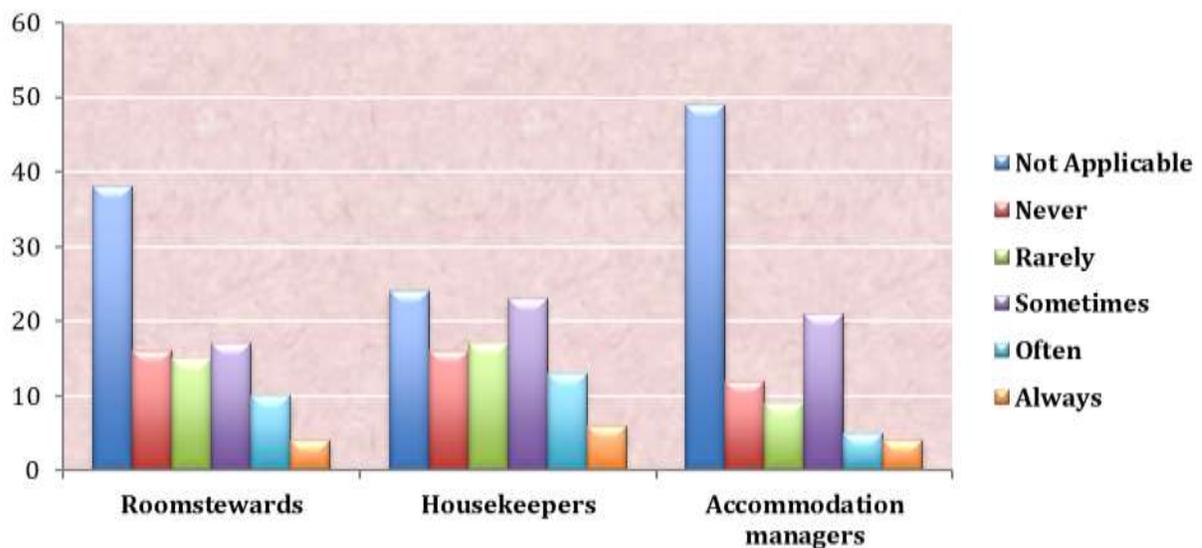


Figure 2. Training needs for accommodation

Source: Authors



This indicates serious skills and knowledge gaps in the accommodation services as it implies that the institutions under study did not view the skills as important and were not interested to formally train their accommodation managers, room stewards and housekeepers. However, this might also mean lack of awareness on the required skills. As Kamau and Waudu (2012) suggest, some employers within the hospitality sector lack awareness on the skills required by employees and it was not surprising to note that some respondents in this study indicated that training of accommodation managers, room stewards and housekeepers is not applicable in their respective companies.

Findings from the key informant interviews clearly showed that there are serious gaps in housekeeping within the accommodation sub sector such that it is not uncommon for clients to complain of dirty rooms and dirty linen. With regards to skills requirements it is important to note that the majority of respondent institutions were small, catering for a limited client base, whose view of training and training budgets would be that it is an unnecessary cost that has to be avoided. As Horng and Lin (2013) observe, compared with other industries, the tourism industry fails to provide enough career development and planning opportunities because most of them are SMEs which are unable to invest sufficient money, time and resources in human resource development.

### **Food and beverages services**

Like in accommodation, only a small percentage of respondents said they always experience challenges or difficulties in training staff, 6% for waiters, waitresses and chefs, 5% for cooks, and 4% for bartenders and food & beverage managers. Slightly a large number of respondents said they sometimes experience difficulties or challenges in training staff, 29% for waiters and waitresses, 32% for chefs, 26% for cooks, 27% for bartenders, and 14% for food & beverage managers. On the contrary, a slightly small number of respondents indicated that they never experience challenges or difficulties in training staff, 15% for waiter and waitresses, 10% for chefs, 7% for cooks, 10% for bartenders, and 15% for food & beverage managers. These results show that there are skills gaps in the food and beverages sub sector and employers are facing challenges in training their staff. Other researchers such as Becton and Graetz (2001) have enumerated a number of barriers that small businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry encounter. Such barriers include the cost of training and inflexible hours.

Like in accommodation services, the majority of respondents indicated that staff training for the mentioned job categories was not applicable in their institutions: 37% for food and beverage managers, 29% for bartenders, 28% for cooks, 20% for chefs and 25% for waiters & waitresses. However, since these institutions offer food and beverages, the skills sets and training needs for the mentioned job categories should be relevant. Thus the findings paint a grim picture on the availability of requisite skills for the sub-sector and lack of understanding.

The quantitative findings support the qualitative arguments that most restaurants in the country do not have qualified chefs and food and beverage managers. The problem, according to one of the key informants, is that *“most operators opt for cheap labour and hire poorly trained or untrained people”*. Furthermore, it was noted that some employers hire staff with qualifications from unaccredited training institutions.

These findings highlight the problem of lack of policy guidelines and strategic plans on the development of tourism training and education in many countries especially developing nations as indicated by Mayaka and Akama (2006). As one of the hotel



managers interviewed lamented, pastry chefs are rarely found on the market and when such skills are imparted through in-house training, it becomes difficult to fill a vacancy when the staff leaves.

### **Travel Services and Attractions**

This category comprises of national parks, wildlife reserves, nature & leisure parks, museums and monuments, travel agencies, tour operators, event management agencies, and destination management organisations. The majority of operators think that training of staff in the assessed job categories is not applicable for their institutions; 96% for tour guides, 94% for museum or heritage managers, 93% for curators, 88% for tour operators and 81% for destination managers. None of the respondents said they always have challenges or difficulties in training tour guides, curators and museum or heritage managers, but only a few (2% for destination managers and 3% for tour operators). Likewise, only very few respondents indicated that they often have challenges or difficulties in training staff in the assessed categories, 1% for tour guides, museum or heritage managers and tour operators, 2% for curators and 4% for destination managers. Similarly, very few respondents said they never have challenges in training staff, 1% for tour guides, curators and museum or heritage managers, and 2% for destination managers and tour operators.

Since the questions were tailor made for operators in travel and attractions, the large number of respondents reporting that the skills sets for the assessed job categories were not applicable indicates a serious gap in skills and knowledge in the sector. The very small number that indicated that they never experience challenges or difficulties in training the staff in the assessed job categories might not actually mean abundance of skills in the sector, but rather a dysfunctional lack of knowledge and staff capacity development initiative amongst the operators, in line with Kamau and Waudo (2012) who indicate lack of awareness among employers on what skills are required of the employees.

It was further noted from the key informant interviews that tour guiding and interpretation is a critical skill in the travel services and attractions. The respondents revealed skills deficiencies in tour guiding. They argued that though tour guiding is a profession, in Malawi it is considered a job for the uneducated. It was noted that there are no institutions in Malawi offering any formal training in tour guiding. Hence they recommended that tour guiding should be taught at college level. The idea is that for Malawi to develop the tourism sector, there is need for professional tour guides with knowledge of foreign languages like French, Chinese, Portuguese and in-depth understanding of the natural and cultural tourism products in Malawi. As noted by a proprietor of a travel agency:

There is deficiency in skills on guiding and interpretation. To solve the problem courses at diploma level would be fitting. Tour guiding modules can also be incorporated in the degree programmes.

These sentiments were echoed by another respondent:

...there is a big gap on product knowledge as most people who do tour guiding do not know the product being offered. Consequently, there is a lot of misinformation given to international tourists about Malawi by people who guide but lack knowledge.



The need for skills in language [and communication] is commonplace in the industry. Becton and Graetz (2001) observe that among the five skills' areas that may need upgrading, language and culture was one of them while Baum (1990) highlights soft skills that are in demand which include professionalism and communication.

On the other hand, the respondents maintained that numerical and analytical skills relevant in preparing tour packages are not adequate. The argument was that there is need to develop programmes that should equip students with ample knowledge on tailor made numerical and accounting skills for the tourism and hospitality sector. As one practitioner in the sector argued:

...there is need for specialized accounting programme for the tourism and hospitality sector. Students should acquire knowledge on tour packaging, how tickets are issued, and the relevant computer packages. Unfortunately, our schools are compromising on these skills- these are the areas that are overlooked.

The sentiments appear to be supported by the findings that suggest that the travel services and attractions in Malawi are poorly managed due to lack of skills in the sector. Over 80% of the respondents said that trainings for the skills sets for the assessed job categories in the administrative, management and others were not applicable to their institutions.

The implication is that the majority of the assessed institutions do not believe that skills development for administrative staff, human resource managers, tourism and marketing managers, travel agency managers, event managers and tourism information centre managers are relevant. Thus there appear to be a serious skills gaps and training requirements in the management and administration of the travel services and attractions in Malawi.

### **Transport Services**

This category comprises of airlines/aviation, bus or coach operators, and car hire services. Like in the travel services and attractions, the majority of the respondents in the transport services had the view that the skills sets for the assessed job categories were not applicable in their institutions. Only 1% of the respondents indicated that they always have challenges or difficulties in training staff. While the results would mean that the majority of the operators appear to have little problems concerning training of their staff members, the reality is that the majority of the operators lack skills and knowledge and have critical training needs. Overall, there is a general need to develop the sector to meet international standards since most operators appear to believe that the skills sets and job categories that were assessed were actually not applicable.

The in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion established that there are problems in car hire companies as most drivers who at times work as guides have very poor knowledge about Malawi tourism products. As they mostly double as tour guides, the drivers need to be knowledgeable of the visitors' attractions in the country.

However, only few tour operators offer on the job training about tour guiding basics. The skills gaps and training needs in the transport services, like in the travel services and attractions, appear to a certain extent to stem from lack of skills in management, administration and other staff categories as demonstrated by the findings from the quantitative aspect of the study.



### **Generic skills gaps and training needs**

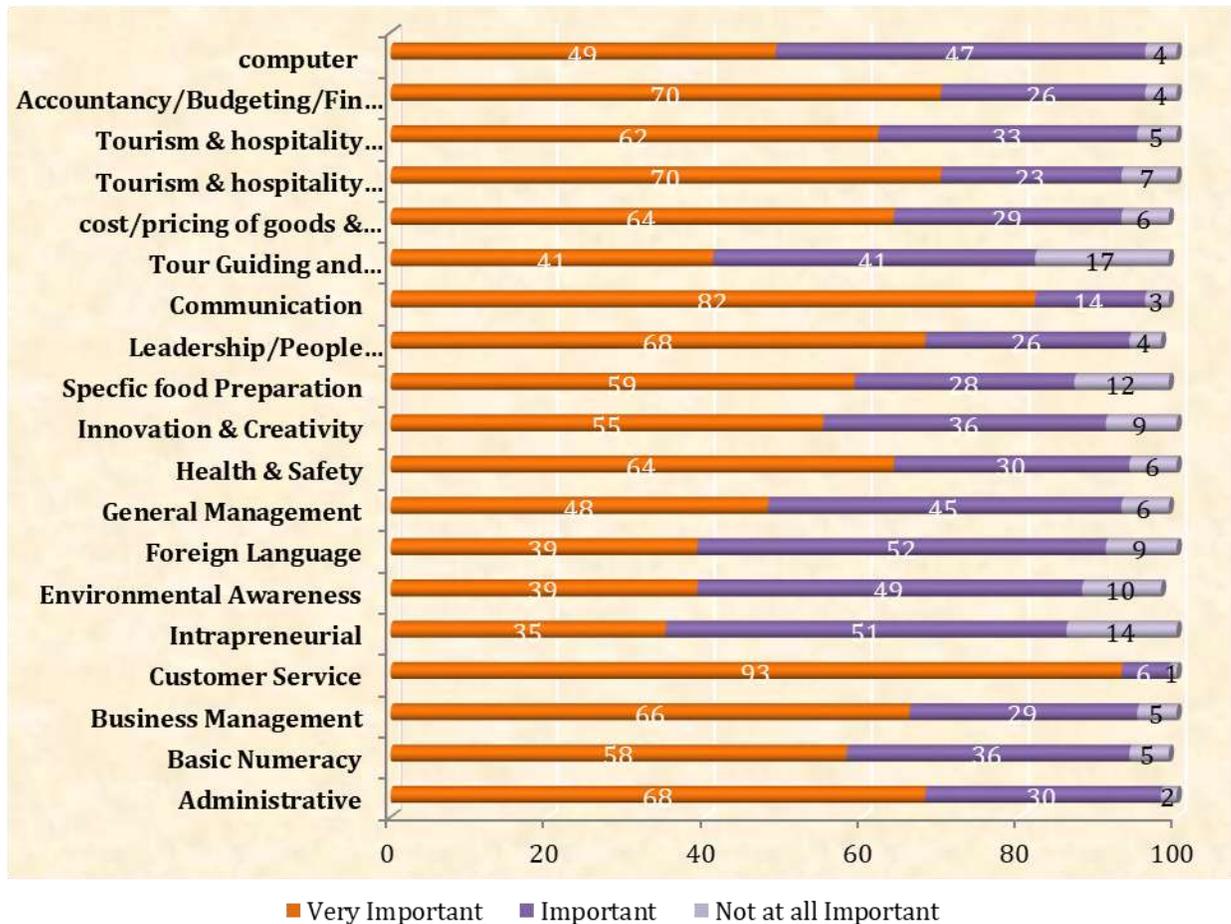
The study also assessed critical skills gaps and training needs for administrative, marketing, finance/accounting, front office and other staff in the industry. The majority of the respondents, either said they never experience challenges or difficulties training staff for the skills sets, or the skills sets for the assessed categories were not applicable. The implications are that the trainings for the assessed skills sets were either irrelevant or unnecessary. Again, this indicates a serious skills and knowledge gap in the hospitality industry.

It was noted the from the key informants and focus group discussions, that there is poor delivery of service at front office level; and that there are knowledge gaps regarding health and safety issues to the extent that it is not uncommon to find loose electrical wires and fire extinguishers that are expired in lodges and hotels. These findings show a significant gap as far as skills requirements are concerned, as noted by Anderson (2015) who posits that the imbalance between the demand and supply of generic skills is widespread. However, Baum et al. (1997) state that the generic skills and competences fostered by many tourism education programmes are in wide demand within other service sectors and beyond.

### **Important Skills Sets for the tourism and hospitality sector**

The study also established important skills in the tourism and hospitality three sub-sectors. Generally, the study revealed that there are shortages of courses to develop skills for supervisory and managerial level employees in the sector. Most employees in the sector acquire supervisory and managerial skills on the job. As such, there is urgent need for tertiary education institutions to design refresher courses for honing the management and supervisory skills in the sector.

Specifically, 93% of the respondents identified customer service skills as the most important in the sector. This was followed by communication (82%) and tourism & hospitality marketing (70%) and accounting/budgeting/financial management (70%). Ironically, only 39% of the questionnaire respondents indicated foreign languages as an important skill, despite the fact that this was identified by key informants as one of the most important skills needed in the sector as the world is globalizing. Figure 3 summarizes the important skills in the sector.



**Figure 3.** Overview of important skills in the tourism and hospitality sector

**Source:** Authors

### Staff training challenges in the tourism industry

The study established that financial resources and time are two major constraints to training of individuals who are already employed in the tourism and hospitality sector. Most institutions are reluctant to release financial resources and their employees for long-term training because they consider such a move as a loss. Hence the respondents recommended that tertiary institutions should consider introducing block release and/or distance learning programmes. This flexible approach, according to the respondents, will allow businesses to release their employees to attend relevant courses as it will be cost effective and the employees will not be out of work for so long that businesses can be negatively impacted.

The results from the questionnaire survey support the findings from the key informants. The most preferred modes of training are on-the-job training (70%), short courses (55%) and work experience (55%). The least preferred is long-term course (26%) and exchange visits (43%). The last two entails that the institutions incur huge costs of training and suffer long absence of the employee from the work place.

The quantitative data on the challenges for staff training further supports the findings that institutions are more inclined to save money and time other than to consider reaping the



benefits of long-term training of employees. The major cited challenge for training is the direct cost of the training (60%) followed by the cost of releasing staff for training (55%). Finding training of sufficient quality (46%) and finding training of suitable duration (43%) were also some of the challenges faced by operators in staff training.

On challenges to staff training, ironically, only 30% of the respondents cited lack of training budget as a challenge to training. It is also apparent that the institutions know, and are aware, of the institutions that offer training in tourism and hospitality as only very few respondents (23%) indicated lack of knowledge of the training providers as a challenge to staff training.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The overall objective of the study was to establish the training needs and skill gaps in the tourism industry in Malawi. Specifically, the study identifies the kinds of skills that are required, and where the gaps are and how to address the gaps. The tourism and hospitality sector in Malawi is faced with challenges in matching its skills requirements to the changing labor market. The imbalance between the demand and supply of generic skills is widespread. Learning providers focus much on the theoretical knowledge delivery and less on hands on, yet the industry requires more practical knowledge. This has been attributed to lack of coordination and consultation between tourism educators and the tourism industry.

The findings therefore imply that there is need for collaborative and comprehensive efforts, strategy and investment to enhance skills development for the fast growing tourism and hospitality industry in Malawi in order to provide skilled personnel to drive and sustain the industry. Additionally, training institutions should ensure that educators are able to deliver key skills required by the industry. It is therefore recommended that students should be spending more time at workplaces for their internship programmes before their graduation to ensure that they acquire some basic requisite practical skills in their areas of specialization.

Overall, there is need for tertiary education institutions offering tourism and hospitality management programmes to review their curriculum and develop new courses in order to satisfy the market demand. It is recommended that the revised curriculum for all tourism programmes should incorporate detailed aspects of Malawi's tourism products, quality management and tailor made modules for marketing and accounting for the tourism and hospitality industry. For the new curriculum to be effective however, the institutions would require purpose built infrastructure that meets international standards. It is therefore recommended that education institutions should introduce programmes in tour guiding and culinary arts to address some of the skills gaps being faced by the industry. As there are many untrained people in the industry, it is also recommended that the institutions should consider start offering part time programmes through block release, e-learning and distance learning programmes.

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