Employability Skills and Knowledge in the Tourism Industry of Pakistan

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Abstract: This study is carried out with the intentions to identify the pivotal role of skills and knowledge in employability within the tourism industry of Pakistan. With respect to knowledge, the study examine the potential differences within personal traits of the participants i.e. academia and practitioners, whilst, the importance of skills and abilities is evaluated through collection of data from the participants on a list of twenty seven skills attributes, gleaned from extensive trawl of relevant literature and international good practices in operation in tourism and hospitality sector. Results of the study delineate that at present more than half of the faculty in tourism educational institutes have irrelevant qualification, which adversely affecting the academic rigor. In contrary, the hospitality practitioners are recorded with acceptable level of experience, however, their qualification and theoretical knowledge is noticed much below the average standards required. The 27 skills attributes are variably opted by academia and practitioners. Academia consider the Oral Communication, Customer Service Skills, and Work Ethics as three most important skills and abilities. However, the industry practitioners opine that Oral communications, Team Working skills and Adoptability at work are the three major skills and abilities. However, limited opportunities for graduates' internship and standardized training facilities in the educational institutes are recorded as one of the major obstacles in producing the skilled workforce. Recommendations are presented for bridging the skill and knowledge gap for producing comparatively well rounded graduates for the tourism industry in the country.

Key Word: Skills; Knowledge; Tourism; Hospitality; Pakistan

Introduction:

Tourism provides a variety of jobs across the employment spectrum (Liu and Wall, 2005). It is estimated that one in eleven jobs in the world is related to tourism industry (WTTC, 2016; 2020).In 2020, the total contribution of tourism industry to Pakistan's GDP was PKR 1,874.4BN, which accounted for 4.4% of the total economy, as compared to PKR 2,438.7BN (5.7 of total GDP) in 2019. Likewise, in 2020, the tourism employment contribution was approximately 3.5 million, accounted for 5.5% of the total employment (WTTC, 2020).

Though, the tourism industry is well established for its employment creation and economic contribution, however, the World Travel & Tourism Council report 'Global Talent Trends and Issues' published in 2015, attracted the attention to a critical human resource (HR) challenge in the tourism industry (Becton and Graetz, 2001; Chan and Kuok, 2011). While this talent problem will occur across industries and economies, however, Tourism & Hospitality (T & H) industry will be more seriously affected. This severe impact can be attributed to the labor-intensive nature of the T & H industry (Nzonzo and Chipfuva, 2013). In this regard tourism industry of Pakistan would not be an exceptional.

Though, at present the tourism sector of the country can be considered at its infancy stages of development, however, the prevailing circumstance portray that the country is expected to see an expansion of both domestic and international tourism in the coming years (World Bank Report, 2019). Therefore, tourism can be presumed as a potential venue for maximum employment creation and subsequent economic growth of the country.

Although, the tourism industry of Pakistan in general and hospitality sector[1] in particular has the potential for significant contribution to the economic development of the country. However, the country has been facing a number of challenges in order to fully exploit the potential of this industry. Some of these challenges are cross-cutting, whilst, some are sector-specific which collectively affecting the overall economic benefit from the sector. Amongst the sector's specific issues the most important is the lack of desired number of quality and professional workforce in the industry. Ideally, the conceptual learning and the skills acquired by the tourism & hospitality graduates must mirror the demands of the today's competitive tourism industry. The issue concerning the scarcity of quality workforce in hospitality sector of the country has also been highlighted in: Master Plan for the Promotion & Development of Tourism in NWFP (1998); Vision Document for Tourism Sector of KP (2011); Tourism Policy KP (2015); and KP Integrated Development Strategy (2014-2018).

It is a well established fact that education can only accomplish its purpose when it produces graduates with competencies the industry demands. However, the existence of gap between academics and practitioners has also been well recognized in almost all educational fields and industries. The tourism industry has not been exceptional in this regard (Sheldon et al., 2008; Tribe, 2002a; Busby, 2003 and Airey, 2005). Therefore, this study has been conducted with the intentions to critically investigate the academia-industry perspective on workplace essential skills & knowledge. The study will assist in bridging the university-industry gap and will ultimately enhance the acceptability of tourism graduates in the market.

1. **Literature Review:**

Research studies have shown that in tourism industry the key stakeholders i.e. educators and practitioners have different viewpoints and sometimes do not understand each other's perceptions (Petrova& Mason, 2004). For example, tourism and hospitality educators have been criticized for not

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[1]Tourism is a multidisciplinary industry, with many different sectors. The "hospitality" sector encompassing accommodation and food services which represents 50-75% of all tourism-related jobs within the industry (OECD, 2012), will be used as a proxy for much of the discussion .

equipping students effectively for employment in the industry (Petrova and Mason, 2004; Asirifi et. al., 2013; Airey, 2005 and Dale & Robinson, 2001). The research studies advocating industry perspectives further claimed that there is a mismatch between skills and knowledge required by industry and those provided by universities (Cooper, 1993; Evans, 1993; Dale & Robinson, 2001; Churchward & Riley, 2002; Airey, 2005). In contrary, researcher like Petrova (2008) declared that the tourism industry's skepticism is only based on perceived mismatch between what is required and what tourism and hospitality graduates offered.

The European Commission (2015) report on tourism education affirmed that degree-level education is important for developing more sophisticated and diverse individuals. However, it is more difficult in Higher Education (HE) due to obstacles in interaction and dialogue between HE institutions and the industry. In fact, to a certain level the objectives of HE institutions and the industry diverge for valid reasons. However, to resolve such issues need an open debate and interaction amongst stakeholders. In many countries, it requires more investment from both sides in improving the quality of education in tourism. Whilst, researcher like Jenkins (2001) has considered the old fashioned attitudes and amateur human resources management approaches of hospitality practitioners as some of the reasons for creating the gap between academia and industry.

A study by Munar& Montano (2009) argued that most educators have focused on supplying hotels, restaurants and related businesses with human labor who in some cases do not meet the employer's expectations because tourism and hospitality industry is rapidly changing and hence there is a need for educators to keep abreast of these dynamics to meet the industry expectations. Therefore, in bridging University- Industry gap, the role of tourism industry stakeholders cannot be overlooked. The need for a mutual relationship between the educators and the employers has been stressed by the researchers (Hinchliffe, 2011; McMurray et al., 2016; Helyer, 2014 and Jackson et al., 2017).

In order to fill the university- industry gap in the sector, the researchers have primarily concentrated on the issues of: subjects' standardization and diversification (Airey, 2005; Airey& Johnson, 1999; Amoah & Baum, 1997; Cooper, et al., 1996; Fayos-Solá, 1997; Koh, 1995; McKercher, 2002); inclusion of more specialized subjects in the curricula (e.g. Perdue et al., 2000; Kay and Russette, 2000; Jiang& Tribe, 2009; Raybould& Wilkins, 2005; Donina& Luka, 2014; Riley, Ladkin, &Szivas, 2002 and Tan & Morgan, 2002) and, tackling the contemporary issues in the relevant discipline (Sigala, 2002; Jordan, 2008; Wang, 2008; Busby, 2003; Jurowski, 2002; O'Halloran & Deale, 2004; Raybould and Wilkins, 2006; Casado, 2003; Deale et al., 2009; Lopez, 2005 and Horng et al., 2009). Researchers (e.g. Dale and Robinson, 2001; Morgan 2004; Wang and Ryan, 2007) also suggested that tourism educators should develop courses specifically to meet the needs of students and practitioners. This is a trend toward, in Illich's (1990) words, the creation of a 'packaged certificate'.

The terms competencies and skills are more often used interchangeably (Zegward& Hodges, 2003; Hodges &Burchell, 2003), however, according to Coll., et al (2002:36) a competent individual may be defined as "one who has skills and attributes relevant to tasks undertaken".
In general, at undergraduate level the relative value of competencies or employability skills is well documented in the literature (Bath et al., 2004; Barrie 2006; Hind et al., 2007; Rainsbury et al., 2002) and, tourism education is not an exceptional (Ladkin, 2005).

An array of research has been conducted on the skills and competencies required by the tourism industry (for example, Airey& Johnson, 1999; Amoah, & Baum, 1997; European Commission report , 2015; Stahl et al., 2013; Mayaka and Akama, 2015; Daniel et al. 2017; Jaber and Marzuki, 2019; Christou; 2000; Malone; 2007; O'Connor; 2002; Velo and Mittaz, 2006; Pring, 1993; Koh, 1995; Kunwar, 2018; Renfors, 2017; Dredge et al. 2013). However, according to George Washington University (2008), tourism skills are ostensibly consistent worldwide. This supported the viewpoint of Baum (1991) who argued that the issue of management competencies should not be examined in isolation and emphasized the need for 'global', 'entrepreneurial' skills and 'vision' that will enable graduates to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

APEC (2017) classified tourism industry skills into four main categories. These are: hard skills, digital skills, soft skills and general business skills. However, with reference to hospitality sector, several studies have also been conducted to determine the importance of relevant competencies. For example, Ineson and Kempa (1996) identified four main skills: oral and written communication skills, supervising skills, customer satisfaction and service skills. To achieve operational objectives, skills like: problem solving, maintaining professional and ethical standards, professionalism and leadership skills have been regarded important in hospitality sector (Baum 1990; Kay and Russette 2000; Christou and Sigala 2001). Skills which ensure public and staff safety has also been prioritized (Baum 1990). However, Kay and Russette (2000) mentioned that leadership' and communication skills are of major importance in tourism industry. Skills like computer literacy, accounting and numeracy, small business management, marketing and entrepreneurship are also considered essential by researcher from operational perspectives of tourism and hospitality sectors (Kandampully and Duddy 2000; Breiter and Hoart 2000).

Whilst concluding the debate regarding the training needs of the hospitality sector in Australia, Whitelaw et al., (2009) stated that it appears that there is a common movement to recognize that graduates should continue to develop their communication and operational skills through a solid foundation in practices. It is further argued that in response to environmental and market changes, graduates should also demonstrate cognitive skills that will enable them to identify problems and subsequently devising counteractive strategies.

A passerby reference to generic skills and competencies has been noticed in HEC-quality assurance document (un-dated) for evaluating students' attributes. However, in view of the pivotal role of skills and abilities in tourism education, this study has endeavored to investigate the perception of academia and industry regarding the skills & abilities in graduates' employability in the sector.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection:

This study used questionnaire survey for data collection. A good questionnaire always focuses on the aims of investigations and therefore, the quality of data collected is directly dependent on the quality of questionnaire used. However, designing a good and statistically robust questionnaire is a complex and time consuming task. Inspired from Jang et al (2013) and an extensive review of relevant literature, enabled in formulating a comparatively more standardized and valid questionnaires for investigating the perspective of hospitality sector and educational institutes.

The data was collected on two main aspects of the investigations i.e. personal information about the interviewees and perceptions about graduates' employability skills

The personal information included: name of organization, position, experience and qualification were used to investigate the background knowledge of the interviewee. However, for the sake of confidentiality and anonymity, the first question i.e. name of the organization was kept optional. This section provided valuable information about the personal traits of individuals creating gap between the academia and hospitality sector.An extensive trawl of relevant literature enabled in devising a list of twenty seven (27) skills and abilities (Table 1). These are variably considered important for graduates' employability in the hospitality sector.

Table 1. List of twenty seven skills & abilities	
1. Oral Communication	2. Decision Making
3. Written Communication	4. Negotiation Skills
5. Work Ethics	6. Management Skills
7. Customer Service Skills	8. Practical Skills
9. Team Working Skills	10. Industry Knowledge
11. Adaptability at Work	12. Leadership Ability
13. Relationship Management Skills	14. Marketing & Sales Skills
15. Attention to Details	16. Networking Ability
17. Confidence	18. Computer Skills
19. Problem Solving Skills	20. Critical Thinking
21. Organizational Abilities	22. Creativity
23. Research Skills	24. Event Management Skills
25. Legal Understanding	26. Relevant Work Experience
	27. Academic Grades

The participants' perception about the enlisted skills and abilities was investigated with respect to the graduates' employability in the hospitality sectors. The section provided information regarding the skills & abilities gap between the supply and demand sides of the sector. The questionnaire was pre-tested or pilot tested prior to its application for data collection.

To provide an overview on the opportunities and issues related to skills and abilities of the graduates, the requisite data was collected from representative hotels of each category. Furthermore, efforts were also made to include maximum number of registered hotels from tourism destinations. For better insight, a number of hotels were also included from Islamabad. A total of 87 hotels of different categories were thus investigated through structured questionnaire and informal interviews with the managerial staff/administrators of the hotels.

At the time of the investigation period of this research project, a total of six (06) Universities in KP were offering Undergraduate/BS Program in Tourism & Hospitality (T&H). These are: Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan; Hazara University, Mansehra; Malakand University, Chakdara; Sawabi University, Sawabi; Swat University, Mingora and University of Chitral, Chitral. The Departments of the

mentioned universities offering BS Tourism & Hospitality (T&H) programs are variably named as either Department of Tourism & Hospitality or Department of Tourism & Hotel Management. In University of Swat it is called Department of Cultural Heritage Tourism & Management. A total of 38 individuals, accounting for 78% of the total full time faculty, were investigated. For the sake of comparison and in-depth understanding of the issue concern, viewpoints of 06 individuals from two educational institutes in Punjab province (Air University and Foundation University) were also collected.

3.2 Data Analysis:

The industry practitioners and academia were investigated for their perception regarding the importance of 27 predetermined skills and abilities with respect to the employability in the hospitality sectors. Likert Scale was used for the investigation of the respondents' attitude about the skills and abilities. The Likert scale is named after Rensis Likert, who proposed the use of this method in his report *"A technique for the measurement of attitudes"* (Likert, 1932). The procedure of the Likert method involves measuring a set of attitudes statements along a five-point or sometimes longer scale. In order to rate the level of importance of the 27 randomly enlisted skills and abilities, five-point Likert Scale was used i.e. 1= Extremely Unimportant; 2= Unimportant; 3= Neutral; 4= Important and finally, 5= Extremely Important. The mean score calculated for each attribute showing the intensity of the respondents' perception.

The data collected both from hospitality sector and educational institute through questionnaire survey were analysed through statistical analysis software –SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 21.0 and Microsoft Excel. The data analyzed was presented as comparative perception of academia and hospitality sector practitioners in the following areas:

3. **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

   3.1 **Personal Attributes:**

A total of 38 individuals from academia are investigated through a questionnaire survey. The investigated individuals are accounted for 78% of the total faculty[2]. The majority of the individuals (29) investigated are holding an academic position of lecturer, followed by Assistant Professor (8), whilst, an individual is also recorded with a position of demonstrator. Of all, only four individuals have terminal PhD level of academic qualification. Interestingly, only 02 of them have comparatively relevant degree in tourism & hospitality. Likewise, 21individuals are recorded with MS/MPhil qualification, with less than a half with the relevant degree. Twenty four (24) individuals are recorded with Master Degrees (MA), however, 14 of them have non- Tourism & Hospitality (T & H) degree. In addition, most of the faculty members (Fig. 2) are also recorded with certificates and diploma qualification.

Likewise, Managerial/administrative staff from 87 hotels of different categories is investigated through a structured questionnaire.The data collected reveal that almost half of the individuals investigated have more than ten years of relevant experience. However, the cumulative qualification of the hospitality practitioners delineates that only 22% of the overall individuals having tourism related qualification. Out of which, certificate and diploma courses are accounted for 10% and 5% respectively. Individuals

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[2] The core faculty of the Departments of Tourism & Hospitality

with Bachelor degree in Tourism & Hospitality (T & H) are 3%, while, MA & MS in T&H are recorded only 2% each.

Though, it is well documented that the educational background, beliefs, and level of expertise in the relevant discipline are some the essential attributes of individuals which affect their planning and operational capabilities (Stark and Lattuca, 1997). However, the data collected from academic institutes delineate that at present more than half of the faculty in T & H educational institutes have irrelevant qualification. Likewise, it is also noticed that these institutes have negligible number of individuals with higher academics positions i.e. Associate Professors and Professors. The recorded attributes can mainly be due to the comparatively infancy stages of tourism education coupled with the lack of opportunities for higher studies (MS/MPhil or PhD) in this discipline within the country. Regardless of the fact, the prevailing situation is adversely affecting the academic rigor of the program. Furthermore, international good practices in tourism education depict that industry experience is important for hospitality educationists (Shen et al., 2015). However, during the course of this study it is noticed with concern that with the exception of only 7.8% of academia the rest have no practical work experience in the hospitality sector, especially in hotels, and hence, they are unaware of the working environment of the hotel sector and lacking experiential capabilities. This situation can be overcome through providing industry exposure opportunities to the academia.

In contrary, the hospitality practitioners are recorded with acceptable level of experience, however, their qualification and theoretical knowledge is noticed much below the average standards require. Only 22% of the individuals having tourism related qualification. The tourism qualification is dominated by certificate and diploma courses (15%), followed by BS in T& H degree (3%), while, individuals with MA & MS degree in T& H are accounted only for 2% each. The rest of the individuals working on managerial positions are without any reasonably acceptable qualification.

4.2 Perception about Graduates' Skills & Abilities in Employability:

Tourism and hospitality education can only assures the quality of graduates through equipping them with a set of particular skills and abilities. A list of twenty seven skills and abilities is gleaned from an extensive trawl of relevant literature and international good practices in operation in tourism and hospitality sector. The academia and practitioners' views are collected on the enlisted skills and abilities of graduates with respect to its importance in employability in hospitality sector. The 27 skills and abilities are variably prioritized by academia and industry. Comparative assessment of the top ten skills & abilities by academia and industry practitioners with respect to tourism graduates' employability (Figure 1).Academia consider the Oral Communication, Customer Service Skills, and Work Ethics as three most important skills and abilities. However, the industry practitioners opine that Oral communications, Team Working skills and Adoptability at work are the three major skills and abilities.

The difference of opinion between the academia and practitioners regarding skills and abilities required by the industry and those delivered by universities has been well documented in the literature (Cooper, 1993; Evans, 1993; Dale & Robinson, 2001; Churchward& Riley, 2002; Airey, 2005).

Fig. 1: Academia & Practitioners' Views on Skills and Abilities
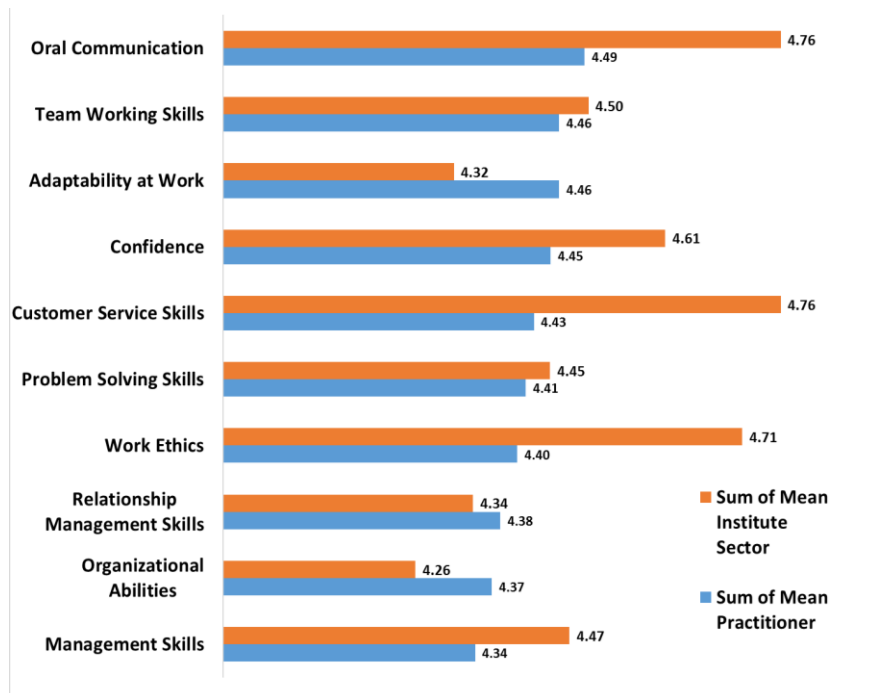
4. Conclusion& Recommendations:

Indeed, in many ways, tourism and hospitality education has been at the forefront of the move to integrate skills and knowledge with the recognition that a practical learning component is an undividable aspect of inclusive hospitality education curriculum. International good practices delineate different models for imparting practical skills at graduate level in hospitality, for example, learning in on-campus commercial hotels; learning in on-campus training hotels; learning in on campus training units; off campus practicums and internships etc.

This study established that the T&H degree essentially demands work integrated learning for transferring classrooms activities to workplace. Though, in the present study the value of skills and abilities in employability of graduates is well identified by both the academia and practitioners. Furthermore, on campus training units and internships are regarded as major venues for graduates' skills development. However, during personal visits to educational institutes, it is observed with great concern that some of the institutes are virtually lacking basic labs/training units required for practical skills development of graduates in hospitality. However, the others are found with unacceptable and poor infrastructure and facilities which can hardly ensure graduates' skills and abilities as demanded by the contemporary hospitality sector. In addition, none of the institutes are recorded with skillful and qualified demonstrators for imparting practical skills.

This study concluded that although the government of Pakistan upgraded tourism sector to the status of an industry in 1990, however, tourism education has rarely been taken seriously. The present fast-paced development of the tourism industry in the country demanding well qualified and professionally trained academia and practitioners for ensuring sustainable growth of the tourism industry.

To bridge the skills and knowledge gap this study recommend:

- Establishment of standard hospitality labs in educational institutes;
- Efficient university & industry coordination;
- The industry must provide competitive edge to T&H graduates;
- Hospitality sectors should invest in educational institutes;
- Fulfilling the need of relevant qualified individual in the education institutes;
- Balancing liberal and vocational aspects in curriculum;

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