

# The Hospitality Industries Demand for Blended Learning

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To truly accomplish sustainability, it is inevitable to develop skills as well as knowledge in manpower. Those educational institutions that have changed the game of teaching in hospitality are already ahead with their graduates being more preferable in employability. This research has conducted two focus groups with hospitality industry employer representatives and graduates from hospitality related programs to establish the required pedagogical foundations, curriculums and assessments for developing the required skills and knowledge that the hospitality industry demands, through analyzing the responses with thematic analysis. Research results show common themes on the requirement for blended learning, skills development assessment styles and curriculums that offer opportunities for on the job training.

**Keywords:** Hospitality Education, Blended Learning, Industry, Sustainability, Skills

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## Introduction

Tourism education evaluations in research to date has been summarized to lack skills and practical knowledge or emphasis on ‘doing’ in the tourism and hospitality sector (Cobanoglu, Guden and Akyildiz, 2022), and further authors such as Airey (2016), who initially stated the gaps in tourism education and Jafar Jafari (2003) stating there is a ‘canyon of difference between what the industry wants and what we are providing the students’ and even claiming that educators have failed the industry at large. A more recent study by Zuccoli and Korstanje (2023) outlining in their research the role of pleasure to improve tourism education. It is clear that there is a mismatch of what the industry requires, and what the student and graduate desire. This paper attempts to summarise what these are and how higher education institutions can be innovative in education delivery and curriculums to achieve success for all stakeholders. It applies two focus groups one with the professionals from the hospitality industry and the other with the graduates from hospitality related programs. The results strongly advocate for a reformed pedagogical approach that embeds blended learning within hospitality education. By adopting this model, educational institutions can create more employable graduates, meet industry demands more effectively, and contribute to the sector's long-term sustainability. Moving forward, a collaborative effort between academia and industry is essential to redesign curriculum frameworks that prioritize experiential learning, technological integration, and skills-based assessment—thus bridging the persistent gap between education and employment in the hospitality field.

## 1. Literature Review

### *Problem Based Learning*

Hospitality programs commonly incorporate some form of work-integrated learning, including internships, to bridge academic knowledge with practical experience. Notably, certain institutions, such as the University of South Florida (USA), have established scholarship schemes in collaboration with the hospitality industry, allowing students to simultaneously work and pursue their studies. The literature provides strong support for pedagogical approaches that actively engage students in addressing real-world challenges. For instance, initiatives such as the “learning to be” project (Daniel

et al., 2017) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) (Lee & Jo, 2023) advocate for experiential methods in which students develop solutions to actual problems presented by public and private sector stakeholders.

Furthermore, supranational bodies such as the European Union are demonstrating a commitment to workforce development through projects like the European Hospitality and Tourism Skills Passport (EU: [europeanjobdays.eu/en](http://europeanjobdays.eu/en), 2025), aimed at enhancing the mobility and employability of tourism graduates across Europe. Interestingly, recent studies highlight a persistent trend among young people to pursue university degrees, often favouring academic routes over vocational training (Gong & Jia, 2022). Despite the presence of these initiatives and a growing emphasis on experiential and problem-based learning, the literature continues to emphasize a disconnect between graduates' theoretical knowledge and their practical competencies (Baudrillard, 1998; Chadwick, 1994; Page, 2009; Kozak & Kozak, 2017; Jafari, 2003; Guden & Safaemanesh, 2024).

Attempts to deliberate integration of blended learning strategies, drawing on the interdisciplinary foundations of tourism education that have taken decades to establish has never been so urgent (Airey, 2008; Kozak & Kozak, 2017; Guden, 2022). Reforming tourism education through a hybrid learning model is imperative, particularly at a time when the global tourism sector is experiencing a critical demand for skilled and adaptable professionals (Guden, 2022).

### ***Metaverse Learning Platforms***

Lee and Jo (2023) argue that COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious disruptions in implementing PBL in higher education institutions. Given the transition to non-face-to-face classes through online learning applications, students have lacked the opportunity for cooperative learning activities such as PBL (Williams, 2022). Although COVID-19 pandemic did globally cause a serious disruption for hospitality and tourism education, this situation has driven the development of distance learning methods and technologies at a quick pace (Lee & Deale, 2021). Scholars have also paid more attention to the topic of hybrid learning. For example, Lei and So (2021) examined the online teaching and learning experiences of university instructors and students in hospitality and tourism programmes. Thus, universities have adopted metaverse platforms such as Zepeto, Roblox, Gather Town, and Fortnite for implementing PBL to overcome educational crises and enhance students' performance in cooperative learning activities and tasks (Tlili et al., 2022). Metaverse, which is an immersive digital environment that interacts with others through virtual representations called avatars (Suh & Ahn, 2022), can expand students' learning opportunities by enabling abstract or impracticable education and training in the real world through the convergence of various technologies (Dwivedi et al., 2022). Recent researches have proven the effectiveness of this blended learning approach and have suggested the importance of blending technology and class room for graduate employability and sectoral demands (Lee, and Jo, 2023; Singh, and Sharma, 2024; Saneinia, et al., 2024; Guden, and Safaeimanesh, 2024; Chen, 2025)

### ***Blended Learning***

Graham (2013) has been the pioneer in defining and redefining blended learning, he states that an increasing number of people are discussing blended learning, but the ambiguity remains regarding how to define it. Often there appears to be a confusion of what is to be blended (Graham, 2013) and for many researchers it is accepted as a mix of online and face-to-face teaching (Dziuban, Maskal and Hartman's, 2006; Graham, 2013; Picciano, 2009). It is worth mentioning that an area of common ground is that learning takes place away from the usual classroom setting. Consequently, as cited in Bonk and Graham's work (2012), this may be defined as combining instructional methods. It is also worth mentioning that blended learning (BL) began with e-learning ideas and most of the research to date is on this basis, however as more research is conducted we find that it is not limited to this pedagogy but is broader, as in this research. This can be identified with Graham, Woodfield and Harrison's (2013) work in which they attempt to investigate institutions who endeavour to develop blended learning. The focus is on institutional policy and adoption issues. Their research investigates six cases of institutional

adoption of blended learning to examine the key issues. The results identified key markers related to institutional strategy, structure and support. These are outlined as follows:

- **Strategy:** this includes issues regarding the overall design of BL, such as its definition and policies (which again raises the question of *what* is being blended), forms of advocacy, degree of implementation, and purposes for implementation.
- **Structure:** this relates to the technological, pedagogical, and administrative framework facilitating the BL environment such as those soft factors and hard factors outlined in chapter one of this project
- **Support:** involves issues relating to the manner in which an institution facilitates faculty implementation and maintenance of its BL design, to include technical support, pedagogical support and faculty incentives.

Zapata-Cuervo et al. (2021) in more recent years have called BL “hybrid learning” but also refers to an instructional delivery approach that integrates online learning with a traditional face-to-face classroom platform. Instructors typically mix online technology with face-to-face teaching practices, thereby enhancing the learning experience of students (Choi, 2024).

These experiences suggest influences by different factors, such as the technology, perceived benefits of the BL course, instructor’s and student’s technical skills, class interaction and communication, and the change from traditional to virtual learning. Zapata-Cuervo et al. (2021) further explored students’ psychological perceptions of a blended learning experience and what factors affected their online class engagement. The findings revealed that students’ self-efficacy and anxiety significantly influenced their online class engagement and, in turn, affected their learning experience. Orłowski et al. (2021) research discovered that in the context of online culinary and beverage labs, social presence significantly affects students’ experiential satisfaction through emotional cognitive engagement.

Although previous hospitality and tourism studies have examined the quality attributes of education, scholars have tended to place less attention on the specific quality attributes of blended learning. Empirical studies in BL, have been overlooked in the hospitality and tourism education literature (Lei & So, 2021; Huang & Lee, 2022). Moreover, scholars typically overlook asymmetric impacts when evaluating the relationships between hospitality and tourism education quality and classroom satisfaction. This is especially relevant in the research by Guden, Cobanoglu, and Akyildiz (2022) in which results show that students and graduates claimed that courses that had an element of BL supported their learning and were able to apply skills in their jobs and internships, as well meeting the industry demands.

Over the years some academics have argued this can be achieved through “story telling” (Stevens, Grimwood, & Caton, 2019) to differentiating vocational to academic learning in Asia (Liu, & Schänzel, 2019). Whilst there is a mixed idea of what is required in different geography’s the main argument that exists to date is what the employers of the tourism sector want. The key principle from the research is the need for balance between the requirements for trained personnel and for programmes offering “mix and match” modules.

Saneinia, *et al.* (2024), go further in researching whether a metaverse learning platform can provide a more satisfying learning experience. They state that as developments in technology have increased, more attention has been devoted to the use of computer simulation as an alternative teaching vehicle for examining and evaluating effectiveness. This supports the view that blended learning of multi-disciplinary subjects such as tourism is what the tourism sector requires, as discussed. In particular, this alternative method to lectures and case studies continue to prove effective in testing critical and analytical thinking abilities. Guden and Safaeimanesh (2024) confirms that blended learning processes enabled by technology can support and foster employability intentions by the industry.

## 2. Methodology:

To develop an understanding of the issues at stake when considering the hospitality industries demands from education, the data for this study has been collected through the qualitative method of 2 focus groups with industry executives from the field of hospitality management, and graduates from the hospitality industry. Focus Groups (FG) are more advantageous providing more authentic environments in which participants influence one another and are influenced (Casey & Crueger, 2000). Group interaction is the other advantage creating synergy effect on participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, (2014). This research instrument is also useful when there is limited opportunity for data collection (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009) and are utilized to collect high-quality data in the social context. FG's appear as a recognizable element of the qualitative research group of cognitive and scientific research for a specific purpose (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The author is experienced in FG moderating and open-ended questions were given to achieve answers and stimulate debate among the members involved. The objective of this approach is raise discussion on the greatest number of arguments and perspectives within a limited duration. This method has been adopted to explain a deeper understanding of hospitality education and BL than a questionnaire method would have (Prasad & Garcia, 2017). Sample questions for the two focus groups are shown in table I and II.

**Table I: Focus Group 1- Sample Questions for Professionals from the Hospitality Industry**

<i>Ques.No:</i>	<i>Question:</i>
1	How well trained and ready are the graduates you employ at this establishment?
2	Which skills are the graduates you employ very competent in and why do you think that is?
3	Which skills are the graduates you employ lacking in and why do you think that is?
4	What theoretical knowledge is lacking in the graduates do you think and why might that be?
6	What theoretical knowledge do the graduates have sufficiently and why might that be?
7	What are the weaknesses and threats of the educational curriculums in hospitality?
8	What are the opportunities and strengths of the educational curriculums in hospitality?
9	Over the last 5 years in your experience what have been the greatest challenges of employing hospitality graduates that have had blended learning?
10	Over the last 5 years in your experience what have been the greatest successes of employing hospitality graduates that have had blended learning?

**Table II.: Focus Group 2- Sample Questions for Graduates from Hospitality related programs**

<i>Ques.No:</i>	<i>Question:</i>
1	How well trained and ready were you when you first were employed at this establishment?
2	Which skills were you very competent in and why do you think that is?
3	Which skills were you lacking in and why do you think that is?
4	What theoretical knowledge was lacking when you first were employed and why might that be?
6	What theoretical knowledge was lacking when you first were employed and why might that be?
7	What are the weaknesses and threats of the educational curriculums in hospitality?
8	What are the opportunities and strengths of the educational curriculums in hospitality?
9	Over the last 5 years in your experience what have been the greatest challenges of as a hospitality graduate that has had blended learning?
10	Over the last 5 years in your experience what have been the greatest successes as a hospitality graduate that has had blended learning?

Expert sampling was used, selecting respondents with demonstrated or known expertise in the area of hospitality skills management, with 10 general managers of hotels and human resources managers from hotels (Kumar, 2018) for one FG. The data collection process was iterative in nature, enabling a continuous reflection on perspectives and a re-evaluation of assumptions among the researchers involved in the interviews. The second FG respondents were selected with purposeful sampling which were 10 graduates from hospitality management related programs and working in the hospitality

industry. The FG interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour each. After conducting and recording the FG's, a transcript was written up through GoodTape. According to Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021) a focus group discussion is a useful attempt to have participants with common experiences together to examine a particular subject of interest, and it is known as an effective.

To address concerns about using a qualitative approach, each member invited for the FG was studied individually before invitation, to make sure they have at least 5 years' experience in managing skills and people in the hospitality industry. Table III. and IV show the profile selected for the focus groups.

Thematic Analysis was deemed the most suitable results evaluation with common themes from both focus groups being coded and presented.

**Table III: Focus Group 1- Profile of Professionals from the Hospitality Industry**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Organisation Type</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Number of Years' Experience</i>
1	5 Star Hotel Resort	General Manager	15
2	5 Start Hotel Resort	Human Resource Manager	8
3	Boutique Hotel	Owner and General Manager	10
4	Restaurant Chain	Human Resource Manager	7
5	4 Star Hotel Resort	General Manager	6
6	4 Start Hotel Resort	Human Resource Manager	9
7	5 Star Hotel	General Manager	7
8	Luxury Restaurant	Owner and General Manager	17
9	4 Star Hotel	Human Resource Manager	5
10	4 Star Hotel	Human Resource Coordinator	6

**Table 4: Focus Group 2-Profile of Graduates from Hospitality related programs**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Organisation Type</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Number of Years' Experience</i>
1	5 Star Hotel Resort	Restaurant Coordinator	5
2	5 Start Hotel	Front Office Clerk	5
3	Boutique Hotel	Front Office Clerk	9
4	Boutique Hotel	Kitchen Sous Chef	7
5	4 Star Hotel Resort	Restaurant Bar Manager	5
6	4 Start Hotel	Front Office Manager	9
7	4 Star Hotel	General Manager	7
8	Restaurant	Owner	10
9	Restaurant	Manager	5
10	5 Star Hotel Chain	Public Relations Manager	6

### 3. Results and Discussion

Reflecting on the two focus groups there appears to be compatible results which clearly show requirements for more applied learning, with input of blended learning that adopts problem based learning and hybrid learning styles.

In both focus groups the majority of responses proved that the overall perception is that young people want to be a graduate from higher education with six of the professionals voicing that graduates want to be in management positions upon graduation. The graduates outlined that there is truth in this observation from their own experiences and that real life experiences in the industry with blending online simulations (such as Front Office Labs) provided them with the skills to quickly move up to the positions they wanted. On the other hand, the professionals from the hospitality stated that there is a lack of 'doing' in graduate competency with examples such as gastronomy graduates being able to make

excellent food but not able to work an industrial dishwasher. It was evident from the responses that the graduates of this generation are more ICT competent but these skills are not sufficient to benefit the establishments. With examples from the hospitality professionals stating their requirements for social media managers, but these are not taught on the programs. A summary of the thematic codes found from the two focus groups are summarized with the thematic analysis in figure 1 and 2

**Figure 1: Results, Focus Group 1: Professionals from the Hospitality Industry**

- TC1 Perception of graduates wanting to be managers as soon as they complete their program
- TC2 Hospitality curriculums must continue to have multidisciplinary courses
- TC3 Students must specialise in a specific department towards the end of the program
- TC4 There is a lack of “doing” in graduate competency, a requirement for practical training
- TC5 Requirement for better ICT competent professionals in the sector
- TC6 Requirement for better Language competent professionals in the sector
- TC7 Requirement for classroom pedagogies combined with practical training

**Figure 2: Results, Focus Group 2: Graduates from Hospitality related programs**

- TC1 Too many Business and Economics courses that were taken were not applied
- TC2 Should have more work experience opportunities in the program
- TC3 Should have study from home opportunities
- TC4 Courses with applied learning were more beneficial for employability
- TC5 Theoretical assessments were not rewarding for knowledge as much as practical assessments
- TC6 Requirement for classroom pedagogies combined with practical training
- TC7 There is a high demand from young people, wanting to become university graduates

*Discussion*

Graham’s (2013 and 2015) were applied in defining the term blended learning and explanation of what has been blended in hospitality education to date was provided during the focus groups while generally it was at first accepted as a mix of online and face-to-face teaching as described by many researchers (Dziuban, Maskal and Hartman’s, 2006; Graham, 2013; Picciano, 2009); acceptance of BL in the context of a place away from the usual classroom setting was appreciated. Consequently, as cited in Bonk and Graham’s work (2012), combining instructional methods, providing PSL and other metaverse learning opportunities was the strengths of the programs according to both focus groups. Which confirmed Lei and So (2021) positive online teaching and learning experiences of university instructors and students in hospitality programmes. Such examples included the Front Office simulation and hybrid learning environments.

**4. Implications**

This research aimed to explore the alignment between hospitality education and the practical demands of the industry, particularly through the lens of blended learning and skills development. The findings from two focus groups—comprising industry professionals and recent graduates—reveal a consistent gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical competencies expected in real-world hospitality settings. While graduates value their academic qualifications and are eager to enter managerial roles, employers emphasize a notable deficiency in hands-on capabilities and job-specific skills, such as operational proficiency and department specialization.

A recurring theme is the necessity of blended learning models that combine theoretical instruction with immersive, practice-based experiences such as simulations, problem-based learning (PBL), and on-the-job training. This integration allows for a richer, more holistic learning experience that better prepares graduates for industry challenges. Technologies such as metaverse platforms and virtual simulations

have emerged as innovative tools that can enhance cooperative learning and critical thinking, particularly in situations where physical placement opportunities are limited.

Another key finding is the demand for greater ICT and language competencies among graduates, reflecting the evolving skillset required in the modern, globalized hospitality sector. Additionally, both focus groups highlighted the value of multidisciplinary curriculums, yet also expressed the need for increased departmental specialization in the final stages of study to allow students to refine career-relevant skills.

In conclusion, this research underscores the imperative for a reimagined pedagogical framework that systematically incorporates blended learning into hospitality education. Embracing such a model enables educational institutions to enhance graduate employability, align more closely with industry expectations, and support the sustainable development of the sector. To advance this agenda, a coordinated partnership between academia and industry is vital for the co-creation of curriculum structures that emphasize experiential learning, the integration of digital technologies, and competency-based assessment. Such collaborative efforts are critical to narrowing the enduring gap between educational outcomes and workforce requirements in the hospitality domain.

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