

BRIDGING THE COMPETENCY GAP BETWEEN HOSPITALITY EDUCATION AND INDUSTRY: EVIDENCE FROM A CORPORATE FOCUS GROUP AT ASHLEY HOTEL INDONESIA

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Hospitality Education; Competency Gap; Employability Skills; Curriculum Alignment; Polytechnic–Industry Collaboration. Received: August 05, 2026 Approved: September 28, 2026 Published: September 30, 2026	The rapid transformation of the hospitality industry, driven by digitalization, artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and changing guest expectations, requires higher education institutions to continuously align graduate competencies with industry needs. Nevertheless, competency mismatches between hospitality graduates and employer expectations remain a persistent issue, particularly in vocational education. This study aims to identify competency gaps among hospitality graduates, explore priority soft skills required by employers, formulate curriculum improvement recommendations, and examine preferred models of polytechnic–industry collaboration. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed using a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving seven corporate managers and three representatives from vocational education colleges. They are representing Human Resources, Hotel Operations, Housekeeping, Revenue Management, Information Technology, and Marketing Communication at Ashley Hotel Indonesia and Head of Hotel Program Department, Head of Public Relation, and Secretary of academic dept. of Sahid Tourism Polytechnic. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged. First, technical competency gaps were identified in operational hotel systems, Property Management Systems (PMS), revenue management, AI utilization, digital marketing, business knowledge, housekeeping procedures, and analytical software. Second, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, observation, and professional attitude were recognized as essential employability skills. Third, curriculum reform should emphasize experiential learning through industry projects, role play, mentoring, AI integration, and competency-based assessment. Finally, respondents highlighted the importance of sustainable polytechnic–industry collaboration through guest lectures, curriculum co-development, internship supervision, practitioner mentoring, and continuous curriculum evaluation. The study proposes an Industry-Based Hospitality Competency Framework integrating technical competencies, employability skills, digital capability, and industry partnership. The findings provide practical implications for curriculum redesign within hospitality higher education to improve graduate employability and workforce readiness.

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INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is currently experiencing unprecedented transformation due to the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), digital technologies, automation, data analytics, and evolving customer expectations. Hotels are no longer expected merely to provide accommodation services but are increasingly required to deliver personalized, technology-enabled, and memorable guest experiences. Consequently, hospitality organizations demand graduates who possess not only technical operational competencies but also advanced interpersonal, analytical, and digital capabilities (Yi et al., 2026).

The acceleration of technological innovation has substantially changed competency requirements within hotels. Property Management Systems (PMS), revenue management systems, business intelligence platforms, digital marketing, predictive analytics, and AI-assisted guest services have become integral components of hotel operations. Therefore, hospitality graduates are expected to demonstrate technological adaptability alongside traditional service competencies. Previous studies indicate that hospitality employers increasingly prioritize communication, leadership, financial literacy, digital capability, adaptability, and critical thinking over purely technical skills (Shariff & Razak, 2022).

Despite continuous curriculum improvement initiatives undertaken by higher education institutions, competency mismatch remains one of the most critical challenges confronting hospitality education worldwide. Employers frequently report that graduates possess adequate theoretical knowledge but lack practical competencies, commercial awareness, communication ability, and technological readiness required in real hotel environments. These competency gaps negatively influence graduate employability and organizational productivity (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Recent comparative research across South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong demonstrates that curriculum emphasis does not always align with students' perceived competencies and industry expectations. The findings suggest that competency alignment requires stronger collaboration between higher education institutions and hospitality organizations to ensure graduates are adequately prepared for increasingly complex workplaces (Yi, et al, 2026).

Within the Indonesian context, empirical evidence exploring competency expectations from corporate hotel management remains relatively limited. Existing studies generally focus on students' perceptions or internship experiences, whereas research capturing strategic perspectives from hotel executives responsible for recruitment, operations, revenue management, marketing, engineering, and human resources is still scarce. This limitation restricts the development of competency-based curricula that accurately reflect contemporary industry requirements (Alexandria et al., 2025).

To address this gap, the present study was conducted through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving seven corporate managers from Ashley Hotel Indonesia Corporate Office located in Jakarta. The participants represented diverse managerial functions, including Human Resources, Hotel Operations, Marketing Communication, Housekeeping, and Revenue Management, thereby providing a comprehensive organizational perspective regarding graduate competency requirements. The composition of participants is also documented in the uploaded participant list.

The discussion generated four principal areas of inquiry:

1. What technical competencies are still lacking among hospitality fresh graduates?
2. Which soft skills are considered most critical for career success in the hotel industry?
3. What curriculum reforms are urgently required by industry?
4. What forms of collaboration between universities and hotels are most desirable?

Unlike previous studies that primarily identify competency lists, this research aims to develop an integrated understanding of graduate readiness by combining competency gaps, employability skills, curriculum alignment, and polytechnic–industry partnership into a unified conceptual framework. Such integration provides a more comprehensive basis for competency-based curriculum redesign within hospitality vocational education.

The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the literature on hospitality competency development and practically to curriculum enhancement within vocational higher education institutions, particularly those preparing graduates for Indonesia's rapidly evolving hospitality industry. Accordingly, the research problem addressed in this study is the insufficient alignment between hospitality education competencies and the competency expectations of the hotel industry, particularly in relation to technical competencies, employability skills, curriculum relevance, and polytechnic–industry collaboration.

Based on this research problem, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What technical competencies are perceived by hotel industry managers to be lacking among hospitality fresh graduates?

RQ2. Which employability skills are considered critical for graduates' successful transition into the hotel industry?

RQ3. What curriculum improvements are considered necessary to better align hospitality education with current industry requirements?

RQ4. What forms of polytechnic–industry collaboration are considered desirable for strengthening graduate competency and workplace readiness?



Figure 1. Small Focus Group Discussion at the Ashley Corporate Hotel on July 31, 2026 in Central Jakarta.
Source: Author, 2026

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to explore hospitality industry perspectives regarding graduate competency requirements, curriculum improvement priorities, and preferred polytechnic–industry collaboration models (Creswell & Poth, 2018) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand participants' experiences, professional judgments, and organizational expectations rather than to test hypotheses or quantify relationships. The design allowed participants to interact, exchange viewpoints, and collectively identify emerging competency issues relevant to hospitality higher education, as focus groups capitalize on interaction among participants to generate rich qualitative insights (Morgan, 1997).

The research design incorporated a systematic data-processing procedure based on thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the analytical process was organized into six stages: (1) familiarization with the FGD data through repeated reading of the discussion record; (2) generation of initial codes from meaningful statements; (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing and refining candidate themes against the coded data; (5) defining and naming the final themes; and (6) producing the analytical report by interpreting and presenting the themes in relation to the research objectives. This staged procedure provides a transparent pathway from the raw FGD material to the final thematic findings and is consistent with contemporary guidance on the systematic development and reporting of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*, 2021).

Research Setting

The study was conducted at Ashley Hotel Indonesia Corporate Office, located on Jl. KH. Wahid Hasyim, Central Jakarta, on 31 July 2026. The FGD involved cross-functional corporate managers who were directly responsible for employee recruitment, performance management, operational supervision, marketing, revenue management, and housekeeping. Conducting the discussion at the corporate level enabled the research to capture strategic competency expectations that extend beyond a single operational department.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were:

1. holding managerial positions within Ashley Hotel Indonesia;
2. possessing direct responsibility for supervising employees or recruitment processes;
3. having practical experience in evaluating the competencies of fresh graduates;
4. being willing to participate voluntarily in the discussion.

A total of ten participants met these criteria. Their functional diversity ensured that the discussion reflected multiple organizational perspectives.

Table 1. Participants of Focus Group of Discussion

No	Position	Functional
1	Corporate HR Manager	Human Resources

2	Hotel Manager	Hotel Manager
3	Assistant Housekeeping Manager	Assistant Housekeeping Manager
4	Corporate Marketing Communication Manager	Corporate Marketing Communication Manager
5	Cluster Housekeeping Manager	Cluster Housekeeping Manager
6	Housekeeping Manager	Housekeeping Manager
7	Corporate Assistant Revenue Manager	Corporate Assistant Revenue Manager
8	Head of Diploma 2 Floating Hotel Services	Study Program
9	Head of PR of Campus	Moderator

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The Focus Group Discussion involved seven hotel-industry managerial representatives from Ashley Hotel Indonesia Corporate Office, representing Human Resources, Hotel Operations, Housekeeping, Revenue Management, and Marketing Communication. These participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in recruitment, employee supervision, operational management, and competency evaluation. Their cross-functional perspectives provided insights into graduate competency requirements across several important areas of hotel operations. However, because F&B, Engineering, and Sales managers were not represented, the findings should be interpreted as selected managerial perspectives rather than a comprehensive representation of all hotel functional areas.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a semi-structured Focus Group Discussion (FGD). An interview guide containing four open-ended questions was used to facilitate discussion while allowing participants to elaborate freely based on their professional experience.

The moderator encouraged interaction among participants rather than sequential individual responses. This interaction generated richer insights because participants were able to validate, challenge, and expand each other's viewpoints.

The discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes and produced detailed qualitative data regarding industry competency expectations. The minutes FGD became the primary source for thematic coding.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by (Braun & Clarke, Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, 2006).

Phase 1. Familiarization

Researchers repeatedly read the FGD transcript to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives.

Phase 2. Initial Coding

Meaningful statements were coded line-by-line. Codes represented specific competencies, curriculum suggestions, and collaboration forms mentioned by participants.

Examples of initial codes included:

1. AI literacy
2. Storytelling
3. Communication
4. Personal branding
5. Reading emotional cues
6. Revenue management

7. PMS
8. Power BI
9. Professional attitude
10. Business knowledge
11. Critical thinking
12. Adaptability
13. Mentoring
14. Guest lecture

These codes were derived directly from the FGD data.

Phase 3. Searching for Themes

Related codes were grouped into broader conceptual themes.

Table 2. Conceptual Themes

Initial Codes	Themes
Opera, PMS, Revenue System	Opera, PMS, Revenue System
Communication, Observation	Communication, Observation
AI, Power BI, Automation	AI, Power BI, Automation
Mentoring, Seminar	Industry Partnership
Initial Codes	Themes

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Phase 4. Reviewing Themes

Themes were reviewed to ensure internal consistency and distinctiveness across categories. Similar themes were merged while overlapping codes were refined.

Phase 5. Defining Themes

Four overarching themes emerged:

1. Technical Competency Gap
2. Employability Skills
3. Curriculum Alignment
4. Polytechnic–Industry Collaboration

These themes formed the basis for subsequent interpretation.

Phase 6. Reporting

Findings were presented using descriptive narratives, thematic tables, and selected participant quotations to illustrate each theme while maintaining coherence with the research objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Focus Group Discussion involved nine managerial representatives from Ashley Hotel Indonesia Corporate Office. Participants represented Human Resources, Hotel Operations, Information Technology, Engineering, Revenue Management, Marketing Communication, and Housekeeping, providing a multidisciplinary perspective on graduate competency requirements. Such cross-functional representation strengthens the richness of

qualitative findings because competency expectations originate from different operational responsibilities rather than a single department.

Table 3. Competency Priorities

Functional Area	Number Participants	Main Contribution
Human Resources	1	Recruitment and competency assessment
Hotel Operations	1	Front office and guest service operations
Housekeeping	3	Operational competencies and SOP implementation
Revenue Management	1	Revenue systems and business analytic
Marketing Communication	1	Digital marketing and branding

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The diversity of participants enabled triangulation across departments and enriched the identification of competency priorities.

Theme 1. Technical Competency Gaps Among Hospitality Graduates

One of the strongest findings emerging from the FGD concerns the mismatch between the competencies acquired during higher education and those expected by employers. Participants consistently stated that many fresh graduates possess basic theoretical knowledge but experience difficulties in applying operational procedures in real hotel environments. The technical competencies identified as insufficient include:

Table 4. Technical Competency Gaps

Competency Area	Evidence from FGD
Hotel operational procedures	Check-in/check-out speed, room allocation, night audit
Property Management Systems	Opera, VHP, PMS
Revenue Management	Revenue mindset, channel management
Housekeeping SOP	Cleaning techniques, equipment handling
Computer Skills	Microsoft Excel, Power BI, Office applications
Business Knowledge	Commercial awareness
Digital Marketing	Social media and content creation
AI Utilization	AI for analysis rather than entertainment
Storytelling	Human-touch communication
Tax Reporting	Hotel operational reporting

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The HR representative emphasized that graduates should be able to use Artificial Intelligence not merely for entertainment purposes but as an analytical tool capable of supporting business decision-making. In addition, storytelling was considered an increasingly important competency because hospitality remains fundamentally a human-centered service industry.

Similarly, hotel operations managers highlighted deficiencies in room allocation, night audit, emotional reading during guest interactions, and understanding the distinction between guest requests and complaints. These operational competencies directly influence guest satisfaction and service recovery.

Housekeeping managers further noted that graduates often recognize equipment names but fail to execute standard operating procedures independently. This finding suggests that

practical exposure during higher education should extend beyond laboratory demonstrations toward authentic workplace simulations.

These findings support recent literature indicating that technical competency alone is insufficient without contextual operational experience.

Theme 2. Employability Skills Required by the Hospitality Industry

Besides technical competencies, participants consistently emphasized the importance of employability skills. Communication emerged as the competency most frequently mentioned by almost every participant.

Table 5. Priority Employability Skills

Soft Skill	Frequency of Mention
Communication	Very High
Problem Solving	High
Adaptability	High
Critical Thinking	High
Observation	Medium
Professional Attitude	Medium
Decision Making	Medium
Personal Branding	Medium
Commercial Awareness	Medium
Ability to Work Under Pressure	Medium

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Communication was not merely interpreted as speaking ability but also included guest interaction, storytelling, reading guest emotions, interpersonal communication, and negotiation. One participant emphasized that graduates should be capable of distinguishing between guest requests and complaints while demonstrating empathy during service interactions. Another participant argued that adaptability has become increasingly important because hotel operations are continuously transformed by digital systems and automation. Professional attitude was another recurring theme. Participants explained that interns and fresh graduates should proactively understand workplace expectations rather than expecting operational staff to adapt to them. These findings reinforce employability literature suggesting that communication, adaptability, and problem-solving are core competencies influencing career success within hospitality organizations.

Theme 3. Curriculum Alignment with Industry Needs

Participants unanimously agreed that hospitality curricula require continuous revision to remain relevant to rapidly changing industry practices. The following curriculum improvements were proposed.

Table 6. Recommended curriculum Improvements

Recommendation	Description
Case-based learning	Real hotel cases
Role play	Guest interaction simulation
Practitioner mentoring	Industry experts in classrooms
AI integration	AI-assisted operational analysis
Revenue analytics	Power BI, Excel
Digital marketing	Social media management

Storytelling	Guest engagement
PMS training	Opera, VHP
Housekeeping simulation	SOP implementation
Competency certification	Industry standards

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Several participants suggested that more practitioners should be involved in classroom teaching through guest lectures and mentoring sessions. They also emphasized the importance of feedback after each teaching activity to ensure continuous curriculum improvement. The discussion also highlighted the need for students to develop AI literacy, analytical thinking, and digital competence alongside traditional operational skills. Participants regarded collaboration between polytechnic and hotels as an essential strategy for reducing competency gaps.

Theme 4. Preferred Polytechnic-Industry Collaboration

Table 7. Formula of Collaboration

Collaboration	Purpose
Guest lectures	Update industry knowledge
Practitioner mentoring	Practical competency development
Internship supervision	Improve work readiness
Curriculum consultation	Curriculum alignment
Teaching evaluation	Continuous improvement
Joint seminars	Knowledge sharing
Student projects	Real industry problems
Social media collaboration	Digital marketing projects

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The Human Resources representative recommended that polytechnic invite hotel practitioners more frequently to provide current industry insights. These recommendations demonstrate that collaboration should move beyond internships toward strategic partnerships encompassing curriculum design, mentoring, applied projects, and continuous knowledge exchange.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the competency gap between hospitality education and industry is multidimensional. While technical operational competencies remain fundamental, employers increasingly expect graduates to possess digital capability, AI literacy, communication skills, analytical thinking, and professional attitudes. These findings align with recent studies highlighting the widening digital skills gap in hospitality organizations and the growing demand for graduates capable of integrating emerging technologies with interpersonal and analytical competencies (Minor et al., 2024) (Wibowo et al., 2016).

An important contribution of this study is the identification of AI literacy and storytelling as emerging competencies. Unlike traditional competency models emphasizing operational expertise, participants viewed AI as a strategic tool for business analytics and decision support, while storytelling was considered essential for translating data into

meaningful managerial insights and preserving the human touch that distinguishes hospitality services. Similar arguments have recently been advanced in hospitality education literature, which emphasizes AI integration, data storytelling, and ethical judgment as core competencies for future hospitality professionals (Noone & Boyd, 2025). Another notable finding concerns the growing importance of revenue analytics. Competencies related to Microsoft Excel, Power BI, revenue management systems, business intelligence tools, and Property Management Systems were repeatedly identified as strategic capabilities for modern hotel operations, reflecting the industry's transition toward integrated commercial management and data-driven decision-making (Xu et al., 2019).

Finally, participants emphasized that curriculum improvement should be undertaken collaboratively through sustained partnerships between polytechnics and the hospitality industry. Rather than limiting collaboration to internships, respondents advocated co-designed curricula, practitioner mentoring, guest lectures, and continuous curriculum evaluation. These findings are consistent with recent evidence that meaningful industry participation in curriculum development is essential for preparing graduates with competencies aligned to digital transformation and evolving hospitality practices (Wan et al., 2025).

Proposed Industry-Based Hospitality Competency Framework

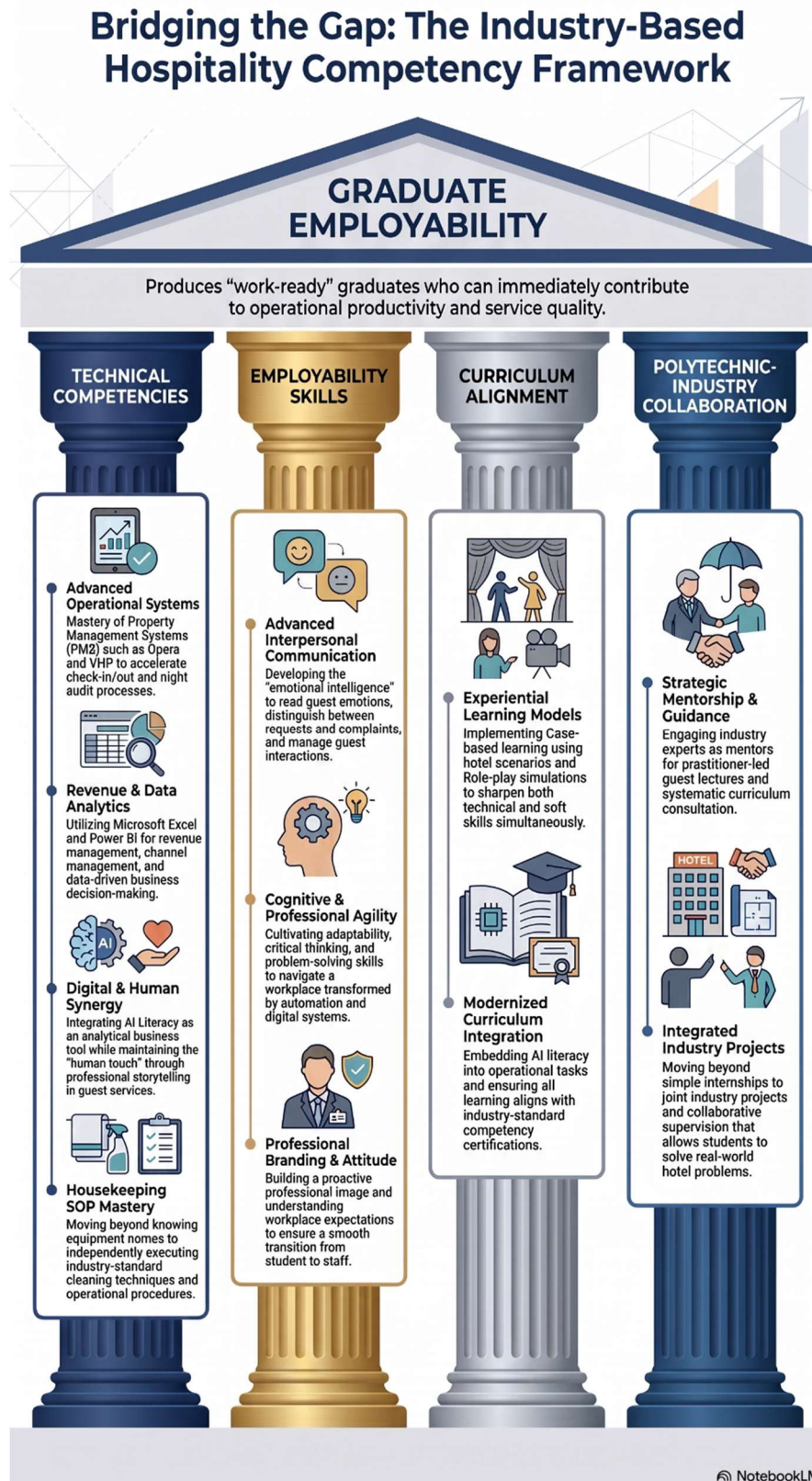


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: The data was processed by the researcher with the help of NotebookLM, 2026

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the competency gaps among hospitality graduates from the perspective of hotel industry practitioners, determine the most critical employability skills required by employers, formulate curriculum improvement priorities, and explore preferred models of polytechnic–industry collaboration. The findings demonstrate that the competency gap extends beyond technical operational knowledge and reflects the growing demand for graduates who possess integrated competencies encompassing technical expertise, employability skills, digital capability, and professional attitudes.

The Focus Group Discussion revealed that employers perceive deficiencies in several technical competencies, including Property Management Systems (PMS), revenue management, housekeeping standard operating procedures, digital marketing, business analytics, and operational decision-making. In addition, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, problem-solving, observation, and professional attitude emerged as the most essential employability skills for successful careers in the hospitality industry. Participants also emphasized the increasing importance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) literacy, storytelling, personal branding, and data analytics as emerging competencies required to respond to the digital transformation of hotel operations.

Based on these findings, this study proposes an Industry-Based Hospitality Competency Framework that integrates four complementary dimensions: technical competencies, employability skills, digital and AI readiness, and polytechnic–industry collaboration. This framework provides an empirical basis for strengthening competency-based hospitality education and contributes to narrowing the gap between higher education outcomes and industry expectations. The study therefore demonstrates that graduate employability can be significantly enhanced when curriculum development is continuously informed by industry participation and aligned with current technological and operational changes within the hospitality sector.

Practical Implementation

Hospitality higher education institutions should redesign curricula using an Outcome-Based Education (OBE) approach that explicitly integrates industry-required competencies into learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment methods. Greater emphasis should be placed on experiential learning through case-based learning, role-play, hotel simulations, practitioner mentoring, and industry projects. The curriculum should also strengthen students' competencies in Artificial Intelligence applications, Property Management Systems, revenue management, digital marketing, Microsoft Excel, Power BI, storytelling, and guest communication to improve workplace readiness.

Policy Recommendations

Hospitality education providers should establish formal and sustainable partnerships with hotel industry stakeholders by involving practitioners in curriculum design, guest lectures, internship supervision, competency assessment, and curriculum evaluation. Industry participation should become a systematic component of curriculum review rather than an

occasional consultation. In addition, national competency standards for hospitality education may be updated to incorporate emerging competencies related to AI, digital transformation, data analytics, and customer experience management.

Implications for Tourism and Hospitality Policy

The findings suggest that strengthening collaboration between vocational higher education institutions and the hospitality industry should become a strategic priority in developing a competitive tourism workforce. Government agencies responsible for tourism and higher education may encourage structured industry–academia partnerships through competency certification, collaborative curriculum development, teaching factory initiatives, and work-integrated learning programs. Such policies are expected to enhance graduate employability while improving the competitiveness and service quality of Indonesia's hospitality industry.

Limitation of Study

This study has several limitations. First, the findings were derived from a single corporate hospitality organization, which may limit their transferability to other hotel categories or geographical contexts. Second, the study relied exclusively on qualitative data collected through a Focus Group Discussion with corporate managers and therefore reflects employer perspectives rather than those of students, lecturers, alumni, or hotel guests. Third, the study focused on identifying competency expectations without quantitatively measuring the magnitude of competency gaps among hospitality graduates.

Future research is recommended to involve multiple hotel chains representing different market segments and regions to improve the generalizability of findings. Mixed-method studies combining qualitative inquiry with quantitative surveys could further validate the proposed **Industry-Based Hospitality Competency Framework**. In addition, future studies should examine the effectiveness of curriculum reforms in improving graduate employability and investigate how AI adoption, digital transformation, and evolving guest expectations continue to reshape competency requirements in the hospitality industry.

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