

Employability attributes of hospitality graduates and expectations of hotel managers

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Abstract

Employers worldwide place the responsibility of ensuring that graduates are employable on institutions of higher learning. This study was conducted to determine the employability attributes of hospitality management students from private Higher education institutions. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews. Purposive, judgement sampling was used to gather hotel managers' thoughts, knowledge and opinions. The findings suggest that hotel managers require eight knowledge sub-domains, and seven skill sub-domains, and a wide range of competencies from hospitality graduates from private Higher education institutions. However, private higher education institutions, hotel managers, hospitality graduates and human resources personnel have a great responsibility to ensure that graduates are competent, competitive and valuable and can make meaningful contributions to the hotel industry. Data was only gathered from hotel managers from 4 and 5-star hotels, therefore the findings cannot be generalised to all hotels in South Africa. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised to all the tertiary institutions in South Africa. Suggestions are made that can assist higher education institutions, hotel managers, hospitality management graduates, students and future researchers, particularly now in this time of globalisation, knowledge economy, and rise of technological advancements.

Keywords
Attributes, employability, hospitality graduates private higher education institutions

Introduction

The demand for graduates will continue to increase within the world of work. Thus the right set of attributes — also referred to as employability — to enter the world of work would be an advantage. Employability of graduates is essential. This study seeks to determine which employability attributes hotel managers seek from hospitality graduates from private higher education institutions (PHEIs), and whether hotel managers are satisfied with the future-readiness of graduates from private academic institutions. According to Neroorkar (2022), considering the work environment of different stakeholders, it is vital to apply suitable metrics to assess employability. Higher academic institutions experience substantial pressure from employers and students to ensure that graduates are ready for the work environment (Ahmed et al., 2017). PHEIs do not receive government support, and need to collaborate extensively with the private sector to provide students with exceptional career guidance as they need to deliver quality students for the industry to absorb these graduates.

The advancement of technology and evolving guest preferences have created both opportunities and challenges that affect graduates' employability and education (Aurecon Group, 2020). Furthermore, globalisation has created concerns regarding developing the employability attributes that graduates should possess (Abas & Imam, 2016). Employers are often looking for employability attributes beyond formal qualifications (Adler et al., 2016; Ahmed et al., 2017; Tran, 2015).

The nature of employability is changing (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019a; Jezard, 2018). It is becoming increasingly difficult to define the term in today's society because of the wide range of definitions that exist in current literature. The way in which employability has been described keeps changing, depending on the time frame, country and economic situation (Chetty, 2012; Williams et al., 2015). It may be ingenuous to think that a single dominant definition of employability exists.

Eurico et al. (2015) define employability as the capability of an individual to adjust to the current dynamic and professional needs of labour markets. These authors suggest that there is a direct link between the ability to find employment and maintain employment. How each individual uses their knowledge, skills and competencies to benefit themselves are key factors that lead to secure employment (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018).

Abas and Imam (2016) state that employability refers to qualities that employees have other than technical competence, which make them valuable to an employer. In this regard, they state: "Employability attributes vary in categorisations from personal qualities, basic theoretical skills, thinking skills and are valuable across all levels of positions" (Abas & Imam, 2016, p. 120).

Various studies have been conducted in South Africa and abroad regarding the employability attributes required in the tourism and hospitality industry (Spowart, 2011; Caiyod et al., 2015; Jonck & Minnaar, 2015; Khatibi et al., 2015; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019a; Wessels et al., 2017). However, most studies were conducted in the general tourism and hospitality industry and public higher education institutions. Limited literature exists for the hospitality and private higher education institution sectors combined. While many international studies have been conducted regarding the employability of graduates, it is imperative to consider that the South African business environment is different due to its history, education, geography, political climate and diversity (Wessels et al., 2017).

Problem statement

The hotel industry has been facing difficulties in finding and retaining employees with the correct employability attributes to fill positions in hotels. Rapid growth of PHEIs offer niche qualifications and pride themselves in meeting industry standards, due to their specialised courses and options on where and how to study. PHEIs provide various benefits to a potential student. Yet, the industry requires graduates with the right set of employability attributes (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). Graduates are finding it hard to secure, retain and build sustainable careers in the hotel industry because they possess inadequate employability attributes, work experience and practical skills (Jezard, 2018; Espellita & Maravilla, 2019). Students are expected to display multiple skills in real-world situations at workplaces. The skills domains related to interpersonal, problem solving, and self-management are perceived to be very important in the hospitality industry. Yet, many hospitality graduates do not enter into employment due to inaccurate expectations and perceptions of the industry.

Theoretical framework

This paper adopts Ahmed et al.'s (2017) definition of employability as the set of knowledge, skills and competencies that all job applicants should possess to ensure they are proficient in being effective in the workplace. The research objective for this study is to determine employability attributes from hospitality graduates from PHEIs and expectations from hotel managers.

Literature review

Private Higher Education Institutions

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) provide students with a wealth of options when choosing a degree, diploma or other qualification. Public and private higher education institutions are subject to some oversight and regulation, and will receive the same qualification regardless of whether you opt for state-funded university or a private institution (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2020). PHEIs do not receive financial support from government. The benefits of studying at a private institution is that it has smaller class sizes, with more network opportunities, which are key factors in future success with quality education. It is perceived that PHEIs provide graduates with greater employment prospects and have international links (Bezuidenhout & De Jager, 2014), but at a substantially higher fee.

There is a substantial and consistent increase in student numbers who opt for private higher education institutions. Some additional benefits according to one well-known establishment are: students do not have to relocate to a new city to pursue their dreams; less of a financial burden; improved access to support and staff; a large percentage of lecturers are not only academics but actively work in the industry and have real world experiences while studying. According to Bezuidenhout and De Jager (2014), students perceive PHEIs to have better security and safety conditions on campus, and spacious classes well-equipped with facilities.

According to the DHET (2020), because PHEIs do not receive state subsidies, they are wholly reliant on student fees. Students are treated as valued customers, require value for money, and demand quality education. Therefore, PHEIs need to provide good services, be credible, and offer quality education, or face closing their doors. Employability is a key success factor for PHEIs, and hospitality qualifications presented to students are closely associated to the industry.

Defining employability

Countries such as Australia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and South Africa have highlighted the importance of generic, non-contextualised, or transferable employability attributes (Ahmed et al., 2017). Furthermore, terms such as soft skills, hard skills, essential skills, key competencies, enterprise competencies, practical skills, work-readiness, knowledge-based skills and twenty-first century skills have been widely used in studies related to employment and employability (Jonck & Minnaar, 2015; Abas & Imam, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2017). As a result, generic skills frameworks have been developed that propose the attributes that need to be imparted to all graduates, regardless of the discipline being studied (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019a).

An analysis of past literature on employability reveals that different definitions exist to describe this notion. According to Rowe and Zegwaard (2017), the term 'employability' is often confused with employment outcomes (securing a job after graduation or having the potential to earn a higher income). Furthermore, employability is often used interchangeably with the concept of work-readiness (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021).

Work-readiness is described as a set of circumstances satisfactory for gaining initial employment, while employability is described as the set of knowledge, skills and competencies necessary, but not sufficient for securing and retaining employment (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). Irrespective of how the term is used, it is better to consider holistically that a graduate has to be both ready for employment and be employable to enhance their chances of employment (Kleynhans et al., 2019).

Employability is viewed and defined as a multi-layered notion that has broadened to summarise a variety of skills, qualities and other measures such as networking, having a professional identity, and being an active citizen. Employers expect graduates to possess a broad set of attributes. The employment focus has shifted from practical skills and attributes essential for graduates to be considered work-ready, to a broader notion that includes non-technical areas such as being able to negotiate, having a professional identity, and being able to network (Lowden et al., 2011).

According to Gill (2018, p. 2), employability can be defined as ‘an array of soft skills, intangible assets, achievements, personal characteristics and understandings.’ Although employability is often difficult to replicate authentically in a classroom environment, it improves graduates’ ability to secure employment and be prosperous in their preferred professions, thereby benefiting themselves, the labour force, the economy and the greater community (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Gianotti, 2020).

Crane and Kinash (2015) refer to employability as the capacity to create work or obtain work. They further describe employability as the agreement between higher academic institutions and employers regarding the knowledge, skills and competencies essential for graduates to be successful in the workplace.

Employability skills can be defined as the transferable skills necessary for an individual to be employable within the world of work (Ahmed et al., 2017). This term highlights the skills that an employee can transfer from one job to another. Some of these skills include communication, personal and interpersonal, teamwork, ethical behaviour, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Doyle, 2019).

Espellita and Maravilla (2019) suggest that employability attributes are those that prepare students for the workplace. They cover a variety of competencies within hotel departments, such as conceptual skills, hospitality operations skills, personal skills, and human resources skills. The researchers feel that these skills are essential to maintain work within the hotel industry.

The hotel industry requires highly skilled and competent employees who possess employability attributes that contribute to the prosperity of the business, as this industry is not just about the attractions and facilities accessible to guests (Espellita & Maravilla, 2019). Every individual employed in the hotel industry needs to have the knowledge, skills and competencies to offer the standard of products and services that hotel guests expect (Chinyamurindi et al., 2018). Acquiring knowledge about the hotel industry, product offerings, target market, and employees’ roles and responsibilities is an important starting point to a successful career in the industry (Espellita & Maravilla, 2019). As mentioned previously, this study adopted Ahmed et al.’s (2017) definition of employability as the set of knowledge, skills and competencies that all job applicants should possess to ensure they are proficient and effective in the workplace.

Skills required in the hotel industry

Hotel employees need to possess both hard and soft skills (Chetty, 2012). Hard skills are described as the tangible abilities that graduates bring to the table as potential employees. Often, these skills are taught in secondary schools and public or private tertiary hospitality academic institutions.

According to Majid et al. (2020), hard skills include formal academic qualifications in a specific industry, language fluency, social media skills, and information technology (IT) systems proficiency. Most of the time, new entrants need to possess a set of hard skills related to the specific hotel department where they are going to work (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2021).

Soft skills are described as the aptitudes and capabilities learned organically through past interpersonal relationships and work experiences. They are more about what an individual offers as an employee (Half, 2020). Hotel employees engage and interact with people and, therefore, should possess many soft skills to meet guests' needs, wants, preferences, and expectations (Espellita & Maravilla, 2019). These soft skills include communication, problem-solving skills, a strong work ethic, team leadership, time management, flexibility, organisation, a positive attitude, and multitasking skills (Gianotti, 2020).

Examples of hard skills required in the hotel environment include basic numeracy skills and knowledge about hygiene and safety for the food and beverage department, and laundry and cleaning skills for the housekeeping department (Half, 2020). If graduates are applying for a front-office job, hard skills such as computer and typing skills would be beneficial. Social media skills are beneficial to hotel employees, as apps provide the easiest and fastest way to access and share information. Furthermore, numerous apps have been created to make managing hotel staff easier, such as Hive Mind, which allows employees to set personal passwords when they clock in or out of a shift (Le Cordon Bleu, 2020). Examples of soft skill for front-office staff include language proficiency, attitude, critical thinking, problem-solving, flexibility, communication, organisation and multitasking. In the housekeeping and food and beverage departments, soft skills such as flexibility, organisation, communication, and multitasking are essential (Gianotti, 2020).

Skills identified by the World Economic Forum

The World Economic Forum (WEF) (2020) further identified that, due to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the skills necessary to perform many occupations will change substantially. The universal average 'skills stability' (the percentage of essential skills necessary to execute tasks that will remain the same) is estimated at 58%. Thus, the workforce will experience an average shift of 42% in compulsory workplace skills leading up to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Ivanov, 2020). The skills required include active learning, analytical thinking, learning strategies, innovation, technology design and programming, systems analysis and evaluation, creativity, critical thinking, originality, emotional intelligence, reasoning, ideation, initiative, complex problem-solving and analysis (Jezard, 2018). Technology design has already transformed how hotels conduct business.

Chidera (2020) declared certain skills necessary for employees in the workplace for 2020. The skills required in a hotel environment include communication skills, emotional intelligence, people management, customer service, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, teamwork, judgement, cognitive flexibility, decision-making, service orientation, creativity and negotiation.

New entrants need to possess emotional intelligence, judgement and negotiation skills to deal with difficult guests and handle guest complaints. Furthermore, creativity is critical in the hotel industry as automation and artificial intelligence are changing employees' roles in the workplace (Jezard, 2018, Ivanov, 2020;). Going forward, hotels will be more economic, ergonomic, ecological and competitive. Therefore, new entrants should be well equipped to keep up with evolving trends (Panayotis, 2017).

The evolution of technology and the need for improved employability

The use of technologies such as self-service kiosks, chatbots and artificial intelligence is common (Ivanov, 2020). Hotel guests expect to access the internet effortlessly and without too many disturbances (Aurecon Group, 2020). Successful hotels make great contributions towards better and faster Wi-Fi so guests can use their devices effortlessly when they make reservations and conduct business (Aurecon Group, 2020). Thus, new employees need skills to assist guests with any problems they may encounter while trying to use hotel services.

In addition, Chidera (2020) deemed the following skills necessary for the year 2030: higher cognitive skills, technological skills, and social and emotional skills. Higher cognitive skills comprise complex information processing, advanced literacy, advanced writing, critical thinking, and quantitative and statistical skills (Chidera, 2020). According to Gao (2019), exceptional test scores and expertise are becoming more important in entry-level positions. However, the characteristics and high-level talents that the industry requires for graduates are self-learning, finding and solving problems, and critical thinking. These traits are commonly described as higher cognitive abilities (Gao, 2019; WEF, 2020b).

Technological skills include everything from basic to advanced IT skills, engineering, and data analysis to research (Chidera, 2020). These skills are expected to be the most rewarded as companies seek more engineers, software developers, and robotics and scientific experts (Wakelin-Theron, 2021). Some industry disruptors, such as Airbnb establishments, also challenge the hotel industry. These disruptors are online trading platforms for short-term rentals that list a substantial number of properties that serve as homes for visitors whilst travelling. Digitalisation has become the norm and, to be competitive, hotel employees need to be innovative and use the most up-to-date technology to support their guests.

Cade (2015) suggests that a hotel is a 'home away from home' for guests. Thus, it is important that guests feel welcome and comfortable, as it makes their stay more memorable and enjoyable. In order for hotel guest experiences and overall guest engagement to be above standard, hotel employees need to possess social and emotional skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence to build deeper connections that will result in better service (Cade, 2015). These skill sets cannot be ignored, as they are essential in ensuring that graduates are successful and competent in the hotel environment (Chidera, 2020).

Research design and methodology

This study was conducted in Pretoria, the capital city of the Gauteng province of South Africa. The rationale for selecting this city was that Pretoria is the administrative capital of South Africa. Many travellers visit the city for both business and leisure. Furthermore, there has been an emergence of private hospitality academic institutions in Pretoria, for example, The International Hotel School, Capital Hotel School, Capsicum Culinary Studio, and Legend Hospitality School & Academy, which has increased the number of hospitality graduates.

The population for this study was hotel managers in four- and five star hotels in Pretoria. From this population, the researcher, using non-probability, purposive, judgement sampling to select seven managers for participation in interviews. Before any data were collected, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the University Ethics Committee to conduct the research (ethical clearance code 2019STH090).

Data collection

Consent to conduct interviews was obtained from various hotels, and the aim of the study was clarified. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time, without harm.

The main concern of this research study was the identification of the target population in the industry. There are a total of 708 hotels in the City of Tshwane, a metropolitan municipality in Gauteng province. Yet, when the researcher identified the four-star hotels in a 5km radius within the city of Pretoria, only 11 hotels were identified, of which six were five-star hotels. A total of 17 hotels were asked to participate in the study. However, only four agreed, and seven managers agreed to be interviewed. This study was carried out during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, while South Africa had strict lockdown regulations, which disrupted the tourism and hospitality industry. In this study, the hotel population consisted of hotel managers from different operational areas who were active during the time period of the study. The table below identifies the number of interviews with manager of different operational areas in the hotels.

Table 1: Number of Interviewees from different operational areas in the hotels

Job role	Number interviewed
Front-office manager	2
Food and beverage manager	2
Banqueting manager	1
Housekeeping manager	2
Total	7

Four key departments were selected to obtain the required data, as these managers know which employability attributes are required of employees. These departments were chosen as they are the four main departments in any hotel, and managers are part of the selection process when looking to fill positions in their various departments. According to Tesone and Ricci (2006), in hospitality and related operations, these managers are expert individuals to consult with regard to the identification of job competencies.

Research instrument: Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to formulate questions in advance and probe participants to gain more insight by asking questions on employability attributes that hotel managers from the aforementioned four departments seek in hospitality graduates from PHEIs (Farooq, 2015). The participants were able to disclose their thoughts and ideas in their own words. Thus, the semi-structured interviews offered information that was both reliable and comparable (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Costa et al., 2016; Bhandari, 2020). The reliability was tested by constant comparison of responses by multiples coders of the data sets.

Data analysis

Data analysis is central to credible qualitative research (Kelly, 2023). Qualitative data analysis aims to create interpretations from large amounts of collected data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). To select relevant data on which to base judgments is also the aim of data analysis (Kelly, 2023). A thematic analysis framework was used to note thoughts, ideas, knowledge and insights gathered from the study participants (Caulfield, 2020). Both deductive and inductive analysis approaches were used to reduce

the wide and varied data, link the data to the research objectives (deductive), uncover new themes, and review interpretations and multiple meanings of the data (inductive) (Costa et al., 2016).

Method of data analysis: Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data. It is often used for data in the form of text. A thematic approach is an excellent approach to take when the study attempts to understand people's ideas, beliefs, knowledge, experiences, or values from a set of qualitative data – such as interview transcripts, social media profiles, or survey responses (Caulfield, 2020).

This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework. The phases are displayed in Figure 1, below.

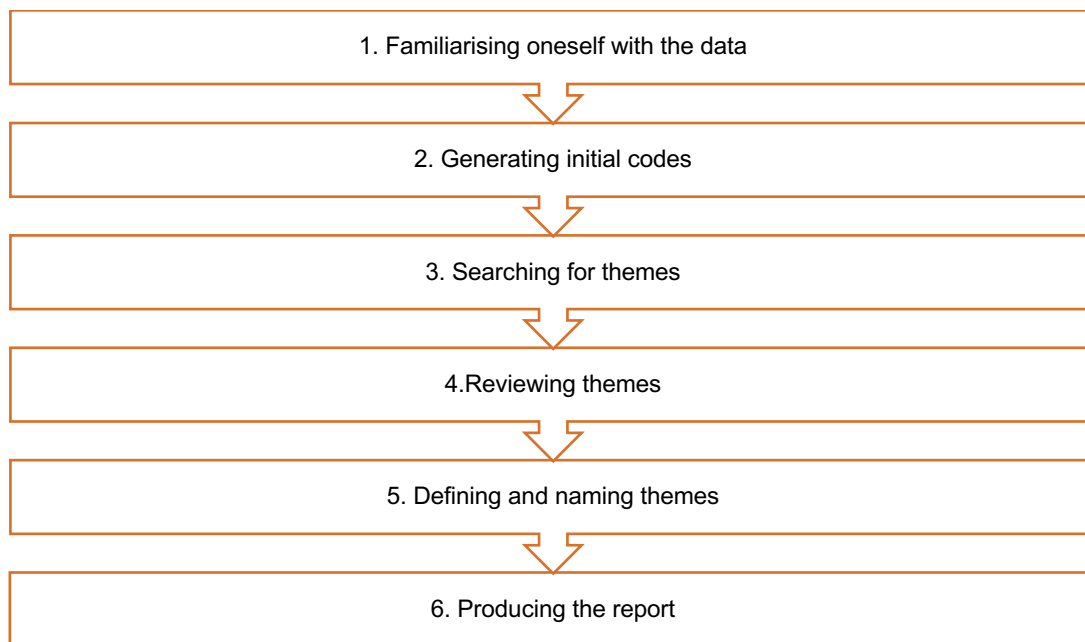


Figure 1: Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Phase 1: Familiarising oneself with the data

In this phase, familiarisation with data was achieved by transcribing the data and reading through the transcripts. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), transcription is a time-intensive process, which is frustrating and, at times, boring, but is an excellent way of familiarising oneself with the data. Furthermore, when data are collected through an interactive means (such as an interview), the researcher gains prior knowledge of the data.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), Phase 2 begins when the data have been transcribed and read. Thereafter, the data are used to generate initial codes that appear important or interesting to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the researcher started by reading through each transcript and highlighting important and interesting parts of the data.

Once this was complete, the researcher used the comments function in Microsoft Word to code the data in a systematic manner across the entire data set, organising data relevant to each code. Line-by-line coding was used to summarise each line of text in the data set, and the researcher noted phrases the participants used. Many codes were created in this phase, as line-by-line coding allowed the researcher to look into the data rigorously.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Phase 3 began after the researcher had coded all the data and had a list of the various codes discovered across the data set. This phase entailed categorising the codes into suitable themes and combining all the relevant coded data extracts inside the selected themes, thereby refocusing the investigation on themes rather than codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this phase, the researcher used Microsoft Excel to categorise codes into overarching themes (Racer, 2019; Quirkos, 2019). A spreadsheet was created with the following headings: Source (the participants of the study), Star grading, Department, Data collection method, Notes (direct quotes from the participants), Codes, Abbreviations, and Themes.

As the data were categorised, some of the codes were dropped or adopted as main themes and sub-themes. Themes started emerging as the data were recorded. The researcher started seeing patterns, similarities and repetitions. Once all the data had been categorised, the researcher reviewed it again to check whether the data first recorded matched the findings. Some initial codes developed into core themes, whereas others developed into sub-themes, and others were rejected.

The researcher used the 'find and replace' function in Microsoft Excel to ensure that the abbreviations created for each heading matched the code in the category section. The abbreviation column helped the researcher to track and match all the codes and themes using the 'filter' function.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

During this phase, the themes created in Phase 3 were reviewed, modified, and developed (Delahunt & Maguire, 2017). Throughout this phase, it became clear that some themes were not truly themes (for example, if there were inadequate data to support them, or if the data were too diverse), while others were merged.

Other themes were divided into sub-categories (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the theme 'employability attributes' was refined and sub-themes were created. Knowledge, skills and competencies were included, as this theme was too broad.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

When there was a suitable thematic map of the data, Phase 5 commenced. In this phase, themes were developed and established, and the associated data were analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The employability themes identified in this study included knowledge, skills, competencies, and manager's satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding the employability attributes of graduates.

Phase 6: Producing the report

This is the last phase of the analysis, during which the researcher selected rich, engaging examples related to the research topic and literature, and wrote a description of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Latent and semantic themes

Another choice is identifying themes at a semantic or explicit level, or a latent or interpretive level. A thematic analysis typically focuses solely or mostly on either a semantic or a latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the data were analysed at a latent level to learn about and examine underlying assumptions, concepts, conceptualisations, and beliefs that were theorised as affecting or informing the semantic content of the data and to look beyond what a participant had said (Delahunt & Maguire, 2017). Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data in this study. This method of data analysis is explained in the section below.

Discussion of findings

The study's findings suggest that hotel managers, namely: front office, food and beverage, banqueting and housekeeping, require eight knowledge sub-domains and seven skill sub-domains, with a wide range of competencies, from hospitality graduates from PHEIs. The eight knowledge attributes that hotel managers appreciate are: basic knowledge, service knowledge, product knowledge, cultural knowledge, practical knowledge, process/systems knowledge, cleaning knowledge and theoretical knowledge.

The seven skill sets that hotel managers require are: basic skills, technical skills, technological skills, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, skills related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and other skills such as life skills and customer skills. More attention was placed on competencies, mostly soft skills, including passion, personality, and attitude. Hotel managers indicated that knowledge and hard skills could be learned on the job. However, without soft skills (for example, an employee with the wrong attitude or no passion for the industry), it is harder for graduates to cope, contribute effectively, and remain in and sustain a job in the hotel industry (Majid et al., 2019).

In consensus, Lie et al. (2008) found that employers ranked a positive attitude and mind-set as the most important attributes, which were followed by specialisation in content area, communication, vocational/professional competency, language and communication, critical thinking, general knowledge, cultural awareness, and sustainable citizenship. Similarly, Finch et al. (2016) found that intelligence and personality attributes were viewed as foundational resources. Thus, managers require evidence that graduates have a core personality that aligns with the job and the organisation (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019b). This evidence includes extracurricular activities, pre-graduate work experience, interviews, and references from past employment, if any (Finch et al., 2016).

Formal qualifications were perceived as a proxy of intellectual capabilities, and academic performance as signs of other important characteristics such as goal orientation, organisation and discipline. The participants indicated that formal qualifications are not a scarce resource, as all graduates possess this credential. Thus, participants concluded that a qualification does not offer a competitive advantage. This finding is in line with the findings of Spowart et al. (2019), namely that graduates require a combination of industry exposure, a wide variety of experience, and practical skills.

Moreover, Kleynhans et al. (2019) noted that 83% of stakeholders indicated that they required a Grade 12 qualification for entry-level employment in the industry. However, 75% of managers in Kleynhans et al.'s (2019) study indicated that number of years of exposure or service in the industry was important. Yet, 75% of participants mentioned that attitude was the main personal trait that was required, while only 33% of participants indicated that hospitality studies at a high-school level affected graduates' ability to be recruited. These participants indicated that the knowledge, basic skills and abilities studied at school are adequate for entry-level employment, whereas, 67% of participants stated that all the knowledge, skills and abilities required can be learned on the job. Interestingly, 42% of stakeholders indicated that they expected entry-level employees with or without qualifications to start at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Moolman and Wilkinson (2014) conducted a qualitative content analysis of 21 broad skill frameworks. The researchers identified 1,129 generic attributes and categorised them into four domains: a) fundamental, b) thinking, c) people, and d) personal attributes. First, the fundamental attribute domain consists of literacy skills, numeracy skills, technical skills, and technological skills. Second, the thinking attribute domain comprises creativity and innovation, critical thinking, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, learning skills, reflective and critical reading skills, reflection skills, intellectual ability, an inquiring mind, willingness to learning and self-development. Third, the people domain

consists of communication skills and social intelligence attributes. Fourth, the personal attributes domain comprises emotional intelligence, attitudes and values (Moolman & Wilkinson, 2014).

The hotel managers in this study did not pay close attention to critical thinking skills, innovation, or creativity. It is important to emphasise that these attributes may lead to greater productivity levels and positively affect the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the achievement of business goals, including creativity, the ability to motivate staff, greater innovation, and higher job performance satisfaction (McFee, 2020). Nonetheless, it is clear that soft skills are extremely valuable in the hotel industry and hospitality management, and that graduates should invest in soft skills to gain a competitive edge when looking for employment (Spowart et al., 2019). Creativity, critical thinking, innovation and adaptability enhance products and service in the industry, which are extremely important in a post-COVID world to gain a competitive edge (Majid et al., 2019).

The findings of this study confirm that there is indeed a mismatch between the employability of graduates from PHEIs and the attributes that hotel managers seek. They expressed great concern regarding the work-readiness of graduates as they enter the hotel labour market. Hotel profit margins relate to guest satisfaction and guest retention, which are affected by the service they receive from hotel employees across the entire hierarchy of the organisation.

Practical implications of the study

Through the reflections from the findings, suggestions are made that can assist PHEIs, hotel managers, hospitality management graduates, students and future researchers — particularly during this time of globalisation, the knowledge economy, and the rise of technological advancements. This paper contributes to the literature on graduate employability and PHEIs in the hospitality domain to address and review both the industry and the workplace, in order to make it more attractive and rewarding for young graduates, and also to enhance the educational model that still dominates hospitality management programmes in preparing graduates for careers.

Originality and value

A good understanding of the employability attributes expected of hospitality graduates will contribute to retaining graduates in the hotel sector, advance the industry, and ensure more sustained graduate employment in the future.

This study may further assist PHEIs to improve the hospitality curriculum and more accurately address the employability attributes relevant to and necessary in the hotel industry. Even as new entrants in the hotel industry, graduates ought to be prepared and equipped with current employability attributes to be valuable to hotels, solve the challenges they encounter, and continue to work in the industry. This study can be further utilised as an instrument to recognise the capability of graduates to become managers in the future. It will also confirm that hotels and PHEIs are in accord with what is essential for employment in the hotel industry.

Limitations and future directions

As data were gathered only from hotel managers of four- and five-star hotels in Pretoria, the findings may not be transferable to all hotels in South Africa. The targeted sample size was not reached, which is common in studies involving hotel managers. Fraser (2017) mentions that, due to the demanding nature of their work, hotel managers are known to be reluctant to participate in research. Although this is a contributing factor in this study, the researcher identified other possible reasons for the small

sample size, namely (a) COVID-19 restrictions, (b) low staff morale, and (c) hesitancy to participate in any form of research.

The limited number of participants was also experienced by Kleynhans et al. (2019). They conducted a study in the City of Tshwane that targeted front-office, housekeeping, and food and beverage managers. Although 25 hotels were approached, only 12 agreed to participate. Unfortunately, Kleynhans et al. (2019) were unable to gather responses from departmental managers, as general managers refused to give consent to interview departmental managers; thus, the researchers opted to collect data from the general managers themselves. Saturation point was reached after seven hotel managers were interviewed, indicating that additional data collection and analysis are unnecessary.

Furthermore, demographic variables were not compared in this study. Thus, the researcher was unable to compare which relationships existed between the different demographic factors and opinions of the study participants. Moreover, the study only focused on hospitality management programmes (diploma and certificate qualifications); therefore, the findings of the study may not be transferable to all hospitality qualifications in PHEIs.

The researcher acknowledges that some attributes used in this study may be interrelated and overlap with one another. Some attributes may be categorised differently by other researchers, depending on the nature of the research.

Recommendations

Both public higher education institutions and PHEIs are striving to build a knowledge-based economy that can compete on a global scale, secure employment, and retain and sustain employees in the respective industries in South Africa, a developing country. Indeed, PHEIs have the responsibility to educate, train, prepare and equip students with employability, work-readiness, and future-ready attributes; however, they cannot achieve this goal singlehandedly. They require private institutions to support and equip graduates from a product- and service base.

The relationship between PHEIs, hotel managers, and human resources managers is important. Ongoing conversations and engagement between these stakeholders will benefit the tourism and hospitality industry as a whole. According to Mgaiwa (2021), these partnerships will assist PHEIs in refining and improving their curricula by ensuring that they include up-to-date and future-ready knowledge, skills and competencies. If institutions design their curricula without engaging the industry, the programmes offered may fall short of societal needs and increase unemployment among graduates. Therefore, higher education institutions need to redesign and realign hospitality qualifications that are future-ready to equip students for the industry, as well as adapt to post-COVID-19 skills.

The issues of partnerships and collaborations of higher education institutions and the hotel industry have been suggested by several researchers (Kleynhans et al., 2019; Mgaiwa, 2021; Spowart et al., 2019). The lack of these partnerships may result in higher unemployment rates, graduates leaving the hotel industry and pursuing careers in other industries, and a greater mismatch between the employability of hospitality management graduates and the requirements of hotel managers.

These partnerships will benefit all higher education institutions, the hotel industry, and graduates (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019a). Higher education institutions will have better employment records after graduation. Hotel managers will save on training costs, as graduates will be work- and future-ready. Thus, graduates will be able to add meaningful contributions, solve problems, use critical thinking skills, and move the industry to greater heights. Moreover, industry partnerships may benefit higher education institutions. Partnerships between higher education institutions and hotels will

enable students and graduates to secure and retain employment. Graduates will be happy and motivated in their jobs because they will contribute effectively and be employable. Furthermore, graduates may be able to venture into many opportunities, such as entrepreneurship and gig work.

Graduates and students are encouraged to pay close attention to the nature of the hotel industry and its demands. They are further encouraged to invest in lifelong learning and upskill themselves to remain competent and competitive, as employability in the hospitality industry is not a one-sided approach.

Conclusion

This study achieved its objective by presenting the employability attributes required by hotel managers. However, a significant amount of work still needs to be done to ensure that hospitality management graduates from PHEIs possess the correct employability attributes. PHEIs, hotel managers, hospitality graduates, and human resources personnel have a great responsibility to ensure that graduates are competent, competitive, and valuable and can make meaningful contributions to the hotel industry.

Hospitality higher education institutions are urged to re-examine, develop and refine their curricula to meet the current labour requirements and produce future-ready graduates. Employability attributes such as creativity, critical thinking, innovation, empathy and adaptability enhance products and services in the industry; therefore, possessing these attributes will enhance the competitive edge of new hospitality industry entrants in a post-COVID-19 world.

This research contributes significantly to education and curriculum design to improve employability among hospitality management graduates. The study contributes empirical data on the many employability approaches that exist. Institutions and governments are placing greater emphasis on employability as the main expected outcome of higher education; therefore, it is critical to demonstrate the impact of various attributes and factors related to employability from various angles to support graduates and students in different academic disciplines.

In conclusion, this study highlights that both hotel managers and graduates need to better understand the employability attributes required of graduates, as this will enhance graduates' chances of securing and sustaining satisfactory employment.

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