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## Exploring the Competencies Perceived by the Hospitality Undergraduates in Public and Private Universities

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### Abstract

Excellent academic performance does not ensure a job offer to the fresh graduates. Employers are now looking at the graduates' competencies. There is a tense among undergraduates to compete in the battle of competencies, which are demanded by the industry. This study aimed to explore the competencies perceived by hospitality undergraduates in both public and private universities in Malaysia. The sample was selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods, where semi-structured interviews were conducted to the respondents. The findings of this study reveal eight core competencies perceived by the respondents: communication skill, lifelong learning and information management, teamwork skill, technical skill, moral and professional ethics, critical thinking and problem solving, leadership skill, and entrepreneurial skill. The most common skill delineated by the respondents was the communication skill, while the least was the entrepreneurial skill. This study is anticipated to give an understanding about the competencies obtained and possessed by the undergraduates, although there are various competencies infused in the curriculum. It is also expected by exploring the components of the skill, the effort to bridge the skill gap between university and industry will be less severe, which later enhance the quality of the fresh hospitality graduates.

**Keywords:** Competency, Hospitality, Undergraduates, Public University, Private University, Skill.

### Introduction

The hospitality industry, which includes hotels, foods, restaurants, chefs, as well as food services suppliers, can be viewed as a human-based and dynamic industry. Over the years, the demand of human capital in this industry is hiking as it continues expanding and shows a positive growth. According to Bernama (2017), the aggressive measures taken by the government has successfully boost Malaysia's tourism and hospitality industry and maintain the industry as the third

largest contributor to Malaysia's economy. However, a high percentage on employee turnover seems parallel with this industry. Even though a list of researchers looked into this issue, further investigation is needed as labor intensive employees are part of the hospitality (AlBattat, Som, & Helalat, 2014).

Looking at the notion of hospitality industry as a human-based industry, Bharwani and Butt (2012) argued that human resources are one of the main parts of the organization which have a challenging role in the industry. Employees need to enhance their performances by implementing the knowledge, skill, and abilities in delivering their tasks. Realizing this norm, creating awareness on the graduates' abilities and preferences is considered equally critical to craft effective recruitment strategies and address the employees' needs, especially the demand of good recruitment in the hospitality industry (Jusoh, Simun, & Choy Chong, 2011). Hence, universities and colleges are recognized as the best medium to supply graduates to the industry, where these institutions hold a big responsibility to provide potential employees to the competitive labor market (Sewell & Pool, 2010).

However, from year to year, there was a major human capital issue being highlighted by many different bodies, which is unemployment. Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) reported that in the year 2016 alone, there were 200,000 unemployed graduates in Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2017). This number did not include the ones that have just completed their *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), diplomas and certificate programs. According to a report by Free Malaysia Today (2017), which supported by the manager of JobStreet.com Malaysia, Chook Yuh Yng, fresh graduates should focus on improving their attitude and good character instead of worrying the industry to employ people with experience. The poor command of English and lack of right attitude are said to be the real reasons why fresh local graduates fail to get a job (Balakrishnan, 2017).

Also, it has been highlighted that the graduates who took bachelor courses related to the hospitality management also did not excluded from experiencing this issue due to the lack of competencies. Weinstein (1989) long argued majority of hospitality management graduates who entered the workforce were well versed in technical skills but lacked the interpersonal skills. Reflecting to this matter, this study intended to explore the competencies perceived by the hospitality undergraduates in both public and private universities.

## Literature Review

### ***Competencies of Hospitality Management***

According to Le Deist and Winterton (2005), the idea of 'competence' generally refers to functional areas while 'competency' refers to behavioral areas. However, the application of the term is inconsistent, where most of the previous research emphasized 'core competence' as a critical organizational resource that could be exploited to gain competitive advantage (Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Javidan, 1998; Lorig, Sobel, Stewart, Brown, Bandura, Ritter, & Holman, 1999). Hamel and Prahalad (1994) defined core competence as the collective

learning in the organization, especially on how to coordinate diverse production skills and integrate multiple streams of technologies.

The hospitality industry has changed quickly due to evolving economies, social orders and quick creating advancements amid the previous couple of decades (Baum, Amoah, & Spivack, 1997). The rapid changing of hospitality industry these days required workers to arm themselves with multiple skills. Subsequently, hospitality educations are winding up more essential to hospitality students and suits the current hospitality industry (Hee, 2008). Hospitality management courses for instance, urge undergraduates to think more strategically and to see how multinational hospitality companies can be overseen. The tertiary hospitality educations may make it conceivable to work all the more adequately, accomplish advancement, and change work parts (Barry & Sillitoe, 2001).

### ***Core Competencies among Hospitality Undergraduates***

In Malaysia, the graduates of hospitality management degree find it hard to secure or fulfill a management position of a company. In this way, the attainment of a managerial position is through diligent work by beginning from an entry-level position and not by having an academic qualification (Mullins, 2007). Thus, some managers have never acquired a formal education from higher education institutions. They started their profession as non-managerial employees and by being among the best entertainers, they have been elevated to a managerial position.

Upon graduation, most of the graduates from the hospitality management degree believed that they can be a senior manager right after leaving the university (O'Brien & Marakas, 2006). However, there are dynamic changes in the hospitality industry today (Baum et al., 1997). The changes demand skillful employees with sets of abilities. Hospitality industry will benefit from the increased levels of formal vocational education and training education (Barry & Sillitoe, 2001). The hospitality tertiary educations, in particular, are providing students with the skill sets to succeed in this fast-changing industry. Jung Hee (2008) also supported that undergraduates who are studying in the bachelor of hospitality management need to adapt to the contemporary environment in the hospitality industry.

Given the importance of skills in Malaysia, the Higher Education Minister has given the alternatives that all undergraduates in higher education institutions, especially those in public universities, to be taught on key competencies (Shakir, 2009). Entrepreneurship, finishing school, mobility and internship are some of the mechanisms by which skills are trained. Though the mechanisms are not compulsory, similar modules were also introduced by private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with the intention of making sure that their graduates are equally proficient upon graduation (Abdul Karim et al., 2012).

As of 2010, all HEIs in Malaysia are required to comply with the outcome-based curriculum which focuses on the student-centered learning as stipulated by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). Varying efforts have been made by individual HEIs to ensure graduates acquire

generic competencies needed to secure employment. Within the Malaysia context, researchers found that the graduates from public and private HEIs were lack of soft skills including poor English command, lack of communication skills, and not having career preparation skills (Abdul Karim et al., 2012; Alistair & Mohd Zahari, 1994).

The most critical competencies required by a graduate are the ability to communicate proficiently, practice critical thinking, ability to solve problems, competent working with others and flexible (Yorke & Harvey, 2005). These are in line to the Malaysia context, where employers demand for graduates who competent in communication, interpersonal, leadership, and teamwork skills (Bakar, Mohamed, & Hanafi, 2007). The importance of possessing these critical 'employability skills' have been underlined by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Malaysia. There are seven essential skills which all HEIs need to infuse among university students in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006). The seven competencies are defined as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The list of competencies and the definitions outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia

No.	Competencies	Definition
1	Communication	Measures students' oral, written and non-verbal communication abilities in both the Malay and English languages.
2	Critical thinking and problem solving	Measures students' critical, creative, innovative and analytical thinking abilities. In addition, it measures students' problem-solving skills.
3	Lifelong learning and information management	Measures students' ability to inculcate lifelong learning. It also measures students' ability to access and manage information from a variety of sources.
4	Teamwork	Measures students' ability to work in teams consisting of members from a diverse background. It includes the ability to build a relationship, interact and work effectively towards achieving an objective.
5	Entrepreneurial skill	Measures students' awareness of entrepreneurship which includes the ability to define attributes, principles and the ethical values of an entrepreneur. It also measures students' ability to develop a business proposal and identify business opportunities.
6	Moral and professional ethics	Measures students' inclination to apply ethical principles and professional ethics. It includes awareness towards society, culture, and the environment.
7	Leadership	Measures students' leadership ability. It includes students' ability to plan, supervise, monitor and lead.

(Source: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006)

***Communication***

Communication skills are associated with listening, presenting, verbalizing, and nonverbal communications. According to Lolli (2013), four main components of communication skills when dealing with all constituents are listening, body language, verbal language, and conduct. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006) outlined that undergraduates are expected to impart in both Bahasa Malaysia and English while in classes. They should be able to convey their thoughts with clarity and confidence in both written and oral. In addition, they need to be active listeners while providing necessary responses, and capable of integrating technology in their presentations.

***Critical Thinking and Problem Solving***

Higher education institutions in Malaysia measures undergraduates critical thinking and problem solving by their creativity, innovative, and analytical manner which includes the ability to apply the knowledge they obtained in solving problems. The elements that undergraduates must possess for this aspect are the ability to identify and analyze complex situations as well as making evaluations with strong justifications. They should also have the ability to expand and improve thinking skills, provide ideas and alternative solutions (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006). The critical thinking and problem solving competency is essential and it is supported by Assante, Huffman and Harp (2008) where they reported the hospitality graduates who possess independent and critical thinkings would be successful in their career.

***Lifelong Learning and Information Management***

Lifelong learning emphasizes on embedded character, pointing to the increasing integration of working and learning and the concomitant requirement for information contextualized to the task at hand (Fischer, 2003). In order for learning to be embedded, contextualized and integrated with everyday tasks, it must also be flexible, and this flexibility must extend to its spatial and temporal dimension, accommodating learning, as is so often said, 'anywhere' and 'anytime' (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003). Undergraduates should be able to do self-regulated learning independently to require skills and knowledge. In addition, they should have the skills to search for relevant information from various sources and able to manage the information efficiently. Undergraduates are expected to be receptive to new ideas and able to develop an inquiry mind (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

***Teamwork***

Hamilton, Nickerson and Owan (2003) found the adoption of teams at the plant level improved worker productivity even after taking into account the selection of high-ability workers into teams. Moreover, Batt (2004) noted that self-managed teams were associated with significantly higher levels of perceived discretion, employment security, and satisfaction to workers, and were effective in improving objective performance measures. By conducting group delegation, it will reduce employee absenteeism rate and improve organizational performance (Benders & Van Veen, 2001). Teamwork skills involve the ability to work and cooperate with people from various social and cultural backgrounds to achieve a common goal. In order to build a good working relationship with

peers, it is essential that undergraduates are respectful to others' attitude, behavior, and belief. From time to time, each undergraduate is expected to undertake the role of a leader interchangeably (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

### ***Entrepreneurial Skill***

Entrepreneurship is part of the marketing skills, which comprises conducting market research, assessing the marketplace, marketing products and services, persuasion, getting people excited about your ideas, dealing with customers, and communicating a vision (Fisher, 2012). Though this skill is not meant for every people, particularly to all the undergraduates within the context of this study, it is reported that employers prefers having employees with entrepreneurial skill (Sewell & Pool, 2010). Sewell and Pool (2010) stated that employees with entrepreneurial skill may help the business of an organization to grow by increasing the profit. Undergraduates are expected to create business and financial plans, and also manage finance (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006). In addition to that, entrepreneurial skills are also referring to adapting to new situations, coping with uncertainty, defining a vision, and developing a strategy (Fisher, 2012).

### ***Moral and Professional Ethics Skill***

In enhancing the employability and competencies of graduates, attaining the moral and professional ethics skill is another core value that a student should have. Despite focusing only on academic success, the ability to implement this set of soft skill professionally in respective disciplines is the one that the future employer are looking for in a holistic human resource (Chan, 2011). According to Litchfield, Frawley and Nettleton (2010), professionalism covers how an employee acts ethically and responsibly, respect, honest, integrity and continuous learning in delivering the code of conduct. Schneider (2014) added that addressing the ethical code of conduct is through several level, starting with basic level, proceed to the higher level where an employee able to understand, advise other, and follow the ethical guideline in problem solving process. This is parallel with the soft skill elements outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006). The body listed three levels of addressing and evaluating moral and professional ethics skill among the students where graduates are anticipated to be able to not only understand the effects of the economy, environment, and socio-cultural factors in their respective professional but also to analyze and practice good ethics while having a sense of responsibility.

### ***Leadership Skill***

Being a leader is another piece of puzzle in a complete set of holistic human capital. The leadership skill is not only involving one's capability in problem solving but also demand working in a harmony teamwork to accomplish a task or to make a change (Brungardt, 2011). Indeed, as Reicher and Hopkins (2003) explain, leaders and followers are working together in a mutual environment to help define future possibilities and make sense out of current realities. Believing the notion that soft skill can be taught and learned, Brungardt (2011) explained that education for leadership focused on the soft skills as well as the human interaction involved throughout the leadership process. It is similar to the guideline pointed in Malaysia's higher education programs where students will develop their

leadership skill through the ability to lead activities and projects. Moreover, it is also essential that graduates can understand the role of a leader and a group member and be able to carry out those roles interchangeably (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

### **Research Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative approach, where face-to-face interview was conducted to the targeted sample. It is anticipated that the qualitative approach provides an in-depth views of information from the respondents regarding the issue of competencies. The semi-structured questions served as the medium in collecting the data.

The population of this study is the final year undergraduate from the hospitality, foodservice and hotel management degree program. The list of the universities offering bachelor degree programs related to the specified field was obtained from the website. This study managed to obtain permission from four universities in Malaysia. Students from two public universities, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK); and two private universities, which are University College of Islam Melaka (KUIM) and Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan University College (KLMUC) were included as the respondents of this study. Purposive and snowball samplings were used to select the respondents. The criteria for the purposive sampling include the final year students from the hospitality degree program in Malaysia, where the program must be a four-year program and the students already undergone their internship with the duration of four to six months.

The semi-structured interview questions were used to elicit relevant information about core competencies among the undergraduates in public and private universities. Questions related to the participant's demographic dan core competency perceived by them were asked during the face-to-face interview. One of the main questions was "What are the core competencies that have been gained throughout your study?". Build on this main question, the latter questions derived by probing and prompting based on the information given by the respondents. The probed and prompted questions derived from the literature review, where these questions were asked to the context of the respondents accordingly.

The researcher obtained the contact details of the respondents from the university and through the snowball method. An appointment was made according to the respondent's availability and the interviews took about 45 minutes to one hour. All data were recorded and notes were taken by the researcher. The respondent validation was taken to avoid misinterpretation of the findings, thus ensuring the validity of the data.

The data were then transcribed. Codes were extracted from the transcript. Patterns and regularities of codes were analyzed and grouped into themes. The ATLAS.ti software helped the process of the thematic analysis. This software grasped every information the respondents provided, ease the arrangement of the codes and themes.



## Result and Discussion

There are eight respondents for this study. The demographics of the respondents is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic profile of the respondents

ID	Gender	Age	Bachelor Program (University)	Semester	CGPA	Work Experiences	Internship Placement
R1	Female	23	Food Service Management (UPM)	8	3.40	Food server, Cashier, Seller, Seamstress	Hospital Sultanah Bayah
R2	Male	24	Hospitality (UMK)	8	2.80	Food server, Officer, Seller	Power Sources Company Kajang
R3	Female	23	Food Service Management (UPM)	8	3.44	Cashier, Seller, Cook	Hospital Sultanah Bayah
R4	Male	23	Hospitality (UMK)	8	3.23	Cook, Seller, Housekeeper	Prescott Hotel
R5	Male	24	Hospitality Management (KUIM)	7	2.89	Cook, Society volunteer	MOTAC, Putrajaya
R6	Female	24	Hospitality Management (KUIM)	8	3.67	Babysitter, Seller, Cook, Cashier	Bangi Wonderland
R7	Female	24	Hotel and Restaurant Management (KLMUC)	7	3.54	Food server, Promoter, Miller	Berjaya Times Square Hotel
R8	Male	24	Hotel and Restaurant Management, (KLMUC)	7	3.42	Food server, Housekeeper, Businessperson	Berjaya Times Square Hotel

Based on Table 2, there are equal representatives in term of gender for public and private universities. The respondents age range between the ages of 23 to 24.

Each of four universities was represented by two undergraduates, where the students were in the program of Bachelor Science in Food Service and Management from UPM, Bachelor in Hotel and Restaurant Management from KLMUC, and Bachelor Hospitality Management from UMK and

KUIM. Majority of the respondents were in the eighth semester and obtained CGPA above 3.00. They have work experiences as part-timer for various position; such as seller, food server, cashier, cook and housekeeper. The respondents undergone their internship at various places, for examples hospital, theme park and hotel.

### ***Thematic Analysis for Core Competency Perceived by the Hospitality Undergraduates***

The inductive approach had been used in this study, where the codes were extracted from the transcripts, the patterns and regularities of the codes were analyzed and clustered into themes. The inclusion of codes into certain themes and the name of the themes were developed based on the literature review. There were eight themes emerged for the core competencies perceived by the respondents throughout their undergraduate studies. Table 3 shows the components of each theme, namely: 1) communication skill, 2) leadership skill, 3) moral and professional ethics, 4) entrepreneurial skill, 5) lifelong learning and information management, 6) teamwork skill, 7) technical skill, and 8) critical thinking and problem solving. The codes frequency is also shown in the table, where the themes are arranged from the highest number of codes to the lowest.

Table 3: Themes for the core competencies perceived by the hospitality undergraduates

No.	Theme	Components of the theme	Codes frequency of the theme
1.	Communication skill	- Confidence in communication - Writing skill - Oral interaction - English communication	26
2.	Lifelong learning and information management	- Management planning - Time management - Operation information - Follow instruction	24
3.	Technical skill	- Customer service - Computer skill - Multitasking - Cooking skill	19
4.	Moral and professional ethics	- Job commitment - Willingness to work - Work ethics	16
5.	Teamwork skill	- Brainstorming - Contribute to group	13
6.	Critical thinking and problem solving	- Idea generation - Problem solving	9
7.	Leadership skill	- Organizing skill - Giving instruction	9
8.	Entrepreneurial skill	- Business strategy	4

**Communication skill**

This theme comprises four components: oral interaction, confidence in communication, English communication, and writing skill. One of the respondents mentioned that she learned the communication skill through the assignments given by the lecturers, where the student had to interact with the industry people, for example a restaurant manager, to get the information to complete the assignment. The oral interaction with professional people was part of the communication competencies that respondents develop throughout her studies.

*“For communication skill, we have to interact with the industry people. Basically, we were given assignments by a lecturer where we have to interact with restaurant managers or supervisors. Through the assignment, I have learned how to communicate and interact with many of professional people.” (R1)*

Another respondent mentioned that she had to be confident in communication during her internship, as she was out of her comfort zone. Talking to a supervisor was different and required a higher confidence level, as compared to communicating with her friends. Most of the courses enrolled by the respondents were conducted in English, where this enhanced their English communication competency, besides the writing skill and oral interaction.

It is agreed that communication is an essential element to succeed in job interviews and career development (Ismail, Yussof & Sieng, 2011; Ladkin & Juwaheer, 2000; Lawrence, 2002; Sewell & Pool, 2010). According to Macintyre, Dornyei, Clément and Noels (1998), communication is the most vital competency as it is viewed as the medium to an individual’s knowledge and portray the confidence of someone. Clearly, communication competency is very important in the hospitality industry and majority of the respondents perceived they practiced this competency during their studies in the university. The communication skill was the most frequent skill elaborated by the respondents in this study.

**Lifelong learning and information management skill**

This skill consists of these components: management planning, time management, operation information and follow instruction. The respondents described they gained this competency from society programs, internship and from their part-time job.

*“From the program that I have joined, I need fewer instructions as I know what to do in the program. However, to satisfy my boss, I still need to follow the instruction given but at the same time, I learn what they are expecting from me.” (R5)*

The respondents also mentioned on the time management, which is one of the important competencies to them as they learned to be punctual and complete tasks within the given time duration. Further, some of the respondents gained the management planning skill when they had the

responsibility to manage an event. They learned from their supervisors on how to plan and arrange an event to be systematic and successful. The lifelong learning reflects the independent learning. The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia expected undergraduates to have the skill of searching relevant information for knowledge acquisition and to have ongoing learning (Shakir, 2009).

### **Technical skill**

The technical skill comprises four components: multitasking, computer skill, customer service, and cooking skill. The respondents perceived that they obtained and enhanced the technical skill through an internship, part-time work and courses with lab. For example, before entering the university, they only have a basic computer skill. Once they enrolled for courses in the university, the students improved their skill in using software like Microsoft Office and statistical software. On the other part, they also learned about customer service, which is extremely essential in the hospitality industry. Most of the technical skills that they learned in classes were applicable to their jobs in the hospitality industry. One of the respondents delineated:

*“There is one course where we learned about service sequence. How the flow in serving guests starting from greeting them at the door until the guests leave. This skill is applicable to our internship.” (R4)*

The respondents also mentioned on the multitasking, which they obtained this skill mostly during the internship. Multitasking refers to the skill possesses by a person who can manage and do a number of tasks at the same time. It is supported by Baum et al. (1997) who agreed that hospitality graduates should obtain the multitasking skill due to the dynamic work environment of the hospitality industry.

### **Moral and professional ethics**

There are three components under the moral and professional ethics: work ethics, job commitment, and willingness to work. The respondents reported they gained the moral and professional ethics skill mostly during their internship. They need to learn about the work ethics of an internship’s company, the standard operating procedure (SOP) and adapt to the work environment:

*“I observe what they do to the society. I applied all the professional and ethics from the top management especially the experienced superiors.” (R8)*

In addition, the respondent perceived that their personality has improved during the internship and they were committed to their job, particularly completing the given tasks before the deadlines. The respondent defined job commitment as the responsibility to accomplish the

organization's goals. Job commitment to the organization has been a compelling interest to industrial psychologists due to the impact of work behavior (Robbins, 1993).

### **Teamwork skill**

There are two components under the teamwork skill: contribute to group and brainstorming. Both components were practiced in classes, where they have to exchange ideas and contribute to complete group assignments.

*"Teamwork is very important when we are in an organization, where everyone has been assigned with a certain task. Everyone has to contribute to complement other's task." (R3)*

Teamwork is vital in the hospitality industry, where the contribution from every employee needs to be synchronized to meet and exceed guests' expectations (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Weber, Crawford, Lee, & Dennison, 2013; Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera, 2009). The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006) encouraged undergraduates to be able to work in a team, which consist of members from diverse backgrounds. The skill includes the ability to build relationships, interact and work effectively towards achieving an objective.

### **Critical thinking and problem solving**

The components of this theme comprises problem solving and idea generation. This competency was obtained and escalated through exams, course's assignments and internship. For example, students were given case studies in their assignments, where they need to solve the problems experienced by an organization and considering related factors that might affect the solution. It is stated in the interview:

*"We were given a problem in the assignment, for example in a government sector, a person wants to claim RM150,000 for the program she manages, but the available budget provided is only RM100,000. So we have to think how to solve it. We need to check related documents, the financial statement and other factors. This assignment affects the way I think." (R5)*

During the internship, the respondents stated that they need to impress their supervisor by generating ideas for improvement, particularly to improve the efficiency of their job. Their supervisor also tested the students' ability to solve problems, which within the context of this study: customers' complaints and problems. Critical thinking has been recognized as an essential skill in higher education institutions (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006). Hospitality managers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century require critical thinking to sustain in the labour market (Cho, Schmelzer, & McMahan, 2002).

### **Leadership skill**

This theme comprises two components: organizing skill and giving instruction. These components emerged as the respondents perceived they had the responsibilities of giving instructions and manage their peers when organizing an event or a program. This is shown through a statement below:

*“There, I learned about leadership. For example, we were given a task by the lecturer to decorate the restaurant with Hari Raya theme. The group members need to contribute ideas where I was in charge to lead and ensure the event will run smooth. I have to decide and give instructions to my group members.” (R3)*

The organizing skill is one of the important elements particularly in the hospitality industry. The skill relates not only to an event; to the human relations too. In this study, majority of the respondents from private universities mentioned they always involved in the student council where they hold a leadership position and take charge to manage other students to achieve certain goals. The leadership skill has long been regarded as multifaceted and includes a wide range of behaviors such as monitoring subordinates, setting rules and regulations, giving instructions and deadlines, and motivating subordinates to work hard (Misumi, 1985).

### **Entrepreneurial skill**

There was only one component under the entrepreneurial skill which is a business strategy. The respondents informed they gained this skill in classes that focused on the entrepreneurship. The basic entrepreneurship course has been a compulsory course in Malaysian public universities since 2012 (Sukaimi, 2017). They also gained the skill in their part-time work, for example sales and marketing job. It is depicted in the statement:

*“It is very important when applying for a job, we need to have knowledge related to on how can we strategize the success of the organization business that we will join. I plan to open a business, but I need to explore more about the industry. That is why I think entrepreneurship is very important for our future.” (R1)*

The respondents also stated that they learn about the business proposal and strategic management by selling products required in the basic entrepreneurship course. The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006) expected undergraduates would be able to identify business opportunities and develop business proposals. However, the entrepreneurial skill was the least frequent skill mentioned by the respondents in this study, as compared to other skills.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Determining relevant competencies and skill sets has helped human resource managers over the years to improve selection and hiring practices, in developing strategies to retain managers, and for the career planning initiatives (Johansson and Winroth, 2010). This study attempted to explore the core competencies perceived by the hospitality undergraduates from public and private universities, specifically from the final year students.

It is found in this study that there are eight core competencies perceived by the hospitality undergraduates in both public and private universities, throughout their studies: communication skill,

lifelong learning and information management, technical skill, moral and professional ethics, teamwork skill, critical thinking and problem-solving, leadership skill and entrepreneurial skill. The most frequent skill mentioned by the respondents was communication. Majority of the respondents explained that they learned to communicate well in their university as there were many platforms to practice communication, for example through assignments. The students had to communicate with industry people to gain information in completing the assignment and do the presentation in class. On the other side, the entrepreneurial skill was the least mentioned by the respondents. Entrepreneurship is still in the infancy stage for most of the higher education institutions, as the compulsory course of basic entrepreneurship was just introduced over the last six years (Sukaimi, 2017).

There are some skills which have different components compared to the previous studies, although within the similar hospitality context. For example, the technical skill. The components of the technical skill found in this study were a bit different as compared to the ones suggested by Ruetzler, Baker, Reynolds, Taylor and Allen (2014). The authors proposed that technical skill that should be obtained by hospitality practitioners includes letter writing, e-mailing, scheduling, interacting with guests and employees, budgeting, forecasting, and strategic planning (Ruetzler et al., 2014). While the components of the technical skill perceived by the respondents comprise multitasking, computer skill, customer service, and cooking skill. The difference might derive as the respondents of this study were students, and they have yet to become a practitioner, which require a higher level of skill possession.

Generally, this study is anticipated to give an insight into the current competencies gained by the hospitality undergraduates, both in public and private universities. The findings can be an indicator to the hospitality recruiters on what to expect to the fresh graduates who are looking for a job. Besides, it helps the management team to strategize and structure trainings needed by the fresh graduates. It is also aimed for educators to fill in the gap between the competencies delivered to undergraduates with the competencies demanded by the industry. The improvement can be made by reviewing the courses and curriculum in the hospitality programs. This will in turn improve the employability of Malaysian hospitality graduates. It is recommended to conduct further research on the investigation of specific competencies required by the hospitality industry, particularly within the specific sector, such as competencies needed by fresh graduates in the hotel industry. In addition, future research may focus on the effective delivery of the competencies, to identify what mechanism may help the students to fully practice and enhance the skills.

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