

Evolving Competencies in the New Normal: A Study of Tourism and Hospitality Graduates' Skills and Industry Demands

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Abstract: The tourism and hospitality (T&H) industry has undergone significant change as a result of global disruption and the emergence of the “new normal” post-COVID-19. Consequently, the competencies and skills expected of graduates entering this field have evolved. While prior research emphasised problem-solving, effective communication, and teamwork, a gap remains in understanding precisely how the new normal has reshaped the specific competencies graduates require. This study identifies the essential competencies for tourism and hospitality graduates in light of the industry’s changing needs. Using a qualitative research design, the research conducted focus group discussions with industry representatives across accommodation, food and beverage, culinary, cruise line, travel, tourism, and entrepreneurship sectors. Thematic analysis of the discussions shows that evolving competencies fall into two broad categories: soft skills (professionalism, communication and interpersonal skills, and personal and professional development) and hard skills (entrepreneurial, technical, and digital skills). The study further identified challenges and gaps in skills development and education, as well as broader industry challenges. These findings carry significant implications for curriculum development in educational institutions, for recruitment and training processes in industry, and for the ongoing professional development of graduates. By identifying the specific competencies the industry demands, this study contributes to preparing graduates for successful careers in tourism and hospitality and to the wider dialogue on the skills needed for success in the new normal era.

Keywords: Competencies, tourism, hospitality, skills, industry

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Introduction

The global tourism and hospitality (T&H) industry has undergone a period of unprecedented disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions, shifting consumer behaviour, and the accelerated adoption of technology have fundamentally reshaped how hospitality businesses operate and the skillsets required for success (Buheji & Buheji, 2020). This has created a pressing need for educational institutions to reassess their curricula to ensure graduates possess the competencies the industry now demands in this new normal.

Prior to the pandemic, research identified a disconnect between the skillsets developed in T&H education programmes and the expectations of industry employers (Millar et al., 2010). Studies highlighted a need for graduates with stronger business acumen, industry-specific certifications, and digital fluency. However, the pandemic has likely widened this gap, potentially rendering traditional curricula obsolete.

While a growing body of research has examined the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality education, a comprehensive understanding of the specific skills and competencies graduates require in the post-pandemic landscape remains limited. There is a particular need for research investigating the evolving nature of both hard skills (technical knowledge and abilities) and soft skills (interpersonal and communication skills) demanded by industry employers in a post-pandemic context.

This research addresses that gap by investigating the evolving competencies required for success in the T&H industry. Through focus group discussions with industry professionals, the study explored:

- The specific hard and soft skills currently deemed most valuable by industry employers;
- The challenges graduates face in attaining these competencies; and
- The perceived gaps between current educational offerings and industry needs, and how these gaps might be bridged.

By identifying these critical competencies and the discrepancies between them, this study aims to inform the development of more responsive, future-proof T&H curricula, equipping graduates with the skillsets needed to thrive in the rapidly evolving landscape of the new normal.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly reshaped the tourism and hospitality industry, demanding a re-evaluation of the skillsets required of graduates entering this new normal (Buheji & Buheji, 2020). This review examines the evolving competency needs of the industry across four areas: essential soft skills, necessary hard skills, challenges in skill attainment, and strategies for bridging the gap between graduate skills and industry demands.

Soft Skills

Although the industry is increasingly embracing technology, studies consistently affirm the enduring importance of soft skills (Commey et al., 2019; Radwan & El Sawy, 2022). Effective communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills remain crucial for building rapport with guests and fostering positive experiences (Millar et al., 2010). Empathy and emotional intelligence are also increasingly valued, enabling graduates to navigate diverse guest needs and manage challenging situations (Commey et al., 2019). This emotional dimension of service delivery extends to frontline employees more broadly, whose cognitive and emotional engagement with their role shapes not only guest satisfaction but also broader brand advocacy outcomes (Konar et al., 2026).

Hard Skills

The pandemic accelerated digital transformation, making digital fluency a critical hard skill. Graduates must be proficient in online platforms, reservation systems, and digital marketing strategies (Buheji & Buheji, 2020; Lee et al., 2006). This shift is amplified by the growing deployment of robotics, artificial intelligence, and service automation across hotel operations, which is redefining the technical competencies graduates are expected to bring into the workplace (Yan et al., 2024). Additionally, research by Radwan and El Sawy (2022) suggests a growing demand for problem-solving abilities and analytical skills to tackle industry disruptions and optimise operations.

Challenges in Attaining These Competencies

A potential disconnect exists between the skills graduates possess and those valued by the industry (Millar et al., 2010). Traditional curricula might not adequately address the evolving need for digital fluency and data analysis. Additionally, opportunities for practical experience, crucial for honing soft skills, may be limited within academic programmes (Commey et al., 2019).

Bridging the Gap Between Graduate Skills and Industry Demands

Universities can bridge this gap by collaborating with industry professionals. Guest lectures, internships, and industry-driven projects expose students to real-world scenarios and the skillsets employers desire (Millar et al., 2010). Curriculum revisions incorporating digital marketing courses and data analysis modules can equip graduates with necessary hard skills (Lee et al., 2006). Fostering soft-skill development through role-playing exercises and case studies can likewise prepare graduates for effective communication and interpersonal interaction (Commey et al., 2019).

In sum, the new normal demands a blend of soft and hard skills from tourism and hospitality graduates. While core competencies such as communication and teamwork remain essential, digital fluency and problem-solving abilities are increasingly valued. Thus, educational institutions must adapt their curricula and foster industry collaborations to equip graduates with the skillsets needed to thrive in this evolving landscape.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to gather industry perspectives on the skillsets needed by future graduates. Participants were grouped into seven sectors: accommodation and MICE, food and beverage, culinary, cruise line, travel industry, tourism and entrepreneurship, and the MICE sector. Each group comprised three to five industry representatives, moderated by an assigned CITHM administrator. A total of 20 industry participants took part in the study.

Each FGD generated substantive discussion, producing valuable outputs for the researchers. Following the discussions, each group presented its findings on the identified questions, with all sectors contributing meaningfully. Thematic analysis was then used to interpret participant responses. This structured approach to gathering industry perspectives ensured that the diverse skill requirements across sectors were effectively captured and analysed.

Findings

Soft Skills in Tourism and Hospitality

This section presents the thematic analysis of soft skills identified by participants as critical for success in tourism and hospitality. Three key themes emerged: professionalism and work ethic, communication and interpersonal skills, as well as personal and professional development.

Professionalism and Work Ethic

Professionalism and work ethic form the foundation of a successful career in hospitality and tourism. Industry participants emphasised punctuality, attendance, and preparedness. One participant aptly stated, *“Being on time or ahead of time is one of the best traits in the hospitality industry.. Timeliness and punctuality are necessary”* (This study). This aligns with past research highlighting the crucial role of reliability and a strong work ethic in fostering guest trust and satisfaction.

Participants also stressed commitment, passion, a sense of decorum and respect, good moral conduct, humility, and a sense of urgency. These qualities contribute to a

positive work environment and demonstrate genuine dedication to service excellence. One participant further emphasised the need for ethical behaviour and integrity, reflecting the industry's responsibility to operate with honesty and transparency.

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Industry participants unanimously agreed that communication and interpersonal skills are essential traits of hospitality and tourism practitioners. Tourism-sector participants further noted that oral and written communication are competencies they specifically look for. Effective communication and interpersonal skills are paramount for building rapport with guests, managing diverse clientele, and delivering exceptional service (Radwan & El Sawy, 2022). Communication skills encompass both verbal and written proficiency, enabling graduates to articulate information clearly, listen actively to guest needs, and resolve issues effectively. Strong internal communication and genuine employee engagement, in turn, underpin the kind of advocacy behaviour that drives service quality in five-star hotel operations (Sun et al., 2025).

Customer service is an essential sub-theme, encompassing empathy, attentiveness, and the ability to anticipate and exceed guest expectations (Commey et al., 2019). Participants also highlighted friendliness, a welcoming attitude, and conflict-management skills. The ability to navigate challenging situations and maintain a positive demeanour is crucial for de-escalating conflict and ensuring a smooth guest experience.

Personal and Professional Development

A commitment to personal and professional development is vital for graduates to thrive in a constantly evolving industry. Leadership and initiative allow graduates to take ownership of their roles and contribute to team success (Radwan & El Sawy, 2022). Moreover, adaptability and resilience are crucial for navigating unforeseen challenges and adjusting to industry shifts.

Creativity and problem-solving skills enable graduates to think beyond convention and develop innovative solutions to guest needs and operational challenges. Strong interpersonal skills and teamwork are likewise essential for collaborating effectively with colleagues from diverse backgrounds (Commey et al., 2019). A related consideration is the generational composition of the graduate workforce itself; Generation Z and Millennial employees have been shown to follow distinct pathways from workplace gratitude to psychological ownership and advocacy behaviour, suggesting that professional development strategies may need to be tailored by generational cohort rather than applied uniformly (Islam et al., 2026). The enduring importance of soft skills is a key finding of this study, with

communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills consistently identified as central to building rapport with guests and fostering positive experiences (Commey et al., 2019; Radwan & El Sawy, 2022).

Hard Skills for Tourism and Hospitality Graduates

The changing landscape of the tourism and hospitality industry necessitates a re-evaluation of the hard skillsets graduates require. Participant responses converged on three key themes: entrepreneurial and business skills, technical and digital skills, as well as training and development.

Entrepreneurial and Business Skills

Culinary and tourism participants reiterated the value of equipping students with entrepreneurial and business skills, noting this as one of the strongest career options available to graduates. As one culinary participant observed, *“creating and putting up a food business is not an easy task; however, it is most rewarding and, if done right, profitable.”* Similarly, a participant from an NGO focused on entrepreneurship noted that *“entrepreneurial and business skills form the bedrock of a successful career in tourism and hospitality.”* Industry participants emphasised business acumen, including financial literacy and an understanding of core business principles. Industry-specific certifications further demonstrate a commitment to professional development and specialised knowledge relevant to particular sectors of the industry.

Keeping abreast of current industry trends allows graduates to adapt to evolving guest expectations and technological advancements. Participants also highlighted the importance of a solid grounding in basic industry knowledge and operations, which provides a springboard for further specialisation and ensures graduates can contribute meaningfully from day one. In the culinary sector specifically, this entrepreneurial and technical foundation is increasingly intertwined with technology: as robotic and automated food-preparation systems become more common, the ability to work alongside such technology while managing the emotional and relational dimensions of kitchen operations is emerging as a distinct competency in its own right (Liang et al., 2026).

Finally, foreign language proficiency remains a valuable asset in a globalised tourism industry. The ability to communicate effectively with diverse clientele enhances the guest experience and fosters stronger cross-cultural understanding.

Technical and Digital Fluency

Technology’s transformative impact on the industry has made digital fluency a critical hard skill. Graduates must be proficient in online platforms used for booking and

guest communication (Buheji & Buheji, 2020). Understanding reservation systems and mastering digital marketing strategies, such as search engine optimisation and social media marketing, equips graduates to contribute to a hotel's online presence and reach a wider audience (Lee et al., 2006). This is reinforced by the industry's accelerating adoption of robotics, artificial intelligence, and service automation, which is reshaping frontline and back-of-house roles alike and demanding a corresponding evolution in graduate competencies (Yan et al., 2024).

Guest-facing technology adds an additional layer of complexity: as properties integrate AI-driven concierge and chatbot systems into the guest journey, graduates must understand not only how these tools function but also how they shape guest expectations and experience (Weimei et al., 2025). Notably, comfort with such technology is not uniform across the graduate cohort; digital natives and digital immigrants have been found to perceive and adopt smart hotel technologies quite differently, a generational gap that educators must account for when designing digital-skills training (Yan et al., 2025a). Beyond guest-facing applications, human–robot collaboration is increasingly shaping employees' behavioural intentions and day-to-day working conditions, meaning graduates also need the interpersonal adaptability to work effectively alongside automated systems rather than purely technical proficiency with them (Xiaoxin et al., 2026).

The specific technical skills required vary by career path. Culinary expertise remains a cornerstone skill for graduates entering the food and beverage sector, while those pursuing cruise line careers may prioritise proficiency in cruise operations management software or safety protocols.

Training and Development

The dynamic nature of the tourism and hospitality industry necessitates a commitment to lifelong learning as well as ongoing training and development. While the specific focus of training may evolve throughout a graduate's career, some core skills remain consistently relevant.

Industry leaders are divided on emphasis; some advocate for a strong foundation in data analysis to optimise operations and revenue management (Radwan & El Sawy, 2022), while others argue that critical thinking and problem-solving skills are equally important for navigating unforeseen disruptions. Structured training and development also matter for how well employees ultimately perform once in role; evidence from resort hotel settings indicates that well-designed training interventions translate directly into measurable improvements in task performance, underscoring training and development as an outcome-oriented competency rather than a purely developmental one (Xiaoxin, Liquan et al., 2025).

Challenges and Gaps in Bridging Industry Needs and Graduate Competencies

This section examines the challenges and gaps industry participants identified regarding the competencies of tourism and hospitality graduates, highlighting the disconnect between current skills development and education, and the industry's evolving demands.

Skills Development and Education Gaps

Industry partners emphasised the need for improved programmes to develop graduates' communication capabilities. Effective communication, both verbal and written, is crucial for building rapport with guests, delivering exceptional service, and navigating diverse clientele (Commey et al., 2019). However, traditional curricula may not adequately address these essential soft skills (Millar et al., 2010).

Industry participants also highlighted the need for enhanced computer literacy and the incorporation of micro-credentialing opportunities. Digital fluency, encompassing proficiency in online platforms and reservation systems, is an increasingly critical hard skill in the new normal (Buheji & Buheji, 2020). Micro-credentials, focused training modules on specific skills such as social media marketing or revenue management software, can equip graduates with targeted expertise valued by the industry.

To address these gaps, educational institutions should evaluate their laboratory and operational standards. Ensuring access to updated technology and simulating real-world scenarios can enhance graduates' practical skills. Additionally, faculty development programmes can ensure instructors possess current industry knowledge and effective pedagogical approaches (Millar et al., 2010).

Finally, industry participants called for improved internship, immersion, and exposure programmes. Practical work experience allows graduates to hone soft skills, apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, and build valuable industry connections. Collaborative efforts with industry partners can create robust internship programmes that expose graduates to diverse work environments and prepare them for successful careers.

Industry Challenges

Industry participants also identified ongoing challenges in the industry related to staff shortages, retention difficulties, and an evolving technological landscape. Addressing these challenges is not solely the responsibility of educational institutions; however, universities can play a role by equipping graduates with the skills and adaptability required to navigate the industry's complexities. As hotels increasingly integrate AI and metaverse-enabled experiences into guest-facing

operations, the pace of technological change itself becomes an industry challenge; institutions and employers alike must continually recalibrate what “future-ready” digital competency looks like for incoming graduates (Konar & Weimei, 2026).

Discussion

The evolving tourism and hospitality landscape demands graduates with a diverse skillset. A foundation in business acumen, industry knowledge, and foreign languages remains critical. To thrive in the new normal, however, graduates must also embrace digital fluency, develop technical skills relevant to their chosen career path, as well as cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Educational institutions must adapt their curricula accordingly to ensure graduates are prepared to navigate an increasingly complex tourism and hospitality landscape.

This need for a multifaceted approach extends into how the industry integrates automation. Rather than treating robotics and human labour as competing forces, the evidence suggests organisations achieve better outcomes by explicitly managing the balance between automated efficiency and workforce stability, since over-reliance on automation without corresponding attention to employee loyalty can erode the very service quality technology is meant to enhance (Xiaoxin, Konar et al., 2025). Bridging the gap between graduate skillsets and industry demands therefore requires educational institutions to adapt curricula, embrace technology thoughtfully, and prioritise practical learning experiences that build communication, digital, and adaptive skillsets in tandem. Hence, collaboration with industry partners through internship programmes and faculty development initiatives can further support graduates' transition into the dynamic world of tourism and hospitality.

Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolving competencies tourism and hospitality graduates need in the new normal era. The findings carry implications for curriculum development in educational institutions, for recruitment and training processes in industry, and for the ongoing professional development of graduates. A particularly direct implication concerns curriculum design: as sustainability, digitalisation, and automation reshape the sector simultaneously, tourism and hospitality programmes may need to revisit not only what technical content is taught but also whether foundational sustainability and future-skills literacy are embedded early enough in the syllabus to meet industry's evolving expectations (Fuchs et al., 2025).

In conclusion, this study addresses the research gap in understanding the evolving competencies required of tourism and hospitality graduates in light of the industry's shifting demands. The findings carry practical implications for educational

institutions and industry stakeholders and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the skills and competencies needed for success in the new normal era.

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