Article

Bridging the Gap: Preparing Students for the Real World of Tourism and Hospitality Management at State Universities

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined tourism and hospitality employers' expectations of state university graduates and their impact on Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) curricula. Employers prioritize practical skills, problem-solving, customer service, emotional intelligence, technological proficiency, and cultural awareness. They emphasize the need for hands-on training, internships, and industry partnerships to bridge the gap between education and industry demands. Soft skills, particularly emotional intelligence, are essential for communication and conflict resolution, while technological competence in customer relationship management and booking systems is increasingly valued. Global competence is also critical in the industry's diverse landscape. The study highlights the gap between industry needs and current THM curricula, recommending curriculum reforms that integrate experiential learning, soft skills training, and technological advancements to enhance graduate employability.

Keywords: Tourism And Hospitality, Employer Expectations, Curriculum Development, Soft Skills, Technological Proficiency, Cultural Awareness.

Introduction

Tourism and hospitality management is a rapidly growing global industry with a significant economic impact. State universities play a crucial role in preparing students with industry-specific skills, yet a gap remains between academic learning and practical application. This study examines the readiness of state university students for the tourism and hospitality workforce, identifying challenges and opportunities in aligning academic programs with industry needs.

Despite efforts to equip students with knowledge in operations, customer service, marketing, and event planning, a disconnect persists between theory and practice [11]. Many programs emphasize theoretical learning over practical experience, lacking industry partnerships and internships [2]. Scholars suggest experiential learning, including internships, fieldwork, and live projects, significantly enhances career readiness [3]. Faculty with industry experience also play a vital role in student preparedness. Stronger collaborations between academia and the tourism industry are essential to ensure curricula remain relevant [11]. However, limited research exists on structuring such partnerships within state universities. While experiential learning is increasingly recognized as essential, its integration into Philippine state university curricula remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by evaluating curriculum design, faculty involvement, and industry linkages to enhance student preparedness for real-world challenges in tourism and hospitality management.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the perceptions of Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) faculty members regarding the effectiveness of current academic programs in preparing students for the tourism and hospitality industry.
2. To examine the role of industry partnerships and internships in enhancing THM students' employability and real-world readiness at state universities.
3. To identify the challenges state universities face in integrating real-world experiences into the THM curriculum and the strategies used to overcome these challenges.

Research Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study aimed to determine the workforce preparedness of state university graduates who finished the Tourism and Hospitality

Management programs. The semi-structured interview gave the researcher the flexibility to obtain more details and keen insights on participants' experiences, perceptions, and insights. The study participants included 10 lecturers who are staff members of various state colleges offering THM courses, 15 outstanding students majoring in THM, and six employees in the tourism and hospitality industries. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those with appropriate knowledge and experiences could provide valuable information about the study. Faculty members were selected because of their roles in the curriculum design; students, who would soon be graduating from the final THM program stages; and industry professionals to provide information about the general competencies required by the workforce. Semi-structured interviews were conducted personally or virtually, depending on participants' schedules. These interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions customized to each group of participants, audio-recorded interviews with the participants' permission, and a verbatim transcript of the interview during transcription for analysis. Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding, identifying and categorizing recurring patterns and themes to answer research questions. This methodological approach enabled researchers to gain insights into the experiences and perceptions of all stakeholders when interacting with THM education programs and tourism and hospitality business operations. Such interviews then became the basis for recommendations for improvement in the integration of real life into academic programs.

Results and Findings

All-important observations that emerged from interviewing the respondents are included in this section, coded (P1, P2, P3, etc.) to preserve anonymity. Quotes are edited wisely for clarity and translated into English for easy readability. It includes all key themes identified in the interview data, their significance indicating relevance to each research objective, and offers invaluable and often unexpectedly rich perspectives towards the future of creative writing in the digital age.

Perception of Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) Faculty Members

The insights of faculty members underscored three recurring themes concerning the preparation of students in tourism and hospitality management programs: the alignment of curriculum with industry standards, the provision of practical experience through internships, and the development of essential soft skills. Faculty expressed concerns that curricular content remained outdated, lacking

coverage of contemporary industry trends such as digital marketing, sustainable tourism, eco-tourism, and data analytics, which are now integral to professional practice. They stressed that closer partnerships with industry are necessary to ensure relevance and expose students to real-world tools and systems. Equally emphasized was the need to expand practical learning opportunities, with several faculty members asserting that limited industry immersion leaves students at a disadvantage when transitioning into the workforce. Greater collaboration with businesses and enhanced internship programs were identified as key pathways for bridging the theory–practice divide. Finally, faculty highlighted a gap in soft skills development, pointing out that while students often excel academically, they struggle with interpersonal communication, leadership, teamwork, and conflict resolution, skills critical in a customer-centered industry. These themes reveal that curricular reform, stronger industry linkages, and deliberate integration of soft skills training are essential to ensure that graduates are not only academically knowledgeable but also industry-ready and equipped for the dynamic demands of tourism and hospitality.

Alignment of Curriculum with Industry Standards

Faculty members highlighted the importance of aligning the curriculum with the latest industry standards and trends. Several faculty members expressed concerns about outdated content that did not reflect the rapidly changing demands of the tourism and hospitality sectors. For example, faculty believed that allowing the most current trends, such as digital marketing, sustainable tourism, and technological improvements in operations, would prepare them more aptly to navigate this new workforce. They asserted that a curriculum not refreshed regularly could be left behind by the differences in students' preparation for practical application in professional pursuits.

Participant 3: *Our students do not go through contemporary industry trends such as eco-tourism and data analytics. It is essential in the modern workplace. Updating the syllabus would bridge this gap.*

Participant 9: *We need to partner with industry so that our content is relevant and our students get hands-on experience with the tools and practices they will use in the workplace.*

Practical Experience and Internship Opportunities

A general, consistent theme among all the faculty members was that there should be more practical experience and internship opportunities for the students to bridge the gap between academic learning and industry application. Most faculty believed that theory was necessary, yet clearly insufficient for equipping students to

face the dynamic tourism and hospitality industry. Faculty members believed that if there were more partnerships among local businesses and opportunities for more internships, practical application of student knowledge within real-world scenarios would increase, thus allowing better preparedness.

Participant 2: *Our students need more practical training. To date, the students have very little industry exposure, which puts them at a disadvantage since they cannot develop the required practical expertise.*

Participant 13: *Internships are an area for improvement in our program. Better relations between the industry partners and the students can give the latter an immersive learning experience.*

Development of Soft Skills

The faculty members also highlighted that soft skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving were essential for the tourism and hospitality industry but have been less emphasized in the curriculum. Several instructors indicated that most students are excellent academicians but fare poorly in interpersonal skills, which are much needed for success in the customer-centric context of tourism and hospitality. It has led several faculty members to argue that soft skills training could be integrated into the curriculum through group projects, customer service simulations, and leadership training.

Participant 2: *As for the demands of the industry in dealing with customers, most students who joined us are not fully prepared for that. I mean, soft skills in resolving conflict and teamwork.*

Participant 3: *Most students ace the tests but flunk interpersonal skills. Therefore, Soft skills should find a prominent position within our curricula to equip them for 'real life adequately.'*

Role of Industry Partnerships and Internships in Enhancing the Employability and Real-World Readiness of THM Students at State Universities

Faculty members and administrators emphasized that industry partnerships and internships are indispensable components in preparing Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) students for the realities of the professional world. Strong collaborations with industry were described as vital "cords to reality exposure," enabling students to engage with emerging trends, current practices, and practical applications of their classroom learning through guest lectures, workshops, and live projects. Respondents noted that these linkages provide students with valuable experiences, such as planning tourism events and working alongside established

hospitality brands. Similarly, internships were consistently highlighted as critical platforms for translating theoretical knowledge into practical skills, particularly in communication, customer service, teamwork, and time management, which are essential in the fast-paced tourism and hospitality sector. Internships also serve as gateways for building professional networks, boosting employability, and aligning student competencies with employer expectations. However, the data also revealed persistent challenges in securing high-quality opportunities. Faculty members pointed out that the lack of a consistent framework for placements, limited availability of slots, and uneven quality of internship experiences hinder students from fully benefiting from these programs. In some cases, industry partners lacked the resources or structured systems to provide comprehensive training. Collectively, these insights highlight both the potential and the limitations of industry partnerships and internships, underscoring the need for strengthened collaboration, structured frameworks, and equitable access to ensure that every THM student is adequately prepared for the demands of the global tourism and hospitality workforce.

Industry Partnerships as Important Cords to Reality Exposure

Industry partnerships are indispensable in preparing THM students for real-world work environments. Faculty members and administrators always remarked that strong partnerships with the industry allow students to have firsthand experience, exposure to the current industrial practices, and access to emerging trends. Such partnerships often involve guest lectures, workshops, and live projects that give experience in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Participant 10: *Industry leaders often come to the faculty to share their insights with students.*

Participant 6: *Through partnerships, our students get to be part of real projects, from planning tourism events to working with global hospitality brands.*

The Role of Internships in Developing Practical Skills and Work Experience

Faculty and administrators consistently mentioned internships as essential to enhancing the employability of THM students. These opportunities allow the students to have hands-on experience in which they will take their abstract knowledge and apply it in real-life situations. Interns allow the development of critical skills such as communication, customer service, teamwork, and time management, which are crucial in the tourism and hospitality industry. Furthermore, an internship allows a student to build professional contacts as widely as possible, boosting one's chances of employment shortly after graduation.

Participant 11: *Internships give our students the kind of experience they need for the swift world of tourism and hospitality sectors*

Participant 3: *Internships help students build a good portfolio of skills. They need to understand what the employers expect from them and how to act in real-world situations before graduation.*

Challenges in Obtaining Quality Internships and Industry Partnerships

Although internships and industry partnerships are critical, there is a challenge to source quality opportunities for all students, according to the responses of the faculty. Lack of a consistent framework for securing internships, limited availability of placements, and variety in the quality of experiences offered by different companies were considered barriers towards maximizing these opportunities. In addition, some faculty members expressed that industry partners may not always be able to deliver the structured learning experience required to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the industry.

Participant 10: *Internships are essential, but there are not enough structured opportunities for all the students.*

Participant 6: *We focus more on sound relations with the industry partners so that they are ready to offer some opportunities for an internship*

Challenges Faced by State Universities in the Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) Curriculum and the Strategies Used to Overcome these Challenges

Faculty members identified several persistent challenges in preparing Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) students for industry readiness, with the most pressing issue being the limited access of state universities to strong industry partnerships and resources. Institutions in rural or less economically developed regions often struggle to establish ties with significant tourism and hospitality companies, restricting students' exposure to high-quality internships, fieldwork, and industry-based projects. As one participant noted, partnerships with smaller firms, while helpful, can often not provide the breadth of experiences students require to gain competitive skills. A second critical challenge lies in the rigidity of the THM curriculum, which many have described as overly theoretical and difficult to adjust due to bureaucratic processes and accreditation requirements. This inflexibility prevents programs from embedding hands-on learning opportunities that reflect the fast-changing demands of the sector, including innovations in technology, sustainability, and global service standards. Finally, faculty pointed to resource and time constraints as significant barriers to implementing experiential learning.

Organizing internships, site visits, and industry collaborations requires substantial coordination, which is difficult for full-time faculty already burdened with teaching and administrative responsibilities. Without adequate funding and structural support, these initiatives remain underdeveloped. Collectively, these challenges underscore the urgent need for state universities to strengthen partnerships with industry players, secure additional resources, and promote curriculum flexibility while investing in faculty professional development to ensure programs remain relevant and aligned with the evolving needs of the tourism and hospitality industry.

Inaccessibility to Strong Industry Partnerships and Resources

The biggest challenge identified by faculty members was the inaccessibility of state universities to powerful industry partnerships and resources. State universities, especially those in more rural or less economically advanced regions, tend to have difficulties creating ties with major players in the tourism and hospitality industries. Without such partnerships, giving students practical internships or fieldwork, much less industry-based projects that can simulate real conditions in the industry, is more challenging.

Participant 5: *Our industry partnerships are confined to a specific scope. Some of our links have been with smaller firms, which do not provide us with the experience we want our students to have.*

Participant 7: *Without strong ties with the industry, providing students with the hands-on learning necessary to go beyond their classroom experience becomes difficult.*

Curriculum Stiffness and Inability to Adjust

The second major challenge is the rigid nature of the existing curriculum. Many THM programs are based on fixed courses with no flexibility to incorporate real-life experiences as needed. Professors and administrators complained that changes to the curriculum often are avoided, supposedly because of accreditation requirements or institutional practices. Such programs make it challenging to constantly adapt to the dynamic demands of the tourism and hospitality industries, which require flexible and dynamic learning approaches. It incorporates real-life experiences, which demand constant adjustments to the teaching methods and course content. It is difficult in rigid structures.

Participant 12: *It is hard to get real-life experiences when the curriculum is so full of theoretical content. We must be able to change courses and mix more hands-on training, but bureaucracy sometimes makes it hard.*

Participant 8: *The flexibility of the curriculum is what is really challenging. It is impossible to put together the kind of real-life experiences we want for some courses, so we cannot offer many options to students.*

Resource and Time Constraints for Implementing Experiential Learning

One of the challenges arising with respect to experiential learning was resources and time constraints. The more significant difficulty is that organizing any of these activities, such as internships, field visits, or industry-based projects for real-world learning, is very time-consuming and labor-intensive, often beyond the ability of full-time faculty, due to high teaching and administrative loads.

Participant 12: *While we acknowledge the need for real-world learning, we do not have the necessary resources and time to implement these plans effectively*

Participant 4: *We know the need for experiential learning, but with limited resources, giving all students this experience is challenging.*

State universities should enhance their partnerships with industrial players in developing internships and fieldwork sites or collaborative projects. Continuous professional development support is necessary to ensure that the professors are relevant and up to date with the latest trends and practices in the tourism and hospitality industry. In addition, higher education institutions should promote increased curriculum flexibility to include real-world experience and seek additional supplemental funding to accommodate the integration of those experiences.

Discussion of Results and Findings

The findings revealed strong concerns among faculty members regarding the outdated nature of the THM curriculum, which they argued fails to keep pace with contemporary industry demands. Respondents emphasized that incorporating trends such as digital marketing, eco-tourism, data analytics, and sustainable tourism is necessary to ensure graduates are prepared for modern workforce requirements. As P3 observed, students are not adequately exposed to *"contemporary industry trends such as eco-tourism and data analytics."* Participant 9 stressed the importance of industry partnerships in making content relevant.

This observation is consistent with Raybould and Wilkins (2006), who found that hospitality curricula often lag the fast-changing demands of the industry, particularly in emerging technological and sustainability practices. Similarly, Airey and Tribe (2005) argue that continuous curriculum renewal is essential in tourism education to bridge the gap between academic programs and professional realities. Without such updates, state universities risk producing graduates who are well-

versed in theory but poorly equipped to respond to real-world industry expectations (Richardson, 2009).

Faculty members strongly emphasized the importance of practical experiences and internships in bridging the theory and practice divide. Participant 2 remarked that students currently receive *"very little exposure to the industry,"* leaving them disadvantaged in acquiring practical expertise. Participant 13 noted that strengthened internships could give students an *"immersion learning experience."*

The centrality of internships to employability is well established. According to Zopiatis (2012), structured internship programs provide essential opportunities for students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world contexts, enhancing skill development and industry readiness. Stansbie, Nash, and Chang (2016) found that work-integrated learning deepens professional identity and increases job preparedness. However, as Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) pointed out, many programs still emphasize theoretical approaches, creating a mismatch between employer expectations and graduate competencies. The results of this study thus highlight the urgent need for stronger partnerships with local businesses and structured internship frameworks to ensure equitable access to quality placements.

Another recurring theme was the underdevelopment of soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership. Participant 2 observed that students *"are not fully prepared"* for customer-facing roles that require interpersonal skills, while Participant 3 explained that although students "ace the tests," they "flunk interpersonal skills."

The importance of soft skills in hospitality education is well documented. Raybould and Wilkins (2005) emphasize that generic skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and communication are among the most valued by employers. Likewise, Suh et al. (2012) observed that soft skills often outweigh technical knowledge in determining career advancement in tourism and hospitality. Richardson (2010) further argues that the customer-centric nature of the industry makes interpersonal skills indispensable, as service quality is directly tied to employee interaction with clients. It aligns with the study's findings, which call for integrating soft skills into the curriculum through group projects, customer service simulations, and leadership training modules.

Respondents described industry partnerships as *"cords to reality exposure,"* noting that collaboration with tourism and hospitality organizations provides students with authentic opportunities to learn from practitioners. Participant 6 highlighted that through partnerships, students participate in real projects, while Participant 10 mentioned frequent guest lectures by industry leaders. Faculty members agreed that

these linkages are critical for exposing students to current practices, building networks, and boosting employability.

Scholarly literature reinforces this perspective. Ladkin (2011) stresses that industry partnerships enhance students' employability by ensuring that training is aligned with workforce demands. Barron and Maxwell (1993) also found that partnerships strengthen students' perceptions of hospitality as a viable career by offering firsthand exposure to professional environments. Nevertheless, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to such opportunities, as noted by Zopiatis et al. (2021), who found wide variation in the quality of industry-based learning experiences.

The findings revealed persistent barriers in providing effective experiential learning. Faculty identified limited access to strong industry partnerships, particularly in rural universities, as a critical challenge (Participant 5, Participant 7). They also pointed to curriculum rigidity, making integrating new learning experiences difficult due to bureaucratic and accreditation requirements (Participant 8, Participant 12). Finally, participants highlighted resource and time constraints, noting that organizing fieldwork and industry projects is labor-intensive and often unfeasible given high teaching loads (Participant 4, Participant 12).

These challenges echo Richardson (2012), who found that hospitality graduates often report insufficient practical training due to program constraints. Riley, Ladkin, and Szivas (2002) similarly argue that institutions cannot keep up with the dynamic labor needs of the tourism sector without flexible curricula. Moreover, Flor (2021) noted that limited funding and infrastructure in public universities often restrict the ability to deliver high-quality experiential learning, especially in developing countries.

Thus, the findings highlight three central insights: (1) curricula must be continuously updated to align with industry standards and trends, (2) practical training through internships and partnerships must be expanded and better structured, and (3) soft skills development must be deliberately embedded into program design. However, systemic barriers, such as weak partnerships, rigid curricula, and resource constraints, continue to hinder the full realization of these goals in state universities. Addressing these issues requires stronger industry collaboration, curriculum reforms, and institutional support, consistent with international best practices in tourism and hospitality education.

Conclusion

This study highlights the gap between state university Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) curricula and industry demands, emphasizing the need for more

substantial alignment with evolving workforce expectations. Faculty members, students, and industry professionals stress the importance of integrating real-world applications through industry partnerships, internships, and experiential learning. Key findings reveal that soft skills, technological proficiency, and cultural awareness are crucial but underemphasized in current programs. Challenges such as rigid curricula, limited industry ties, and resource constraints hinder practical training. To bridge these gaps, universities must enhance collaboration with industry partners, promote flexible curricula, and provide faculty with continuous professional development. Strengthening these areas will equip THM graduates with the competencies needed for a dynamic global workforce.

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