

Ruth PUHR<sup>1</sup> (Sion)

# The skills debate in the context of a pandemic: Are students prepared for the workplace?

## Abstract

This paper explores the preparation of hospitality management students for the workplace in the context of a global health crisis. In an intrinsic mixed methods case study, student perspectives are used to problematize and evaluate conceptualizations and terminologies. The study recommends that employability, a dualistic and politicised term, be replaced by the intrinsic construct of work readiness and finds that competencies, work integrated learning and perceived relevance of the degree play instrumental roles in delivering work readiness. Context-specific and regularly updated competency frameworks are recommended. Capability emerges as a powerful and often overlooked construct.

## Keywords

work readiness, competencies, skills, capability

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1 email: [ruth.puhr@lesroches.edu](mailto:ruth.puhr@lesroches.edu)



# 1 Introduction

The relationship between higher education (HE) and the workplace is undeniable and has generated a vast, unresolved and highly contentious political debate about the nature of the skills that a university education should provide to students (BARNETT, 2013; DROGE, 2017). Amidst an increasing focus on marketability, consumerism and performativity (BALL, 2008), higher education institutions (HEIs) specialising in hospitality management education in Switzerland have embraced skills frameworks, recognising synergies with the professional orientation already embedded in their programs (OSKAM, 2018; WEIERMAIR & BIEGER, 2005).

The extraordinary context of a global health crisis with far-reaching social and economic repercussions provides both a backdrop and rationale for problematizing long-established terminologies and prevailing skills and competency frameworks in HE. Student perceptions regarding the role of skills and competencies as well as other factors in preparing them for the workplace also merit probing.

Advocating a culture of experimentation to prepare for an unpredictable new-normal, this study interrogates the preparation of graduating hospitality management students for the workplace, evaluating the suitability of terminologies and frameworks and probing student perspectives. The following research questions guide the study:

- RQ1: Which concepts and terminologies represent the preparedness of graduating hospitality management students for the workplace?
- RQ2: What role do skills and competencies play in preparing hospitality management students for the workplace?
- RQ3: What other factors contribute to students' perceptions of their preparedness for the workplace?

To answer the research questions, I address the literature to examine current terminologies and the hospitality management education context. I then turn to the empirical aims of the study, evaluating, from a student perspective, the ongoing relevance of an institutional competency framework (ICF) during a global pandemic and probing the role of competencies and other factors in preparing hospitality management students for the workplace.

## 2 Theoretical Perspective

### 2.1 Employability: A politicised term

*Employability* has, for more than twenty years, been a potentially political and particularly contentious term in the skills debate (HARVEY, 2003; JACKSON, SIBSON & RIEBE, 2013). This is, in no small part, due to the influence of fluctuations in the labour-market on the employability discourse (BROWN, HESKETH & WILLIAMS, 2003; MCQUAID & DALE, 2005). KNIGHT & YORKE (2004) attempted to address this by defining employability as a mix of understanding, skilful practice, self-efficacy and reflectiveness rather than as the ability of a graduate to acquire and maintain a suitable job (HILLAGE & POLLARD, 1998). However, employers are the most influential stakeholders in the literature (TSITSKARI, GOUDAS, TSALOUCHOU, & MICHALOPOULOU, 2017), driving a perception that HE is failing to deliver (JOLLANDS, 2015; WHARTON & HORROCKS, 2015). Few studies have explored the student perspective of employability (FENECH, BAGUANT & ABDELWAHED, 2019; YORKE, 2006) and the lack of a range of perspectives in the literature makes the politicisation of the term all the more troublesome.

The impossibility of dissociating employability from the dynamics of the labour market has resulted in the generally simplistic and misguided matching of acquired and required skills that dominates the employability discourse (SULEMAN, 2018). The continued massification of HE has led to congestion and increased competitiveness in the graduate labour market (GEDYE & BEAUMONT, 2018), a strengthening of the performativity agenda in HE (BARNETT, 2013) and a continued blurring, as predicted by YORKE (2006), of the distinction between employability and employment, rendering the term employability ambiguous and unreliable.

#### 2.1.1 Work readiness: An alternative to employability

Work readiness is an emerging twenty-first century construct with which we can understand gradueness in terms of the readiness of graduates to enter the workplace (CABALLERO & WALKER, 2010; CASNER-LOTTO, 2006). While graduate employability, as discussed above, is characterised by a problematic duality (BROWN et al., 2003) and is now widely recognised as a matching of a graduate's acquired skills, knowledge and attributes to those required by an employer, work

readiness is more intrinsic to the individual, encompassing the potential to perform at the required level in the workplace, with minimum supervision, contributing value to an organisation (PRIKSHAT, KUMAR & NANKERVIS, 2019). In a time of crisis in the global workplace, this study explores whether students might be better served by abandoning the use of the term employability in favour of work readiness when referring to the preparedness of graduating students for the workplace in the new-normal.

## 2.2 Skills, competences and competencies

Both employability and work readiness are strongly associated with *skills, competences and competencies*, which are often incorrectly treated as interchangeable terms (ZEHRER & MÖSSENLECHNER, 2009). Although interpretations may be influenced by language, culture and context (ZEHRER & MÖSSENLECHNER, 2009) competences are generally considered broader and more complex than the skills contained within them and may be likened to a mobilisation of skills, knowledge and judgement (SULEMAN, 2018). This corresponds with the conceptualisation of MOORE, CHENG & DAINTY (2002) where a competence encompasses what people do, while competencies include the behaviours and attitudes which underpin and support what people do. Thus, competencies are more comprehensive and holistic, encompassing how people do something in a particular context (VAN DER VELDEN, 2013).

ZEHRER & MÖSSENLECHNER (2009) go further, asserting that a competency includes “integrated tonalities consisting of multi-dimensional aspects” (p. 270) and is greater than the knowledge, expertise, skills, attributes and abilities that it contains. This complex multi-dimensionality combined with the potential for improvement through educational practice may explain why competencies have come to dominate the scholarly discourse, particularly in the field of Education (SALAS-PILCO, 2013) and aligns with terms found in recent hospitality-oriented literature (BHARWANI & TALIB, 2017; PETROVA, 2014; SHUM, GATLING & SHOEMAKER, 2018).

### **2.2.1 Competency frameworks**

Conceptualisations of skills and competencies exist in the form of inventories, taxonomies and frameworks, an overview of which reveals little consensus. JOLLANDS (2015) identified gaps in several widely used frameworks as well as an observation that frameworks tend to become quickly outdated. Similarly, SALAS-PILCO (2013) compared ten competency frameworks developed by international organizations, private foundations and individual governments in the previous ten years and recommended that frameworks must evolve over time and should ideally be developed for specific contexts. SULEMAN (2018) looked at several recent attempts to condense, cluster and categorise skills and competencies and found that, here too, the nomenclature suggests an ongoing and increasing lack of consensus.

## **2.3 The hospitality management context**

HEIs specialised in hospitality management education have always maintained a close relationship with the hospitality and tourism industries. Developments in the curriculum are often informed by and reflect this ongoing contact (OSKAM, 2018). Equally, research-driven trends in the curriculum can be seen to have an impact in the industry (TRIBE, 2014).

While some authors advocate for a curriculum designed to meet evolving industry needs (ALEXAKIS & JIANG, 2019; MIN, SWANGER & GURSOY 2016; SISON & ADAMS, 2013), several studies insist that a university education is not, and should not be, synonymous with professional training (CHUNG-HERRERA, ENZ & LANKAU, 2003; LASHLEY, 2015). Finding a balance between these two opposed positions is a challenge for hospitality management education (JOHANSON, GHISELLI, SHEA & ROBERTS, 2011; PETROVA, 2014; TRIBE, 2014).

Research suggests that competencies can provide a helpful link between the curriculum and the industry (JACKSON et al., 2013), especially as there is no shortage of literature outlining hospitality industry expectations from an employer perspective (PETROVA, 2014). The enduring importance of a hospitality mindset associated with service management (JOHANSON et al., 2011; MIN et al., 2016; SPOWART, 2011) combined with the primacy of intercultural leadership competencies (JO-

HANSON et al., 2011; PIZAM, 2014; SHUM et al., 2018) also support the need for a context-specific approach to the framing of competencies.

The importance of internships and work-integrated learning (WIL) in hospitality management education is reflected in the large body of literature devoted to understanding and enhancing the positive impact of this essential component of many hospitality management programmes (see ROBINSON, RUHANEN & BREakey, 2016) with some focusing specifically on links between WIL and competency development (JACK, STANSBIE & SCIARINI, 2017). WIL is seen as significant in pre-professional identity construction (JACKSON, 2017; MOONEY & JAMESON, 2018) and highly influential in informing the career choices of hospitality students (FARMAKI, 2018; TSAI, HSU & YANG, 2017). However, some studies suggest that negative internship experiences may result in students turning their back on the hospitality industry after graduation (ROBINSON, RUHANEN & BREakey, 2016; FARMAKI, 2018; MOONEY & JAMESON, 2018) suggesting that more research is needed to understand the role of WIL in preparing students for the workplace.

## **3 Research design and methods**

### **3.1 An intrinsic case study**

An intrinsic case study design provides for intensive and detailed research in a specific and bounded context (STAKE, 1995; YIN, 2014). I selected a small HEI in Switzerland which specialises in hospitality management and has a well-established global reputation for employability. While this context gives the case study an intrinsic purpose, the context institution might also be considered as representative of similar specialist HEIs both in Switzerland and globally, offering instrumental potential (STAKE, 1995).

### **3.2 A mixed methods strategy**

Mixed methods research allows for the pragmatic and purposeful mixing of qualitative and quantitative data (CRESWELL, 2013). To address the research questions, I selected a sequential explanatory QUAN-qual approach as illustrated in Figure 1.

I quantitatively evaluated the legitimacy of the ICF, and then used the results of the quantitative analysis to design and conduct interviews probing student perspectives regarding terminologies and the role of competency development as well as other factors in fostering work readiness.

A purposive sampling strategy was used in which all 327 final year undergraduate students at the context institution were invited to participate in an online questionnaire. The response rate was 18% ( $n = 57$ ). While the sample size is a limitation of this study, it meets the minimum requirements for the statistical tests undertaken (SIEMSON, ROTH & OLVEIRA, 2010). A nested sampling strategy was used for the interviews in which participants were a self-selecting subset of the survey respondents ( $n = 5$ ).

The online questionnaire included demographic questions and asked students to rate, using a visual analog scale, the development during their studies of competencies from an ICF. A five-item workplace-relevance scale (WRS), developed by KABANOFF, RICHARDSON & BROWN (2003) to measure students perceptions regarding the relevance of their degree to the workplace was demonstrated by JACKSON (2019) to be a predictor of work readiness across an array of disciplines in which students had completed WIL as part of their program. I adapted the WRS for use in the questionnaire.

The quantitative data was analysed using IBM SPSS Version 26 and MS Excel for Mac Version 16.37. Semi-structured interview data was subjected to an iterative coding process using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 as part of a rigorous thematic analysis (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006; WAHYUNI, 2012).

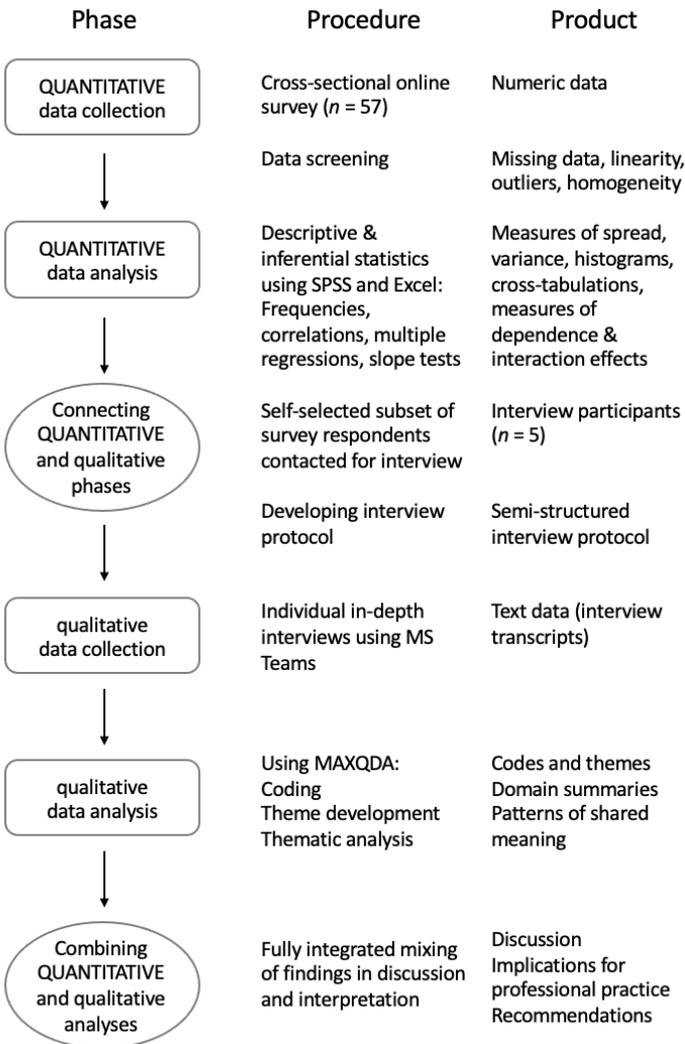


Figure 1: Mixed methods sequential explanatory QUAN-qual research design

## 4 Analysis: Findings and discussion

The interactive method of analysis in pragmatic mixed methods research maintains the primacy of research questions (JOHNSON & ONWUEGBUZIE, 2004, p. 17) by treating datasets as interdependent (DURAM, 2012). The results and discussion are woven together and interact with the literature to address each research question in turn.

### 4.1 RQ1: Which concepts and terminologies represent student preparedness for the workplace?

Interviewees were asked whether they were familiar with the terms *employability* and *work readiness*. All five clearly understood employability as being extrinsic and linked to the job market, the workplace and the requirements of employers. Neil stated simply, "...it's according to the job market" and Ben used the word "matching", associated by SULEMAN (2018) with the simplistic, misguided and ultimately problematic use of the term.

Work readiness was understood as more intrinsic by four of the five interviewees. Sara said, "it's more about yourself being ready." For Vlad, "work readiness is about ... how ready do you feel... as an individual," while Amy spoke about being mentally prepared for challenges. Neil went even further, acknowledging that the job market is difficult in the context of a global pandemic but that this hasn't affected how prepared he feels to enter the workplace. This reflects a spontaneous concurrence with conceptualisations of work readiness in the literature (CABALLERO, WALKER & FULLER-TYSZKIEWICZ, 2011; PRIKSHAT et al., 2019) and endorses the suitability of the term for operationalisation in hospitality management education in the new-normal.

## 4.2 RQ2: What role do skills and competencies play in preparing students for the workplace?

According to JACKSON (2019), student perceptions regarding the workplace relevance of their degree is a predictor of their work readiness. Survey responses demonstrate that students consider their degree to be highly relevant to the workplace (see Figure 2). The alpha reliability for the WRS was .79. A new variable was computed for overall workplace relevance by combining these items and this was tested for a correlation against a single work readiness item. The test demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship between overall workplace relevance and work readiness ( $r(57) = .298, p = .030$ ), confirming that workplace relevance is a predictor of work readiness.

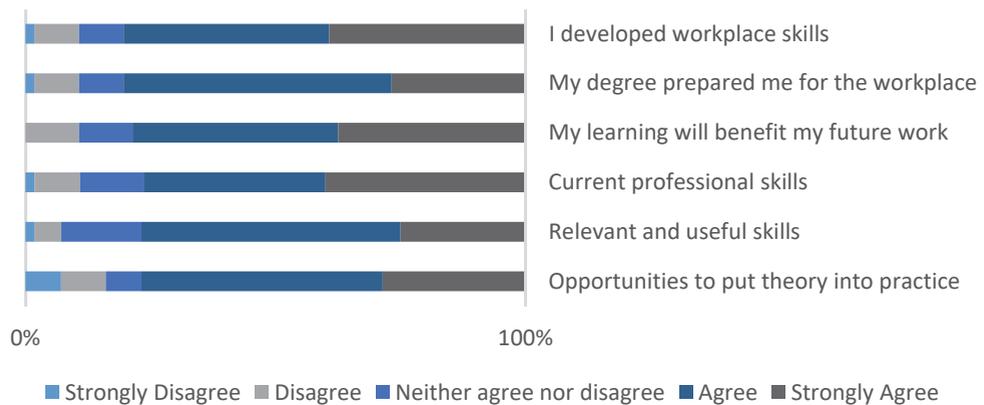


Figure 2: Workplace relevance of the degree

A new variable was then computed for overall competency development by combining the VAS scores for all the ICF competencies. A statistically significant positive relationship between competency development and work readiness ( $r(57) = .364, p = .019$ ) was identified.

A regression analysis using centred variables was conducted to test for a two-way interaction. The slope test for moderation (see DAWSON, 2014) revealed a statistically significant ( $p = .049$ ) positive relationship between the perceived relevance of the degree to the workplace and work readiness when competency development is high. Figure 3 illustrates the two-way linear interaction effect ( $\beta = .379$ , 95% CI = 0.004, 0.724,  $p = .014$ ). Detecting a moderation effect is notoriously difficult, particularly with small samples (MCCLELLAND & JUDD, 1993), supporting the relevance of the finding.

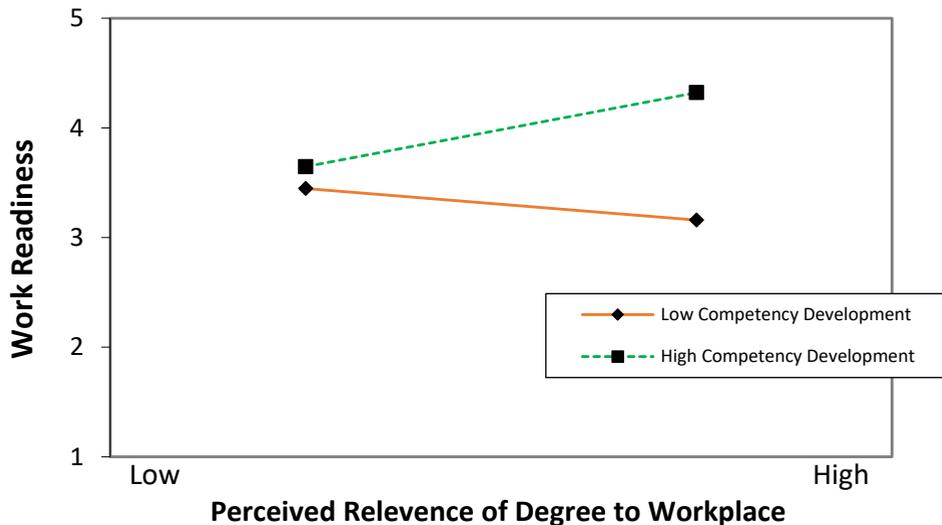


Figure 3: Moderator effect of competency development on the interaction between work readiness and workplace relevance of the degree

The plot confirms that the magnitude of the effect of workplace relevance on work readiness varies as a function of competency development. Although workplace relevance may be a predictor of work readiness, this finding suggests that it would be overstated to consider workplace relevance as a proxy for work readiness.

### **4.3 RQ3: What other factors contribute to student perceptions of preparedness for the workplace?**

#### **4.3.1 The emergence of capabilities**

During the axial coding process, several codes emerged in interviews which are absent from the ICF. These included resilience, adaptability, self-efficacy and persistence, all hallmarks of capability as defined by STEPHENSON (1998) and further conceptualised by HIGGS & PATTON (2018). Aspects of emotional intelligence and self-management such as self-efficacy, persistence, resilience and adapting to change are identified as fundamental in hospitality leadership literature (BHARWANI & JAUHARI, 2013). These are also features of work readiness as conceptualised by CABALLERO et al. (2011) and PRIKSHAT et al. (2019).

Self-efficacy and confidence were developed throughout the curriculum: Ben spoke of the importance of students “believing in themselves” and Sara insisted that “no matter what ... whether the situation is bad or not, there is always ... something that I will be able to do” echoing Stephenson’s insistence on the need for graduates to be ready for an unpredictable future (STEPHENSON, 1998).

#### **4.3.2 Capabilities and WIL**

Students at the context institution spend the second semester of their first year and the first semester of their third year on a six-month internship. Interviewees provided rich insights into the impact of these practice-based learning experiences on their work readiness. Capabilities featured prominently as interviewees spoke at length about the challenges they faced on internships. Overcoming adversity was a common theme: “I wasn’t very happy ... but I learned a lot,” and “even though there were negative [things], I learned from them.” This awareness of the value of being confronted with real problems was often accompanied by a sense of growing resilience and a reinforcing of the capability of self-efficacy. Interviewees also spoke with passion and pride about their persistence: “It made me so mad, but I didn’t say anything because I wanted to learn.”

On-campus learning and WIL are seen as complimentary by students. Their detailed accounts confirm the central importance of WIL in the structure of the degree

and role of WIL in developing work readiness. Sara stated, “we apply everything we learned” and Amy explained:

“I feel like it’s a combination of both of those things, so I do have the qualifications from (the context institution). Also, having work experience from the two internships ... I’m definitely prepared and much more. I do have the mindset to just step into the workplace.”

When asked about the potential for negative internship experiences to have a lasting damaging impact, as suggested by some sources (ROBINSON et al., 2016; FARMAKI, 2018; MOONEY & JAMESON, 2018), Neil mused “the grass is always greener on the other side [of the fence].” Ben acknowledged the “negative image” and “downsides in hospitality” but claimed that these were negated by a powerful sense of community and belonging.

Neil explained that “once you go into the field – the work field, you have a first impression, then you can have a second impression and it provides ... a huge source and enrichment ... of experience.” This suggests that the second WIL opportunity helps redress the impact of negative experiences, which interviewees tended to associate with the first internship. Their insistence that a negative internship experience builds resilience, another capability, rather than inflicting harm is strongly associated with the opportunity, in a second internship, to benefit from the wisdom of hindsight.

## **5 Conclusion, limitations, recommendations and implications for further research**

The influence of extrinsic market forces on interpretations of employability has long been understood and, this study suggests, is particularly troubling at a time when the workplace has become volatile and unpredictable. This study finds that work readiness is understood by students to be more intrinsically linked to their own preparedness for the workplace than employability. I suggest that the utility of this term might extend beyond the extraordinary circumstances of a global crisis offering lasting benefits in the new-normal. I recommend replacing employability with work readiness to reorient the discourse away from market forces over which HE has no influence and towards the development of students.

Student data confirmed the relevance of the ICF, supporting the value of a context-specific framework as suggested in the literature. The development of the competencies in the ICF were found to be a predictor of work readiness. The findings also confirmed that perceived relevance of the degree to the workplace is a predictor of work readiness, but this is moderated by competency development. Although the small sample ( $n = 57$ ) is a limitation of the study, this finding suggests that there is a complex relationship between the programme of study, competency development and work readiness which warrants further exploration.

The concept of capability, which includes resilience, perseverance, self-efficacy and adaptability, was identified by students as crucial in the rapidly changing and increasingly unstable world of work. Capabilities are often overlooked in the literature and the integration of capabilities into institutional frameworks is a recommendation of this study.

The value of WIL was confirmed by this study, as was the complementarity of WIL with the degree. The relationship between capability and WIL as well as the benefits of multiple rather than single WIL experiences emerged. Additional exploration is required to gain a fuller understanding of the potent role of WIL and the interaction of WIL with on-campus learning in the development of capabilities.

This study focused on a Swiss HEI specialised in hospitality management education. Despite the small sample size, there are several significant findings and further research is needed to determine the extent to which the findings and recommendations are relevant beyond the institutional context as well as for other disciplines.

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## Author



Ruth PUHR || Head of Teaching & Learning Development, Les Roches Global Hospitality Education || Route des Moulinettes 2, CH-3975 Crans Montana

<https://lesroches.edu>

[ruth.puhr@lesroches.edu](mailto:ruth.puhr@lesroches.edu)