



Socio-emotional Skills and Graduate Employability in the Hospitality Sector of South Western Uganda, Kigezi Sub -Region

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Abstract: *Hospitality graduates struggle to secure employment in the hospitality sector. This study examined the relationship between socio-emotional skills and graduate employability in the hospitality sector in the southwest Uganda-Kigezi sub-region. The research design employed in this study was the cross-sectional quantitative research design with a population of 640 graduates and a sample size of 400 was established for hospitality graduates based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970). The data was collected using structured and unstructured questionnaires and the data analysis was done by SPSS V. 23 Smart PLS V 4 and NVivo. Socio-emotional skills like emotional intelligence, teamwork, and communication skills were found to affect graduate employability. Numerous barriers were pointed out, like lack of experience and limited chance to meet others. Based on the study findings call for focusing on practical training and internships with institutions and industries to acquire skills required for improvement in the job market. Recommendations included curriculum integration, industry collaboration, practical experience internships and apprenticeships, and creating a linkage between HEIs and the hospitality sector. Furthermore, the development of socio-emotional skills is a prerequisite for the development of employment in the hospitality sector. This study may contribute to the existing literature on the development of soft skills and employment, and the findings from this study may be helpful for analogous study environments in Southwestern Uganda—Kigezi Sub-Region.*

Keywords: *Graduate employability, Socio-emotional skills, Hospitality graduates, Skills, Kigezi sub-region.*

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1. Introduction

Graduate employability has emerged as a global concern in general and more so in developing countries owing to poor match between the skills taught in college and the skills demanded in the job markets (Mgaiwa, 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Socio-emotional skills, often known as Soft skills, are described as the competencies that affected the

interaction between people at the workplace and in society in general and which are necessary for successful social interaction. Employee relations were important in any organization, particularly because hospitality was all about accommodating customers, and effective teamwork, communication, flexibility, emotional intelligence, and innovation were of value. These skills, have recently received global consideration and in particular areas like hospitality where client and staff interface is crucial (Jones

& Bouffard, 2012; Sydorenko, 2020). Internationally the hospitality industry is credited with playing a central role in the generation of revenue and thus gross domestic product while at the same time being identified (Ampofo, 2020), by its deposition on face-to-face communication, as having profound socio-emotional demands. Literature from developed countries such as the United States and Europe point out to today's employers looking for more than technical competence (Liu-Farrer & Shire, 2023).

As it has been highlighted by Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron (2023), while there appears to be a trend of improvement in the number of graduates from tourism and hospitality institutions, employers continue to complain of low social - emotional competencies of talents. This has gone a long way in showing the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and various stakeholders of an industry on the preparation made by graduates to make them fit and marketable for the job markets in society. In Uganda, the hospitality sector contributes significantly to tourism with emphasis on areas that are endowed with important tourist attractions such as South-Western Uganda with Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (Tushabomwe et al., 2020).

The regional economy immensity does little to calm unease about the job prospects of hospitality graduates. In the opinion of Guàrdia et al.,(2021), most fresh graduates do not find employment early because they lack some soft skills, especially, communication, teaming, and flexibility. Employers in the Kigezi sub region have complained that their employees, most of who are graduates, are not ready to take on the challenging roles in the workplace that call for high level of emotional intellect and interpersonal skills. This local experience emphasizes the need to close the socio-emotional skills deficit so that graduates are well-equipped to promote the growth of the hospitality industry (Mesuwini, 2021).

1.1 Study Gaps and Justification

There is one significant flaw evident in hospitality graduate employability literature that has not captured much attention: a crumbled-upon of socio-emotional skills from employability outcome perspectives (Devis-Rozental et al., 2018). Although there is literature studying the technological competency among the hospitality human resource, the more or less they fail to address the multiple aspects of the soft competency including verbal and written communication, interpersonal relationship, emotional intelligence among employees and other teamwork competencies which play a major role in the overall job performance. This is so especially in service-oriented entities whose operations are anchored on personal

contacts and exchanges. The absence of broad and extensive review of socio-emotional skills within the hospitality industry, including in the emerging economy of Uganda, underscores the need to fill existing research gap by focusing research on the area in question. This research intends to help to fill that gap by focusing on a more precise area of study, namely, the effects of socio-emotional skills on the usability of hospitality graduates in the South-Western Uganda.

Most of the literature is based on developed economies or large cities in developing countries; a study of such areas like the Kigezi sub-region in Uganda would highlight Rural/semi urban areas. As the region is gradually becoming a tourist destination and is gaining more economic importance, it is important to identify and ideally pinpoint some of the concerns along with the opportunities for hospitality graduates in the area. Therefore, due to lack of localized studies on soft skills and graduate employability may hinder employment in the South-Western Uganda is untouched.

Another gap is that employability issues are not addressed by academia and industry in equal measure. Worldwide research has revealed that many educational organizations provide their students with curricula that are irrelevant to the hospitality industry (Azar et al., 2020; Griffin, 2021), hence producing a workforce that is not fit for deployment. This is worsened in Uganda by poor higher education Institutions - industry linkages resulting in; a misalignment between the competencies offered in academic programmes and the needs of companies.

Lastly, there is dearth of studies which shows the employability of hospitality graduates over a period of time. Quite of a lot of research focus on what graduates do in terms of employment within the first year or two of graduation and fails to capture what happens to employability as graduates grow through their career and in the face of different obstacles that they come across in the business world. This gap is especially important in terms of socio-emotional skills which are usually in the process of formation and improvement throughout the interactions in the course of work. Confining this study to graduates from the years 2018 to 2023 would come up with a view of how socio-emotional skills affect the employment probabilities at the time of graduation as well as in the initial years in the labor market.

1.2 Study Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the effects of socio-emotional skills on graduate employability in hospitality sector in Southwestern Uganda.
2. To investigate the challenges experienced by hospitality graduates in Southwestern Uganda.

2. Literature Review

Effect of socio-emotional skills and their challenges on graduate employability in hospitality sector

Socio-emotional skills are transferable skills that are in employees or graduates, are very essential in the employment market and more evident at the graduate level (Succi & Canovi, 2020), especially among employees in the service sectors, including the hospitality sector. These are interaction skills such as communicating, working in a team, being flexible, and emotional intelligence to work in a team setting as well as address the unpredictability of customer relations Boudreau et al., (2022). Sarker et al., (2021) found out that soft skills are valued higher than technical skills when it comes to employability since they are fundamental for keeping consumers satisfied and running a smooth business. This emphasis is relevant, especially in Uganda's hospitality industry, in that employers and employees interface with clients and have to be innovative in dealing with service delivery issues. The interpersonal skills and management of customers' complaints are key determinants to success; hence the need to build socio-emotional skills for any graduate. Emotional intelligence as a part of socio-emotional skills has been discussed in detail in the recent literature.

Emotional intelligence, according to Goleman, (2001), is a person's capacity to accurately perceive, understand, and manage emotions—self and others. This is a critical factor that can facilitate handling demanding and customer-related jobs. In organizational contexts where stressful customers and environments pervade the operations of each industry, especially the hospitality industry, emotional intelligence enables employees in decision-making processes, handling customers or colleagues' grievances, as well as coping with pressure. Nuwagaba, (2012); Ojedokun, (2023) noted that the graduates' high emotional intelligence enhanced relations in the hospitality sector when dealing with the customers. This achievement supports the authors' conclusion that soft skills are crucial for employability and to the career prospects of hospitality graduates. Other socio-emotional skills include

communication, which has equally been deemed crucial for employability, especially in relation to the hospitality industry. It is fundamental for graduates to be able to communicate effectively with customers, peers, and managers fully professionally. This skill helps graduates to engage in professional and clear communication with their customers, peers, and managers in service industries.

In Pitan's (2017) opinion, it is crucial to develop effective communication skills because employers consider it a priority when hiring because of the numerous failures that arise from the lack of proper communication of ideas and tasks, which organizational customers find unsatisfactory. In the realm of hospitality within the southern western part of Uganda, all communication barriers, be they cultural or linguistic, facilitate ways of delivering services to the visitors within the recommended international standards. Employees with poor communication skills are at a disadvantage in the labor market because their communication abilities and responses to customers' needs are poor (Ndiuini & Baum, 2021). Such employability skills as teamwork and adaptability are also used in the course of predicting the employment of graduates in the hospitality industry. Since hospitality services are more or less a team effort, it is crucial to be a team player. Employers require graduates to establish a commitment to team endeavors, manage tasks collectively, and maintain good relationships within working groups. Baum, (2019) also pointed out that graduates who exhibit good teamwork behavior will receive prioritized consideration for retention and promotion in hospitality organizations. Also, flexibility, that is, the capacity to work effectively in different surroundings and to cope with change, is appreciated because of the rapidly growing and developing nature of the sector. The graduates in the Kigezi sub-region who possess such qualities are likely to find jobs easily, besides our ability to perform our tasks well.

3. Methodology

This study utilized Quantitative data, which gave a numerical value to the association level of two variables (Creswell, 2015; Morgan, 2022). This facilitates a comprehensive consideration of the research questions providing both a statistical and expository evaluation of the results.

3.1 Research design

The study used a cross-sectional design aimed at collecting data at one point in time from hospitality graduates, in South-western Uganda. This design was appropriate for measuring the current situation with regards to graduate

employability and socio-emotional competencies in the hospitality sector (Cummings, 2018; Kesmodel, 2018) . This gave a cross-sectional picture of the readiness levels of the graduates for employment and the presence of the existing mismatch between university training and employers' requirements. The design was useful in establishing relations between socio-emotional skills and graduate employability in hospitality sector.

3.2 Study Population and sample size

The study focused on the hospitality graduates from the three mentioned institutions; African College of Commerce and Technology (ACCT), Kabale University

and Uganda College of Commerce (UCC) who graduated between 2018 and 2023. This time frame was adopted in order to make some certainty that the study will be targeting recent graduates who are actually participating in the job market. The total population includes 640 graduates and a sample size of 400 graduates. To achieve this, the research employed stratified random sampling to make certain that all institutions are well represented and 136 and 136 and 132 graduates were sampled from each institution. This made it possible for the study of variations in the institutions while at the same time having a sense of the entire hospitality graduates' population. The sample size was determined by using Krejcie & Morgan,(1970) table and formula.

Table 1: Sample Size

NO.	Institution	Study population	Sample size	Sampling Technique	
1	African College of Commerce and Technology (ACCT),	220	136	Stratified Sampling	Random
2	Uganda College of Commerce (UCC)	210	132	Stratified Sampling	Random
3	Kabale University	210	132	Stratified Sampling	Random
Total		640	400		

Source: Primary Data, 2024

3.3 Data Collection Methods/Instruments

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The development of structured and unstructured questionnaires was guided by the work of Kallio et al., (2016). The structured questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (DA), and strongly disagree (SDA), with each of the points assigned a value as follows: SA = 5, A = 4, N = 3, DA = 2, and SDA = 1. Unstructured part had open ended questions. Questionnaire provided information based on facts and opinion. The questionnaires were used because of large samples size of 400 graduates and the results were more dependable, reliable, cheaper than other methods and free from bias. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to the selected hospitality graduates to find out the views of the respondents on the socio-emotional skills and graduate employability of hospitality graduates in the southwest Uganda-Kigezi sub-region.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data was cleansed to remove any unreliable big data. Data screening was carried out to check for errors arising from incorrect data entry, out-of-range values, missing values, and normality, and then provided solutions for such errors (Field et al., 2009). The quantitative data were analyzed using IBM Statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) Statistics V.23 and Smart PLS V 4. The unstructured data were uploaded into NVivo 10 Windows for analysis.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure ethical research principles, the researcher obtained an introductory letter from directorate of graduate training at Kabale University. Ethical approval of the study was sought from the Kabale Research Ethics Committee (KABREC-2023-32) as well as the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. The research registration number with the UNCST was SS2048ES before commencing the study.

The ethical issues related to carrying out this study were considered, including the confidentiality, privacy, and

security of the collected data. No participant identification was used in any communication document. Before any data collection, consent was obtained from the participant, and participation was voluntary after the participant had gotten all the detailed information about the study. There were no risks for participants who took part in this study, and no compensation was given to them. During the analysis, databases were password-protected to restrict access.

4. Results and Discussion

Objective 1. To examine the effect of socio-emotional skills on graduate employability in hospitality sector in Southwestern Uganda.

Table 2: Correlation between Socio-emotional skills and Graduate Employability in Hospitality Sector

Socio-emotional Skills	Correlation (r)
Interpersonal skills	0.62**
Team work	0.58**
Adaptability	0.54**
Emotional Intelligence	0.65**

**correlations is significant at the 0.01level (2 tailed)

Source; Primary Data, 2024

Table 2 offers a summary of the results of the correlation tests done on socio-emotional skills and employability outcomes: employment status, job retention, and career advancement. The analysis revealed the fact that all the socio-emotional skills discussed in this paper are positively associated with graduate employability. A moderate positive correlation was obtained, whereby the highest correlation was between emotional intelligence and employability with a coefficient of 0.65, $P < 0.01$, whereas the second highest correlation was between communication and employability with a correlation coefficient of 0.62, $P < 0.01$. This means that graduates

who master good socio-emotional skills will look for a job easier and will also remain at the workplace as they ascend the career ladder. This is supported by qualitative findings. “ *graduates need more practice in the area of soft competencies because, though we take time to learn them these competencies in the classroom, their effectiveness is realized when competing for employment through job simulation* ” (Graduate 3. Interviewee 3, 2024).

Objective 2: To investigate the challenges experienced by hospitality graduates in Southwestern Uganda.

Table 3: Key challenges experienced by hospitality graduates in Southwestern Uganda

Challenges	Frequency
Lack of experience	45%
Inadequate networking opportunities	30%
Insufficient socio-emotional skills	25%
Limited job opportunities in the region	20%

Source: Primary Data, 2024

Primary challenges that graduates acknowledged in their exercise of finding a job, as highlighted unstructured questionnaires were;

Lack of Experience

A survey of the respondents revealed that the most serious hindrance to employment in the hospitality industry in South-Western Uganda is the absence of experience among the graduates, with 45 percent citing it as an issue. This finding is in accordance with the recommendation by Mitana et al., (2019) and Nuwagaba, (2012), who also observed that most employers in Uganda value work experience more than academic achievements, for junior positions . This leads to a situation whereby university students are academically qualified to work but cannot be

employed due to a lack of working experience (Otto, 2022). This was also backed by one graduate who said, “*Every employer I tried to approach told me they were looking for experience, which I lacked. This is a big challenge because how does one get experience when they are not hired?*” (Graduate 6, Interviewee 6, 2024).

Inadequate networking opportunities

Lack of networking, as viewed by 30% of the graduates, is a major issue in the hospitality industry and getting a job. This is in concurrence with other works, like that of Mutebi et al.(2023), who argue that networking is central to career advancement because hiring is often done on recommendation. The absence of organized professional networks for hospitality graduates in southern Uganda further complicates their job search. Again, one interviewee said: “*I do not know where to meet people in*

the field to assist me in securing a job; for instance, there are no job fairs or career fairs in our region” (Graduate 1, Interviewee 1, 2024). This reveals the need for education institutions to create platforms through the organization of job fairs, alumni networks, and engagements in collaboration with industries. These sites can help graduates form contacts that could result in a job offer. Few Careers Available in the Area

Last but not least, the shortage of job markets in the Kigezi sub-region, according to 20% of the graduates, remains a hindrance to employment in the hospitality industries. This was a major challenge, and it is owed to other prevailing economic realities in the region, whereby the tourism opportunity has not particularly been matched to the employment openings. As noted by the World Bank, (2018), herein we find out that development in Uganda has been partly segmented regionally, and this has translated into Kigezi being left with fewer employment opportunities than those to be expected in urban areas. Similar

sentiments were expressed by respondents in the interview with graduates, who opined “that there are few job opportunities within the hospitality industry in Kigezi and that most of the companies are already employing people” (Graduate 1, Interviewee 1, 2024). And also went on to say that; “There is a lack of job opportunities in this region, especially in the hospitality industry. I feel perhaps I will have to go to Kampala and look for a job.” Hence, the Kigezi region needs regional economic development programs.

Research Findings from Unstructured Questionnaire

The concept map generated from unstructured questions illustrated the main difficulties that graduates experience in realizing their desire to obtain a job in the sphere of hospitality.

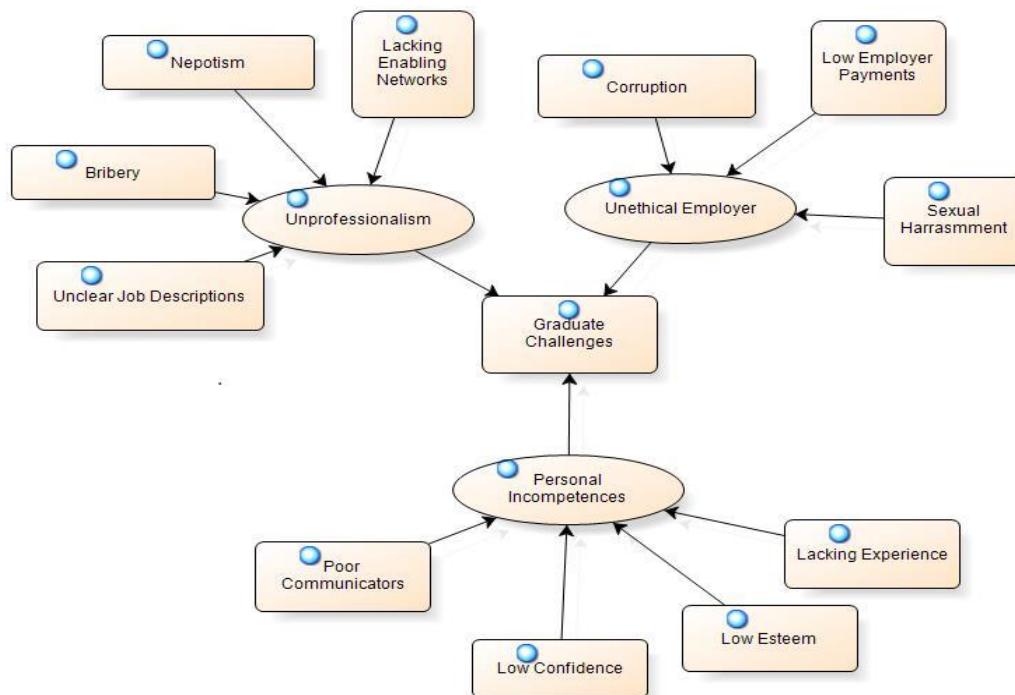


Figure 1: Challenges Experienced by Hospitality Graduates in Southwestern Uganda
 Source: Primary Data, 2024

These challenges are categorized into three main areas: improper behavior, unethical measures of employers, and personal inefficiencies. Most of these are aligned with inadequate soft skills, which affect the employability of the graduates. The above problems of unprofessionalism, for

instance, have a root cause in factors such as nepotism, bribery, a lack of clear work descriptions, and the absence of enabling networks. Such issues make professionalism, communication, and networking skills key socio-emotional skills requirements in the operation of hospitality

organizations. Students today, who may be exiting universities, may find themselves in a fix to market them or deal with the real-world challenges present in the market.

Also, the diagram singles out other unethical employer practices like corruption, low payments, and sexual harassment, which culminate in negativity that is unfriendly to graduates. Last but not least, personal handicaps, including communication deficits, low self-confidence, low self-esteem, and a lack of experience, are clear impediments to employment. These are some of the areas where, if trained, hard skills alone are not sufficient. Students who do not develop these skills will struggle when it comes to job interviews, relationship building, or job performance upon being hired. The research results reveal that more attention should be given by educational establishments to the enhancement of these four fundamental soft competencies that would allow graduates to respond more adequately to the requirements of the sphere of hospitality

Discussion

The study result revealed that socio-emotional or soft skills comprise of communication, interpersonal, teamwork, flexibility, and emotional intelligence, are strongly correlated with the employment outcomes of the hospitality graduates in southern Uganda. Affective commitment has a coefficient of ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$). These results are supported by other studies that have been carried out on affective or emotional intelligence and job performance particularly in service industry, hospitality discipline inclusive. For example, emotional intelligence, as noted by Borges et al., (2022), posited that people with high Emotional Intelligence can have better interpersonal relationship, better understanding of the customers' needs, and their ability to handle affective requirements that are very essential in service sector particular in the hospitality industry. Thus, these findings underscore just how much colleges should invest on EI since, in the current study; there was a significant correlation between EI and job prospects.

Interpersonal skills were also seen to moderately and positively predict employability outcomes ($r = 0.62, p < 0.01$) thus the importance of interpersonal skills in the industry. Communication skills are very important when dealing with guests, other customers or other employees because it is through communication that majority of the services will be enacted. As supported by the research conducted by Venter (2017), it was revealed that communication is amongst the skills that are highly demanded by employers. Coming to this cognate area of

South Western Uganda where Tourism sector is gradually playing major role, good and effective communication skills will enhance the improvement of service quality and customer satisfaction thus improving marketability of a graduate. Based on these findings, it is suggested that, promotion of skill in communication through Packages would offer a better employment chance to the hospitality graduates in the region.

Team work was also revealed to have a positive relationship with employability with the values of Pearson coefficient ($r=0.58, P<0.01$). The same was true for the reported level of adaptability whereby; Pearson coefficient ($r = 0.54, P < 0.01$). These increases could also be explained by qualitative data to the overall quantitative results. *“When I began my first hospitality job, I realized how important teamwork truly was. I was able to apply teamwork to the job, and that was very crucial in the teamwork activities. If I had not good teamwork skills, I could not manage all the work of the job”* (Graduate 2 Interviewee 2, 2024). These skills are crucial in view of the fact that the tasks within the hospitality industry are always fluid and can be unpredictable. Teamwork makes it easier for employees to work with their colleagues, which is useful in the industry since operations depend on the integration of employees' efforts. While flexibility prepares the graduates to face various occasions that may occur in an organization, such as the shifting of the consumer's taste or the emergence of some barrier to the execution of the operations, Clifton & Harter, (2019) and Sanders & De Grip, (2004) team works show how critical these skills play in the hospitality industry.

The results of this study correlate with the current literature from other countries, and the author has worthy evidence to support the study: socio-emotional skills remain important for employment of the hospitality graduates. According to Mutambala et al., (2020), it was argued that the educational institutions in Uganda require to attend to these skills much more in order to narrow the academia-industry gap. Thus, with socio-emotional competencies such as those relating to overall emotional intelligence, communication and such, the institutions not only impart the content of their programs but also produce competitive job market graduates ready for employment across the global markets.

As postulated by Singh et al., (2022) this is a clear indication that it is not only what one learns but who knows that one is important. As one graduate said, *“It is not just about having a degree; it's about who you know. Without connections, it's almost impossible to get a job.”* This supports the need for the institutions to develop linkages and partnerships that help learners secure job

openings. According to Rozental et al., (2018), people can use self-emotion regulation and the right display of emotions while handling the situation professionally. A graduate interviewee noted: *'There are cases where you find employers demanding bribes, or they proposition you for a job—it is disappointing, but you have to remain strong and keep on searching for employment'*. It would thus be beneficial for the relevant educational institutions to offer socio-emotional skills training that prepare students for ethical challenges and other adversities at the workplace.

Lack of communication skills, low self-esteem or confidence, and lack of experience can be said to be the fastest causes of a shortage of socio-emotional skills among graduates. Such findings support the research done by Fakunle & Higson, (2021), which states that employers often claim that such skills as communication and confidence levels are available where graduates are least prepared. Here one graduate said, *"In school, for instance, we did not get a lot of chances to practice our communication set skills; when getting into interviews, for instance, I found myself struggling trying to find the proper ways of expressing myself."* This highlights why there is a need for more practice-oriented, real-life simulations and the implementation of theory learned at school. Employing socio-emotional skills is another critical area where institutions have to ensure that experiential learning, such as internships, role plays and group projects.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The research findings indicated that interpersonal, communication, teamwork, flexibility, and emotional intelligence were important in the employment of hospitality graduates in Southwestern Uganda. The employers in the industry regard these skills as very important, to the extent that they value them even more than the kind of knowledge a candidate has in the field.

Finding employment for hospitality graduates in Southwestern Uganda involved a lot of constraints. Some major constraints are inaptitude regarding workplace exposure, congenial networking facilities, inadequate socio-emotional competency, and the dearth of appropriate employment opportunities in the area. These challenges thus raise concerns about graduate employability and contribute to high unemployment and underemployment in the hospitality sector.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Hospitality educational institutions that have a hospitality curriculum should incorporate socio-emotional skill training as part of the curriculum. This means working towards the production of programs and units that address skills in the areas of communication, team building, flexibility, and emotional intelligence to make sure that the graduate is fit for the market.
2. It is crucial that schools engage employers in dialogues with the aim of synchronizing the school's objectives with the demands of the employers. In this way, institutions can enter into agreements with hotel companies, restaurants, and other businesses that provide institutions with internships and employment, giving students practical experience in the development of socio-emotional skills.
3. There is a need for institutions to allow more simulated workshops and vocational training to get more practice on these socio-emotional skills. By using such an approach, not only will the students comprehend the relevance of these skills, but they will also get more prepared for finding a job through practical application.
4. Higher Educational institutions (HEIs) should also enhance the internship and apprenticeship programs, which enable students to undergo practical sessions while in school. Engagement with industry partners to create more structured and supervised work experience will enable graduates to gain the experience that will enable them to meet the entry-level job specifications.
5. HEIs should grab opportunities to arrange networking sessions, career fair activities, and seminars that will provide graduates with further job openings. Such events may help foster rapport between professionals and also create opportunities that may otherwise be hard to find for graduates employed in the relatively rigid hospitality industry.

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