

Aligning College Tourism Curriculum with Industry Needs: A Framework for Enhancing Graduate Employability

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ABSTRACT

The growing complexity of the global tourism industry requires higher education institutions to produce graduates equipped with industry-relevant competencies. However, persistent gaps between academic preparation and industry expectations continue to challenge graduate employability. This study investigates the role of curriculum alignment in enhancing the skills of tourism graduates for real-world industry demands. Using a qualitative-descriptive design through secondary data analysis of recent studies (2021–2026), the research identifies critical mismatches in technical, digital, and soft skills. Findings reveal that insufficient experiential learning, weak industry collaboration, and outdated course content contribute to employability gaps. The study emphasizes the importance of

competency-based curriculum design, integration of digital skills, and strengthened industry-academe partnerships. It concludes that aligned curricula significantly improve graduate readiness and recommends continuous curriculum review, expanded internship programs, and stakeholder engagement to ensure relevance in a dynamic tourism landscape.

Keywords: *Curriculum Alignment, Tourism Education, Employability, Industry Skills, Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing global industries, contributing significantly to employment and economic development. Despite this growth, a recurring issue persists: the mismatch between tourism graduates' competencies and industry requirements.

Recent studies highlight that higher education institutions often fail to align learning outcomes with industry needs, resulting in graduates lacking critical technical and soft skills MaCarthy& Tasin,(2025) . In the Philippines, tracer studies reveal that while tourism graduates acquire foundational knowledge, there is a need for more skills-based and experiential learning components to enhance employability Punsalan et.al. (2024)

Globally, curriculum misalignment remains evident. For instance, tourism programs show weak integration of emerging competencies such as sustainability and digital skills Maguire, et al. (2024) . As the industry evolves through digital transformation and globalization, curriculum alignment becomes essential to ensure graduates are industry-ready.

In Asia, tourism education institutions are likewise facing challenges in responding to rapidly changing workforce demands. Studies conducted in India and other Asian countries reveal that many tourism curricula remain overly theoretical and inadequately emphasize experiential learning, industry immersion, and technology-based competencies (Kumar & Bhinder, 2026). Asian employers have increasingly emphasized the importance of practical exposure, intercultural communication, and digital

competencies due to the region's expanding international tourism market. However, gaps continue to exist between academic preparation and actual workplace expectations, limiting graduates' employability and adaptability in the tourism sector.

In the Philippines, tracer studies reveal that while tourism graduates generally acquire foundational knowledge and communication skills, there remains a significant need for more skills-based instruction, technology integration, and experiential learning opportunities to enhance employability (Punsalan et al., 2024). Philippine tourism employers continue to identify deficiencies in operational competence, customer service application, digital literacy, and workplace readiness among graduates. Additionally, several tourism and hospitality institutions still rely heavily on traditional teaching approaches with limited industry collaboration and practical immersion.

Despite the growing body of literature on tourism education and graduate employability, there remains limited research focusing specifically on curriculum alignment frameworks within Philippine tourism education, particularly in provincial higher education institutions. Most existing studies primarily examine graduate employability or tracer outcomes without comprehensively analyzing how curriculum alignment, industry collaboration, experiential learning, and emerging competency integration collectively influence workforce readiness. Furthermore, there is insufficient localized research addressing how tourism programs in provincial institutions adapt to evolving industry demands and digital transformation.

Hence, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining how aligning college tourism curricula with industry needs can enhance graduate employability and industry readiness. Specifically, the study aims to explore the role of competency-based education, experiential learning, and industry-academe collaboration in preparing tourism graduates for the real-world tourism and hospitality industry.

This study aims to examine how curriculum alignment in tourism education can enhance the employability and industry readiness of college graduates.

Literature Review

Curriculum Alignment and Industry Needs

Recent international studies emphasize that curriculum alignment is essential in ensuring that higher education programs produce graduates equipped with industry-relevant competencies. According to Cagurangan (2025) systematic review on hospitality management education, the rapid evolution of the tourism and hospitality sector requires curricula that are technology-driven, sustainability-oriented, and competency-based. The study found persistent gaps between academic preparation and industry expectations, particularly in digital skills, innovation, and experiential learning.

Similarly, Kumar and Bhinder (2026) examined the impact of curriculum components on tourism students' employability potential in India. Their findings revealed that functional area skills, practical learning activities, and generic competencies significantly influence graduate employability. The study highlighted the importance of revising tourism curricula to include industry-required competencies and work-integrated learning experiences.

In Asian tourism education, curriculum alignment has increasingly focused on preparing students for post-pandemic industry transformations. Research conducted in Thailand and India emphasized the growing demand for graduates with digital literacy, adaptability, and intercultural communication skills. Asian institutions have started integrating simulation-based learning, sustainability education, and technology-enhanced instruction to improve graduate readiness. Kumar and Bhinder (2026) further emphasized that tourism students in Asian universities demonstrate higher employability potential when curricula include practical exposure, industry immersion, and competency-based assessments.

MaCarthy and Tasin (2025) investigated curriculum alignment in tourism and hospitality schools in Davao City. The study found significant gaps between curricular content and industry expectations, particularly in revenue management, digital marketing, customer service, and intercultural communication.

The researchers noted that many institutions still rely heavily on theoretical approaches with insufficient emphasis on experiential learning and industry immersion.

Furthermore, Melchor, De Guzman, and Maling (2025) conducted a tracer study among hospitality and tourism graduates in the Philippines and found that ICT and financial competencies were among the weakest areas identified by graduates and employers. The study recommended curriculum enhancement, stronger industry linkages, and improved internship opportunities to strengthen graduate employability.

Tourism Industry Competency Requirements

The global tourism industry requires employees to possess technical competencies, soft skills, and digital literacy. International studies reveal that tourism employers increasingly prioritize adaptability, customer service, communication skills, and technological competence due to the digital transformation of tourism operations. Cagurangan (2025) emphasized that modern hospitality and tourism industries demand graduates capable of operating within technology-driven environments. Employers now seek graduates proficient in digital marketing, reservation systems, data analytics, and sustainable tourism management.

Philippine studies reveal persistent competency gaps among tourism graduates. According to Melchor et al. (2025), tourism graduates identified communication, management, and customer service skills as highly useful in employment, while ICT and financial competencies were considered areas requiring improvement. Gappi et al. (2025) also identified technical competence, adaptability, and customer relations as significant predictors of employability among tourism management graduates in the Philippines.

Employability of Tourism Graduates

In the Philippines, tracer studies consistently reveal that many tourism graduates gain employment shortly after graduation; however, a significant number work outside tourism-related industries. Patimo, Amor, and Casiracan (2021) found that tourism graduates from a state university in Eastern Visayas were generally employable, but curriculum review and syllabus enhancement were necessary to maintain industry relevance. Similarly, Campo (2025) emphasized that employability pathways among tourism graduates depend heavily on industry exposure, communication skills, and curriculum relevance.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive research design grounded in secondary data analysis to examine how curriculum alignment in tourism education enhances graduate employability and industry readiness. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the study aimed to explore and synthesize existing scholarly discussions, industry perspectives, and educational practices related to curriculum relevance, competency development, and workforce preparation within the tourism sector. This design enabled the researcher to analyze patterns, themes, and relationships among curriculum practices, industry demands, and graduate outcomes across different educational contexts.

Data Sources

Multiple secondary sources were utilized to ensure comprehensive analysis and triangulation of information. These sources included:

Peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, MDPI, and ResearchGate published from 2021–2026 focusing on tourism education, curriculum alignment, employability, competency-based education, and industry-academe collaboration.

Institutional and policy documents from organizations such as the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), UNESCO, and OECD, which provide frameworks, competency standards, and educational policy guidelines related to tourism and hospitality education.

Tracer studies and employability reports from higher education institutions and research organizations examining tourism graduates' competencies, employment outcomes, and industry preparedness in both local and international contexts.

Curriculum frameworks and program specifications from tourism and hospitality programs of selected universities in the Philippines and abroad to identify alignment practices and competency integration strategies.

Industry reports and tourism workforce studies discussing emerging skill requirements, digital transformation, sustainability competencies, and workforce expectations in the tourism industry.

Analytical Method

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to systematically examine relationships between curriculum alignment practices and graduate employability outcomes.

The analysis focused on recurring themes related to:

Curriculum alignment and competency-based education, Technical, digital, and soft skill requirements in tourism, Employability and workforce readiness of tourism graduates, Experiential learning and internship programs, Industry-academe collaboration and curriculum development, Emerging trends in tourism education and workforce demands

Coding procedures were conducted using both inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from the reviewed literature, while deductive coding was guided by the study's theoretical framework, particularly Competency-Based Education, Human Capital Theory, and Constructive Alignment Theory. Through this process, the researcher identified significant patterns and synthesized findings that explain how aligned tourism curricula contribute to graduate competence and employability.

Research Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility and reliability, the study relied exclusively on legitimate and reputable academic sources from peer-reviewed journals and recognized institutional publications. Data triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple source types, including academic literature, policy documents, tracer studies, and industry reports. Additionally, the inclusion of both international and Philippine-based studies enhanced the contextual relevance and comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Competency-Based Education (CBE), Human Capital Theory, and Constructive Alignment Theory, which collectively explain the importance of curriculum alignment in tourism education. Competency-Based Education emphasizes the development of measurable and industry-relevant competencies that prepare students for real-world workplace demands (Mulder, 2017). Human Capital Theory, proposed by Gary Becker (1993), highlights education as an investment that enhances an individual's productivity, employability, and economic value through skills development and training. Meanwhile, Constructive Alignment Theory by John Biggs (2011) stresses the alignment of learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment practices to ensure effective learning and competency acquisition. Together, these theories support the study's premise that aligning tourism curricula with industry needs can produce competent, industry-ready, and employable graduates.

Competency-Based Education focuses on developing industry-relevant skills. Human Capital Theory emphasizes employability, while Constructive Alignment ensures coherence between outcomes, teaching, and assessment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of secondary data revealed several recurring themes regarding curriculum alignment in tourism education and its influence on graduate employability and industry readiness. The findings indicate that curriculum relevance, competency development, experiential learning, and industry collaboration significantly affect the preparedness of tourism graduates for the demands of the real-world industry.

Curriculum Alignment Enhances Graduate Employability

The analysis revealed that curriculum alignment plays a crucial role in improving graduate employability within the tourism industry. Studies consistently emphasized that tourism programs aligned with industry competencies produce graduates who are more adaptable, competitive, and workforce-ready.

International literature highlighted that competency-based curricula contribute to stronger employability outcomes because learning objectives are directly linked to workplace expectations. Kumar and Bhinder (2026) found that tourism students exposed to competency-oriented instruction demonstrated higher confidence levels, improved technical capabilities, and stronger career readiness. Similarly, Maguire et al. (2024) emphasized that aligned curricula improve students' ability to respond to emerging tourism trends such as sustainability and digital transformation.

In the Philippine context, MaCarthy and Tasin (2025) observed that many tourism institutions continue to emphasize theoretical instruction while providing limited practical exposure. This misalignment contributes to skill gaps among graduates, particularly in operational competencies and customer engagement. The findings suggest that curriculum alignment is essential in bridging the gap between academic preparation and industry expectations.

The findings support the principles of Competency-Based Education, which emphasize measurable learning outcomes and industry-relevant skill acquisition. Institutions that adopt aligned and competency-driven curricula are more likely to produce graduates capable of meeting tourism industry standards.

Technical, Digital, and Soft Skill Gaps Persist Among Tourism Graduates

Another significant theme that emerged from the analysis was the persistent gap between graduate competencies and employer expectations. Tourism employers increasingly require graduates who possess technical competencies, digital literacy, and interpersonal skills.

The reviewed studies revealed that many graduates demonstrate adequate theoretical knowledge but lack operational and technology-related competencies. Chemli, Toanoglou, and Roman (2024) emphasized that digital skill shortages remain a major challenge in tourism education due to rapid technological advancements in reservation systems, online marketing, and data analytics. Similarly, Melchor, De Guzman, and Maling (2025) identified ICT and financial management competencies as among the weakest areas among Philippine tourism graduates.

Soft skills were also consistently identified as essential employability factors. Employers emphasized communication skills, teamwork, adaptability, customer relations, and emotional intelligence as critical competencies in tourism and hospitality work environments. However, tracer studies indicated that some graduates struggle to apply these competencies effectively in workplace situations due to limited experiential exposure.

These findings demonstrate the need for curriculum enhancement strategies that integrate digital competencies, communication training, leadership development, and customer service simulations into tourism programs. Aligning curriculum content with emerging industry skill requirements can significantly improve graduate employability and workplace performance.

Experiential Learning Strengthens Industry Readiness

Experiential learning emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting graduate preparedness and employability. The reviewed studies consistently found that internships, on-the-job training (OJT), simulations, and industry immersion programs enhance students' practical competencies and confidence.

According to Dungog and Cayunda (2025), graduates who participated in extensive internship programs demonstrated stronger adaptability, communication skills, and workplace professionalism. Experiential learning allowed students to apply theoretical concepts in real operational settings, improving both technical and interpersonal competencies.

Similarly, Philippine tracer studies revealed that graduates considered OJT experiences among the most valuable components of their tourism education because these experiences exposed them to actual industry practices and customer interactions. However, some studies also reported inconsistencies in internship quality due to limited industry partnerships and inadequate supervision.

The findings support Constructive Alignment Theory, which emphasizes the alignment of teaching activities and assessment methods with intended learning outcomes. Integrating experiential learning activities into tourism curricula ensures that students develop competencies relevant to workplace realities.

Overall, the findings indicate that institutions with stronger experiential learning components produce graduates who are more industry-ready and employable.

Industry–Academe Collaboration Improves Curriculum Relevance

The analysis also revealed that strong industry–academe collaboration significantly contributes to curriculum relevance and graduate preparedness. Studies consistently emphasized the importance of involving tourism industry stakeholders in curriculum planning, internship supervision, and competency assessment.

MaCarthy and Tasin (2025) found that tourism programs with active industry consultations were more responsive to labor market demands and emerging industry trends. Collaborative curriculum development allowed institutions to identify competency gaps and update course content accordingly.

Industry partnerships also strengthened internship opportunities and professional exposure. Employers participating in internship programs contributed to skill development by providing students with practical training, mentorship, and workplace immersion.

However, the analysis also identified challenges in sustaining effective partnerships. Some institutions experienced limited communication with industry stakeholders, insufficient internship placements, and inconsistent employer participation in curriculum evaluation processes.

Despite these challenges, the findings demonstrate that industry–academe collaboration is essential in ensuring that tourism curricula remain updated, responsive, and aligned with real-world industry demands.

Overall, the findings of the study demonstrate that curriculum alignment significantly influences graduate employability and industry readiness in tourism education. Institutions that integrate competency-based education, experiential learning, digital competencies, and industry collaboration produce graduates who are more adaptable and responsive to workforce demands.

However, persistent gaps in technical skills, digital literacy, and practical exposure indicate the need for continuous curriculum enhancement. The study highlights the importance of adopting industry-driven and outcomes-based educational approaches to ensure that tourism graduates acquire competencies relevant to the evolving global tourism landscape.

The findings also validate the study's theoretical framework. Competency-Based Education supports the development of measurable industry competencies, Human Capital Theory explains the role of education in improving employability, and Constructive Alignment Theory emphasizes the importance of aligning teaching methods and assessment practices with intended learning outcomes. Together, these theories explain how aligned curricula contribute to graduate competence and workforce preparedness.

CONCLUSION

In the rapidly evolving tourism and hospitality industry, curriculum alignment has become a critical factor in ensuring that higher education institutions produce graduates who are competent, adaptable, and industry-ready. The findings of the study reveal that tourism education is no longer solely centered on theoretical instruction but must also address the growing demands for technical competencies, digital literacy, experiential learning, and interpersonal skills. As the tourism sector continues to be shaped by globalization, technological advancement, and changing consumer expectations, institutions must continuously reassess and redesign their curricula to remain relevant and responsive to industry needs. The study further highlights that graduate employability is significantly influenced by the extent to which academic programs align with real-world workforce expectations. Institutions that integrate competency-based education, experiential learning opportunities, and industry collaboration are better positioned to develop graduates who can successfully transition into professional tourism environments. The incorporation of internship programs, simulation-based learning, and technology-driven instruction enhances both technical and soft skill development, ultimately improving graduate preparedness and career sustainability.

Moreover, the integration of Competency-Based Education, Human Capital Theory, and Constructive Alignment Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how curriculum alignment contributes to workforce readiness and employability. These theories collectively emphasize that education should not only transmit knowledge but also cultivate measurable competencies, practical experiences, and lifelong adaptability. By aligning educational practices with industry realities, tourism institutions can produce graduates capable of contributing meaningfully to the growth and sustainability of the tourism sector.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Competency-Based Curriculum Design

Higher education institutions should continuously review and redesign tourism curricula to ensure alignment with industry-required competencies, including digital literacy, sustainability practices, customer service, and operational management skills.

2. Enhance Experiential Learning Opportunities

Tourism programs should strengthen internships, on-the-job training (OJT), simulations, and industry immersion activities to provide students with practical exposure and real-world operational experience.

3. Expand Industry–Academe Collaboration

Institutions should establish stronger partnerships with tourism establishments, government agencies, and professional organizations to support curriculum development, internship placements, faculty immersion, and competency assessment.

4. Integrate Emerging Technologies and Innovation

Tourism curricula should incorporate technology-driven instruction such as digital marketing, online reservation systems, artificial intelligence applications, and tourism analytics to prepare graduates for modern industry operations.

5. Conduct Regular Tracer Studies and Curriculum Evaluation

Higher education institutions should implement continuous tracer studies and stakeholder consultations to identify competency gaps, employment trends, and emerging workforce demands that can guide curriculum enhancement initiatives.

6. Promote Holistic Graduate Development

Institutions should prioritize the development of communication skills, leadership, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and professional ethics to ensure that graduates possess both technical expertise and strong interpersonal competencies.

By aligning tourism education with evolving industry standards and workforce expectations, higher education institutions can foster not only graduate employability but also innovation, professional excellence, and sustainable growth within the tourism and hospitality sector.

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