Employability competencies in the hospitality sector: employers' requirements and graduates' preparedness post COVID-19 pandemic. A case study from Saudi Arabia

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COVID-19 has a huge impact on the hospitality sector around the world. The industry's competency needs have evolved due to the pandemic, and hospitality management programs must reflect these changes to ensure graduates' readiness and success in their future career. The goal of this study is to explore the employability skills needed by hospitality sector professionals in Saudi Arabia following the COVID 19 epidemic, identify to what extent hospitality graduates meet those requirements and determine any skills gaps that need to be remedied. A questionnaire survey was designed and self-administered to collect data through a sample of 140 hospitality undergraduates from Umm-Al-Qura University and 58 Saudi Arabian hospitality professionals. The findings highlighted a significant competencies gap between hospitality graduates and industry needs. An index of skills was developed showing the competencies that employers believed important for graduates to possess before joining the hospitality sector. This research can assist Saudi educational institutions revise and/or update their hospitality programs, curriculums, and teaching styles to match the industry expectations. The study implied that more collaboration between academics and industry experts is required to fully comprehend the sector's new tendencies and fulfill competency needs.

1. Introduction

The overall contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in Saudi Arabia was 9.8% in 2019 and is expected to increase to 10.9% in 2028. It contributes to 9.1% of total employment (1,116,500 jobs) involving jobs indirectly supported by the industry, and this is forecasted to increase to 9.8% of total in 2028 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2018, 2021). Saudi Arabia seriously invest in tourism and hospitality industry as one of the key strategies of economic diversification. The tourism and hospitality industry is evolving at a rapid pace. Tourism and hospitality education must consider the COVID-19 pandemic's multiple effects on the tourism businesses (e.g., operational models, recruiting, competition and industry structure), as well as re-create graduates' confidence in tourism/hospitality employment and career choices (Sigala, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic hotel owners/managers were facing great challenges in employees' recruitment and retention (Filimonau et al., 2020). Hotel operators were obliged to lay off staff, reduce their salaries and/or give them open

vacations. No doubt this issue influenced hotel workforce creating ambiguity in terms of their job status, income, and career development. Espellita and Maravilla (2019) indicated that graduates of hotel management programs faced an increasingly competitive and uncertain job market in the 21st century. They should have the necessary abilities, attitudes, and values to deliver the high-quality products and services that customers demand. Employers in the hotel business all around the world require graduates to be job-ready with skills such as interpersonal skills, collaboration skills, communication skills and problem-solving abilities. Numerous organizations have convinced that enhancing employees' career adaptability via education and training can assist staff to deal with the challenges in the workplace in this hard time (Rasheed et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has a profound impact on every aspect of our society. The tourism and hospitality higher education system must adapt to the present changes of the current pandemic by moving from traditional classroom-based learning toward online courses. Many parts of the student learning environment are affected by this transformation (i.e., internship) (Park and Jones, 2021). The challenge for educators is to identify whether curriculums are fulfilling the industry's continuously changing needs and to devise a strategy for adapting programs to meet the hospitality industry requirements (Quinn and Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2019). Syllabuses and delivery methods must be restructured and updated to address the new industry skills required by hospitality graduates including health/safety protocols, flexibility, social distance, communication skills, innovation, remote working, technology literacy and management, leadership and teamwork skills (Espellita and Maravilla, 2019; Sigala, 2021). Employing adequately trained graduates is necessary to maintain and promote the growth of the hotel industry. To do this, university curricula must sufficiently prepare students for the workplace (Commey et al., 2020).

Industry executives are disappointed because hospitality workers, particularly freshers, have a low level of competency. This gap between industry and academia can have significant repercussions, including graduates may not attain the essential knowledge and competencies needed to compete in a highly competitive global environment; students will be confused with their career choice leading to increase the rate of turnover and associated costs in the industry; the industry may need to dedicate more money and time to retrain graduates (Akhtar, 2015). Career preparedness and students' insights of readiness are major factors that should be examined on a regular basis. Academic institutions providing hospitality programs should collaborate closely with industry professional to make sure that the skills, aptitudes, and experiential learning which students obtained are related to what the industry seeks in new applicants. Internships and work-study programs, both during and outside the academic year, must be designed and utilized as a career development approach (Quinn and Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2019). Much previous research tackled the issue of determining the core competencies required by hospitality recruiters in which graduates should acquire to get employed (i.e., Caiyod et al., 2015; Yuan et al. 2017; Espellita and Maravilla, 2019; Dhaliwal and Misra, 2020; Marneros et al., 2021). However, there are wide variations of the necessary competencies identified between these studies. This can be attributed to the variances in the studies' settings along with cultural and socioeconomic disparities (Marneros et al., 2021). To the researcher knowledge, this is the first study to explore the essential competencies needed by the hospitality industry in Saudi Arabia after coronavirus pandemic. The study examined the gap between the competencies expected by hospitality employers and those possessed by graduates. Specifically, this research tackled this gap by investigating three research objectives:

- To determine the real competencies possessed by graduates of the Tourism and Hospitality Department of Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah.
- To identify the employability skills that seem to be important and required by hospitality industry in Saudi Arabia after COVID-19 pandemic.
- To investigate the differences between the competencies held by graduates with those demanded by hospitality recruiters.

2. Review of the literature

The COVID-19 pandemic had a great influence on the hospitality businesses of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA), as it had on other regional and world economies. Regional and worldwide travel restrictions halted the influx of hotel visitors causing several hotels to close temporarily. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hotel industry resulted in a decrease in key performance measures across KSA. For instance, the performance of Jeddah's hotels was tied to that of Makkah, which had severe visitation restrictions from March to October 2020. Jeddah had a drop in both ADR and occupancy during this time leading in a RevPAR fall of up to 80% in contrast to the same time 2019. Makkah's hotel occupancy for 2020 was 25%, compared to 61% in 2019, whereas ADR was down by 45%. Consequently, RevPAR decreased by 77% (Deloitte, 2021). Notably, the hospitality industry has been badly impacted throughout the world by the current coronavirus pandemic. It raises employees' feelings of insecurity and their impression of being unemployed, thus negatively impacting their mental health. According to WTTC research, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens 75 million travel and tourism jobs worldwide, with at least 6.4 million lost in the EU and one million in the UK. Firms of all sizes will be forced to reorganize and optimize their business operations quickly and adapt to new ecosystems and supply networks in to survive. The competencies required will change for both high and low skilled labor. The industry's top objective is to respond to the current circumstances and build strategies for post COVID-19. More interaction between the tourism and education sectors is required (NTG, 2021).

A competency is 'a set of personal characteristics (e.g., skills, knowledge, attitudes) that a person acquires or needs to acquire, in order to perform an activity inside a certain context with a specific performance level' (Asame and Wakrim, 2018:228). Herling and Provo (2000) indicated that graduates should hold knowledge, capabilities, and competences to achieve long-term competitive advantage. The high rate of staff transition and movement is one of the reasons why a competency-based recruiting process is helpful to the hospitality sector. For a long time, the hotel industry has looked for a way to decrease staff turnover to address the problems of recruiting and retaining qualified staff (Ghiselli et al., 2001). Kay and Russette (2000) showed that academicians and human resource managers should work together to minimize employee's turnover by determining relevant job skills in future managers, improving recruiting practices and employing from quality educational programs that provide qualified managers with the potential industry related competencies. Organizations are pressurized to adopt new technologies and applications to meet the new operating environment imposed by COVID-19 measures. Tourism businesses including hotels, airlines, and restaurants are working to make their operations contact free or contactless. Many hotels deployed digital payments, self-service kiosks, in-room technology and used robotics technology for reception and concierge services. In addition, check-in/out, bookings, payments, and purchases were all made using mobile applications. They developed artificial intelligence-enabled websites and chat boxes for client interactions (Sigala, 2020). To prioritize customer safety and limit interactions with hotel employees, hotels should utilize digital innovation and adopt technology such as the IOT (Internet of Things), which uses technology to control room systems (i.e., lighting, colours, temperature etc.). Likewise,

hotels should use artificial intelligence and virtual reality technology, for example virtual tours of the hotel to make customers aware with the facilities (Ivan, 2020).

The future of tourism and hospitality job market may progressively need highly skilled workforce in social skills, resilience, digital, and problem-solving abilities. Educational institutions should include these skills into their curriculum. In the next 1-3 years, the industry may require fewer staff and only those people who can adapt to changes will be hired (NTG, 2021). Employers expect that employees' competencies should be different before and after the pandemic, demanding graduates to prepare for the new required skill sets (Buheji and Buheji, 2020). Employees will need new competencies because of the pandemic, primarily in terms of social distance, health and safety, and infection control, but also in respect of taking the initiative to deal with unusual situations, identify new customer requirements, communicate effectively, proper use of materials and utensils, digital skills, content creation, and remote working. This implies that staff will need to be trained on pandemic-related safety precautions. Employers must also ensure that their employees are trusted and competent to take initiative and make appropriate judgments (Enback, 2020).

The curriculum provided by the institutions has a significant impact on the students' career preparedness. Hospitality programs and curriculum should be reviewed to identify what needs to be modified and/or added for the graduates' benefit. By evaluating the curriculum, institutions will be able to create a better one that will grow and educate their students to be globally competitive (Rahman, 2014). Employability refers to providing graduates with the information, skills, and abilities that will enable them to find employment, perform well in their positions, and grow in their professions (Ali et al., 2017). According to Wang and Tsai (2014) employability is a collection of abilities, knowledge and characteristics that enable a person to pick a career, be hired, move around freely in the job market, grow, perform job responsibilities, demonstrate devotion to work, feel satisfied or successful and achieve personal potential. Wakelin-Theron et al. (2019) created a model to improve graduate employability and boost graduates' job chances. This model was created to aid tourism graduates, the tourist industry, and higher education institutions in their efforts to improve graduates' employability. The model highlights the knowledge, skills, and competences necessary in the tourist sector, which are divided into four categories: professional skills, personality traits, knowledge skills, and operational skills.

Caiyod et al. (2015) investigated the factors that influence the employability of recent graduates in the hospitality sector from the perspective of human resource managers, specialists, and recruitment staff. The study concluded that recent graduates should concentrate on their physical appearance, including hygiene and grooming, as well as their soft skills (i.e., leadership, social awareness, communication skills etc.) along with the level of education and work experience. All are criteria related to fresh graduates' employability. Graduates can also invest in industry-related internships to improve their chances of getting a job. Dhaliwal and Misra (2020) analyzed the most significant employment competencies required by recruiters as reported from several studies done in the hospitality sector and published from 1983 to 2018. The findings identified that leadership, problem solving, teamwork, interpersonal skills, oral and written communication, personality development, customer service, professional and ethical standards, professionalism, time management, hard and soft skills, decision making, and information technology were the most required competencies in the hospitality sector. They concluded that academic institutions must develop these competencies among their students to meet the expectations of the global hospitality industry. There is a great need for institutions to develop theoretical and practical capabilities in their students and create course content that meet the demands of the industry.

Commey et al. (2020) adopted a qualitative approach to explore the key skills required from the perspective of the hospitality industry. A total of 43 hotel managers from Ghana's hospitality industry were surveyed. According to the findings, good interpersonal skills, ability to maintain professional standards, innovation, critical thinking, and the capability to think of new ways of undertaking things, self-motivation, customer-oriented, ability to use and uphold the various tools and equipment, and good communication skills are the principal competencies needed from hospitality graduates. Marneros et al. (2021) examined the fundamental skills required for a successful career in the hotel sector. They used two questionnaire forms to gather data from the perspectives of both academicians and hospitality professionals in Cyprus. Six fundamental competency dimensions were established using the exploratory factor analysis approach, including respectively: human relations-communication, followed by professional image and operational knowledge, interpersonal communication-cultural diversity, human resource management, leadership, and critical thinking and finally information technology and financial analysis. Hospitality institutions should create partnerships with industry experts to collaborate and develop their educational programs. Shariff et al. (2015) established an index of competencies for tourism and hospitality graduates in Malaysia involving eight domains: management and technology, leadership, organizational, personal effectiveness, business-oriented, self-oriented, customer-related and innovation. Staton-Reynolds et al. (2009) explored 127 hospitality employers and 161 hospitality instructors and found that emotional intelligence was rated as a crucial competency by hospitality recruiters, whereas technical competencies were emphasized by hospitality instructors. In addition, both groups rated integrity, passion, and ability as the most essential factors to acquire.

Yuan et al. (2017) identified six dimensions of managerial competence for hospitality workforce in India, namely: self-management; leadership and communication; efficiency and decision making; legal and interpersonal skills; critical thinking and career commitment; conflict and stress management. Espellita and Maravilla (2019) identified seven most employable competencies in the hospitality sector, as indicated by supervisors in three divisions (housekeeping, front office, and food and beverage) in Philippines, namely: front office operational capability, leadership, communication skills, cooperative teamwork, critical thinking, hands-on experience, and strategic planning. While the skills of lodging administration, negotiation, computer application, and finance and accounting lowed down in the supervisors' assessment. Surprisingly, all these lowest-rated employable aptitudes are taught as cornerstones and should be kept. Marneros and Gibbs (2015) surveyed 500 hospitality professionals in Cyprus and found that both technical industry specific skills (e.g., food and beverage cost control, housekeeping operations) and general management abilities (e.g., marketing, human resource management) are required for good management performance. In today's workplace, initiative is also becoming increasingly vital.

Wang and Tsai (2014) explored mid-level managers in 15 international hotels in Taiwan to assess the importance of the following key job competencies: leadership, professional management skills, technical skills and knowledge, work attitude and personal traits. In addition, students from a four-year hospitality school were asked to rate the same skills. There were differences in the ranking of significance of the skills in the areas of leadership, professional management skills, and technical skills between students and business managers. Srisangkaew (2018) conducted a gap analysis of graduates' employability skills in 4 and 5-star hotels in Bangkok. The findings demonstrated that the three stakeholders participated in this research (hotel managers, educators, and internship students) agreed that the most important perceived competencies needed from undergraduates to remain integral in

the hospitality sector were communication, willingness to learn, adaptability, flexibility, customer service and cultural sensitivity. Ali et al. (2017) investigated the viewpoints of hospitality employers on sustainability and the consequences for hospitality education. Employers progressively realized the importance of sustainability in their operations. Nevertheless, they believed that it was not now a top focus as a crucial employability skill in the hotel industry.

COVID-19 had a critical influence on internships. Several organizations canceled their internships due to economic restrictions or the difficulty converting to an online format. On the other hand, numerous colleges replaced the traditional internship with a virtual one. Virtual internships allow students to obtain job experience from afar without having to physically attend a work site. Students communicate with their supervisors and coworkers using several platforms (i.e., Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams). However, students participating in remote or virtual internships would not be able to have the same level of interaction with their site supervisor or colleagues. They would not be placed in a situation where they would have to present themselves professionally and interact (Park and Jones, 2021). Experiential learning via internships allows students to integrate classroom learning with real-world experiences prior to graduation, assist them to better prepare for their future and increase their chances of job success. The internship can quickly adapt students to the real world and thus help students who struggle to transfer from the classroom to the workplace (Chang and Chu, 2009). In addition to social competencies, practical experience, and work ethics, experiential learning can assist undergraduates accomplish academic learning, knowledge, and intellectual goals associated with learning outcomes such as application of knowledge, critical thinking, and a wide understanding of subject matter (Eyler, 2009). To produce graduates with the most essential capabilities, educational institutions must reform their curriculum structures and regard internship programs as a basis for producing graduates with the most critical competences. Furthermore, educational institutions must view the industry as a first step in building tourism and hospitality curricula (Shariff et al., 2015).

3. Theoretical framework
A conceptual framework was developed to guide this research (see Figure 1). A list of competencies that seems to be important for graduates seeking a career in the hospitality sector was identified based on previous literature (i.e. Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019; Espellita and Maravilla, 2019; Commey et al., 2020).
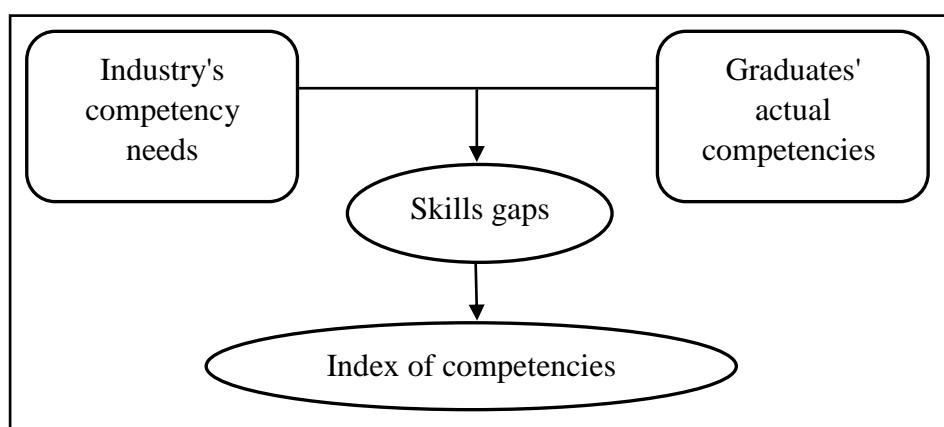
Fig. 1. Theoretical framework

Evidently, the setting of the study plays important role in deciding what constitutes essential competences, as there was considerable variance between past studies depending on where they were conducted. Thus, this research explores the list of aptitudes developed in the context of Saudi Arabia to determine the employability skills needed after coronavirus outbreak from the perspective of hospitality recruiters. Then, it identifies the real competencies acquired by fresh graduates upon completion of their studies in the tourism and hospitality department at Umm Al-Qura University and evaluates whether hospitality graduates fulfill industry expectations. This leads to highlight the skills gaps between the industry and graduates. The study establishes a competency index for hospitality program providers to prepare undergraduates with the skills that meet the hospitality industry requirements in Saudi Arabia following COVID 19.

4. Methodology

A quantitative approach was utilized to investigate hospitality graduates' career preparedness and identify the competencies required by hospitality employers in Saudi Arabia. A quantitative research entails gathering data so that information can be quantified and apply it to statistical analysis to support or disprove research hypotheses (Williams, 2011). This study adopted a case study methodology to investigate in-depth the skills and competencies possessed by graduates. A case study was developed from the graduates of the tourism and hospitality department at Umm Al-Qura University in 2022. A case study enables an in-depth investigation on an individual, a group of people, or a unit with the intention of generalizing over various units (Gustafsson, 2017). Case study can enhance a thorough understanding of a case or a phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2002). According to Yin (1984:25) case studies should not be confined only to qualitative research, he declared that "case studies can be based entirely on quantitative evidence". This means that quantitative research can be carried out using case study methodology as with the case of the current study. A survey instrument was utilized as a primary tool for collecting data. The questionnaire was made up of two main parts. The first one was about the demographic profile of respondents like age, gender, educational level, and experience. The second part presented a list of 57 competencies that participants were asked to rate. This part intends to measure the actual aptitudes and skills possessed by hospitality graduates and assess the level of importance of the competencies from the perspective of the hospitality industry's professionals.

The competencies expected from hospitality graduates that used in the survey were generated based on two phases. First, a list of 65 competencies statements were adapted and developed based on reviewing prior empirical research (i.e., Shariff et al., 2015; Srisangkaew, 2018; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019; Espellita and Maravilla, 2019; Commey et al., 2020; Marneros et al., 2021). The second phase - the competencies generated were then revised and verified by 10 hospitality experts/employers to ensure the relevance, accuracy and/or the importance of the developed competencies to the hospitality industry. This enhanced the validity of the research instrument as the experts removed and/or improved some items in which respondents might be confused about them before actual distribution. The verification process resulted in omitting eight competencies as they either were unclear, lowed down in its importance particularly after COVID 19 and/or similar to other listed competencies (i.e., mathematical skills, ability to recognize business related legislation, etc.). Thus, the survey consisted of 57 items categorized under six main domains including: 1) interpersonal skills, 2) leadership and management skills, 3) technical skills, 4) innovative skills, 5) operational skills, 6) basic personal skills. Each of these domains was measured using a number of competency statements as shown in table (3). All items of the graduates' survey were measured by respondents on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 equaled

"very dissatisfied" and 5 equaled "very satisfied". For the professionals' survey, the Likert scale used ranged from "not at all important (1)" to "extremely important (5)".

The questionnaires were self-administered and distributed to two groups of respondents. The first one was the hospitality industry professionals in four and five-star hotels in Makkah, Saudi Arabia (e.g., general managers, human resource managers). Those are involved in operations and/or management and have a great experience and knowledge with the competencies deemed important and required from fresh graduates to be employed. A list of four and five star hotels were identified in the area of Makkah using marketing sources and reservation websites. An online survey was developed using google forms. A random sample was employed to form a sample from the executives of the selected hotels. A sum of 135 questionnaires were sent randomly to the executives of these hotels. There were 65 responses completed and returned with a response rate 48.1%. Of them, seven forms were removed from the analysis as they were not valid.

The second group of participants were students who were graduated in 2022 from Tourism and Hospitality Department at Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah. A purposive sampling approach was utilized to compose a sample of hospitality graduates. Streubert and Carpenter (2010) indicated that purposive sampling can help in gaining insights, great knowledge and understanding of the investigated phenomenon. It ensures a strong connection between the research question and the sample. The research population for the graduates' survey is about 162 students. A sum of 156 questionnaires were sent to students via their e-mails. 148 forms were returned, among them 8 questionnaire forms were removed from the analysis process, as they were partially completed, representing a usable response rate of 89.7%. The data gathered was coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 24 and then interpreted to provide meaningful findings. The weighted mean, ranking and t-test statistical techniques were utilized to better comprehend the study's data.

5. Results of the research
5.1 The reliability of the research
Reliability indicates that the research method used can provide compatible results in case of replication in a different study (Field, 2009). Cronbach's alpha was utilized to determine the internal consistency of the items and reliability of the measures used in the questionnaire. The Alpha value for all constructs used in the questionnaire which administered to graduates ranged from 893 – 939 and for the industry's survey were between 719 – 820 (see Table 1). TerreBlanche and Durrheim (2002) revealed that a coefficient Cronbach alpha of 0.70 is sufficient to reflect the reliability. This indicates that the research instrument and all 57 items used in this study are more reliable in measuring their domains as the Alpha value for all constructs is greater than 0.71

Table 1
The reliability of the research

Domains	No. of statements	Coefficient Cronbach's Alpha	
		Graduates' survey	Industry's survey
Interpersonal skills	10	.928	.770
Leadership and management skills	10	.939	.767
Technical skills	9	.893	.757
Innovative skills	9	.894	.757
Operational skills	10	.916	.719
Basic personal skills	9	.914	.820

5.2 The profile of the sample

The demographics of the graduates showed that all the students were less than 26 years old. More than two-thirds (78.6%) were females, and the rest (21.4%) were males (see Table 2). All students were graduates and had the bachelor's degree in tourism and hospitality management. The entire cohort of graduates participated had less than a year experience in hotel operations and this experience acquired because they had an internship course at the 6th level in their educational plan. They should be trained in the different hotel departments for at least 40 hours a week for two months. A very small percentage (4.3%) of graduates surveyed was working as a part/full time in hotels beside educating and this added to their experiences and enhanced their competencies.

Regarding the hospitality professionals who participated in this study, almost half of them (48.3%) were between 36-45 years, followed by 27.6% were over 50 years old. Of the 58 participants, 72.4% were men and 27.6% were females. The majority (86.2%) had a bachelor's qualification and the rest (13.8%) had higher studies (i.e., diploma, master). Most practitioners surveyed had a great experience in hotel management and operations and this supported the aims of this study. More than half of the respondents (51.7%) had a wide experience of nearly 3-7 years and about 36.2% had over 7 years, while 12.1% of participants had an experience ranging from 1-3 years.

Table 2
The profile of respondents

	Graduate Students		Industry Professionals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Age				
Less than 26 years	140	100	4	6.9
26-35 years	0	0	10	17.2
36-45 years	0	0	28	48.3
Over 45 years	0	0	16	27.6
Sex				
Male	30	21.4	42	72.4
Female	110	78.6	16	27.6
Education				
Secondary school	0	0	0	0
Bachelor	140	100	50	86.2
High education (i.e. Diploma, Master)	0	0	8	13.8
Experience				
Less than a year	140	100	0	0
1-3 years	0	0	7	12.1
Up to 3-7 years	0	0	30	51.7
Over 7 years	0	0	21	36.2

5.3 Descriptive statistics of hospitality employers' assessment of competency requirements and the extent to which graduates meet them

The ranking scales used in this research are based on Kay and Russette (2000); Marneros et al. (2021). The mean score was calculated to determine the rank and the level of importance of each competency. The scale used categorizes mean values into three groups: essential (M>4.50), considerably important (M = 3.50–4.49), moderately important (M=2.50–3.49).

Consequently, employers reported that two competencies were very important and classified as essential because their mean values were greater than 4.50 including: "ability to speak a foreign language" (M=4.57) and "effective use of verbal and nonverbal communication" (M=4.52). While 54 competencies identified as considerably important as their mean score ranged from 3.50–4.49. Only "research skill" was moderately important (M=3.43). On the contrary, the graduates viewed "appearance and personal grooming" as the essentially aptitude they had (M=4.65), with 38 competencies were considerably acquired (M=3.50–4.49) and 18 skills were moderately held (M=2.50–3.49) (see Table 3).

Within the interpersonal skills dimension, practitioners identified that "ability to speak foreign language" was the most important skill needed from graduates to join the industry. It came in first place out of all 57 skills studied (M=4.57, SD=0.596). The competency of "effective use of verbal and non-verbal communication" was ranked 2nd (M=4.52, SD=0.778). From the perspective of graduates, the "ability to build positive relationships with others" (M=4.12, SD=1.05) and to "demonstrate good listening skills" (M=4.04, SD=1.23) were the most competencies held in the interpersonal domain and were in the 9th and 11th ranking respectively. However, "the ability to speak foreign language" was in the last rank (49th). Seemingly, speaking foreign language proficiency was the lowest skill developed by graduates among all the competencies investigated (M=2.80, SD=1.15) along with the "ability to provide constructive criticism and feedback" (M=3.24, SD=1.07) which came in 44th position. Regarding the leadership and management area, employers believed that "crisis management" (M=4.33, SD=0.867, Rank=8) and "leadership skill" (M=4.29, SD=0.899, Rank=10) were crucial skills expected from students when applying for jobs. On the other hand, most of the graduates possessed "planning and organizing skills" and rated them higher than the other competencies within the leadership and management domain (M=3.94, SD=1.17, Rank=16) followed by "ability to uptake decision and take charge of it" and "ability to inspire and motivate co-workers" (M=3.86, Rank=17). Nevertheless, "crisis management" was the lowest competency got by graduates in this category (M=3.27, SD=1.00). It was ranked 42nd.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of hospitality employers' assessment of competency requirements and the extent to which graduates meet them

Domains	Graduate students			Hospitality employers		
	M	SD	R	M	SD	R
Interpersonal skills						
1. Ability to speak foreign language	2.80	1.15	49	4.57	.596	1
2. Effective use of verbal and non-verbal communication	3.59	1.11	30	4.52	.778	2
3. Exhibit good listening skills	4.04	1.23	11	4.22	.992	14
4. Emotional intelligence skills	3.51	1.18	32	4.00	1.03	24
5. Recognize cultural differences	3.95	1.16	15	4.05	.981	22
6. Ability to build positive relationships with others	4.12	1.05	9	4.09	.923	20
7. Customer-focused and caring aptitude	4.02	1.12	12	4.36	.668	5
8. Ability to recognize customer psychology	3.42	1.11	34	3.95	.867	25
9. Able to provide constructive criticism and feedback	3.24	1.07	44	3.90	.968	26
10. Ability to deal with difficult people and complaints effectively	3.36	1.11	39	4.26	.870	12
Composite Mean	**3.61**			**4.19**		
Leadership and management skills						

11. Planning and organizing skills	3.94	1.17	16	4.14	.847	17
12. Business management skill	3.68	1.11	26	4.12	.860	18
13. Leadership skill	3.81	1.16	20	4.29	.899	10
14. Able to make decision and take charge of it	3.86	1.14	17	4.24	.865	13
15. Ability to anticipate guest needs	3.61	1.09	29	4.00	.898	24
16. Ability to manage and resolve conflicts	3.39	1.07	36	4.07	.953	21
17. Ability to teach and direct others	3.80	1.19	21	3.88	1.03	27
18. Ability to inspire and motivate co-workers	3.86	1.18	17	4.03	.936	23
19. Crisis management capabilities	3.27	1.00	42	4.33	.867	8
20. Human resource related skills	3.43	1.13	33	3.74	1.15	31
Composite Mean	**3.67**			**4.08**		
Technical skills						
21. Capability to use hotel operation systems	3.59	1.11	30	4.35	.983	6
22. Knowledgeable of the different technologies used in hotels	3.38	1.22	37	3.88	1.19	27
23. Digital skills	3.01	1.10	47	3.66	1.33	33
24. Computer and software programs competencies	4.01	1.10	13	4.07	.876	21
25. Research skills	3.68	1.11	26	3.43	1.19	38
26. Technical writing and presentation skills	3.74	1.16	24	3.79	1.14	29
27. Ability to use tools appropriately	3.36	1.25	39	4.19	.736	15
28. Data analysis skills	3.18	.939	45	3.55	1.16	35
29. Information management skills	3.33	1.00	40	3.76	1.19	30
Composite Mean	**3.48**			**3.85**		
Innovative skills						
30. Ability to think critically and analytically	3.37	1.13	38	3.90	1.14	26
31. Ability to bring creative ideas and perspectives	3.74	1.07	24	4.00	.898	24
32. Entrepreneurship skill	3.41	1.16	35	3.50	1.08	37
33. Persuasion skills	3.75	1.15	23	4.28	.790	11
34. Keen to learn and use the acquired knowledge into practice	4.25	.938	5	4.12	.938	18
35. Capability to challenge norms	3.54	1.06	31	3.72	1.17	32
36. Ability to identify and solve problems effectively	3.69	1.05	25	4.29	.701	10
37. Ability to adapt effectively to changing circumstances	3.66	1.08	27	4.10	.831	19
38. The ability to take risks	3.04	1.24	46	3.86	.963	28
Composite Mean	**3.61**			**3.97**		
Operational skills						
39. Awareness of health/safety aspects	4.16	1.10	8	4.28	.744	11
40. The ability to work remotely	4.05	1.13	10	3.79	1.12	29
41. Familiar with selling techniques	3.26	1.01	43	4.05	.847	22
42. Recognize customer service skills and standards	3.78	1.01	22	4.34	.762	7
43. Maintain professional standards in the work environment	3.83	1.05	19	4.14	.760	17
44. Risk analysis and mitigation aptitude	3.32	1.06	41	3.62	1.17	34
45. Ability to prepare budget for business unit	2.86	1.08	48	3.53	1.29	36
46. Able to overcome obstacles	3.54	1.04	31	4.03	1.04	23
47. Resource conservation and management	3.65	.967	28	4.00	.956	24
48. Act in an ethical and responsible manner	3.96	1.17	14	4.17	.841	16
Composite Mean	**3.64**			**4.00**		
Basic personal skills						
49. Appearance and personal grooming	4.65	.758	1	4.47	.706	3
50. Work without a direct control and supervision	4.16	1.09	8	4.24	.823	13
51. Self-dependable and trustworthy	4.48	.893	2	4.34	.739	7

52. Perform duties independently	4.34	.903	3	4.29	.773	10
53. Personal competencies	4.33	.917	4	4.28	.790	11
54. Work well under stress	3.81	1.10	20	4.37	.790	4
55. Administer time efficiently	3.85	1.16	18	4.22	.750	14
56. Ability to perform within a team	4.18	1.07	6	4.31	.777	9
57. Awareness of the tourism and hospitality industry	4.17	.881	7	3.90	1.09	26
Composite Mean	**4.22**			**4.27**		

In regard to technical skills domain, "capability to use hotel operation systems (i.e. Opera)" was the 6th most important competency for practitioners (M=4.35, SD=0.983). In addition, "ability to use tools appropriately" (M=4.19, SD=0.736, Rank=15) was evaluated as essential skill. Graduates, on the other side, indicated that they had "the capability to use computer and software programs" (M=4.01, SD=1.10, Rank=13). It was evaluated higher than all the other competencies in the technical skills area followed by "technical writing and presentation skills" (M=3.74, SD=1.16, Rank=24). On the contrary, "digital skills" (M=3.01, SD=1.10, Rank=47), "data analysis skills" (M=3.18, SD=0.939, Rank=45) were considered the lowest-rated competencies as slightly held by graduating students. Concerning the innovative skills category, the industry professionals demonstrated that the "ability to identify and solve problems effectively" was the highest-rated skill and ranked 10th (M=4.29, SD=0.701) and then "persuasion skills" (M=4.28, SD=0.790) came into the 11th position. From the views of graduating students "keen to learn and use acquired knowledge into practice" was ranked 5th (M=4.25, SD=0.938) and was thus regarded the highest skill exhibited by graduates in the innovative skills area. "Persuasion skills" came afterwards (M=3.75, SD=1.15) which ranked 23rd. Conversely, "the ability to take risks" (M=3.04, SD=1.24) was the lowest possessed competency among graduates, ranking 46th, followed by "ability to think critically and analytically" (M=3.37, SD=1.13) in the 38th.

Within the operational skills domain, employers identified three skills that they believed most vital in this category of competencies, namely: "recognize customer service skills and standards" (M=4.34, SD=.762, Rank=7), "awareness of health/safety aspects and social distancing" (M=4.28, SD=.744, Rank=11) and "act in an ethical and responsible manner" (M=4.17, SD=.841, Rank=16). On the other hand, the most competency possessed by the graduates was awareness of health/safety issues (M=4.16, SD=1.10, Rank=8). They had the ability to work remotely (M=4.05, SD=1.13, Rank=10) along with the ability to behave in a responsible way (M=3.96, SD=1.17, Rank=14). Whereas graduates' lowest-rated competence was "the ability to prepare a budget for business unit" (M=2.86, SD=1.08). It came in 48th place and then "knowledgeable of selling techniques" which came in 43rd place (M=3.26, SD=1.01). Regarding the basic personal skills dimension, the 3rd and 4th important skills identified within the list of competencies as assessed by practitioners including, respectively: "appearance and personal grooming" (M=4.47, SD=0.706) and "capability to work well under stress" (M=4.37, SD=0.790) and then "self-dependable and trustworthy" which placed 7th (M=4.34, SD=0.739). The graduates, on the other hand, highly rated the "appearance and personal grooming skill" as closely as the employers' assessment (M=4.65, SD=0.758). It was ranked 1st out of the 57 competencies examined followed by "self-dependable and trustworthy" (M=4.48, SD=0.893) which got the 2nd position and then the 3rd rank was "the ability to perform duties independently" (M=4.34, SD=0.903).

5.4 Testing the variances between hospitality employers' needs of employability competencies and graduates' possession of such skills

An independent samples t-test was executed to compare the means and determine the differences between graduates' preparedness of the skills and the industry professionals'

ratings of the competencies (see Table 4). The results revealed a statistical significant differences at the level of .05 between the two groups, graduates and professionals, in favor of professionals regarding a number of competencies within the interpersonal skills domain, including: ability to speak foreign language (t=14.213, p=00), effective use of verbal and non-verbal communication (t=6.729, p=00), emotional intelligence skills (t=2.942, p=00), customer-focused and caring aptitude (t=2.638, p=00), ability to recognize customer psychology (t=3.568, p=00), ability to provide constructive criticism and feedback (t=4.015, p=00) and ability to deal with difficult persons and complaints effectively (t=6.043, p=00).

Among the leadership and management category, six main competencies were rated significantly different as p < .05 and the mean differences between the two groups were greater in the benefit of hospitality employers, involving: business management skill (t= 3.014, p=00), leadership skill (t= 2.849, p=00), able to undertake decision and take responsibility (t= 2.264, p=02), ability to anticipate guest wants and needs (t= 2.624, p=01), ability to manage and resolve conflicts (t= 4.379, p=00) and crisis management capabilities (t= 6.972, p=00). In terms of technical skills, there were statistically significant variances amongst graduates and practitioners' perspectives regarding capability to use hotel operation systems (t= 4.476, p < .05), knowledgeable of the different technologies used in hotels (t= 2.650, p < .05), digital skills (t= 3.270, p < .05), ability to use tools appropriately (t= 5.806, p < .05), data analysis skills (t= 2.177, p < .05) and information management skills (t= 2.602, p < .05). The rest of competencies in this domain were identified as not significantly different between the respondents of the two categories.

Table 4

Testing the variances between hospitality employers' needs of employability competencies and graduates' possession of such skills

Domains	t-test	df	Sig	Mean Differ	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Interpersonal skills						
1. Ability to speak foreign language	14.21	186	.00	1.769	1.523	2.015
2. Effective use of verbal and non-verbal communication	6.729	149	.00	.932	.658	1.205
3. Exhibit good listening skills	.997	196	.32	.181	-.177	.540
4. Emotional intelligence skills	2.942	121	.00	.493	.161	.825
5. Recognize cultural differences	.587	196	.55	.102	-.240	.444
6. Ability to build positive relationships with others	-.222	196	.82	-.035	-.348	.277
7. Customer-focused and caring aptitude	2.638	171	.00	.341	.086	.596
8. Ability to recognize customer psychology	3.568	135	.00	.527	.235	.819
9. Able to provide constructive criticism and feedback	4.015	196	.00	.654	.333	.975
10. Ability to deal with difficult people and complaints effectively	6.043	135	.00	.894	.602	1.187
Leadership and management skills						
11. Planning and organizing skills	1.147	196	.25	.195	-.140	.530
12. Business management skill	3.014	135	.00	.442	.152	.732
13. Leadership skill	2.849	196	.00	.486	.150	.822
14. Able to make decision and take charge of it	2.264	196	.02	.377	.049	.706
15. Ability to anticipate guest needs	2.624	128	.01	.393	.097	.689
16. Ability to manage and resolve conflicts	4.379	118	.00	.676	.370	.982
17. Ability to teach and direct others	.442	196	.65	.079	-.274	.433
18. Ability to inspire co-workers	1.121	133	.26	.177	-.136	.490
19. Crisis management capabilities	6.972	196	.00	1.056	.757	1.36

20. Human resource related skills	1.762	196	.08	.313	-.037	.663

Technical skills

21. Capability to use hotel operation systems	4.476	196	.00	.752	.421	1.08
22. Knowledgeable of the different technologies used in hotels	2.650	196	.00	.501	.128	.874
23. Digital skills	3.270	90.9	.00	.648	.254	1.04
24. Computer and software programs competencies	.419	132	.67	.062	-.230	.354
25. Research skills	-1.401	196	.16	-.248	-.596	.101
26. Technical writing and presentation skills	.279	196	.78	.050	-.305	.405
27. Ability to use tools appropriately	5.806	173	.00	.833	.550	1.12
28. Data analysis skills	2.177	89.6	.03	.373	.033	.714
29. Information management skills	2.602	196	.01	.430	.104	.756

Innovative skills

30. Ability to think critically and analytically	2.977	196	.00	.525	.177	.873
31. Ability to bring creative ideas and new opportunities	1.778	125	.07	.264	-.030	.559
32. Entrepreneurship skill	.524	196	.60	.093	-.257	.442
33. Persuasion skills	3.706	152	.00	.526	.246	.806
34. Keen to learn and use the acquired knowledge into practice	-.883	196	.37	-.129	-.418	.160
35. Capability to challenge norms	1.108	196	.26	.188	-.147	.524
36. Ability to identify and solve problems effectively	4.743	157	.00	.607	.355	.860
37. Ability to adapt effectively to changing circumstances	3.082	137	.00	.439	.157	.721
38. The ability to take risks	4.987	135	.00	.819	.494	1.14

Operational skills

39. Awareness of health/safety aspects	.880	154	.38	.119	-.148	.385
40. The ability to work remotely	-1.456	196	.14	-.257	-.605	.091
41. Familiar with selling techniques	5.663	126	.00	.795	.517	1.07
42. Recognize customer service skills and standards	3.835	196	.00	.566	.275	.858
43. Maintain professional standards in the work environment	2.315	145	.02	.309	.045	.574
44. Risk analysis and mitigation aptitude	1.753	196	.08	.299	-.037	.636
45. Ability to prepare budget for business unit	3.529	91.7	.00	.677	.296	1.06
46. Able to overcome obstacles	3.066	196	.00	.499	.178	.820
47. Resource conservation and management	2.327	196	.02	.350	.053	.647
48. Act in an ethical and responsible manner	1.454	146	.14	.215	-.077	.508

Basic personal skills

49. Appearance and personal grooming	-1.589	196	.11	-.185	-.413	.044
50. Work without a direct control and supervision	.594	139	.55	.084	-.196	.365
51. Self-dependable and trustworthy	-1.006	196	.31	-.134	-.396	.128
52. Perform duties independently	-.315	196	.75	-.043	-.310	.224
53. Personal competencies	-.383	196	.70	-.053	-.324	.219
54. Work well under stress	4.107	146	.00	.572	.297	.848
55. Administer time efficiently	2.689	161	.00	.374	.099	.649
56. Ability to perform within a team	.846	196	.39	.132	-.175	.439
57. Awareness of the tourism and hospitality industry	-1.707	89.5	.09	-.275	-.595	.045

The outputs of the performed t-test also showed that many competencies listed in innovative skills had great mean differences in favor of employers. These competencies were significantly different between graduating students and employers at .05 level, including: ability to think critically and analytically (t= 2.977, p=.00), persuasion skills (t= 3.706, p=.00), ability to identify and solve problems effectively (t= 4.743, p=.00), adapt effectively

to changing circumstances (t= 3.082, p=.00) and ability to take risks (t= 4.987, p=.00). Furthermore, the results regarding the operational skills revealed a great statistically significant differences in range of items for the advantage of practitioners at the level of .05. This includes awareness of selling techniques (t= 5.663, p=.00) and customer service skills and standards (t= 3.835, p=.00), along with maintaining professional standards in the workplace (t= 2.315, p=.02), ability to prepare a budget for business unit (t= 3.529, p=.001), the ability to remove obstacles (t= 3.066, p=.00) and the conservation and management of resources (t= 3.327, p=.02). Lastly, the analysis of the t-test revealed a great consensus between both parties in terms of basic personal skills. All competencies within this domain were evaluated as not significantly different relation to the views of graduates and employers except two skills which proved to be significant at the level of .05: the ability to work well under stress (t= 4.107, p=.00) and administer time efficiently (t= 2.689, p=.00).

6. Discussion and research implications

This study seeks to identify the skills and abilities which hospitality employers believed that they were necessary for graduates to join the hospitality industry after COVID19, as well as to assess graduates' readiness and possession of such skills. The findings derived from the survey of lodging professionals (N=58) and graduates (N=140) from Tourism and Hospitality Department at Umm Al-Qura University revealed a great discrepancy between the industry's competencies requirements and graduates' perceptions of what they were taught and acquired. In terms of interpersonal skills, the results revealed that English language proficiency was considered the most important skill required for employment in the hospitality industry. Despite studying in the tourism and hospitality department in English, most graduates had poor/low language skills. This can be explained by the fact that students' admission to the department is not conditional on their ability to communicate in English. This means that admissions criteria should be examined, updated, and a language requirement added. Students should also work toward improving their language skill as it is very critical to have a job in the hospitality sector.

Moreover, communication skills were rated as the second critical competency determined by practitioners. This result supports Shariff and Abidin (2015) and Dhaliwal and Misra (2020). However, many students noted that they acquired these skills to a lesser degree. The findings indicated also that most employers regarded range of skills as crucial competencies required, including listening skills, customer-focused and caring, ability to form favorable relationships with others, and recognize cultural differences. The analysis showed that most of the graduates were well equipped with these skills. Likewise, the rest of competencies within the interpersonal skills domain (e.g., handling difficult persons and complaints, emotional intelligence, recognizing customer psychology, and providing constructive criticism and feedback) were considered vital and highly preferred by hospitality professionals. Nonetheless, many students were humble in holding such skills. Shum et al. (2018) explored job-related competencies and found that managing guest-related problems, building strong relationships with customers and coworkers, and effective communication are all important for graduates to succeed in their career in the hospitality industry.

In terms of leadership and management skills, employers demonstrated that crisis management and the ability to manage and resolve conflicts were very essential competencies, but these skills were not possessed by many graduates. Moreover, the aptitudes of leadership, undertaking decision, planning, and organizing, motivating coworkers to achieve desired targets and mentoring others were rated as core competencies that employers expect from graduates. In this respect, the analysis revealed that most undergraduates learned and mastered these competencies. This results concords with Yuan et

al.'s (2017) Managerial Competency Model for the Indian hospitality workforce. Besides, business management skills and ability to foresee changes in guests' needs were important competencies as perceived by employers, although held only by around half of graduates. Lastly, human resource-related skills were low on employers' list of priorities, placing them at the end of the list. Also, numerous graduates lack such skills.

Within technical skills, the results revealed that ability to use hotel's operation systems was the most important skill looked-for by hospitality practitioners. Nonetheless, a considerable percentage of graduates did not achieve such skill. This was attributed to the fact that the department lacked the necessary license to install and operate the opera system in the faculty lab for teaching and training purposes. The results also coincide with Espellita and Maravilla (2019) and Commey et al. (2020) revealed that the skills linked to using tools appropriately and recognizing the various technologies used in hotels (i.e. smart rooms, robotic technologies, automated check-in/out etc.) were highly valued and anticipated by industry experts. However, most of the graduates lack them. This ascribes to the fact that the department lacks training facilities such as educational hotel, kitchen, and/or a restaurant for familiarizing students practically with the tools and equipment that were theoretically taught to them in different courses. Additionally, the findings informed that ability to use computers and software programs along with technical writing and presentation skills were considered essential skills and highly achieved by most graduates. Furthermore, most employers surveyed indicated that information management, digital skills and data analytic abilities were noticeably important. However, most graduates did not obtain such proficiencies. This is consistent with the Enback's (2020) survey across the UK's hospitality, retail, travel, and aviation industries and Shum et al. (2018) who found that digital skills and information management skills would be essential employment skills related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, research skills were considered the least important competency identified by employers. However, such skills were possessed by more than half of the undergraduates.

The findings defined number of innovative skills that were very crucial and examined by employers when hiring new applicants including ability to identify and solve problems, persuasion skills, a desire to learn and the ability to bring creative ideas. From the graduates' views, the majority mentioned that they had these competencies to some extent. These findings corroborated those of Commey et al. (2020). It was found that large percentage of students did not meet these requirements. The ability to take risks was another key competency required despite most graduating students lacked this ability. It is worth noting that entrepreneurship was the second lowest rated competency by industry professionals and at the same time it was not acquired by many graduates.

Regarding operational skills, the results support past research (Shum et al., 2018; Dhaliwal and Misra, 2020) indicated that recognizing customer service skills and standards; health/safety aspects and social distance; maintaining professional standards in the work environment were among the most important employability competencies sought by hospitality recruiters. The present study informed that these pre-mentioned aptitudes were gained to a large extent by most graduates. Moreover, knowledge of selling techniques and the ability to overcome obstacles were highlighted by hospitality experts as vital competencies, yet most graduates lacked such aptitudes. Many employers also believed that the ability to behave ethically as well as resource conservation and management were key competencies for the business and stressed the ability of new applicants to work remotely especially after COVID19, and concurrently most graduates were judged qualified in this respect. Enback (2020) and Sigala (2021) underlined these findings. Finally, many employers

gave a low rate to two operational skills: risk analysis and ability to prepare budget for business unit. It was evident that most undergraduates did not possess such proficiencies.

Overall, this study showed that the basic personal skills were considered the most important dimension needed to be fulfilled by graduates. The findings accord with previous research (Caiyod et al., 2015; Shum et al., 2018; Dhaliwal and Misra, 2020) in which employers highly valued all personal skills investigated and regarded them as very crucial for employment (e.g., appearance and personal grooming; self-dependable and trustworthy; teamwork; work independently etc.). Concurrently, all these pre-mentioned competencies were noted as the most widely possessed by graduates. According to the analysis, the personal skills occupied the first 8 positions that students were highly learnt and acquired among the list of competencies tested. In practice, the study introduced an index of skills and competencies for hospitality education institutions in the context of Saudi Arabia to qualify undergraduates and align with the industry's competency requirements (see Table 5). The index categorizes the skills into six main domains and ranks the competencies related to each construct according to their importance to hospitality employers.

Table 5
An Index of skills and competencies required by the hospitality industry

Interpersonal skills	8. Data analysis skills
1. Ability to speak foreign language	**Innovative skills**
2. Effective use of verbal/non-verbal communication	1. Ability to identify and solve problems effectively
3. Customer-focused and caring aptitude	2. Persuasion skills
4. Ability to deal with complaints	3. Keen to learn and use acquired knowledge
5. Exhibit good listening skills	4. Able to adapt effectively to changing circumstances
6. Ability to build positive relationships with others	5. Ability to bring creative ideas and opportunities
7. Recognize cultural differences	6. Ability to think critically and analytically
8. Emotional intelligence skills	7. The ability to take risks
9. Ability to recognize customer psychology	8. Capability to challenge norms
10. Able to provide constructive feedback	**Operational skills**
Leadership and management skills	1. Recognize customer service skills and standards
1. Crisis management capabilities	2. Awareness of health/safety aspects
2. Leadership skill	3. Act in an ethical and responsible manner
3. Able to undertake decision and take charge of it	4. Maintain professional standards in work
4. Planning and organizing skills	5. Familiar with selling techniques
5. Business management skill	6. Able to overcome obstacles
6. Ability to manage and resolve conflicts	7. Resource conservation and management
7. Ability to inspire and motivate co-workers	8. The ability to work remotely
8. Ability to anticipate guest needs	9. Risk analysis and mitigation aptitude
9. Ability to teach and direct others	**Basic personal skills**
10. Human resource related skills	1. Appearance and personal grooming
Technical skills	2. Work well under stress
1. Capability to use hotel operation systems	3. Self-dependable and trustworthy
2. Ability to use tools appropriately	4. Capability to perform within a team
3. Computer and software programs competencies	5. Perform duties independently
4. Knowledgeable of technologies used in	6. Personal competencies (enthusiastic, resilience

hotels	etc.)
5. Technical writing and presentation skills	7. Work without direct control and supervision
6. Information management skills	8. Administer time efficiently
7. Digital skills	9. Awareness of the tourism and hospitality industry

This research implies that there should be more academic-industry collaboration to obtain precise and up-to-date information on the skills/competencies required by hospitality employers, as well as the newest trends in the industry. Hospitality educators should organize regular meetings and/or visits with the industry professionals to exchange ideas and perspectives to produce high-qualified graduates for the industry. Furthermore, this research agrees with Espellita and Maravilla (2019) and Sigala (2021) that there should be regular review and constant updating to curriculums and teaching techniques to address the changes occurring in the hospitality environment. There is also a great need to replace traditional learning styles with cooperative learning strategies. In practice, tourism and hospitality departments at Saudi Arabian universities should consider the findings and develop and/or update their academic programs with all the skills and competencies that have been rated as essential by employers to meet the high expectations of the industry. Likewise, hospitality departments should provide compulsory internship courses in their educational plans to help students acquire related operational and technical skills. Additionally, instructors should introduce more site visits and field trips as part of teaching their modules to expose students to current trends in the hospitality industry. This will help them to understand the requirements of their future career and link theoretical aspects with practice. Educators should also invite hospitality professionals and experts to give lectures to update students' knowledge with the required competencies to be able to join the hospitality sector. Finally, students must continually work towards developing their skills to fit well into the industry.

7. Conclusion

Hospitality education certainly plays a crucial role in preparing future leaders who can manage and operate hospitality businesses effectively. This research focuses on providing up-to-date information, following COVID-19, on the necessary skills and competencies anticipated by the industry, as well as examining the actual ones achieved by graduates in the context of Saudi Arabia. The findings of this study revealed a significant gap between competency needs and graduates' possession of those skills. The study presented an index of skills under six main competency dimensions that were very important from the perspective of hospitality professionals including, respectively: basic personal skills, interpersonal skills, leadership and management skills, operational skills, innovative skills and technical skills. Besides, this research highlighted an increased significance to number of skills for hospitality employers particularly after coronavirus pandemic, involving crisis management, health and safety aspects and social distance, ethical and responsible behaviour, adaptability, resource conservation and management, the ability to work remotely and digital skills. However, it was evident that many graduates participated in this research were not highly prepared with the employability skills demanded by the hospitality labor market.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by bridging the gap between the academia and the industry in terms of the competencies in which graduates should possess before entering the hospitality sector. The findings of this study can benefit Saudi educational institutions in developing and/or creating hospitality programs that meet the industry's requirements. This research implies that instructors should invite industry's employers to evaluate the curriculums and give their feedback when revising/designing the academic programs. Academicians should enhance their collaboration with hospitality professionals to

understand the new trends and competencies requirements of the industry. Educators should employ cooperative learning styles, provide more field trips, and continually update their syllabus to address the industry needs. The study emphasized the importance of providing mandatory internship courses to effectively prepare graduates with the competencies valued by employers. In practice, this research will enable the hospitality industry in Saudi Arabia to get qualified human resource equipped with the skills, knowledge, and competencies and able to help businesses achieve competitive advantages. This study provides opportunities for further research by replicating it in different settings, for instance, considering other hospitality educational institutions either inside or outside Saudi Arabia to compare and/or validate the results. Future research can also employ qualitative research approach to investigate in-depth the views of educators, graduates, and professionals regarding employability skills and the related challenges.

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كفاءات التوظيف في قطاع الضيافة: متطلبات أصحاب العمل واستعداد الخريجين بعد جائحة كوفيد – ١٩. دراسة حالة من المملكة العربية السعودية

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معلومات المقالة	الملخص
	أثر كوفيد–١٩ بشكل كبير على قطاع الضيافة في جميع أنحاء العالم، وبسبب هذا الوباء تطورت متطلبات هذه الصناعة من الكفاءات والمهارات. لذا يجب أن تعكس برامج إدارة الضيافة هذه التغييرات لضمان استعداد الخريجين ونجاحهم في حياتهم المهنية في المستقبل. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو استكشاف مهارات التوظيف التي يحتاجها المسؤولون في قطاع الضيافة في المملكة العربية السعودية بعد وباء كوفيد–١٩، وتحديد إلى أي مدى يلبي خريجو الضيافة هذه المتطلبات وتحديد الفجوات التي تحتاج إلى تطوير. تم تصميم استبيان وإدارته ذاتيًا لجمع البيانات من خلال عينة من ١٤٠ طالبًا جامعيًا خريجًا من برنامج إدارة الضيافة بجامعة أم القرى و ٥٨ متخصصاً ومسؤولاً في مجال الضيافة في المملكة العربية السعودية. أبرزت النتائج وجود فجوة كبيرة في الكفاءات التي يتمتع بها خريجو الضيافة واحتياجات الصناعة. خلصت الدراسة إلى تطوير قائمة/مؤشر بالمهارات والكفاءات التي يؤمن أصحاب العمل أنها مهمة للخريجين لتطويرها وامتلاكها قبل الالتحاق بالعمل في قطاع الضيافة. هذا البحث سوف يساعد المؤسسات التعليمية السعودية المتخصصة في مجال الضيافة في مراجعة أو تحديث برامج إدارة الضيافة لديها والمناهج وأساليب التدريس الخاصة بها لتتناسب مع توقعات الصناعة. كما أشارت الدراسة إلى أن هناك حاجة إلى مزيد من التعاون بين الأكاديميين وخبراء الصناعة لفهم الاتجاهات الجديدة للقطاع بشكل كامل وتلبية احتياجات الكفاءة.