



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Education Vs Experience: Analyzing Hiring Preferences in Luxury Hotels of Lahore**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study was conducted to explore the hiring preference about formal education and professional experience in the Five-star hotels of Lahore. The aim of the study is to know the opinion of the human resource managers and the departmental heads about the relative importance of the academic qualification and the industry experience for the recruitment decisions of operational and managerial posts. This study has been conducted at selected luxury hotels in the area and a structured questionnaire was used to collect the data for the study of the specific role of the hiring criteria, perception of hospitality education and challenges of workforce selection. The results indicate that there are differences in hotel recruitment preferences among five star hotels, and they operate on the basis of the level of the job and the functional needs. Front-line or operational jobs are typically the ones that are more experience-driven. Formal education is more likely to matter for supervisory and managerial jobs that require strategic and leadership skills. The study also highlights the disconnect between the results of hospitality education and the expectations of the industry which leads to employability issues for newly graduated candidates.

**KEYWORDS** Hospitality Education, Employability, Hiring Preferences, Professional Experience, Five-Star Hotels, Lahore, Human Resource Management, Curriculum Alignment

**Introduction**

The hotel industry consists of services, which are based on human resources. Therefore, it is the ability and willingness of hotel employees to provide the best possible service along with the financial performance of a hotel, which are dependent upon the employee's skills, abilities, and flexible work ethic. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that in addition to providing more than 330 million jobs globally, hospitality and tourism also represent an essential component of job creation through recruiting and training employees. Staff in the luxury hotel segment are expected to function both as technical specialists and as ambassadors for their respective brands, thereby providing guests with personalized and emotional experiences. Due to this, when selecting employees at high end hotels, the decision-making process goes well beyond evaluating if the applicant has the required skill set for the position or not; however, the ultimate goal is to evaluate the applicant's academic background, past work experience, and long term potential as a member of the company's future workforce.

Internationally, there has been significant evolution in hiring practices within the hospitality industry due to growing customer demands, advances in technology and increasingly competitive markets. Research indicates that today employers are seeking a combination of formal educational backgrounds and professional work experience. While the debate continues among employers regarding whether formal education is more

important than work experience when making employment decisions, there is general consensus that formal education provides individuals with strong analytical, strategic thinking and leadership skills. On the other hand, most employers consider a candidate's level of professional experience to be crucial for effective operation and consistency in service delivery, especially in high pressure situations.

However, in developing countries including Pakistan, the debate about the relative importance of formal education compared to work experience is even more complex because of a disconnect between what hospitality degree graduates learn and what employers expect them to know. There is no question that the number of students graduating from hospitality programs is increasing. Nevertheless, the majority of industry professionals indicate that these new graduates do not possess sufficient practical knowledge or preparation for entering into a career in the hospitality industry. As a result, luxury hotels face challenges in integrating experienced employees who have acquired their technical knowledge through years of working experience as opposed to formal education with newly graduated hospitality students who may have completed all the necessary course requirements but still lack practical application in a real world environment.

In the last two decades, the hospitality education sector in Pakistan has witnessed significant growth and specialized hotel and tourism management programs are now available in both public and private sector institutions. Despite progress, studies still observe a gap in the university curricula and industry practical needs in areas of functional expertise, professional conduct and adaptability. Luxury hotel operators frequently note that graduates require extensive in-house training to perform operational duties, which prolongs onboarding times and increases organizational costs.

There are also several five-star hotels in Lahore like Avari, Serena and Pearl Continental that adhere to the local and international standards of service. Lahore is among the best hospitality hubs in Pakistan. The reputation of the brand, the reliability of operations, and the excellence of the service are all essential for the quality of the recruitment in this context, one in which competition is fierce. Therefore, the staff recruitment in frontline, supervisory and managerial positions is regarded as a strategic need, rather than a routine administrative activity.

## **Literature Review**

The debate continues around the world about the merits of formal education versus experience for a career in the hotel industry and is highly dependent on the operating environment. According to (Baum, 2015), the industry's emphasis on on-the-job training as opposed to formal education is a structural bias that might hinder the cultivation of strategic and leadership skills necessary for success. This is especially true in the luxury sector, where the human capital requirements involve improving the interaction with the guests, communicating with them in multiple languages and having a high degree of emotional intelligence. This was reinforced (Solnet, Kralj and Baum, 2015) who argued that with increasing external market pressures and sectoral internal decentralisation many hospitality companies have developed informal hiring processes with manager-led recruitment. The operational readiness is a key concern rather than comprehensive credential evaluation. Additionally, (Lugosi and Jameson, 2017) concluded that there was a mismatch between the requirements of the industry and the university courses, which could have long-term ramifications for the quality of the workforce and academic quality of hospitality education.

Whether it's about experience or education, research into recruitment policies in the luxury hotel industry has identified a complex and intricate array of requirements. Marinakou and (Giousmpasoglou, 2019) conducted an international comparative study based on interviews with management of luxury hotels in the UK, USA, Greece and Australia.

Their findings suggest that a dual-method talent management approach is adopted by luxury properties where academic credentials are employed as a first screening device to assess professional orientation and cognitive ability, while the actual recruitment of staff for guest-facing operational roles is heavily reliant on the evidence of service disposition and prior experience in similar high-contact service environments. The study rejects any overgeneralized understanding of the education versus experience debate in the premium hospitality business. Education gives the qualifications to get a foot in the door, but experience is the last deciding factor in who gets employed.

A hierarchical pattern was validated ( Kravariti, Voutsina, Tasoulis, Dibia, and Johnston, 2022) in a comprehensive systematic literature analysis on 144 papers on talent management in hospitality and tourism. They found that prior operational experience is always regarded as a more immediate predictor of hospitality job performance than formal academic qualifications across a range of geographies and organizational types. Education becomes more important as a predictor of managerial growth potential and strategic leadership readiness, suggesting a two-track logic of evaluation in hospitality, where experience and qualifications complement rather than compete with each other at different levels of a career and at different stages of recruiting.

Within the hospitality workforce literature, there is a recurring, institutional echo of a recognized gap between competencies gained by formal education programs and operational capabilities specific to hotel employers at point of employment. (Ngoepe and Wakelin-Theron, 2023) investigated what employers expect of hospitality graduates from private higher education institutions in the South African context and found that supervisors looked for people who could have both technical service ability and interpersonal resilience, something they believed they could only acquire through real-world experience, regardless of academic achievement. This helped to hinder young people who had just completed their educational programs from applying, while it benefited experienced applicants.

In a multi-country comparative study of HRM practices and organizational performance in luxury hotels in Pakistan, the United Kingdom and Italy, (Sarwar, Ishaq and Franzoni, 2022) found that Pakistani five-star hotel operators had significantly different HR prioritization patterns than European operators, with a stronger and more consistent focus on direct operational competence, guest-interaction capability and cultural service orientation relative to formal academic credentials when making frontline staffing decisions. Their data obtained from 354 hotels in Pakistan showed that HRM in Pakistani premium hospitality establishments is operationally driven and performance motivated. The current hospitality HR literature has also taken organizational fit, service culture fit and emotional labor capacity as factors that affect the successful recruitment of luxury hotels into consideration, introducing assessment issues that cannot be fully represented by formal qualifications and experiences alone.

The current body of research on hiring preferences in the hospitality industry has not yet fully addressed the profound disruption and structural reorganization of the hospitality workforce landscape in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for the availability of candidates and the standards luxury hotel employers use to evaluate them. (Kravariti et al., 2022) note that the recovery of the industry after the pandemic has been hindered by a smaller number of available candidates and a major transformation in employee expectations regarding working conditions, career development routes and employer commitment to the wellness of the workforce. These trends have forced luxury hotel operators to reconsider their recruitment value propositions in ways that might affect the usual education-experience trade-off. The motivation for this study is the wider structural research gap, that is the virtually complete lack of empirically based, contextually-specific research on the interaction of education and experience as the determinants of hiring in Pakistan's luxury hotel sector.

## Material and Methods

The study used a mixed methods research design with quantitative and qualitative data collection methods so that the data collection techniques were suitable to the main research questions. While qualitative understandings were necessary to address more complex questions — such as competency gaps, challenges to workplace integration, and reality shock — quantitative measures were needed to determine the importance of formal education and hands-on experience at different levels of work. The qualitative aspects of the study were able to give depth and explanation to the study and the quantitative part was able to give the general tendencies and the statistical association.

A dual study sampling was adopted, combining purposive sampling for those with first-hand experiences in the luxury hospitality industry and convenience sampling for logistical issues in contacting HR specialists. Of the 340 questionnaires distributed, 320 valid responses were received (overall response rate: 86.5%), spanning three cohorts: Industry Professionals (n = 100), HR Managers and Hiring Professionals (n = 70), and Hospitality Students (n = 150). Three different structured questionnaires were developed using Google Forms, incorporating multiple choice questions, 1–5 Likert scale items, and open-ended inquiry. The obtained data set was analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS Version 26.0, employing descriptive statistics, chi-square tests of independence, one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc comparisons, Pearson and Spearman rank-order correlations. Cronbach's Alpha reliability for all constructs ranged from 0.768 to 0.913, confirming strong measurement quality across the triangulated design.

## Results and Discussion

### Demographic Profiles

The combined sample had common characteristics with the diversity in the ecology of luxury hotels in Lahore. Most of the industry professionals were male (60%), had two or more years of experience (69%) and worked in a variety of occupations including front desk, food and beverage, housekeeping and management. The median number of years the HR managers had in hiring was 3–7 years, representing mid to senior level HR professionals, with the largest group being HR Managers/Talent Acquisition (45.7%). Almost half (47.3%) of the students had no prior work experience; most were female (56.7%) and studying BBA (Hons) Hospitality Management (43.3%).

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Combined Response Rate**

Cohort	Distributed	Returned	Usable (n)	Response Rate
Industry Professionals	100	100	100	100%
HR Managers / Hiring Professionals	80	70	70	87.5%
Hospitality Students	160	152	150	93.75%
Total / Combined	340	322	320	86.5%

### Industry Professionals' Hiring Experience Findings

Six Likert-scale measures were employed to record industry professionals' lived experiences with the education-experience relationship throughout their careers. The results confirm experience primacy across all items. Practical skill and attitude in day-to-day operations scored the highest mean (M = 3.87, SD = 1.07), followed by promotion based on performance/experience (M = 3.63, SD = 0.94). Items relating to education directly influencing salary progression (M = 2.98) and degree holders receiving preferential treatment or faster promotion (M = 2.96) both fell below the midpoint, reinforcing the experience-over-credentials narrative.

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics – Industry Professional Likert Items (n = 100)**

Statement / Item	M	SD	Dominant Response
Q1: Education has directly influenced my salary progression.	2.98	1.01	Disagree (37%)
Q2: I have been promoted based on performance/experience rather than academic credentials.	3.63	0.94	Agree (51%)
Q3: Degree holders receive preferential treatment / faster promotion.	2.96	0.98	Neutral (34%)
Q4: My education limits positions I can apply for.	3.44	0.82	Agree (51%)
Q5: I would pursue further formal education if it meaningfully improved career prospects.	3.48	0.95	Agree (49%)
Q6: In day-to-day operations, practical skill and attitude matter far more than what a person studies.	3.87	1.07	Agree (46%)

In addition to the Likert scale, industry professionals were asked to identify the most important factor in their initial choice of hotel. Experience and interpersonal characteristics explained 74% of the perceived selection rationale, and formal academic credentials were last (11%). Among observed interviewer priorities, the combined percentage of 'Always' and 'Often' experience-focused responses was 56%, meaning that the majority of the professionals experienced interview procedures dominated by practical experience. Only 9% said education was their top priority.

#### 4.3 HR Managers' Descriptive Statistics – Hiring Criteria

HR managers and hiring specialists were asked to rate the importance of several variables for operational and managerial/executive positions on a 5-point Likert scale. For operational roles, grooming, presentation and professional demeanour ranked highest ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ), followed by years of directly relevant work experience ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), English language fluency ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ), and emotional intelligence, attitude and trainability ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). The possession of a formal hospitality degree (BA/BSc) ranked sixth ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) and international certifications were least important ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). The mean difference between formal hospitality degree and work experience is 1.16 units, indicating that experience is substantially more important for operational responsibilities.

**Table 3**  
**Operational Role Hiring Criteria – Descriptive Statistics (n = 70)**

Hiring Criterion	Mean	SD	Rank	Interpretation
Grooming, presentation and professional demeanour	4.45	0.62	1	Highly Important
Years of directly relevant work experience	4.31	0.74	2	Highly Important
English language fluency and communication	4.18	0.78	3	Highly Important
Emotional intelligence, attitude and trainability	4.12	0.81	4	Highly Important
Reputation / ranking of candidate's institution	3.45	1.05	5	Moderately Important
Possession of a formal hospitality degree (BA/BSc)	3.15	1.12	6	Moderately Important
International certifications (WSET, CHA, HCIMA)	2.85	1.18	7	Less Important

For managerial and executive roles, a proven track record in leadership/management roles ranked highest ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ), followed by strategic thinking and revenue management capacity ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), and ability to manage multicultural/multigenerational teams ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ). Notably, a postgraduate degree (MBA/MSc Hospitality Management) rose to the 'Important' category ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) at the management level, from 'Moderately Important' at the operational level, reflecting a tiered credential-experience structure in luxury hotel recruitment.

**Chi-Square and ANOVA Analysis**

Professional Role × Primary Hiring Preference cross-tabulation (n = 70) showed that experience preference is comparable across all professional levels ( $\chi^2(4) = 4.82, p = .307$ , not significant). However, degree preference was notably higher among General Managers (66.7%) compared to Department Heads (16.7%). Of greater significance, the cross-tabulation of Years of Hiring Experience × Formal Degree Importance ( $\chi^2(6) = 13.47, p = .036$ ) revealed a statistically significant monotonic decrease in the perceived value of formal degrees with hiring experience: 0% of professionals with over 15 years' experience rated formal degrees as 'highly important,' while 47.6% of those with fewer than three years of hiring experience did so. This finding has important implications for hiring strategy, as it implies that the industry's experience-centricity is an emergent, pragmatically motivated choice that intensifies with accumulated practitioner experience, rather than a fixed organizational policy.

One-Way ANOVA confirmed that HR professionals at different levels of the function do not assign equal importance to formal credentials ( $F(4, 65) = 3.42, p = .013$ ). Post-Hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that senior executives — General Managers (M = 3.80) and HR Directors (M = 3.62) — value credentials significantly more than HR Managers/Talent Acquisition specialists (M = 2.90). These findings are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**Post-Hoc Tukey HSD – Mean Importance of Formal Degree by Professional Role**

Professional Role	N	Mean	SD	Tukey HSD Group
General Manager / Resident Manager	3	3.80	0.87	A (High valuation)
HR Director / Head of People	14	3.62	0.94	A
Department Head (F&B, F.O., H/K)	12	3.41	1.02	AB
HR Assistant / Intern	9	3.22	1.08	AB
HR Manager / Talent Acquisition	32	2.90	1.15	B (Low valuation)

**Note:** Means with the same Tukey HSD letter are not significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

**Spearman Correlation – Institutional Prestige and Hiring Outcomes**

Two graduate recruiting outcomes — propensity for greater starting salary and desire for departmental placement — were compared to perceived institutional prestige ratings with Spearman's rank-order correlation. Results revealed a strong prestige gradient among institutions: LUMS, Lahore had the highest salary premium ( $r_s = .52, p < .01$ ) despite not having a dedicated hospitality program. In contrast, local HTM and diploma programs returned non-significant correlations ( $r_s = .14, p = .24$ ). This finding provides direct empirical support for Spence's (1973) signalling theory: institutional prestige is a proxy for social capital, English language proficiency and general academic strength, and the industry values all of these qualities beyond technical hospitality knowledge.

**Table 5**  
**Spearman Correlation of Institutional Prestige Ratings and Hiring Outcomes**

Institution	Mean Prestige (1-5)	SD	rs (Salary)	rs (Dept.)	Sig. (p)
LUMS, Lahore	4.21	0.67	0.52	0.48	< .01
Minhaj University, Lahore	3.87	0.74	0.44	0.39	< .01
Superior University, Lahore	3.67	0.78	0.36	0.32	< .05
University of Central Punjab (UCP)	3.52	0.86	0.31	0.28	< .05

University of the Punjab	3.14	0.92	0.18 (ns)	0.15 (ns)	.14 (ns)
Local HTM / Diploma Programmes	2.89	0.98	0.14 (ns)	0.12 (ns)	.24 (ns)

Note:  $p < .01$ ;  $p < .05$ ;  $r_s$  = Spearman's rho; ns = not significant. LUMS non-specialist schools have much larger graduate premiums than specialized hospitality schools, suggesting that hiring decisions are largely based on signals of institutional prestige rather than program content.

**HR Managers: Competency Gaps and Curriculum Alignment**

HR managers identified two co-ranked top competency gaps in fresh hospitality graduates: inability to operate Property Management Systems (PMS) and poor English communication skills (oral and written), each cited by 78.6% of HR managers ( $n = 55$  each). These were followed by unrealistic salary and role expectations (68.6%), lack of service humility/reluctance for manual tasks (65.7%), and discomfort with irregular working hours and shift rosters (61.4%).

**Table 6**  
**HR Manager Responses to Competency Gaps in Recent Hospitality Graduates**

Competency Gap Identified	No. of Respondents	% of Sample	Rank
Inability to operate PMS (Opera, Fidelio)	55	78.6%	1
Poor English communication skills (oral and written)	55	78.6%	1
Unrealistic salary and role expectations	48	68.6%	3
Lack of service humility / reluctance for manual tasks	46	65.7%	4
Discomfort with irregular working hours and shift rosters	43	61.4%	5
Inadequate physical endurance for operational shifts	38	54.3%	6
Poor grooming and personal presentation habits	31	44.3%	7
Weak team integration and inter-departmental communication	28	40%	8

The curriculum alignment data yielded the most unambiguous findings across the entire study. HR managers overwhelmingly disagreed with all five curricular alignment assertions; all means fell below 2.50, well below the neutral midpoint of 3.00. The lowest mean across the entire HR instrument was 24/7 operational readiness ( $M = 2.12$ ), followed by curricula addressing sustainability and responsible tourism practices ( $M = 2.18$ ), industry input meaningfully incorporated into curriculum development ( $M = 2.27$ ), programmes adequately preparing graduates for digital hotel management tools ( $M = 2.31$ ), and Pakistani hospitality curricula reflecting current luxury service standards ( $M = 2.45$ ).

**Student Constructs: Descriptive and Inferential Analysis**

Students in hospitality were asked to rate their opinions across six construct measures using one-sample t-tests against the neutral midpoint of 3.00. The Perceived Importance of Practical Experience (PIPE) scored the highest mean ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ;  $t = 23.54$ ), followed by Perceived Hiring Barriers for Graduates (PHBG) ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ), Perceived Value of Formal Education (PVFHE) ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ), Career Expectations and Reality Gap (CERG) ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ), and Curriculum Quality Perception (CQP) ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ). The only construct that did not significantly exceed the neutral midpoint was the Digital and Sustainable Tourism Curriculum Alignment (DSTCA) ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ;  $t = -0.93$ , not significant), indicating that the curriculum is not in sync with the needs of sustainability and digital technology.

Pearson correlation analysis of the six student constructs revealed all relationships to be positive and significant ( $p < .01$ , two-tailed). The strongest correlation was between

CERG and PHBG ( $r = .538$ ), indicating that students who expect more reality shock also expect higher hiring hurdles. Discontent with digital curricula was embedded in a wider skepticism about quality, evidenced by the DSTCA-CQP correlation ( $r = .512$ ). Chi-Square analysis of Work Experience  $\times$  Perception of Hiring Priority ( $\chi^2(6, N = 150) = 18.47, p = .005$ ; Cramér's  $V = .248$ ) showed a statistically significant and moderate relationship: students with more work experience were more likely to consider education important (55.6% vs. 16.9%), suggesting that exposure to the labor market reveals situations in which credentials function as formal gatekeepers.

**Reality Shock and Graduate Attrition**

In the HR dataset, the Reality Shock construct — consisting of five items — produced the highest cluster of means across the entire HR instrument, all falling in the 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' range ( $M = 3.86-4.32$ ). Graduates typically expect above-entry-level roles upon joining ( $M = 4.32, SD = 0.71$ ), struggle to adjust to the physical demands of operations ( $M = 4.18, SD = 0.79$ ), and fresh graduates leave within the first 6–12 months more often than experienced hires ( $M = 4.09, SD = 0.83$ ). The workplace dynamics construct highlighted the importance of structured integration programs ( $M = 4.27$  — the highest rated item in the entire HR instrument) and intergenerational friction ( $M = 3.94$ ). These findings demonstrate that there is intergenerational friction in the workplace, evidenced by triangulated data from industry professionals, HR managers, and students with internship experience.

**Triangulated Findings Summary**

The triangulated data confirms all 12 research sub-questions, with ten fully confirmed and two partially confirmed (containing nuances and context-dependent patterns). The most robust and internally consistent finding of the study is that all three cohorts overwhelmingly converge on experience primacy: 74% of professionals were selected via experience/personality factors, the mean gap between experience and formal degree importance for HR managers was 1.16 Likert units, and students rated experience the highest construct (PIPE  $M = 4.11$ ). Formal credentials become increasingly important at supervisory and executive levels, with postgraduate credentials (MBA/MSc) emerging as meaningful gatekeepers for senior leadership positions. Curriculum-industry misalignment is a cross-cohort, systemic finding agreed upon from both sides of the hiring interaction. Reality Shock drives early graduate attrition, and institutional prestige generates measurable hiring advantages operating as credential signals independent of programme content.

**Table 7**  
**Chi-Square – Work Experience and Perception of Hiring Priority (Students, n = 150)**

Work Experience Level	Education Prioritised	Equally Weighted	Experience Prioritised	Total
No Experience	12 (16.9%)	34 (47.9%)	25 (35.2%)	71
Internship / Part-time	18 (34.6%)	21 (40.4%)	13 (25.0%)	52
1–2 years full-time	9 (50.0%)	6 (33.3%)	3 (16.7%)	18
2+ years full-time	5 (55.6%)	3 (33.3%)	1 (11.1%)	9
Total	44 (29.3%)	64 (42.7%)	42 (28.0%)	150

Note: Cramér's  $V=.248, p=.005, \chi^2(6, N=150) = 18.47$  (moderate effect). Students with more work experience were more likely to consider education important (55.6% vs. 16.9%) than predicted, suggesting that exposure to the labor market exposes situations in which credentials are formal gatekeepers.

The Chi square result showed that there is a significant relationship between perception of hiring priority and work experience levels. The students' understanding of the employment environment

## **Discussion**

The quantitative results were obtained using descriptive statistics, one sample t-test, chi-square analysis, one way-ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc tests, and Pearson and Spearman rank correlation. To ensure the internal consistency of all instruments for use in mixed-methods analysis, reliability analysis was undertaken, with all instruments showing total  $\alpha$  between 0.792 and 0.913.

## **Demographic Results**

Overall, the sample had common characteristics with the diversity in the ecology of luxury hotels in Lahore. Most of the industry professionals were male (60%), had two or more years of experience (69%) and worked in a variety of occupations including front desk, food and beverage, housekeeping and management. The median number of years the HR managers had in hiring was 3, representing mid to senior level HR professionals, and the largest group of HR professionals was HR Managers/Talent Acquisition (45.7%). Almost half (47.3%) of the students had no prior work experience. Most of them were female (56.7%) and studying BBA (Hons) Hospitality Management (43.3%). The analytic significance of these demographic differences lies in the fact that there are different perspectives on the education-experience debate, namely those of students from aspirational positioning, the HR from institutional hiring authority and the professionals from lived work experience.

### **Key Finding 1: . All Three Cohorts have Pervasive Experience Primacy**

All three cohorts had professional experience more than formal school credentials. Only 11 percent of those with formal degrees made the selection, and 74 percent of industry experts said they selected their first hotel based on interpersonal or experience-based factors. Many (56%) reported that interviewers tended to give more importance to experience in the screening process. Among HR managers at the operational level, the mean difference between formal degree ( $M = 3.15$ ) and work experience ( $M = 4.31$ ) is statistically significant (+1.16 Likert units) substantively significant. Even those who are formally qualified still know the importance of experience in the field of luxury hotels in Lahore

### **Key Finding 2: Variation in Credential Valuation is Role and Experience Dependent**

The dominant finding is that of experience primacy, but there is marked contextual variability revealed by the study. Based on the one-way ANOVA ( $F(4, 65) = 3.42, p = .013$ )—a Tukey HSD Group A versus Group B differential, senior hotel executives (GMs and HR Directors) place a significantly higher value on formal degrees than HR Managers/Talent Acquisition experts. Postgraduate credentials (MBA/MSc) increase in importance from “Moderately Important” at operational level ( $M = 3.15$ ) to “Important” at management and executive level ( $M = 3.78$ ). Credential valuation is predicted to be diminished by hiring experience alone ( $\chi^2(6) = 13.47, p = .036$ ): 0% of practitioners with 15 or more years of experience rate formal degrees as “highly important” whereas 47.6% of those with less than three years of hiring experience rate formal degrees as “highly important.” This finding has important implications for hiring strategy, as it implies that the industry’s experience-centricity is an emergent, pragmatically motivated choice that intensifies with accumulated practitioner experience, rather than a fixed organizational policy.

### **Key Finding 3. The Spencian Signal of Institutional Prestige**

Local HTM and diploma programs had non-significant correlation ( $r_s = .14, p = .24$ ), but Spearman correlation analysis showed a strong prestige gradient among institutions with LUMS ( $r_s = .52, p < .01$ ) having the highest salary premium despite not having a

hospitality program. Institutional prestige is a proxy for social capital, English language proficiency and general academic strength in the Pakistani hospitality industry and the industry values all of these qualities beyond technical hospitality knowledge. This finding provides direct empirical support for Spence's (1973) signalling theory. To compete for placement outcomes at the graduate level, specialized hospitality institutions need to pursue worldwide accreditation and branded industry alliances. In this signaling economy, specialized hospitality institutions are structurally disadvantaged.

#### **Key Finding 4: Systemic Curriculum Misalignment Agreed Across Cohorts**

The most obvious conclusion of the study is reflected in the statistics of curriculum alignment. The average score of all 5 curriculum alignment items was below 2.50 for HR managers which placed all of them in the "Disagree" category. The lowest mean HR instrument was 24/7 operational readiness ( $M = 2.12$ ). The only construct in the student data that did not significantly exceed the neutral midpoint ( $t = -0.93$ , ns) was the students' DSTCA scale that scored 2.94 independently. The most internally validated result of the triangulated design is the convergence of employer and student opinions of curriculum inadequacy, approached from opposite sides of the hiring interaction. The two most pressing and practical needs for curriculum change are the peaks of PMS incapacity and poor English communication, both cited by 78.6% of HR managers as the main competency gaps of recent graduates.

#### **Key Finding 5: Reality Shock Drives Attrition Systemically**

In the HR dataset, the highest cluster of means ( $M = 3.86-4.32$ , all in the "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" range) was produced by the Reality Shock construct which consisted of five items scored by HR managers. We found that new graduates leave disproportionately in the first six to twelve months ( $M = 4.09$ ) – below the 18 to 24 month threshold at which onboarding investment pays dividends. This is a systemic cost to both graduates and hotels. The industry expects this reality gap more than the students do, but the CERG construct in the student dataset ( $M = 3.67$ ) suggests that students themselves expect this reality gap. This gap between the realities and the perception is analytically significant all by itself and indicates that a significant amount of early attrition can be prevented through pre-employment bridging programs and orientation. The Workplace Dynamics construct highlights the importance of organized integration programs ( $M = 4.27$  – the highest rated item in the entire HR test) and the perception of an intergenerational conflict is also high ( $M = 3.94$ ). These findings demonstrate 33 Page 35 of 41 - AI Writing Submission Submission ID trn:oid::1:3573872070 that there is intergenerational friction in the workplace, not just in theory, as evidenced by triangulated data from industry professionals ( $M = 3.74$  for workplace friction, where nearly half reported bidirectional credential displacement), HR managers, and students with internship experience ( $M = 4.10$  for workplace friction, higher than those without experience). The unanimous demand for integration programs in the three cohorts has given a clear mandate for action.

#### **Summary of the Findings**

The study found that practical work experience is the most influential factor in hiring decisions within Lahore's luxury hotel industry, outweighing formal educational qualifications across students, industry professionals, and HR managers. While education remains important, particularly for managerial and executive positions, employers generally prioritize candidates who possess relevant industry experience and workplace skills. The findings also revealed that the reputation of an educational institution can influence employment outcomes, with prestigious universities often providing graduates with an advantage due to perceived strengths in communication, professionalism, and overall competency.

Another major finding was the significant gap between hospitality education and industry expectations. Both students and employers agreed that graduates often lack essential practical skills, particularly in operational readiness, property management systems, and professional communication. This mismatch contributes to a "reality shock" when graduates enter the workforce, leading to high turnover rates during the first year of employment. The study therefore highlights the need for stronger industry-academia collaboration, curriculum improvements, practical training opportunities, and structured onboarding programs to better prepare graduates for the realities of the hospitality sector.

These five systemic themes emerged from the thematic and qualitative analysis:

- Experience primacy, internalized even by students with an interest in formal education
- Curriculum quality deficiencies, consistently perceived by employers and students
- Reality Shock and early attrition as a structural phenomenon that is predictable and largely unaddressed
- The signaling economy of institutional prestige that favors elite generalist institutions over specialized hospitality schools
- Intergenerational workplace conflict as a manageable but unmanaged HR issue

## **Conclusion**

This study has answered the main question that inspired the research: whether formal education or professional experience is more important when it comes to hiring decisions at five-star hotels in Lahore. At the operational level, professional experience is the most important hiring factor; formal academic credentials are becoming increasingly important as individuals move into executive and supervisory positions. Rather than a simple choice based on bias, this is a logical, market-driven response to structural realities at the top end of Pakistan's hospitality sector. The programs coursework and the needs of hotels have separated, resulting in a long term market logic that works in favor of those who can perform right out of the gates rather than those who have a degree and have to be operationally conditioned for months afterward.

Lahore's luxury hotels thus employ a tiered evaluative approach: at the frontline level, grooming, English communication, attitude and practical hotel experience are the key gatekeepers; at the managerial and executive level, while postgraduate qualifications — particularly an MBA or MSc in hospitality — are widely recognised as significant for strategic skills, they are still regarded as secondary to evidence of leadership and proven track record. The curricula of hospitality institutes in Pakistan are not in tune with industry and student standards. Hotel HR managers are not satisfied with the readiness of graduates in areas such as sustainable tourism, shift work conditions, PMS, and English communication — a systemic misalignment that directly leads to high early attrition rates, high onboarding costs and continued undervaluation of formal credentials.

## **Recommendations**

To address these challenges, the study recommends:

- the establishment of a formalized dual-track recruitment process distinguishing credential-based and experience-based entry pathways
- introduction of credential-neutral pre-employment skills assessments covering PMS proficiency and English
- design of a structured 90-day graduate onboarding program including cross-departmental rotations and reciprocal mentoring
- making PMS laboratory training a core curriculum requirement

- restructuring internships as assessed, credit-bearing placements with a minimum of three months in a four-star or five-star property
- establishing formal Industry Advisory Boards for each hospitality program
- pursuit of international accreditation to generate prestige signals
- development of a National Hospitality Competency Framework by the HEC in cooperation with the Pakistan Hotels Association.

To sum up, there is nothing that can be found in conflict between education and experience in Lahore's top-end hospitality industry. They are in series, and the importance of education grows with the role of manager in terms of managerial potential and controlling admittance and advancement. Therefore, bridging institutional plans and the market's plans is not just an educational policy problem but a strategic development of the workforce for one of the fastest growing services sectors in Pakistan.

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