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Hard Skills of Hospitality Graduates and Hotel Skills Gap Reduction in Selected Four-Star Hotels in Kigali City, Rwanda

Jackline Kabatesi[1*], Charles Aloo[1]

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ABSTRACT

Hotels in Rwanda need hospitality graduates whose operational competencies match workplace requirements. This study examined the association between graduates' hard skills and perceived hotel skills gap reduction in three four-star hotels in Kigali City. Guided by human capital and competency-based theories, a descriptive mixed-methods approach combined questionnaires and manager interviews. Of 220 eligible individuals, 147 were selected (113 graduates and 34 managers), and 136 participated (108 graduates and 28 managers; overall response rate 92.5%). Instruments were reviewed by academic experts and piloted; questionnaire diagnostics yielded KMO = .959 and Cronbach's alpha = .988. Graduates rated their hard-skills preparation moderately positively (mean = 3.82), particularly event organization, front-office attachments and kitchen practice, but identified weaker conference exposure and bar and restaurant practical's. Hard skills and perceived skills gap reduction were strongly correlated ($r = .951$, $p < .001$; $N = 108$), with $R^2 = .904$. Managers corroborated the value of practical preparation while identifying continuing needs in hotel-specific systems and languages. The study adds Rwanda-specific evidence that training-to-workplace alignment matters, but self-reported measures and possible common-method bias preclude causal interpretation. Hospitality educators should strengthen authentic service practice, industry exposure and hotel partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Hotels depend on their employees to deliver housekeeping, food and beverage service, front-desk operations and guest interaction, so a persistent skills gap, in which employees' competencies fall short of what the hotel needs, quickly shows up as uneven service, operational inefficiency, heavier supervision and additional training costs. In a competitive sector, hotels need staff with the employability skills to satisfy and retain guests (Espellita & Maravilla, 2019). Hospitality graduates are an important source of such labour, and training institutions are expected to equip them with knowledge and skills that ease the transition into work. A hospitality qualification, however, does not guarantee that a graduate can perform effectively in a particular hotel, and employers increasingly look for graduates who can apply operational knowledge in real work situations rather than rely on academic credentials alone (Dhaliwal & Misra, 2020; Espellita & Maravilla, 2019).

Hard skills are the formal, measurable and job-specific competencies, such as front-office operations, food and beverage production and service, housekeeping and event organising, that graduates acquire through training and practice. They form the operational foundation of hotel work, and Dhaliwal and Misra (2020) and Fajaryati *et al.* (2020) show that employers in hospitality give considerable weight to such operational skills when judging graduate employability. Where the hard skills developed in school are aligned with what hotels do every day, graduates should perform tasks competently from the start and contribute to closing the gap between required and possessed skills.

The question is pressing in Rwanda, where tourism and hospitality contribute significantly to employment and economic growth. The tourism sector earned US$647 million from 1.36 million visitors in 2024, and the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions sector earned US$84.8 million from 115 events (Rwanda Development Board [RDB], 2025). This growth raises demand for staff who can deliver operational tasks reliably. The RDB (2022) skills assessment of the tourism and hospitality sector concluded that workforce competencies must be strengthened and that industry demand and skills development must be better aligned. Kigali City, the main hub for lodging, business travel and conferences, is where this pressure is greatest, yet empirical evidence on whether the hard skills of hospitality graduates help close skills gaps in individual four-star hotels is lacking. Evidence elsewhere points to a disconnect between what hospitality education provides and what hotels need (Succi & Canovi, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023), but it rarely tests the relationship between graduates' hard skills and the extent of skills gap reduction in a Rwandan setting.

This study therefore addresses a single objective: to assess the influence of hospitality graduates' hard skills on hotel skills gap reduction in selected four-star hotels in Kigali City, Rwanda. It answers one research question: what is the influence of hospitality graduates' hard skills on hotel skills gap reduction? The study contributes context-specific evidence from graduates and hotel managers that can guide curriculum design, practical training and

[1] School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Mount Kenya University, Rwanda
[*]Corresponding author's e-mail: jkabatesi55@gmail.com

collaboration between hospitality institutions and hotels. The study's specific novelty lies in combining graduates' ratings of operational preparation with managers' accounts of workplace readiness in three Rwandan four-star hotels, while estimating the association between perceived hard skills and perceived skills gap reduction. Rather than proposing a new theory, it provides a context-specific examination of how human capital investment may translate into workplace-relevant competencies, and where the translation remains incomplete.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hard Skills in the Hospitality Context

Hard skills are the mechanical know-how and measurable abilities that people acquire through formal education, training or practical experience; they are job-specific and can be objectively assessed or tested (Laker & Powell, 2011). The Institute of Hospitality (2022) describes them as cognitive and practical talents that can be acquired through training and verified through certification or assessment. In this study, hard skills are the formal, knowledge-based and practical competencies learned at school that give hospitality graduates the theoretical and procedural grounding for hotel work. They represent the technical and operational knowledge needed to carry out specific hotel activities (Ciapponi, 2023). Amrollahi *et al.* (2025) list front-office operations, housekeeping management, food and beverage production and service, revenue management, financial reporting, marketing, quality assurance and adherence to hospitality standards among these competencies, and argue that employers now expect actual operational ability in addition to academic knowledge. Dzia-Uddin *et al.* (2025) similarly report that, after the pandemic, hospitality employers give more weight to graduates who are ready for work and can apply theory to real workplace situations while maintaining operational effectiveness and service quality.

A hotel skills gap arises when graduates hold adequate theoretical knowledge but lack the practical abilities needed to meet hotel operational requirements. Skills gap reduction is the narrowing of the distance between the skills hotels seek and the skills graduates actually possess. It matters because hotel operations rely on consistent employee-guest interaction and service delivery. The gap is closely linked to the mismatch between what is acquired in hospitality schools and what employers require (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023), which makes the practical content of training the most direct lever through which hard skills can reduce it.

Theoretical Underpinning

Two theories frame the objective. Human capital theory holds that knowledge, skills and abilities gained through education, training and experience raise individual productivity and performance, and that investment in such capital improves organisational outcomes (Becker, 1964). Hospitality graduates are human capital whose operational skills are formed in school; where that formation does not match what the sector demands, a skills gap results. Hard skills in front-office, food and beverage, housekeeping and financial operations are, in this view, investments that increase graduates' capacity to function well in hotels (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023).

The theoretical contribution is therefore a qualified connection between the two perspectives: human capital theory explains why education and practical training may build productive skills, whereas competency-based theory specifies that their workplace value depends on alignment with actual hotel tasks. The observed gaps in conference exposure, bar and restaurant practice, and hotel-standard laundry procedures illustrate potential points where educational investment may not yet produce job-matched competencies. These interpretations are consistent with the theories but do not constitute causal tests of them.

Competency-based theory argues that performance is predicted better by demonstrated competencies than by qualifications alone (McClelland, 1973) and that effective performance occurs when an employee's competencies match job requirements (Boyatzis, 1982). Applied here, hard skills are the core operational competencies of hotel work, and a competency gap exists wherever graduates cannot demonstrate them. Both theories therefore lead to the same expectation: graduates with strong hard skills should contribute substantially to reducing the hotel skills gap.

Empirical Evidence on Hard Skills and Skills Gap Reduction

Shariff and Razak (2022) used a three-round Delphi study with experts from four- and five-star hotels in Malaysia and identified 69 competencies required for graduate employability, grouped into workplace, personal effectiveness, management and academic clusters. They concluded that industry and educational institutions must collaborate closely so that graduates' technical and operational skills match real hotel requirements. Pillai *et al.* (2021), in a study of hospitality educators and professionals in Cyprus, identified through exploratory factor analysis six competency dimensions that combined technical and operational competencies, such as information technology, financial analysis and operational knowledge, with interpersonal skills. Both studies defined the competencies employers need but did not test their statistical contribution to reducing skills gaps.

Shrestha (2024) compared 90 hospitality students' perceived competencies before and after internships and found a gap between industry requirements and the skills acquired through academic preparation; off-campus internships offered practical learning that helped students identify and narrow their competency gaps. In East Africa, Tushabe and Murimi (2024) examined the mismatch between hospitality education and industry needs in Uganda through a qualitative case study of employers, trainers, policymakers and recent graduates. They attributed 35% of training gaps to curriculum

misalignment and 30% to inadequate practical skills training, and called for curriculum-industry alignment, hands-on training, internships and employer participation. Reviews point in the same direction: industry-university cooperation and work-integrated learning strengthen students' technical and industry-related skills (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023), and training collaboration, curriculum enrichment and experiential learning improve graduate employability (Sufi *et al.*, 2025).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Two Strands Were Integrated at The Interpretation Stage: Graduates' Survey Results Identified the Strength and Weaker Areas of Perceived Preparation and Quantified Its Association with Perceived Skills Gap Reduction; Managers' Interview Themes Were Then Compared with Those Patterns to Identify Convergence (Practical Readiness and Reduced Supervision) And Qualification (Continuing Training Needs for Hotel-Specific Systems and Languages). This Is Interpretive Triangulation Rather Than Statistical Pooling of the Two Datasets. No Separate Joint-Display Analysis or Formal Mixed-Methods Integration Statistic Is Reported.

Research Design and Study Area

Importantly, 147 denotes the number selected for participation, not the achieved sample. The final participating group comprised 136 individuals across the three hotels: 108 of 113 selected graduates completed questionnaires and 28 of 34 selected managers completed interviews. Accordingly, the reported correlation and regression use the 108 graduate questionnaire responses; the 28 manager interviews provide qualitative evidence, not additional observations for those statistical models.

A descriptive research design with quantitative and qualitative approaches was adopted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Structured questionnaires gave measurable data on graduates' hard skills and the extent of skills gap reduction, and semi-structured interviews with managers explained and deepened the quantitative findings through triangulation. The study was conducted in Kigali City, Rwanda, in three four-star hotels selected purposively because they are in different districts, employ trained hospitality graduates and gave access to both employees and managers: Park Inn by Radisson (Nyarugenge District), Lemigo Hotel (Gasabo District) and Nobleza Hotel (Kicukiro District).

Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The target population was 220 individuals, comprising 170 hospitality graduates working in operational departments and 50 managers and supervisors. Stratified random sampling was used to select graduates from the front office, housekeeping, food and beverage, and kitchen departments, and purposive sampling was used to select managers with specialised knowledge of staff performance and skills requirements (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). The sample comprised 147 respondents, made up of 113 graduates and 34 managers, allocated across the three hotels (Table 1).

The supervisor and hospitality lecturers' review provided expert assessment of item relevance and wording; the pilot assessed comprehensibility and feasibility before the main survey. The reported KMO and Bartlett statistics indicate that the questionnaire correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis, but do not independently establish construct validity. Likewise, the overall 52-item alpha indicates internal consistency for the combined questionnaire, not necessarily for each separate scale. No separate subscale reliability estimates, factor loadings, or independent validation of the interview guide are available in the reported results; these should be supplied if documented in the underlying analysis.

Because the predictor (hard skills) and outcome (perceived skills gap reduction) were measured in the same graduate questionnaire at the same time, the analysis is susceptible to common-method variance. The existing results do not report a dedicated diagnostic such as a full-collinearity assessment, marker-variable approach, or latent common-method factor analysis. Such a test would require access to the item-level dataset and appropriate assumptions; it cannot be inferred from the reported variance inflation factor for a different regression model. Consequently, the large correlation is treated as an association between self-reported constructs, pending further bias assessment and independent outcome measurement.

Table 1: Target population, sample and participation by respondent category

Respondent category	Population	Sample	Participated	Rate (%)
Hospitality graduates (questionnaire)	170	113	108	95.6
Managers and supervisors (interview)	50	34	28	82.4
Total	**220**	**147**	**136**	**92.5**

Research Instruments, Validity and Reliability

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire for graduates and a semi-structured interview guide for managers. Graduates rated statements on hard skills and on skills gap reduction on a five-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5); the hard skills

section contained ten statements covering practical training in the front office, kitchen, guest rooms, events, bar and restaurant service, laundry and service sequence. Interviews with managers lasted about 10 to 15 minutes, were conducted face to face, and were recorded with consent.

The instruments were developed from the study objectives and current literature and reviewed by the research supervisor and hospitality lecturers for relevance and clarity. They were piloted with 20 graduates and 5 managers from two four-star hotels in Kigali that were not part of the main study, and items were revised in light of the feedback. Construct validity of the whole questionnaire was supported by a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of .959 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity (χ^2 = 16,669.212, df = 820, p < .001). Internal consistency was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .988 across 52 items), well above the .70 threshold (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Data Collection and Analysis

After approval from the university and hotel management, questionnaires were distributed to graduates during working shifts and interviews were arranged at managers' convenience. Questionnaire data were coded and analysed in SPSS version 26.0 using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. The relationship between hard skills and hotel skills gap reduction was tested with Pearson's correlation coefficient and a linear regression model specified in Equation (1), in which Y is hotel skills gap reduction, X is hospitality graduates' hard skills, α is the constant, β is the regression coefficient and ε is the error term. Interview data were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically to identify the main patterns in managers' views (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

$$Y=\alpha+\beta X+\varepsilon$$

Ethical Considerations

Formal written permission was obtained from the hotel managements before data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study and gave written informed consent, participation was voluntary with freedom to withdraw at any time, and no personal identifiers were collected. Data were coded to prevent responses from being linked to individuals and were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

Of the 113 questionnaires distributed to graduates, 108 were completed and returned (95.6%), and 28 of the 34 sampled managers were interviewed (82.4%), giving data from 136 of 147 targeted participants (92.5%; Table 1). The high participation reduces the likelihood of non-response bias, and the analysis of hard skills below is based on the 108 graduates, complemented by the 28 manager interviews.

Graduates' Assessment of Hard Skills

Table 2 summarizes graduates' responses to the ten statements on the hard skills developed during their training, and Figure 2 ranks the statements by mean score. The overall mean of 3.82 lies between neutral (3) and agree (4), closer to agree, indicating that graduates moderately agreed that their training developed the hard skills hotels require.

Table 2: Graduates' assessment of hard skills developed in training

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. dev.
Theory is combined with practical training at the front-office desk	0.0	0.0	37.0	43.5	19.5	3.84	.733
Practical attachments at the hotel front office	0.0	0.0	0.0	48.1	51.9	4.51	.502
Kitchen operations are practiced in school laboratories	0.0	0.0	0.0	60.2	39.8	4.40	.491
Studies include practical and theoretical knowledge of international cuisine	0.0	0.0	0.0	73.1	26.9	4.27	.447
School laundries use the same detergents as the hotel industry	0.0	38.9	0.0	48.1	13.0	3.35	1.125
Attachment to guest rooms follows classroom demonstration	0.0	0.0	20.4	45.4	34.2	4.14	.732
Students are invited to sessions when international conferences are held	26.9	37.0	0.0	36.1	0.0	2.47	1.235
Participation in event organizing is part of training	0.0	0.0	0.0	44.4	55.6	4.55	.499
Bar and restaurant service is part of school practicals	16.7	26.0	13.0	44.3	0.0	2.85	1.167
Laboratory practicals include the service sequence	0.0	0.0	34.2	51.0	14.8	3.82	.680
Overall mean						3.82	

SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

Four statements attracted unanimous agreement (all respondents agreed or strongly agreed): practical attachments at the hotel front office (mean = 4.51), kitchen operations practiced in school laboratories (4.40), practical and theoretical knowledge of international cuisine (4.27), and participation in event organizing as part of training (4.55). Attachment to guest rooms after classroom demonstration (4.14) and the combination of theory with front-office practice (3.84) also drew largely positive responses, with 79.6% and 63.0% agreement respectively, and the remainder neutral. In total, seven of the ten statements recorded no disagreement at all. The pattern suggests that graduates leave school with solid exposure to the core operational areas of the front office, kitchen and events, which is the practical foundation human capital theory expects to raise productive capacity (Becker, 1964) and the kind of demonstrated competence emphasized by competency-based theory (Boyatzis, 1982;

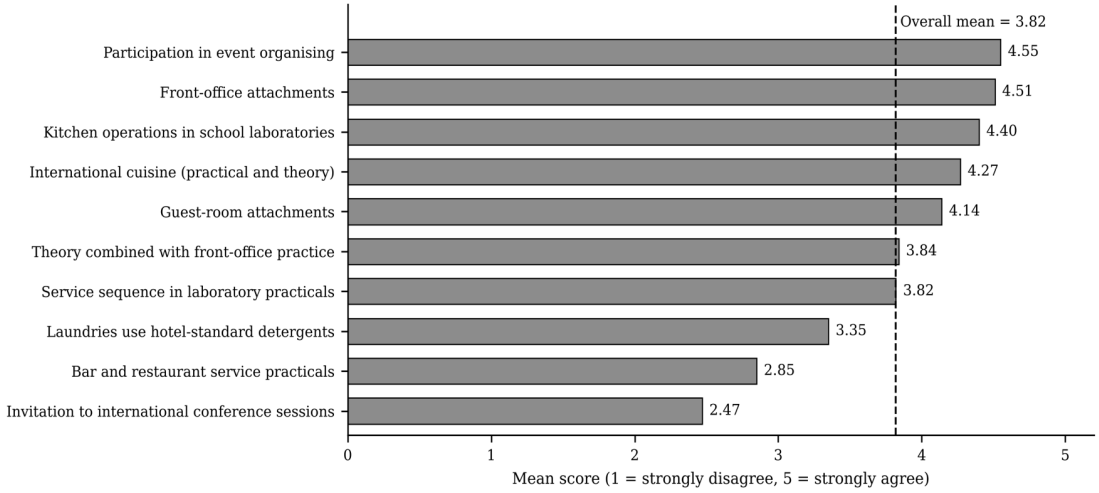


Figure 1: Mean scores of graduates' responses on hard skills developed in training.

McClelland, 1973).

The exceptionally high r = .951 warrants particular caution: common respondents, shared response scales, item-content overlap and socially desirable answers could inflate the observed association. No common-method bias test is reported, so the size of any inflation remains unknown. The R^2 = .904 refers to explained variation in the survey-based outcome within this sample, not to an objectively verified reduction in hotel skill shortages. Replication with employer-rated competence, observed task performance and distinct measurement sources is necessary before drawing stronger conclusions.

Three areas of weakness stand out. Only 36.1% of graduates agreed that students are invited to sessions during international conferences (mean = 2.47, with 63.9% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing), only 44.3% agreed that bar and restaurant service forms part of school practical (mean = 2.85, with 42.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing), and 38.9% disagreed that school laundries use the same detergents as hotels (mean = 3.35). These are the points at which training is least like real hotel operations, and they correspond to the areas in which Tushabe and Murimi (2024) found that insufficient practical training and limited exposure to the industry created training gaps for Ugandan graduates. They also support the argument of Dzia-Uddin *et al.* (2025) that employers value graduates who can apply knowledge in realistic workplace situations. Where school practice does not replicate hotel conditions, the transfer of hard skills to the workplace is likely to be incomplete, and some skills gap will remain.

The strong results for front-office attachments and event participation are consistent with Shrestha (2024), who found that practical experience outside the classroom helped students identify and narrow their competency gaps, and with the calls of Nguyen *et al.* (2023) and Sufi *et al.* (2025) for work-integrated and experiential learning. Taken together, graduates' responses indicate that hospitality schools in the study area develop the hard skills hotels need most in some departments but provide less preparation in service-oriented and externally oriented practice.

Relationship Between Hard Skills and Hotel Skills Gap Reduction

Integration of the two strands reveals both agreement and an important boundary: managers' reports of better procedural readiness are consistent with graduates' positive ratings of front-office and kitchen preparation, whereas managers' continuing training requirements indicate that high self-ratings do not imply complete job readiness. The interviews thus contextualize, but cannot independently validate, the magnitude of the graduate-only correlation.

Graduates also rated five statements on hotel skills gap reduction (overall mean = 3.73), for example that newly recruited graduates meet most job performance expectations (mean = 4.21) and that recruiting graduates has reduced operational skills shortages (mean = 4.18). Table 3 shows how hard skills relate to this outcome. The

Pearson correlation was r = .951 ($p < .001$, N = 108), a very strong positive relationship. The simple regression model gave $R^2 = .904$ (adjusted $R^2 = .903$, standard error of the estimate = .386), meaning that hard skills accounted for 90.4% of the variance in hotel skills gap reduction. When hard skills were entered in a model together with the other competency and workplace variables of the wider study, their coefficient remained positive and significant (B = 0.414, $\beta = .474$, t = 5.661, $p < .001$) with a variance inflation factor of 1.82, well below the threshold of 10, so the effect does not depend on the single-predictor model.

Implications for hospitality education follow the specific item-level evidence. Given low ratings for exposure to international conference sessions (mean = 2.47) and bar and restaurant service practicals (mean = 2.85), training institutions should expand supervised conference/event placements and assessed food-and-beverage service simulations. Because 38.9% disagreed that school laundries use hotel-standard detergents, programmes should review the authenticity of housekeeping and laundry laboratory materials with hotel partners. The strong ratings for event organization (mean = 4.55), front-office attachments (4.51) and kitchen practice (4.40) support retaining and evaluating these experiential components. Hotels and colleges should jointly define observable competency checklists and collect supervisor assessments during internships. These are evidence-informed recommendations, not interventions evaluated by this study.

Table 3: Correlation and regression results for hard skills and hotel skills gap reduction

Statistic	Value
Pearson correlation (r), N = 108	0.951 ($p < .001$)
R square	0.904
Adjusted R square	0.903
Standard error of the estimate	0.386
Hard skills coefficient in the multiple model: B (β)	0.414 (0.474)
t-value; significance	5.661; $p < .001$
Variance inflation factor	1.82

These results show that graduates who judge their hard skills to be well developed also judge that hotels' skills gaps have narrowed, which supports the expectation of human capital theory that investment in operational skills improves performance (Becker, 1964) and the claim of competency-based theory that a match between demonstrated competencies and job requirements closes competency gaps (Boyatzis, 1982). The findings agree with the conclusions of Shariff and Razak (2022) and Pillai *et al.* (2021) that operational competencies are central to employability, and they extend that work by quantifying the relationship in four-star hotels in Kigali, which those studies did not do. The strength of the association should nevertheless be read with care. Both variables were rated by the same graduates, which raises the possibility of common-method bias, and a correlational design cannot establish cause; the figures show a strong association within this setting rather than proof that hard skills alone produce the reduction.

Managers' Perspectives

The 28 managers' interviews strengthen the questionnaire results (Table 4). Managers reported that the hard skills graduates acquire in training allow them to perform their duties more effectively, to follow industry standards and operational procedures accurately when serving guests, and so to improve operational efficiency and service quality. Most recent graduates arrive with practical knowledge of front-desk operations, housekeeping procedures, food and beverage service, reservation systems, customer service standards and basic hotel accounting, which helps them adapt quickly, need less initial supervision and help

Table 4: Managers' views on hard skills and skills gap reduction

Theme	Summary of managers' views
Hard skills and workplace performance	Hard skills acquired in training enable graduates to perform duties effectively, follow industry standards and procedures, and improve efficiency and service quality.
Practical skills and industry readiness	Graduates arrive with practical knowledge of front desk, housekeeping, food and beverage, reservation systems and basic accounting, and need less supervision. Continued on-the-job training is still needed for hotel-specific technologies and requirements, and foreign-language proficiency (beyond English) varies.

to address operational skills gaps.

The qualification managers added is as important as the endorsement. They stressed that continued on-the-job training remains necessary to link academic knowledge to the specific systems and operational requirements of each hotel, and that although many graduates communicate well in English, fewer are proficient in French, Chinese and other languages, which can limit service to guests from diverse backgrounds. This explains why the skills gap is reduced rather than eliminated by graduates' hard skills, and it matches the weaker items in Table 2, where training is least similar to hotel practice. Together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence leads to the same conclusion: hospitality graduates' hard skills significantly influence hotel skills gap reduction, and the influence is greatest where school practice most closely mirrors real hotel operations.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the influence of hospitality graduates' hard skills on hotel skills gap reduction in selected four-star hotels in Kigali City, Rwanda. Graduates agreed moderately that their training developed hard skills (overall mean of 3.82), with the strongest preparation in event organizing, front-office attachments, kitchen practice and international cuisine, and the weakest in exposure to international conferences, bar and restaurant service practice and realistic laundry practice. Hard skills were strongly and positively related to skills gap reduction ($r = .951$) and accounted for 90.4% of its variance, and managers confirmed that graduates with practical skills perform better, need less supervision and help to close operational gaps, while still requiring on-the-job training in hotel-specific systems and foreign languages. The study therefore concludes that hospitality graduates' hard skills have a significant influence on hotel skills gap reduction. The findings are important for hospitality institutions, which should strengthen hands-on training and industrial internships, extend practical sessions to bar and restaurant service and event exposure, and keep their laboratories close to hotel conditions, and for hotels, which should complement graduates' hard skills with structured on-the-job training and language development. The conclusions are limited by reliance on self-reported ratings from the same graduates for both variables, by a single-predictor association that cannot prove causation, and by a sample from three hotels, so future research should combine manager-rated competency assessments, direct observation and objective performance indicators in a wider set of hotels and provinces.

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