

Assessing TVET Graduates in Hospitality Management: Balancing Theoretical Knowledge and Practical Skills for Industry Success

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ABSTRACT

This research analysed the steadiness linking theoretical knowledge to practical skills for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates in hospitality Management in the Western Region of Ghana. It explored how theoretical knowledge provided the foundation for understanding industry standards, management principles, and regulatory frameworks. A quantitative research methodology was utilized, whereby Cochran's sample size determination formula aided in the selection of 200 TVET graduates, instructors and industry-based supervisors. Three sampling techniques; stratified, purposive and convenience were utilized in the selection of respondents and solicit for primary data using a questionnaire whilst data was analysed using SPSS. The TVET institutions faced challenges in achieving a balance in theory and practice which often resulted in a mismatch between industry expectations and graduate competencies. Overemphasized theory resulted in graduates who possessed solid foundational knowledge but lacked hands-on experiences needed for operational roles. Industry collaboration, through internships and apprenticeships, played a crucial role in bridging this gap. Conclusively, a balanced curriculum, incorporating both theoretical and practical elements, are key to producing well-rounded graduates. Effective collaboration between institutions under TVET and the industry stakeholders was considered vital to ensure that training programs aligned with current industry demands. Commendably, curriculum development and industry partnerships can better prepare graduates to balance theory and practice in the hospitality industry, which can enhance employability and contribute to the sector's growth.

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INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is widely recognized for its dynamic and service-driven environment, requiring employees to possess a blend of both theory and practical knowledge. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions have been established to equip students with the essential skills and knowledge needed for specific industries, including hospitality. Hospitality programs at TVET institutions encompassed training in areas like food production technology, principles of catering and hospitality operations. The primary focus of TVET has been to foster employability through practical skills and technical competencies, which are essential for the hospitality sector (Rodzalan et al., 2018). The key challenge that TVET institutions faced, however, was balancing theoretical instruction with practical application. Theoretical knowledge provided students with an understanding of the principles governing the industry, such as customer service management, human resource management, and financial oversight. This knowledge was critical for informed decision-making in areas like food safety and operational strategies (Marginson, 2017). Nevertheless, theoretical knowledge alone was not sufficient; unless the inclusion of practical skills was applied to the settings to make it complete (Baum, 2019). Graduates from TVET programs have been integral to this sector, particularly due to the practical competencies they acquire during their training (Francis *et al.*, 2020).

Over time, a growing concern has emerged regarding the gap between the skills TVET graduates possess and the expectations of employers in the hospitality industry. Many graduates struggle to apply their theoretical learning in real-world settings, while others, despite excelling in hands-on tasks, lack the analytical and strategic skills required for higher-level responsibilities (Makgato, 2021). This disconnect has led to calls for TVET institutions to place greater emphasis on balancing theoretical knowledge with practical training in their curricula (Salleh & Sulaiman, 2019). Researchers have shown that successful graduates are those who ought to be proficient in practical skills to meet day-to-day operational demands and theoretical knowledge to support strategic thinking and problem-solving (Rodzalan & Saat, 2018). As a result, industry collaboration through internships and apprenticeships has been highlighted as a crucial method for bridging the gap between education and employment (Oviawe, 2018). The study focused on the examination of determinants which could bridge a balance between theoretical and practical training in TVET programs, exploring how this integration can enhance graduate employability and performance in the hospitality sector. The main emphasis was to assess TVET graduates balance of theory and practical knowledge in the industry.

Theoretical knowledge in hospitality education

The importance of TVET in preparing graduates for the industry has been extensively published. The TVET institutions play a critical role in equipping students with all the requisite skills needed. This helps to meet modern workforce demands, predominantly in the hospitality sector, which requires both technical expertise and customer service excellence (Baum, 2019). Theoretical knowledge is fundamental in providing students with an in-depth comprehension of principles that govern the hospitality industry, including management, financial planning, and customer service strategies.

Marginson (2017) emphasized that knowledge of industry regulations, safety standards, and business operations is vital for premeditated policymaking in the hospitality sector. For instance, financial management skills help professionals understand budgeting, cost control, and revenue management, while conflict resolution, training and staff recruitment are aided by the human resource management theory (Pieters, 2018). The research also pointed out the restrictions which focuses exclusively on theoretical knowledge. While it builds a foundation for understanding the industry. Similarly, it does not necessarily translate into the ability to perform day-to-day tasks required in hospitality jobs, such as food preparation, front office management, and accommodation (Rodzalan & Saat, 2018). In the end, balancing theory with practical skills is essential for developing well-rounded hospitality professionals.

Practical skills in hospitality education

Practical skills are at the heart of TVET programs, especially in industries like hospitality where operational efficiency is key. These TVET graduates are projected to have practical skill in performing essential tasks such as preparing meals, managing guest accommodations, and organizing events (Francis *et al.*, 2020). Practical skills training in TVET often involves internships, simulated work environments, and on-the-job training, all of which help students gain the experience needed to succeed in the hospitality sector (Aliyu, 2020). According to Baum (2019), “practical skills are crucial for maintaining high service standards and meeting customer expectations”. Graduates who have strong practical competencies are more likely to be successful in entry-level hospitality positions because they can quickly adapt to the workplace demands. More so, studies have shown that practical skills alone are not sufficient for career advancement. Furthermore, hospitality professionals also need critical thinking and problem-solving aids, that are typically developed through theoretical education (Scott *et al.*, 2019).

Challenges in balancing theory and practice

One of the major challenges in TVET education is finding the right link between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Many institutions tend to focus more on one aspect, which can leave graduates underprepared in other areas (Makgato, 2021). The programs that overemphasize theoretical learning may produce graduates who lack the hands-on experience necessary for hospitality roles, while programs that focus primarily on practical skills may fail to equip students with the strategic thinking needed for managerial positions (Salleh & Sulaiman, 2019). Additionally, research has identified this imbalance as a key factor contributing to the skills gap in the hospitality industry. A study by Pang *et al.* (2019) revealed that employers often find TVET graduates lacking in either the technical skills required for operational roles, or the critical thinking needed for problem-solving and leadership. This gap highlights the need for TVET institutions to integrate both theoretical and practical training more effectively.

The role of industry collaboration

Collaboration between TVET institutions and industry stakeholders has been recognized as an effective solution for addressing the skills gap. Industry partnerships provide students with opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, and real-world training, which help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Oviawe, 2018). Industry collaboration also ensures that curricula used for the TVET programme continues to be appropriate and is able to meet standards set by the industries (Muchira *et al.*, 2023). Rodzalan and Saat (2018) argued that close cooperation between TVET institutions and hospitality businesses is essential for producing graduates who are both employable and adaptable. By working together, educators and employers can empower hospitality graduates through the establishment of training programmes geared towards skills acquisition leading to employability.

There is an indication that, a combination of theory and practical capabilities are vital to the success of hospitality industry operation. As theoretical knowledge provides a strong foundation for understanding industry operations, practical skills empower graduates to appreciate contemporary trends practised in the industry. Likewise, a blend of theory and practice continues to pose a challenge for TVET institutions. Furthermore, Industry collaboration emerges as a key strategy for bridging the skills gap and ensuring that TVET graduates attain the technical know-how required to meet the needs of the hospitality sectors.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach which examined how TVET institutions in the hospitality sector balanced theoretical knowledge and practical skills that prepared graduates for the industry. A descriptive survey design was used, with data collected from 200 participants using Cochran's sample size determination formula to select TVET graduates, instructors, and industry-based supervisors, by the utilization of stratified, purposive and convenience sampling techniques. As three different set of questionnaires were used to solicit for primary data, the results made use of SPSS, correlation and descriptive statistics to analyse data received. The study aimed to explore the effectiveness of TVET curricula, focusing on challenges in balancing theory and practice, with industry collaboration emerging as a key factor in enhancing graduate readiness for the hospitality workforce. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

The study's findings highlighted several key insights regarding the balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills in TVET institutions, particularly within the hospitality sector. The data collected from TVET graduates, instructors, and industry-based supervisors provided valuable information on best ways to prepare and empower TVET students for the industry.

Effectiveness of TVET programmes in balancing theory and practice

Based on the responses from TVET graduates and instructors, the effectiveness of TVET programs in balancing theoretical and practical elements varied. Graduates and industry-based supervisors overwhelmingly agreed that theoretical learning dominated, with 73.5% of graduates and 81.25% of supervisors affirming this view, while only 12.5% and 12.5% respectively indicated a focus on practical skills. In contrast, instructors reported a higher emphasis on practical skills, with 30% agreeing that practice was prioritized, though 70% still leaned towards theory.

Table 3. 1: Emphasis on theory, practice, and balance in TVET hospitality education

Respondents	Number (n=200)	Theory Emphasis Percentage in Agreement	Practical Emphasis Percentage in Agreement	Balanced Approach Percentage in Agreement
Graduates	160	73.5	12.5	5
Instructors	20	70	30	5
Industry-Based Supervisors	20	81.25	12.5	6.25

Source: *Field Survey, 2024*

In this context, only a small percentage of each group felt that the training between theory and practice was well-balanced. Specifically, 5% of graduates and instructors respectively and 6.25% of industry-based supervisors agreed that the training achieved a balanced approach.

Graduate performance as perceived by employers

Industry-based supervisors provided insights into the perceived performance of TVET graduates in the workplace. As graduates were rated highly for their technical and operational skills, they were often found lacking in critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, skills typically developed through stronger theoretical instruction.

Table 3. 2: Graduate Performance as Perceived by Employers

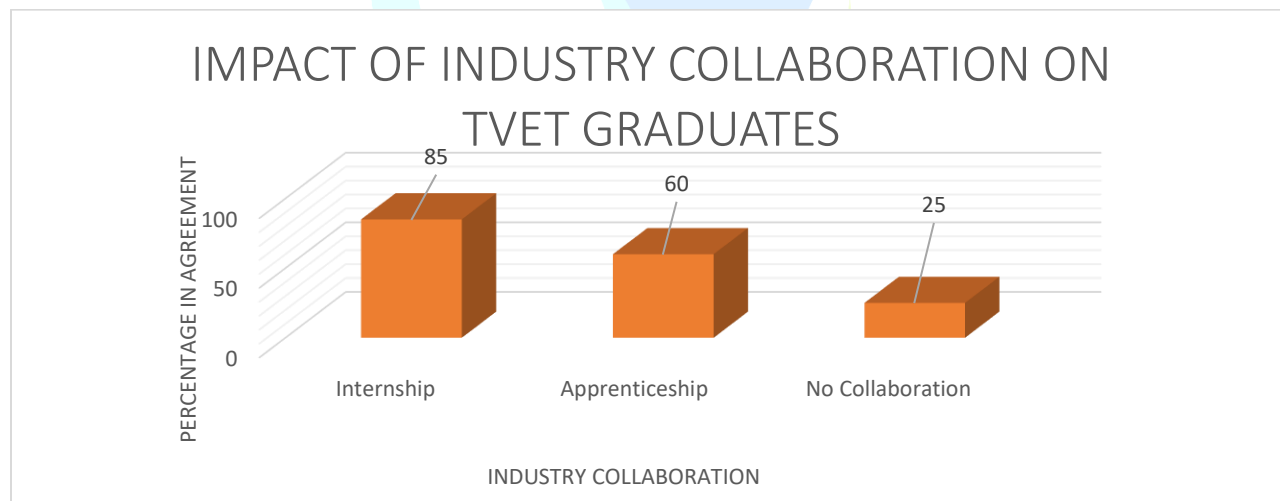
Practical Skills	Percentage in Agreement		
	Good	Fair	Poor
Food Production Technology	59.8	24.6	15.6
Principles of Catering	62.1	33.4	4.5
Hospitality Operation	29.6	40.2	30.2

Source: *Field Survey, 2024.*

The findings presented in Table 3.2 revealed significant insights into the performance of TVET Hospitality Management graduates, particularly in the practical skills required for food production, principles of catering, and hospitality operations. Employers perceived graduate performance as relatively strong in food production technology and principles of catering, with 59.8% and 62.1% of respondents, respectively, rating their skills as “good.” This indicated that graduates were largely competent in technical and operational tasks, which are crucial to the attainment of employment in the industry. However, their performance in hospitality operations was more varied, with only 29.6% of employers considering their skills "good," while a substantial 30.2% rated their performance as "poor."

Impact of industry collaboration on TVET graduate

The study found that industry collaboration through internships and apprenticeships significantly improved TVET graduates’ readiness for the hospitality workforce. Graduates who embarked on internships reported felt more confident in their practical skills, although some still felt underprepared for managerial roles.



Source: *Field Survey, 2024.*

Figure 1: Impact of industry collaboration on graduate readiness

Figure 4.1 further reinforced the importance of industry collaboration in enhancing graduate readiness. A substantial 85% of respondents acknowledged that internships significantly improved graduates' practical skills, while 60% agreed that apprenticeships are critical in graduate empowerment for the workforce. However, the 25% of respondents who experienced no industry collaboration highlighted a gap in the system, underscoring the need for more consistent partnerships between TVET institutions and industry stakeholders. The lack of exposure to real-world environments for the graduates potentially contributed to their lower confidence and preparedness for managerial roles, as noted by some of the respondents.

DISCUSSION

The effectiveness of TVET programmes in balancing theory and practice indicated that most respondents did not feel that theory and practice were equally prioritized, suggesting a need for more integration of both aspects in the curriculum to equip graduates useful for the job market. The results revealed that TVET programs in the Western Region of Ghana predominantly emphasized theoretical knowledge, often at the expense of practical training. This finding affiliated closely to published research works also confirmed the challenge TVET institutions faced when trying to find an equity between the theoretical and practical aspect of the programme studied (Salleh & Sulaiman, 2019). Overemphasizing theory resulted in graduates who possessed solid introductory knowledge in management principles, hospitality principles and customer service, but lacked the hands-on experience needed for operational roles (Rodzalan & Saat, 2018).

Graduates' performance, particularly in practical tasks like food production and principles of catering, was rated favourably by industry supervisors. This corroborates Baum's (2019) assertion that TVET graduates tend to perform well in practical, entry-level positions where practical skills are critical. However, in broader operational areas, such as hospitality operations, graduates were found lacking skills in solving problems, although they are importantly needed for higher-level responsibilities. This gap reflects findings by Makgato (2021), who observed that TVET graduates often struggle in roles that require strategic thinking due to the insufficient incorporation of both theory and practical application.

The study also found that internships and apprenticeships significantly enhanced graduates' practical competencies, aligning with Oviawe's (2018) research, which emphasized the role of industry collaboration in bridging the skills gap. Graduates who engaged in such programs were more confident and equipped for the hospitality industry's demands, particularly in technical areas. However, despite these improvements, many graduates still felt underprepared for managerial roles. This echoes Pang et al.'s (2019) study, which argued that while practical skills acquired through industry placements are essential, they are not enough to fully prepare graduates for leadership positions without a solid theoretical foundation.

The results underscored the necessity for a curriculum that integrates both theoretical knowledge and practical training more effectively. Researchers like Rodzalan and Saat (2018) have emphasized that successful hospitality professionals require critical thinking and decision-making abilities as well as technical skills, which are best developed through a balanced educational approach. The industry's reliance on graduates who can adapt to various roles, both operational and managerial, requires TVET institutions to focus on producing well-rounded professionals.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that a balanced curriculum, integrating both theoretical and practical training is essential for producing competent graduates in the hospitality sector. Furthermore, effective partnerships amongst TVET institutions and industry stakeholders were considered vital to ensure that training programs aligned with current industry standards and requirements to ultimately enhance graduate employability. Finally, TVET institutions ought to enhance industry partnerships and introduce specialized skill development programs. In the end, this would better prepare hospitality management graduates with structured internships, apprenticeships, and mentorships, as well as hands-on expertise to link industry needs and classroom learning.

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