

# Understanding the Covid-19 Pandemic Impact on Hospitality Industry: An Industry Perspective on Graduates' Employability in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Due to the adverse impact of COVID-19 on hospitality business operations and viability, industry viewpoints are essential to assessing the employability of recent graduates. Consequently, the aims of this study were to (1) grasp the effects of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry and (2) determine the impacts on hospitality graduates' employability from an industrial perspective. Qualitative research was employed to obtain hospitality industry representatives' opinions, and the data were analyzed utilizing a thematic approach with the Atlas.ti software. The COVID-19 significantly influenced the business operation, thus impacting graduate employability. Therefore, essential employability skills highlighted by industry needs, namely entrepreneurship skills, analytical or critical thinking, communication, and teamwork are vital for graduates' employability. In addition, substantial knowledge has been pointed out based on participants' prior experiences in these unprecedented circumstances. There are few empirical studies that have investigated the employability of hospitality graduates during or after the COVID-19 pandemic; nonetheless, this study presents valuable industry insights that can aid Higher Learning Institutions (HLI) in improving curricula, hence indirectly strengthening the employability of hospitality graduates. Conclusions and suggestions have been drawn in relation to industry viewpoints to solicit the interest of hospitality practitioners in higher education institutions and scholars.

**Keywords:** Graduates employability, Hospitality graduates, Industry perspective.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the global economy and society, causing widespread fear affecting individuals, institutions, and nations. Businesses have struggled to survive, with some adopting innovative strategies, but many still reported losses leading to downsizing and cost-cutting. The World Tourism Organisation United Nations or UNWTO (2020) attested that the global lockdown and travel restrictions disrupted the operations of travel and leisure businesses worldwide, which greatly impacted the entire travel and leisure industry, especially the hospitality sector. Besides, social distancing measures, bans on mass events, and various travel restrictions including border closure caused severe impacts on travel and leisure industries particularly the hospitality industry. Hence the

present study examined the impact of the pandemic on the hospitality industry in the Malaysian context. The Malaysian government, like other nations, implemented a range of restrictions to curb the spread of the virus which inadvertently resulted in significant revenue losses, widespread layoffs and business closures. Previous studies have highlighted that the primary consequences of lockdown policies were fear of job loss and financial insecurity among employees (Khan et al., 2021; Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020).

Consequently, the issue of graduate employability has become a matter of significant concern, garnering serious attention from the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), Ministry of Human Resources, and scholars. Graduate Statistics 2020 released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) showed that the unemployment rate among degree and diploma graduates increased by 0.5% to 4.4% in 2020, compared to 3.9% in 2019. The labour market remained uncertain during the pandemic, which further increased the unemployment rate by 0.1% to 4.9% in January 2021 compared to 4.8% in December 2020 (Tatt, 2021). The situation made it challenging for recent graduates to secure employment in their desired field due to the limited number of job opportunities. Therefore, it is essential to examine the COVID-19 impacts on the hospitality business operations to examine how the adversity affected graduate employability in the field.

## **2. COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on the Hospitality Industry and Graduate Employability**

The Movement Control Orders (MCO) implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic induced an adverse business environment in the hospitality industries since the industries are entirely services oriented. Bartik et al. 's (2020) study stated that approaches such as community lockdowns, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, travel, and mobility restrictions led to closure of hospitality businesses and decreased business demands then. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospitality industries contributed significantly to the global economy as well as created massive job opportunities. Jones and Comfort (2020) depicted that the hospitality industry consists of diverse accommodations, such as resorts, hotel complexes, and Airbnb homestays, and offered various food and beverage (F&B) services via restaurants, fast-food outlets, bars and cafés and coffee shops, which were adversely affected. The vulnerability of hospitality businesses increased by 60% towards bankruptcy (Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2021) . Many hotels and restaurants went bankrupt while others relied on economic support. The unprecedented pandemic crisis caused widespread crisis in the hospitality industry affecting small and independent ones, forcing many to lay off employees or close down (Maxwell & Armellini, 2019; Nicola et al., 2020; Herbert, Rothwell, Glover & Lambert, 2020 and Holdsworth et al., 2020). This resulted in significant job loss, business closure, economic instability, decline in hotel occupancy and liquidity problems in the restaurant industry in many countries. Not surprisingly, the effects of the crisis posed challenges for graduates to secure employment (Gössling et al. 2020), leading to greater competition among graduates for scarce job opportunities. Many hospitality graduates also struggle to translate their academic skills into practical work experience (Hossain et al., 2018) leading to difficulty in adapting to professional work culture. Although previous literature has examined the pandemic consequences on graduate employability by focusing on their attributes (e.g., Abd Majid, Sharil & Salmee, 2022; Ahmat, Bashir, Razali & Kasolang, 2021), this study highlights graduate employability in hospitality industries.

### **Hospitality Graduates' Employability**

Graduates of today face various employment challenges starting with attending job interviews and matching their skills and abilities to industry demands. Moreover, they face a strong competition in the job market as the number of graduates increase annually despite an unsteady economy and a rise in graduate unemployment (Abd Rahman, Ismail, Ridzuan, Abd Samad, 2020). In their study "Embedding Employability into the Curriculum Learning and Employability Series One," Yorke and Knight (2006) described employability as a collection of abilities, understandings, and personal characteristics that make individuals more likely to acquire employment and be successful in their chosen jobs, which benefits the individual, the workforce, the community, and the economy. Employability is apparently more than a set of qualities (Maxwell & Armellini, 2019), and employability "skills" are expected to entail the set of attributes, abilities, and behaviours, and must be

exhibited by the individual upon admission into and future transfer within the labour market (Holmes, 2003 & Yorke, 2006). Employability skills can be applied to various occupations and life events and are recognized as key or core skills (PetruzzIELLO et al., 2020; Kenayathulla, Ahmad & Idris, 2019; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014). Graduate employability is determined by fulfilling the skills needed by employers for efficient business operations, and employers criticise them for not meeting industry demands (Molefe, Roberson & Roeloffze (2019). Moreover, employers anticipate that hospitality graduates possess a wide range of skills, such as management, calculation, human relations, communication, leadership, interpersonal, and soft skills (Harkison et al., 2011). They must be equipped with appropriate technical and soft skills according to market needs. However, Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions (HLI) graduates appear to possess inadequate employability skills. Hossain et al.(2018) attest that hospitality graduates have poor employability skills and perform poorly due to the lower than average hospitality-and-tourism pay scale (Mullen, 2019; Heller, 2019; Kiersz & Warren, 2020; Chang & Tanford, 2018).

In this study context, the HLI graduates must acquire specific skills and qualities throughout their studies in the hospitality industry. Hence a rising question is: what skills do hospitality graduates require during a volatile economic and employment condition like the COVID-19? Therefore, this study investigated the COVID-19 impacts on the hospitality industry and how it affected the hospitality graduates' employability from industry perspective.

### 3. Methodology

This study focused on the hospitality industry personnel with extensive operational responsibilities and decision-making authority. A qualitative approach was employed to comprehend industrial perspectives on the pandemic implications on business operation and graduate employability. This study employed an asynchronous interview with the participants via Google forms disseminated through WhatsApp due to the professionals' busy work schedule, and the restrictions on face-to-face meetings during the pandemic. The interviews were conducted in eight (8) weeks from June to August 2021. Furthermore, the participants' email addresses were retrieved and their anonymity was specified in the introduction section. Asynchronous interviews are prevalent in qualitative research as it is cost-effective and provides in-depth information (Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). This study anticipated a small sample size using the purposive sampling technique to obtain industrial viewpoints. The participants were chosen based on their positions and experiences as top management (manager/director/supervisor) at a human resource department, where they directly manage their staff or internship students. A structured and semi-structured questionnaire consisting of seven demographic questions; three questions on the COVID-19 business operation impacts, and five questions on their insights on hospitality graduates' employability during the COVID-19 pandemic, were utilised.

The study was pilot-tested on three hospitality industry representatives and one higher learning academic to ensure expertise and clarity. Che Omar, Ishak and Jusoh (2020), Jones and Comfort (2020), and Kaushal and Srivastava's (2021) studies on the COVID-19 implications on the hospitality industry were referred to. Additionally, Hossain et al. (2018), Abbas and Sagsan (2019), Tejan and Sabil's (2019), Rain (2020), Lisá, Hannelová and Newman (2019), and Ahmad, Kenayathulla and Idris' (2017) studies on graduate employability were empirically reviewed. Table 1 illustrates the interview questions utilized.

**Table 1.** Interview Questions

| Category            | Questions  |
|---------------------|--|
| Industry background | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Organisation type</li> <li>2. Hospitality sector [please state your business sector (Hotel, Cafe, Resort)]</li> <li>3. Company name (you may exclude this question if needed)</li> <li>4. Job title (position)</li> <li>5. Gender</li> <li>6. Age</li> </ol> |

| Category   | Questions  |
|--|--|
| <b>COVID-19 impact on business operations</b>                            | <p>7. Experience (years)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Could you explain in detail the challenges faced by your organization during the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>2. As an entrepreneur or executive, do you think your establishment can endure the COVID-19 crisis?</li> <li>3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the employee working experience in your establishment?</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Hospitality graduate's employability during the COVID-19 pandemic</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the hospitality graduates' employability in your establishment?</li> <li>2. Is your organization hiring graduates during this COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>3. Could you elucidate the graduates' essential skills required during the COVID-19 crisis?</li> <li>4. Please indicate your overall opinion regarding the COVID-19 impacts on the hospitality industry towards hospitality graduates' employability?</li> <li>5. Please highlight an area in which higher learning institutions should focus to improve graduate employability?</li> </ol> |

Various qualitative research on the COVID-19 pandemic and the hospitality industry were reviewed and respective scholars have suggested that the number of participants may range between 14 to 30 after achieving the saturation in answering the questions (Phelan, 2015; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Yap & Ineson, 2009). Thus, 23 participants were deemed sufficient for an interview as their answers had achieved the saturation phase where there was similar pattern of answers. Atlast.ti software was employed to analyse the transcripts where the data was subsequently categorised, grouped, and tabulated. Table 2 depicts the participant demography.

**Table 2.** Participant profile

| Participant's coding | Organization type       | Hospitality sector   | Organizational designation    | Age (years) | Experience (years) |
|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| <b>P1</b>            | Private limited company | 5 Star Hotel         | Human Resource (HR) Executive | 25 – 31     | 6 – 10             |
| <b>P2</b>            | Sole-trader             | 4 Star Hotel         | HR Manager                    | 39 – 45     | 6 – 10             |
| <b>P3</b>            | Sole-trader             | Food and Beverage    | Director/Owner                | 39 – 45     | > 11               |
| <b>P4</b>            | Government Agency       | State Tourism Office | Administrative Officer        | 39 – 45     | > 11               |
| <b>P5</b>            | Private limited company | 4 Star Hotel         | Front Office Manager          | > 46        | > 11               |
| <b>P6</b>            | Private limited company | Food and Beverage    | Director/Owner                | 25 – 31     | 6 – 10             |
| <b>P7</b>            | Private limited company | 5 Star Hotel         | Training Manager              | > 46        | > 11               |
| <b>P8</b>            | Private limited company | Food and Beverage    | Supervisor                    | 25 – 31     | 6 – 10             |
| <b>P9</b>            | Private limited company | Cruise Ship          | Restaurant Manager            | 25 – 31     | 1 – 5              |
| <b>P10</b>           | Private limited company | 5 Star Hotel         | Senior HR Executive           | 32 – 38     | 1 – 5              |
| <b>P11</b>           | Sole-trader             | Food and Beverage    | Owner                         | 32 – 38     | 6 – 10             |

| Participant's coding | Organization type       | Hospitality sector | Organizational designation | Age (years) | Experience (years) |
|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| P12                  | Limited Company         | 4 Star Hotel       | HR Assistant               | 25 – 31     | 1 – 5              |
| P13                  | Private limited company | Food and Beverage  | Founder                    | 25 – 31     | 6 – 10             |
| P14                  | Partnership             | Food and Beverage  | HR Manager                 | 25 – 31     | 1 – 5              |
| P15                  | Private limited company | Food and Beverage  | Barista (Owner)            | 25 – 31     | 6 – 10             |
| P16                  | Sole-trader             | Food and Beverage  | Owner                      | 32 – 38     | 6 – 10             |
| P17                  | Sole-trader             | Food and Beverage  | Human Resource             | 25 – 31     | 1 – 5              |
| P18                  | Private limited company | 4 Star Hotel       | Human Resources            | 39 – 45     | > 11               |
| P19                  | Sole-trader             | Food and Beverage  | Co-owner                   | 25 – 31     | 6 – 10             |
| P20                  | Private limited company | Food and Beverage  | Owner                      | 25 – 31     | 1 – 5              |
| P21                  | Other                   | Food and Beverage  | Assistant Manager          | 25 – 31     | 1 – 5              |
| P22                  | Private limited company | Food and Beverage  | Owner                      | 25 – 31     | 1 – 5              |
| P23                  | Sole-trader             | 4 Star Hotel       | HR Executive               | 32 – 38     | 6 – 10             |

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on the Hospitality and Tourism Industry

Table 2 depicts the 23 participant profile consisting of (i) participant coding, (ii) organization type, (iii) sector, (iv) designation, (v) age, and (vi) experience. Four vital COVID-19 implications themes were elucidated: (1) government regulations, (2) operational deterioration, (3) financial issues, and (4) employee and guest safety. In addition, six sub-themes were depicted.

#### *Government regulations*

Most of the participants expressed concerns about the COVID-19 impacts on the industry, particularly government rules and regulations, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and MCO operation restrictions. The participants' opinions are highlighted below:

*“There are no clear government SOPs, which makes it difficult to operate.” - (P6)*

*“Too many government regulation uncertainties, particularly on safety issues and COVID-19.” - (P9)*

*“Inconsistent understanding and guidelines between the government SOPs (rulers) and officers on duty.” – (P19)*

From the participants' answers, it showed that the unclear or uncertain government regulations regarding the pandemic situation affected the industry causing deterioration in operations.

#### *Operational deterioration*

Operational deterioration is faced by many in the hospitality industry. The effects consisted of fewer customers, shortened operation time and staff which disrupted the flow of the overall operations. The participants' opinions are depicted as follows:

- “Lack of customers.” - (P1, P20, and P22),*  
*“Operating hours are disrupted, thus significantly affecting market size. Customers will have constraints to purchase, which reduces daily sales.” - (P21)*  
*“No dine-ins.” - (P13, and P15)*  
*“The number of employees allowed to work will also disrupt the operation flow.” (P21)*

Segal and Gerstel’s (2020) confirmed that the aviation, tourism, travel-related industries, hotels, and restaurants were the most disrupted industries during the MCO. The participants’ reservations and ambiguities increased due to the rigorous SOPs and multiple MCOs enforced during the pandemic. The participants’ opinions are presented below:

- “The SOPs received from the superiors by the on-duty personnel are always contradictory in terms of clarity, which confuses consumers in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).”- (P19)*  
*“Permission letters from the MOA are sometimes valid and sometimes are not. SMEs feel bewildered every time they face restrictions.” - (P19)*

The unprecedented COVID-19 containment measures were noted in the hotel and tourism industry operation deterioration. The participants’ expressions are presented below:

- “The number of employees allowed to work disrupts the smooth operation flow.” - (P21)*  
*“Sudden lockdown leads to guest limitations.” - (P1)*  
*“Operation cease due to the pandemic.” - (P8)*  
*“Operating hours are disrupted, significantly affecting the market size. Customers will have constraints to purchase, reducing daily sales.” - (P21)*

### **Financial issues**

The financial issues concerning cost or expenses were identified because of government regulations and deteriorating operations during the pandemic. The participants’ expressions are presented below:

- “During this pandemic, restaurants only allowed takeaway and dine in. We closed another outlet to control the operational cost and other expenses.” - (P14)*  
*“Budgets were channelled for COVID assistance.” - (P4)*  
*“Revenue did not achieve the target, and expenses were reduced.” - (P5)*  
*“Require extra costs to provide hand sanitizers and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to comply with the SOPs enforced.” - (P21)*  
*“If there are COVID-19 cases reported, the company has to bear the sanitization cost and the employee swab test cost.” - (P21)*

These findings are similar to Sultana et. al.’s, (2022) who discovered that preventative measures like halting operations for an indeterminate amount of time, social withdrawal, travel limitations, and frequent lockdown notifications had an immediate negative effect on the company. Thus, economic turmoil would undoubtedly have a negative impact on society because it will have an impact on all its stakeholders, such as financial intermediaries, the government, and employees.

### **Employee and guest safety**

Furthermore, the participants highlighted their concerns for employee and guest safety throughout the pandemic as the COVID-19 virus was evolving despite strict SOP compliance. The participant’s opinion on the hotel industry is presented below:

- “Staff and long-term guest safety and guest requests are not fulfilled.” - (P5)*

The participant elucidated on the F&B industry below:

*“If there are COVID-19 cases reported, the company has to bear the sanitization cost and the employee swab test cost. In addition, the operations must be stopped to ensure no infections. Consumers will limit purchases from restaurants to reduce infection probability and save money as their economic situations are also affected.” - (P21)*

Participants were inquired about business endurance during the pandemic and a majority of them acknowledged the challenging situation. The participants’ opinions are presented below:

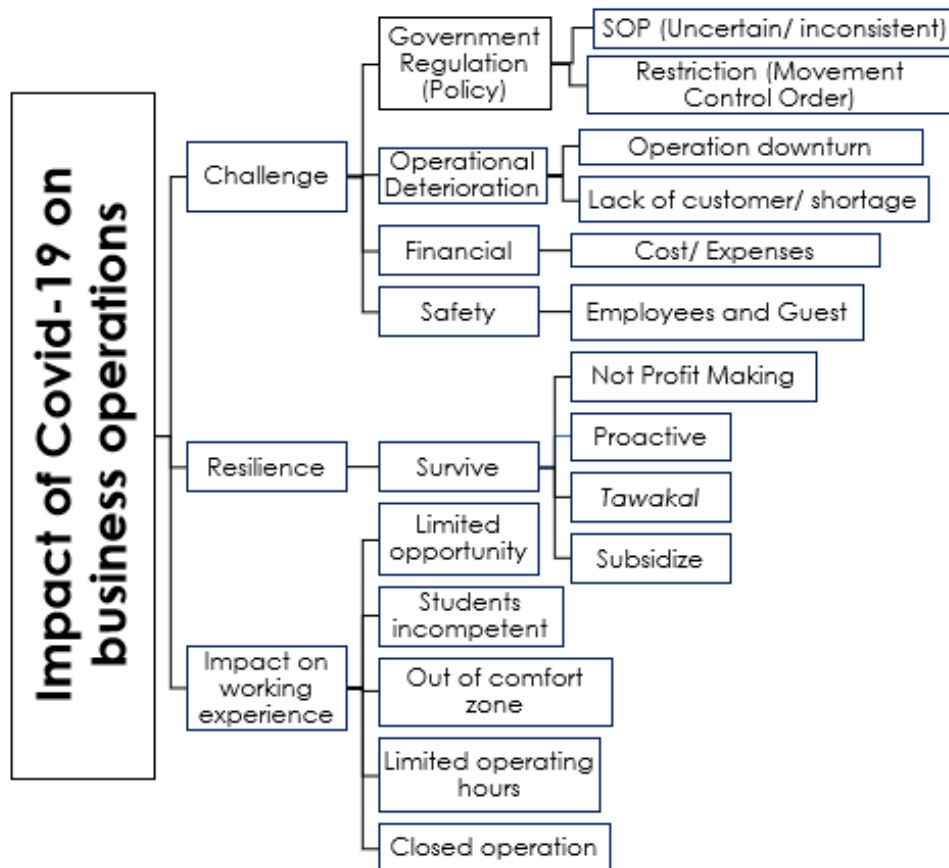
*“Yes, if everyone fully cooperates.” - (P4, P21, P7, P8, P12, P15, P16, and P18)*

*“Surviving, but not generating profit.” - (P2, P19, and P10)*

*“Yes, because food is a necessity.” - (P6)*

*“We are able but still require ministry support.” - (P23)*

Hence, this study discovered that the COVID-19 impacted employee working experience. Approximately 89% of the participants responded ‘Severe’ and ‘Major’, and the remaining 11% (F&B) participants indicated ‘Moderate’ impact on their employee’s working experience. Consequently, the participants highlighted four significant impacts on tourism and hospitality industry: i) government regulations (76.6%), ii) operational deterioration (65.5%), iii) financial issues (61.4%), and iv) employee and guest safety (61.4%). Figure 1 summarizes the overall COVID-19 impacts on the hospitality industry operations.



**Fig. 1** Summary on the Overall Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Hospitality Industry Operations

## 4.2 Industry Perspectives on Graduate Employability during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This study provided a focal outlook on hospitality graduates' employability from an industry perspective. Approximately 43% of participants indicated that the pandemic 'severely' affected graduate employability in their organisations, 34% indicated 'major' implications, and 21% indicated 'moderate' to 'insignificant' implications. The 2020 Graduate Tracer Study by MoHE indicated that the graduate employability rate decreased to 84.4% from 86.2% in 2019 (Bernama, 2021, March 12). The implications on employability are varied, particularly among hospitality graduates. This concurred with the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020) that the pandemic affected new labour market entrants, particularly fresh graduates. Furthermore, there was an increase in job competition among graduates that had to compete with unemployed (laid off) individuals during the pandemic. Hence employers expected graduates to prepare for the workplace after graduating and possess skills acquired through prior work experiences. This study depicted four prominent themes from the participants' viewpoints on the COVID-19 impact on graduates' employability: (1) entrepreneurship skills, (2) analytical or critical thinking, (3) communication, and (4) teamwork.

### *Entrepreneurship skills*

Most F&B directors or owners postulated that hospitality graduates should acquire entrepreneurship skills. Participants also believed that entrepreneurship is the most vital skill that graduates should possess. The participants' expressions are presented below:

*"Yes. In my company, we inculcate five cultures, such as entrepreneurial mindset. This skill should be instilled in hospitality graduates to understand the current situation comprehensively. They should have an entrepreneur's mindset in performing duties to serve guests quality food and delightful experiences based on the company standards."* - (P14)

*"Yes, it is vital. Entrepreneurial skills are a vital element in ensuring smooth business operations."* - (P21)

*"Yes. Very much needed. An entrepreneurial mindset teaches graduates about company management, such as cash and operation flow."* - (P10)

Participants also provided their perspectives as entrepreneurs or executives as entrepreneurial skills are vital for hospitality graduates especially during an emergency like the COVID-19 crisis. Several participants agreed that entrepreneurial skills play an essential role in graduate employability. The participants' opinions are presented below:

*"In an uncertain and unstable economic situation, entrepreneurial skills are pertinent to convince customers to purchase from our company continuously. If employees cannot convince customers, they are more likely to be financially prudent, preparing their meals at home; or purchasing from other restaurants."* - (P21)

*"Self-starters and problem solvers are needed. There are many unforeseen challenges, which no amount of experience could have prepared businesses for."* - (P13)

*"With entrepreneurial skills, other skills will be manifested indirectly in them."* - (P6)

This study discovered three desirable entrepreneurial attributes: able to seize opportunities, adapting to changes, and being innovative. The F&B owners' and assistant managers' opinions are presented below:

*"During these difficult times, graduates must seek business opportunities and ideas. It does not have to be unique but offers something that people need or cannot reject. There will be various challenges. Graduates must be risk-tolerant and do their best to survive."* - (P16)



*“Business opportunities usually change from time to time. Entrepreneurs must always be sensitive to ensure that the products offered are relevant and competitive. For example, if a restaurant sells classic yellow mesh bread, the latest market trend is offering beautiful mesh bread. Consequently, entrepreneurs need to be sensitive and try to meet market needs.” - (P21)*

*“They have to apply the knowledge acquired, comprehend opportunities that can be taken, create demands, and build a brand and personal branding.” - (P19)*

The participants highlighted that as entrepreneurs, they must adapt to unexpected changes. Six participants agreed that they must be flexible and adaptable as the business operations are constantly changing and are uncertain. Several participants expressed their views on being innovative in the hospitality industry. The opinions are presented below:

*“Give suggestions and ideas, grooming themselves as the best they can through training, has owner mentality to control operational cost and expenses.” - (P14)*

*“Ideas and networking are essential to operate a business.” - (P9)*

*“COVID-19 has changed the industry variables, and many lessons must be relearnt.” - (P11)*

### **Analytical or critical thinking**

Besides that, the participants recommended that graduates possess critical and analytical skills to endure the pandemic. This was parallel with Reyad, et. al., (2019) who found that the most effective entrepreneurial skills including critical thinking that direct students to be self-employed.

*“Critical thinking skills are crucial during the pandemic. We have to expect the unexpected.” - (P12)*

*“We need new hires that can provide solutions as not everyone is allowed to work and be at their station all the time.” - (P1)*

*“Need to be able to think outside the box and cooperate to ensure business survival.” - (P16)*

*“Graduates should analyze a problem and suggest improved solutions.” - (P11 and P18)*

### **Communication**

The third primary skills which graduates possess during the COVID-19 pandemic are communication skills.

*“Communication is vital for daily operation and organization smoothness.” – (P12)*

*“The news and SOPs keep fluctuating, and staff must be aware through frequent communication.” – (P10)*

*“Communication is vital for graduates, especially how to communicate in cyberspace.” – (P20 and P22)*

Communication skills are extremely important to the hospitality entrepreneur, especially in negotiation and handling complaints from customers (Bukhari, et.al., 2022). In fact, communication skills have also been classified as generic skills either oral or written (Ebekozi, et.al., 2022).

## Teamwork

The next competency needed is teamwork. Five participants depicted that teamwork is vital during the pandemic. The participants' expressions are presented below:

*"It is essential to act wisely based on the situation."* – (P20 and P22)

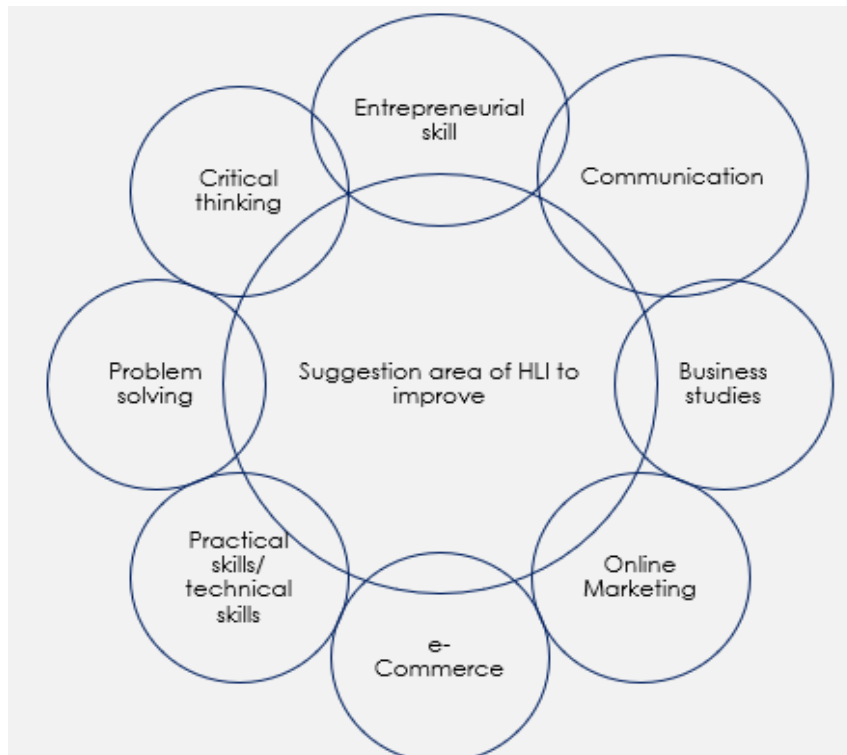
*"During the pandemic, teamwork is highly encouraged because, in some places, people cannot go out to work. Therefore, workers who remain have to work together."* – (P18)

*"During this critical situation, we prefer employees in the same boat with us and have gone through this situation together."* – (P14)

*"It is imperative to be consistent with our brand despite these challenging times. This is how we build long-term trust."* – (P13)

These findings support the previous study by Bukhari, et.al. (2022) who noted that teamwork is one of the important competencies required related to human relations in the context of entrepreneurship. Moreover, this finding is consistent with a study from Phuong and Huy (2022) which teamwork activities have a significant impact on employee performance and provide a number of benefits for an organisation.

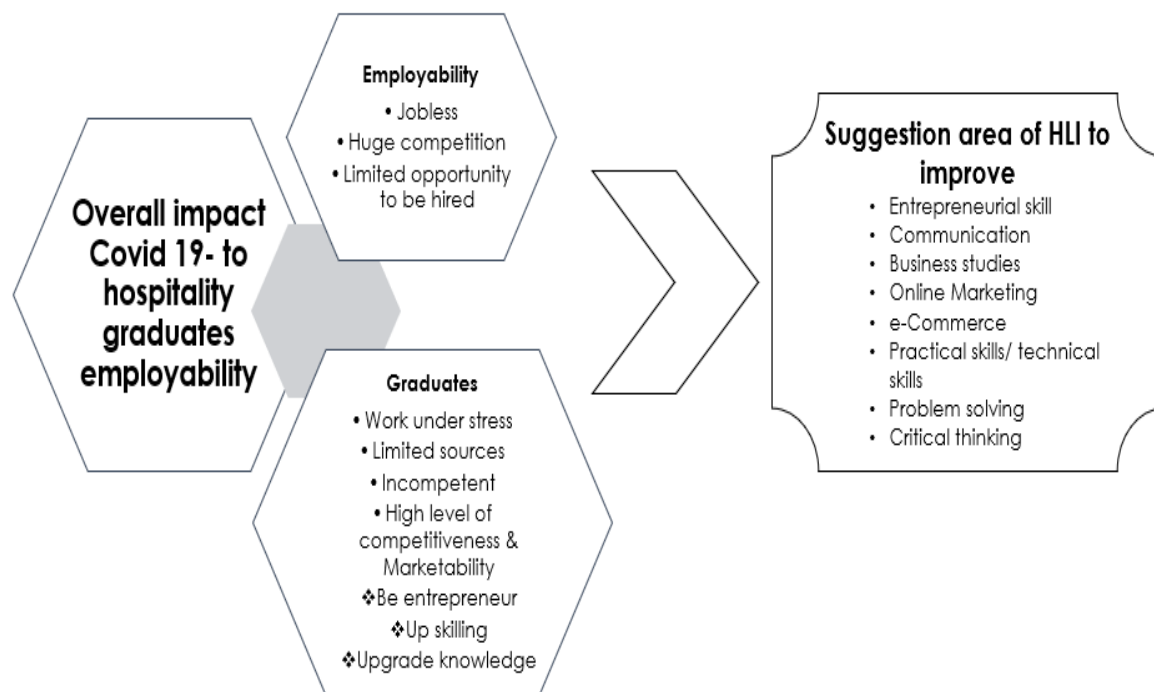
In accordance with the objectives of the study, industry representatives were also asked to describe the essential skills required of graduates and to recommend areas on which HLI should emphasise to enhance graduate employability. Figure 2 presents a summary of the industry suggestions in which HLI should engage with to enhance employability among graduates majoring in hospitality courses.



**Fig. 2** Summary of the industry-recommended areas on which institutions of higher learning should emphasise to enhance the employability of graduates.

## 5. Discussion

In the event of obtaining industry perspectives pertaining to the hospitality graduates' essential skills, the industry values entrepreneurship skills, analytical and critical thinking, communication, and teamwork in graduates during the pandemic crises. These findings corroborated Nadarajah's (2021) study, hence postulating that graduates have the majority of generic employability qualities but need to improve their communication, problem-solving, and analytical skills. Besides, in the twenty-first century, graduates are expected to have employability skills such as information and communications technology skills, problem solving and analytical skills, the ability to learn, communication skills, and interpersonal skills (Humburg and Velden, 2013). Nevertheless, this study indicates that the local hospitality industry personnel perceived the current generation as too spoiled and not resilient. Despite the decline in consumer demands, both large and small businesses are concerned about maintaining payroll. Gossling et al. (2020) contend that COVID-19's effects on the industry would be harmful. However, there is limited research addressing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employability of graduates especially during an emergency like the recent pandemic. This study illustrates useful industry insights (depicted in Figure 3) that may aid HLI of hospitality and tourism education in enhancing employability of hospitality graduates.



**Fig. 3** Overall Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Graduates' Employability and Recommendations area for Higher Learning Institutions

In reference to Figure 3, this study acquired the industry perspectives on the hospitality industry operations during the pandemic. In addition, the implications on the employment of recent graduates were also discussed. A few industry representatives highlighted layoffs, intense competition, and limited employment opportunities for graduates. According to the Graduate Statistics 2020 report, the battle for jobs among graduates is intensifying as more people who lost their jobs during the epidemic are unemployed. A recent study by Mohd Shariff and Zainol Abidin (2022) informs that educational institutions are also trying to increase employability amidst the challenges of limited jobs, the necessity for new skills, and the significance of technology skills, soft skills, and entrepreneurial competencies in the workplace.

## **5.1 Conclusion and Industry Recommendations for Higher Learning Institutions in Hospitality Education**

Training students to adopt employment practices in a subject area depends on learning, teaching, and evaluation techniques embedded in the curriculum's broader context (York & Knight 2006). In accordance with this strategy, Maxwell and Armellini (2019) advocate the development of students' personal literacy, ensuring that they not only possess the necessary employability skills but can also express them upon entry into the labour market. This is in line with Abd Rahman et al. (2020) discovery that more than a quarter of graduates intend to become entrepreneurs if they remain unemployed for more than a year. Figure 3 displays the recommendations of industry representatives who believe that pursuing entrepreneurship, acquiring new skills, and broadening one's knowledge base is a sound approach because it helps to stimulate graduate employability by generating additional job opportunities. In addition, Abd Rahman et al. (2020) study observed that young graduates in Malaysia continue to rely largely on public or private sector employment. Additionally, they lack initiative to self-learn and apply new skills upon post-graduation. As such, HLI must modify their curricula by incorporating specific traits and skills that may boost employability among graduates.

This study has filled the gap by disclosing pertinent information from industry partners. Twenty-three participants from Malaysia's tourism and hospitality industry were asynchronously interviewed for this study, and their responses helped identify certain skills and competences that HLI could highlight to improve the employability of their students majoring in hospitality courses. Figure 2 stipulated that hospitality graduates should be endowed with entrepreneurial skills, communication skills, business studies, online-marketing, e-commerce, practical or technical skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Nine out of twenty-three participants were among the directors, founders or owners of F&B businesses who agreed that entrepreneurial mindset and skills are vital elements in ensuring smooth business operations. The findings of the study is consistent with recent research that identified entrepreneurial skills as competitive attributes that graduates must possess. Entrepreneurship skills can foster graduate self-development to deal with growing competitiveness and globalisation of the industry in the twenty-first century (Mohd Shariff & Zainol Abidin, 2022; Goryushkina et. al, 2019). Therefore, the majority of the industry representatives recommended the cultivation of entrepreneurial skills among graduates so that other essential skills could be learned indirectly too.

The findings emphasised that the COVID-19 crisis has a significant impact on the hospitality business operation, impacting the industry on hospitality graduates' employability. Therefore, essential employability skills based on industry needs, such as entrepreneurship skills, analytical or critical thinking, communication, and teamwork are vital to increase graduate employability. The industry players' perspectives are vital for bridging the existing knowledge gap between the current HLI practice and preparing graduates with the required skills. It is advised that the HLI revamp their curricula in order to incorporate the combination of essential skills and suggested industrial skills that can turn graduates into highly employable human capital. Future research should focus on the integrated hospitality courses syllabus and the graduate employability data. Scholars or policymakers of HLI should incorporate the suggestions in the curricula, as well as monitor the effectiveness of graduate employability.

## **8. Co-Author Contribution**

Author 1: Conceptualization, writing the manuscript, data collection, analysis and interpretation, Author 2: writing/reviewing methodology and final manuscript approval. Author 3: Data collection and writing literature. Author 4: Data collection and writing literature.

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