

## Malaysian Tourism and Hospitality Graduates Competencies: Exploring the Human Resource Managers Perceptions

Nurhazani Mohd Shariff<sup>1</sup>, Azlan Zainol Abidin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Tourism, Hospitality & Environmental Management,  
College of Law, Government & International Studies,

<sup>2</sup> School of Accounting, College of Business Universiti Utara Malaysia,  
MALAYSIA.

<sup>1</sup> [hazani@uum.edu.my](mailto:hazani@uum.edu.my), <sup>2</sup> [azlan@uum.edu.my](mailto:azlan@uum.edu.my)

### ABSTRACT

*Graduates competencies as perceived by the industry are vital particularly in designing the program curriculum. Hence, the study explores the perceptions of 60 Human Resource Managers of tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia regarding the competency items need to be possessed by the tourism and hospitality graduates. 40 competencies are identified in the case of Malaysian tourism and hospitality graduates. The findings indicate that the respondents perceive the item 'ability to work in teamwork' as a vital competency which the graduates must possess in order to survive within the industry. In addition, the item 'ability to use technology' is perceived by the respondent as the most insignificant competency. It can be concluded that in order for the graduates to survive within the industry, working in teamwork is important but knowing how to use technology is not a must. The study significantly contributes to the planning of tourism and hospitality graduate's curriculum by taking into consideration the vital competency items as perceived in the Malaysian perspectives. In doing so, it is also suggested that the tourism and hospitality representatives should be involved during the first phase of designing the curriculum.*

**Keywords:** Competency, tourism and hospitality, Malaysian graduate, human resource manager, perception

### INTRODUCTION

The travel and tourism industry currently plays a vital role to the world by generating employment opportunity for approximately 250 million people (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2002). In order for the industry to operate successfully, many educational institutions attempt to prepare students by developing and enhancing management competencies. To date, there are six Public Higher Education Institutions (IPTA) and 17 Private Higher Education Institutions (IPTS) in Malaysia offering Bachelor degree of Hospitality Management. Additionally, there are four IPTA and eight IPTS offering Bachelor degree of Tourism Management (Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism, 2009). With so many institutions offering the program, the quality of the curriculum structure has become major issue for the tourism and hospitality education institutions. The industry wants to recruit graduates who are not just theoretically but also practically excellent. On the other hands, the educational institutions believe that a balance between theory and practice of the tourism and hospitality education must be enhanced as a basic component in the curriculum particularly in the higher institutions. In line with this phenomenon, the hospitality professionals need to apply specific knowledge and competencies produced by the tourism and hospitality education (Haywood, 1989). Thus, it is a high time to conduct a study looking into the specific tourism and hospitality graduate competencies as perceived by the industry. The study intends to explore the human resource managers' perceptions of the tourism and

hospitality graduates competencies as to ensure the graduates will be able to survive within the future challenges of the industry.

## **RELATED LITERATURE**

Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005) define competencies as the abilities and skills to integrate the education and training, aligning both with the needs of the labor market and promoting mobility for individuals. Various models of competencies have been developed for the purpose of producing more quality and qualified graduates such as the Competing Value Framework (CVF), Competency Framework, Employment and Training Administration (ETA) and Australian Quality Framework. These common models are successfully used by the human resource development or workforce development professionals to examine the competencies possessed by the graduates as required by the industry. As for the tourism and hospitality industry, Sandwith (1993) developed a competency model, which is based on domains, or segments of a job or task. The domains are categorized into three namely leadership domain, administrative domain and interpersonal domain.

The model has also been widely used to identify and develop a set of competencies in the hospitality industry for instance, examining the hospitality managers' job-related competencies (Kay and Russette, 2000), studying the core competencies of innovative culinary developments (Hu, 2010) and investigating competencies for chefs (Zopiatis, 2010).

Previous study also found that the tourism and hospitality education are related to some areas such as finance/accounting, human/employee relations, sales and marketing, and emphasizes on work/experience/internships (Sneed and Heiman, 1996). It was indicated that the graduate's characteristics are the most important aspect to be taken into consideration during the hiring process. Furthermore, the study also found that leadership is the most important competency required by the recruiters, followed by decision making/critical thinking, communication skill (interpersonal verbal, writing, and listen skills), and financial skill.

Furthermore, leadership is viewed as the most important of all competencies, and communication is the second most important competency, followed by employee relations, training, and organization competencies (Breitner and Clements, 1996). In another view, it is revealed that communication skills are viewed as the very important criteria for the hiring process and are used in every important managerial activity, such as recruiting, interviewing, training, employees evaluating and interacting with guests (Geissler and Martin, 1998).

In another study regarding the hospitality education towards preparing graduates for the industry future challenges, it is noted that most of the industry representatives strongly supported the internship program as they believe that the graduates will be exposed to every area of the sponsoring organization including hotel, restaurant, and other facilities (Lefever and Withiam, 1998). It is a fact that the human resource skills which compassed of coaching, training, negotiating, disciplining, and handling difficult people are vital competencies particularly for the tourism and hospitality graduates (William and Hunter, 1991).

Moreover, the tourism and hospitality professional for instance executive chefs, chief engineers, marketing specialists and controllers also apply a unique set of technical skills to their particular jobs which eventually begin from the educational institution (Woods and King, 1995). This scenario consequently reflects the numerous demand and changes in the industry which affected the system to prepare well educated and qualified graduates (Davies, 1994).

## RESEARCH METHODS AND ANALYSIS

### Data Collection

A total of 60 Human Resource Managers of the tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia were identified as respondents to fulfill the objective of the study. They were randomly selected from the 4-star and 5-star hotels, well known travel agencies and established restaurants in specific areas of Langkawi and Penang due to the fact that these sectors recruit graduate which possess great competencies. The respondents were firstly approached via email explaining the purpose of the study and the process of answering the questionnaire. Once they agreed to participate, the questionnaires were mailed out with a stamped-addressed envelope for return. The respondents were given within two months time to complete the questionnaires and return them to the researcher starting from October until December 2012. Within a week, another email was sent to the respondents reminding them to return the questionnaires.

### Instrument Design

A structured questionnaire was used to gain information from the respondents. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part I asked the respondents to fill up their profiles such as age, gender, types of organization and number of years working in the organization. Part II of the questionnaire asked the respondents to rate the importance of competency items for the tourism and hospitality graduates. The items were labeled using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = *least important*, 2 = *less important*, 3 = *neither both*, 4 = *important* and 5 = *very important*. Based on the literature search, the graduate's competency consisted of 40 items. The final part of the questionnaire represented an open-ended section where the respondents were asked to provide their comments and suggestions regarding the competencies possessed by the tourism and hospitality graduates.

### Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) Software 2007. A reliability test was used to estimate the degree to which an item measurement is free of error. In addition, it applied the Cronbach's coefficient alpha to reflect how well the items in the scale are positively correlated to one another. The procedure involved calculating the average inter-correlations among the items measuring concept. A high internal consistency is indicated by an alpha value of 1 and above. Thus, item-to-item correlation below .5 was eliminated from the scale. The composite mean scores for the total industry sample were calculated and the findings indicated 40 competencies with Cronbach's coefficient alpha above .5 with the highest value of .823 and the lowest value of .784. The next analysis was to determine the human resource managers' perceptions of the competencies. This involved descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage. A high percentage described positive perception whilst a low percentage explained otherwise.

### Reliability Results of the Competencies

The reliability results revealed that all 40 competencies indicated Cronbach's alpha value above .5 (Table 1). Thus, all items were significant to be further tested. The item, *interpersonal skill* indicated highest alpha value of .823, followed by *computer application skill* (.820), *creative skill* (.818) and both *coordinating skill* and *technology awareness* (.814). In addition, other competency items which revealed an alpha value above .8 were identified as *networking skill* (.812), *staffing* (.811), *monitoring staff* (.811), *entrepreneurship skill* (.810), *ability to inform information* (.810), *integrity skill* (.810), *professionalism skill* (.810) and *initiative* (.809). Five competencies indicated an alpha value of .808 namely, *reading skill*, *writing skill*, *communication skill*, *and ability to work as teamwork* and *mentoring skill*.

## FINDINGS

### Human Resource Managers' Perceptions of the Graduates Competencies

Table 2 presents the overall findings regarding the importance of competencies for the tourism and hospitality graduates as perceived by the human resource managers. Out of 40 items tested, only one item derived with a full percentage of importance. A total of 100% respondents perceived the item, *ability to work in teamwork* as the most important competency which the tourism and hospitality graduates must possess in order to work in the industry. It was found that 70% respondents rated it as 'very important' whilst the balance of 30% rated it as 'important'. Another two competency items also revealed high level of importance with 98.4%. The items, *learning skill* showed that 56.7% respondents rated it as 'very important' and 41.7% rated as 'important'. Conversely the item, *ability to inform information* derived with 41.7% respondents rated it as 'very important' and 56.7% rated it as 'important'. Three other competency items which received high level of importance with 98.3% were *customer service skill*, *ability to support staff* and *professionalism skill*.

**Table 1. Reliability Results of Graduates Competencies**

No.	Competencies Items	Cronbach's Alpha	No.	Competencies Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Interpersonal skill	.823	21	Reliability	.805
2	Computer application skill	.820	22	Recording skill	.802
3	Creative skill	.818	23	Mathematical skill	.801
4	Coordinating skill	.814	24	Ability to use tools	.801
5	Technology awareness	.814	25	Business fundamental skill	.801
6	Networking	.812	26	Ability to use technology	.801
7	Staffing	.811	27	Preparing budget	.800
8	Monitoring staff	.811	28	Learning skills	.800
9	Entrepreneurship skill	.810	29	Critical thinking skill	.799
10	Ability to inform information	.810	30	Marketing skill	.799
11	Integrity skill	.810	31	Ability to delegate	.799
12	Professionalism skill	.810	32	Customer service skill	.784
13	Initiative	.809	33	Problem solving skill	.784
14	Reading skill	.808	34	Motivation	.784
15	Writing skill	.808	35	Ability to support staff	.784
16	Communication skill	.808	36	Strategic planning	.784
17	Ability to work as teamwork	.808	37	Conflict resolution skill	.784
18	Mentoring skill	.808	38	Ability to clarify company's objectives	.784
19	Flexibility	.807	39	Ability to control resources	.784
20	Planning & organizing skill	.806	40	Vision	.784

The respondents also perceived another five competencies as important skills to be possessed by the graduates before entering the industry. These competencies received 96.7% level of importance and consisted mostly of personal effectiveness skills such as *reliability, integrity skill, interpersonal skill, marketing skill* and *communication skill*. Furthermore, four competency items were rated 95% level of importance by the respondents. The competencies which represented the managerial ability and skills were identified as *staffing, ability to delegate, planning and organizing skill* and *initiative*.

The findings also revealed that 13 competencies derived between 90% - 94% level of importance. The respondents perceived these competencies as important items for the graduates in order for them to survive the challenges in the industry namely, *networking* (93.4%), *reading skill* (93.3%), *conflict resolution skill* (93.3%), *flexibility* (93.3%) and *writing skill* (92.7%). Additionally, the leadership and organizational competency items received 91.7% level of importance for instance, *problem solving skill, mentoring skill, motivation, vision, monitoring staff* and *ability to control resources*. As for the items *strategic planning* and *creative skill*, both were rated by the respondents with 90% level of importance.

Furthermore, the findings also indicated other competencies with high level of importance for instance *recording skill* (88.3%), *coordinating skill, critical thinking skill* and *preparing budget* (85%), *computer application skill* and *ability to clarify company's objectives* (83.3%), *entrepreneurship skill* and *ability to use tools* (80%). Even though the level of importance for the last three competencies derived above 50%, it was found that 3.3% respondents rated the items as 'less important' abilities and skills which need to be possessed by the graduates in order to work in the industry. The competencies were identified as *technology awareness, mathematical skill* and *business fundamental skill*. Finally, the *ability to use technology* was perceived by the respondents as less important competency (45%). The findings indicated that 20% respondents perceived the competency as 'less important' whilst 35% perceived it as 'neither both'.

## **DISCUSSION**

It can be seen from the study that almost all leadership competencies indicate high level of importance such as the *ability to work in teamwork, ability to inform information, ability to support staff, professionalism skill, integrity skill, communication skill, and ability to delegate, mentoring skill, motivation* and *coordinating skill*. Additionally, few competencies which represent the self effectiveness skills also reveal high level of importance by the human resource managers for instance *learning skill, reliability, initiative, flexibility* and *creative*. The findings significantly indicate the importance of including these two categories of competency at the beginning process of designing the academic curriculum for the tourism and hospitality program in Malaysia. Several items are also found to be significant due to the fact that they are also consisted in previous developed models namely Sandwith's Model (1993) and Four Clusters of Skills (Bachman and Milman, 1996). The competencies are, *writing skill, communication skill, marketing skill* and *computer application skill*. In fact, *communication skill* is probably perceived by the industry as a major factor used to evaluate the success of the graduates while working within the industry.

The most significant outcome of the study is acknowledged through the item, *ability to work as teamwork*. It is considered as a vital competency which the tourism and hospitality graduates in Malaysia must possess in order to survive within the industry. Eventually, it needs to be given serious attention by the education institutions in the planning and designing of the curriculum. Putting the competency in specific courses would significantly assist in producing graduates who are qualified to perform within the industry environment.

**Table 2. Human Resource Managers' Perceptions of Graduates Competencies**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Competencies Items</i>	<i>Important (%)</i>	<i>Very important (%)</i>
1	Ability to work in teamwork	30	70
2	Learning skill	41.7	56.7
3	Ability to inform information	56.7	41.7
4	Customer service skill	35.0	63.3
5	Ability to support staff	53.3	45.0
6	Professionalism skill	50.0	48.3
7	Reliability	40.0	56.7
8	Integrity skill	45.0	51.7
9	Interpersonal skill	36.7	60.0
10	Marketing skill	40.0	56.7
11	Communication skill	31.7	65.0
12	Staffing	50.0	45.0
13	Networking	61.7	31.7
14	Ability to delegate	68.3	26.7
15	Planning & organizing skill	56.7	38.3
16	Initiative	45.0	50.0
17	Reading skill	61.6	31.7
18	Conflict resolution skill	45.0	48.3
19	Flexibility	40.0	53.3
20	Writing skill	66.7	25.0
21	Problem solving skill	45.0	46.7
22	Mentoring skill	56.7	35.0
23	Motivation	51.7	40.0
24	Vision	58.4	33.3
25	Monitoring staff	53.3	38.4
26	Ability to control resources	58.4	33.3
27	Strategic planning	45.0	45.0
28	Creative skill	48.3	41.7
29	Recording skill	55.0	33.3
30	Coordinating skill	46.7	38.3
31	Critical thinking skill	46.7	38.3
32	Preparing budget	48.3	36.7
33	Computer application skill	61.6	21.7
34	Ability to clarify company's objectives	48.3	35.0
35	Entrepreneurship skill	55.0	25.0
36	Ability to use tools	66.7	13.3
37	Technology awareness	56.7	15.0
38	Business fundamental skill	41.7	30.0
39	Mathematical skill	56.7.	11.7
40	Ability to use technology	38.3	6.7

Additionally, having courses with few practical and training programs would continue to provide the graduates with confidence level of working as a team. Items such as *learning skill*, *informing information* and *customer service skill* are also consistent as self effectiveness and leadership competencies which the industry perceived important to be possessed by the graduates. This is probably due to the fact that the tourism and hospitality industry is dealing with people and focusing on selling services instead of physical products. Thus, the tourism and hospitality graduates must be able to learn fast in the changing environment in order to survive the challenges within the industry. In addition, the graduates must also have great skills in dealing with customers particularly during conflict. As the wide world industry, the tourism and hospitality graduates also need to be able to inform the exact information regarding the changes in supply and demand of the industry particularly in the case of Malaysia.

Consequently, the item *ability to use technology* is perceived by the human resource managers as the less important competency which the tourism and hospitality graduates need to possess. However, they may consider it as unimportant competency for the graduates to have before entering the industry but it probably may be important once they are working in the industry. It is understood from the study that using technology in the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry is probably not necessary for the graduates since their task may not required them to do so as they will be working at the various managerial level for instance at the front office department, finance and account department, human resource department and marketing department. However, based on the findings, it can also be summarized that the Malaysian tourism and hospitality graduates must at least have the ability to use technology before entering in the industry so that they might be able to work using technology once required. Therefore, there should be no harm to include the item in selected courses or even as one major course for the graduates. The findings of the study eventually emphasize the significant of human resource managers' perceptions regarding the graduate competencies in relation to the academic curriculum in Malaysia. The competencies perceived by the industry as important to be possessed by the graduates must be implemented in the academic curriculum in order to survive in the future industry.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study eventually contribute to the balance need of competencies between theory and practice as required by the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry. The tourism and hospitality graduates need to fulfill the competencies required by the industry in order for them to survive in great challenges within the industry. These competencies are perceived by the industry as important competencies and significant particularly for the Malaysian graduates to have in hands before entering the industry. Therefore, the academic institutions should consider these competencies during the process of designing the curriculum as to meet the industry needs. Also based on the findings, it is recommended that the tourism and hospitality graduates must at least have the knowledge on how to use technology before entering the industry but it is not the vital competency they should possess. Hence, the Malaysia tourism and hospitality institutions need to provide basic background of using technology in the academic curriculum without focusing in depth on the practical aspect. The tourism and hospitality graduates must also have good leadership competency particularly in working as a team since this competency is considered the most significant item which the tourism and hospitality graduates must possess. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Higher Education must train the graduates with this skill during their continuous learning process.

To fulfill this purpose, the education institutions must also take into considerations the industry representatives and practical skills in preparing and planning for tourism and hospitality graduate's future curriculum. It must be clearly identified the significant competencies the graduates must possess before entering the industry and the competencies which the graduates must possess as to survive in working within the industry. These two aspects produce different outputs for the industry future performance. Thus, the involvement of various stakeholders in designing and improving the tourism and hospitality education curriculum is vital so as to create a well-balanced approach of theory and practice in line with the competencies needed by the industry. Additionally, this serves as a continuous lifelong learning process for all stakeholders in the industry as to produce more quality and qualified employees. It can be concluded that the tourism and hospitality graduates need to prepare themselves in advance with specific competencies before entering the industry.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Bach, S. A., & Milman, A. (1996). A Novel Technique for Reviewing a Hospitality Management Curriculum. *Hospitality and Tourism Educator*, 8(1), 37-40.
- [2] Breiter, D., & Clements, C. J. (1996). Hospitality Management Curricula for the 21st century. *Hospitality and Tourism Educator*, 8(1), 61-4.
- [3] Davies, R. (1995). *A Comparative Analysis of Graduate's and Hospitality Management Recruiter's Perceptions of Hospitality Degree Program Content and Curricular Structure*, The Graduate College University of Wisconsin Stout.
- [4] Delamare Le Deist, F., & Winterton, J. (2005). What is Competence? *Human Resource Development International*, 8(1), 27-46.
- [5] Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism. (2009). [www.malaysiauniversity.net](http://www.malaysiauniversity.net)
- [6] Geissler, J., & Martin, L. (1998). Are we staying current in the preparation of our hospitality management graduates? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education* 10(3), 47-50.
- [7] Haywood, K. M. (1989). A Radical Proposal for Hospitality and Tourism Education. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 8(4), 259-260.
- [8] Hu, M. L. M. (2010). Developing a Core Competency Model of Innovative Culinary Development. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 29(4), 582-90.
- [9] Kay, C., & Russette, J. (2000). Hospitality Management Competencies. *The Cornell H.R.A. Quarterly*, 41(2), 52-61.
- [10] Lefever, M. M., & Withiam, G. (1998). Curriculum Review: How Industry Views Hospitality Education. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 39(4), 70-78.
- [11] Sandwith, P. (1993). A Hierarchy of Management Training Requirements: The Competency Domain Model. *Public Personnel Management*, 22, 43-63.
- [12] Sneed, J., & Heiman, R. (1995). What Program and Student Characteristics do Recruiters Consider Most Important? *Hospitality and Tourism Educator*, 7(4), 47-49.
- [13] William, P. W., & Hunter, M. (1991). Recruitment and Retention insights for the Hotel Industry. *F.I.U. Hospitality Review*, 9(1), 51-58.
- [14] Woods, R. H., & Kings, J. Z. (1995). *Quality Leadership and Management in the Hospitality Industry*. Educational Institution of the American Hotel & Motel Association. East Lansing, Michigan.
- [15] World Travel and Tourism Council (2002). *TSA Research Oceania, Summary and Highlights*. Retrieved April 04, 2002, from <http://www.wttc.org/ecres/TSA%202002>
- [16] Zopiatis, A. (2010). Is it Art or Science? Chef's Competencies for Success. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 29(3), 459-67.