



# Academic Completion to Job-Seeking Ventures: Voices of Hospitality Management Graduates

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## Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the job-seeking experiences of Hospitality Management graduates from the Palompon Institute of Technology (PIT), Eastern Visayas, Philippines. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, data from 11 graduates were analyzed, yielding four key themes: (1) Mixed Emotions in the Transition Period, (2) Taking Action Amidst Uncertainty, (3) Expectations Shattered by Reality, and (4) PIT as a Source of Preparation and Identity. Findings revealed that graduates navigated the post-graduation stage with a blend of pride and anxiety, shaped by the pressures of employment uncertainty. While pragmatic strategies such as processing documents, interim work, and skills training supported adaptation, participants encountered systemic barriers including employer preference for experienced hires, stiff competition, and financial burdens in job applications. Importantly, PIT's academic preparation, OJT programs, and TESDA certifications were perceived as crucial in developing applied skills, professional identity, and confidence. Graduates also highlighted the importance of soft skills, discipline, and adaptability in sustaining employability. The study concludes that employability outcomes are influenced not only by technical expertise but also by transferable skills and institutional support. Recommendations are directed toward enhancing curriculum industry linkages, addressing the "experience paradox," and expanding policy interventions to ease graduate transitions.

## Keywords:

*Job-seeking experiences, employability, mixed emotions, OJT, curriculum.*

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## Impacts of the Study

- **For Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):** Provides evidence-based feedback to improve curriculum design, internship programs, and career support services aligned with industry needs.
- **For the Hospitality Industry:** Highlights the value of offering entry-level training, mentoring, and competency-based recruitment to strengthen workforce quality and reduce turnover.
- **For Policy Makers:** Informs workforce planning and the development of employability frameworks and regional programs to reduce underemployment and labor migration.
- **For Students and Graduates:** Offers practical insights on adaptability, resilience, and transferable skills to better navigate the transition from school to work.
- **For Society at Large:** Contributes to economic growth, stronger academic–industry linkages, and more inclusive workforce development in Eastern Visayas and beyond.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of employability in modern societies is of central importance because it affects not only individuals but also educational institutions, employers, and national economies. For individuals, employability enhances competitiveness, supports career development, and enables access to jobs aligned with personal goals. From an educational perspective, employability studies inform curriculum design and pedagogy, ensuring graduates acquire the skills demanded by the labor market. Employers view employability as crucial for recruitment and workforce development, while at the societal level, employability strengthens economic growth and social stability by aligning human capital with industry needs (Valdez et al., 2024).

In the Philippine context, the transition from tertiary education to employment remains a challenge, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sector, which contributes significantly to the national economy. Recent labor reports emphasize the importance of soft skills, adaptability, and practical readiness in graduate hiring, yet many employers continue to note gaps in these areas (Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS], 2024). The Philippine Statistics Authority (2020) further highlights persistent underemployment, with a large share of graduates taking roles outside their fields of study, reflecting a mismatch between educational preparation and labor market expectations.

National and international organizations have underscored these structural concerns. The World Bank (2022) reported that while the Philippines has a relatively young and expanding workforce, many graduates struggle to secure decent work due to limited practical exposure and weak industry linkages in higher education. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) identified education–employment mismatches as one of the main drivers of labor migration, with hospitality and service-oriented graduates often seeking employment abroad.

Although several tracer studies across Philippine state universities and colleges provide quantitative data on graduate employment rates, salary levels, and industry relevance, they rarely capture the subjective realities of graduates' job-seeking experiences. Roxas and

Mina (2019), for instance, demonstrated through phenomenological research that exploring the lived experiences of business graduates in Dumaguete revealed deeper insights into employability perceptions than tracer surveys alone. However, no study to date has focused on the lived job-seeking experiences of hospitality management graduates in Eastern Visayas, leaving a gap in understanding how academic preparation, industry expectations, and local labor market conditions interact in shaping employability outcomes.

This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of Hospitality Management graduates from Palompon Institute of Technology (PIT). By employing a phenomenological lens, it captures the emotions, strategies, and challenges of graduates as they transition into the workforce. The findings aim to inform curriculum reform, strengthen academic–industry linkages, and provide practical guidance for students, employers, and policymakers.

This study is anchored on two complementary frameworks: School-to-Work Transition (STWT) Theory and Career Construction Theory (CCT).

The STWT Theory highlights the processes and challenges shaping how students move from education into the labor market. Bynner and Parsons (2002) showed how socioeconomic background, education systems, and labor markets influence transitions. In the Philippine context, Pineda and Velasco (2022) found that weak career guidance and limited industry linkages delay employment, while Cardoso and da Silva (2021) stressed that skill mismatches prolong job searching and increase precarious work. This makes STWT highly relevant for hospitality graduates in Eastern Visayas, where industry opportunities are still limited.

Complementing this, CCT (Savickas, 2013) underscores how individuals actively construct their careers through adaptability and narrative-building. Recent studies affirm its importance: Koen et al. (2022) found that career adaptability predicts job-seeking success, while Caballero et al. (2021) showed that narrative identity and proactive planning help graduates navigate uncertain labor markets.

By combining STWT and CCT, the study situates employability as both a structural process (influenced by education and labor markets) and a personal journey (shaped by adaptability and lived experiences). This dual lens provides a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies employed by hospitality management graduates, ensuring that both institutional and individual perspectives are captured.

Guided by this framework, the study seeks to explore the job-seeking experiences of hospitality management graduates, focusing on four domains of inquiry:

To determine the lived experiences of Hospitality Management graduates during their transition from academic life to the hospitality job market.

To identify the specific challenges encountered by graduates in seeking employment in the hospitality sector.

To examine how the academic preparation and internship experiences at PIT influenced their job-seeking journey.

To formulate recommendations for higher education institutions, hospitality employers, and future graduates to enhance employability and ease the school-to-work transition.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management (BSHM) graduates from Palompon Institute of Technology (PIT) as they navigate the transition from academic life to the hospitality labor market. Phenomenology is well-suited for this inquiry as it aims to uncover the essence of participants' experiences by exploring how they perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their job-seeking journeys. This approach is consistent with Moustakas' (1994) emphasis on capturing individual realities to reveal universal themes inherent to a phenomenon.

The target participants were PIT BSHM graduates from the last three academic years who have actively engaged in seeking employment in the hospitality sector after graduation. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who meet the following inclusion criteria:

1. Completion of a BSHM degree from PIT,
2. Engagement in job-seeking activities within the hospitality industry, and
3. Willingness and ability to articulate their experiences in detail.

Alumni databases, professional networks, and peer referrals will serve as initial recruitment channels. Sampling will continue until data saturation is reached, defined as the point at which no new themes emerge from the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Given the geographical dispersion of alumni, this study employed a Google Forms-based open-ended questionnaire to elicit rich qualitative narratives. This method was selected to ensure accessibility, broaden participation, and accommodate graduates who may be working in different regions or abroad. To encourage depth and reflection, each guiding question required a minimum 200-word narrative response, prompting participants to provide detailed accounts of their job-seeking experiences.

The instrument is carefully developed based on an Alignment Matrix that linked the research objectives, domains of inquiry, and guiding questions. This ensured coherence between the conceptual framework and the data-gathering tool. The questionnaire contained open-ended, semi-structured prompts aligned with the four research objectives:

Lived experiences during the transition from academic life to employment,

Challenges encountered in securing a job,

Influence of academic preparation and internship experiences, and

Recommendations for enhancing graduate employability.

The final version is disseminated through email and official alumni communication platforms, with explicit instructions regarding voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the estimated time required (20–30 minutes). Participants are encouraged to reflect deeply before submission, ensuring richer narrative accounts.

Upon retrieval, responses were automatically compiled through the Google Forms platform, exported into spreadsheet format, and systematically organized according to the study's objectives. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the researcher conducted a completeness check of responses, engaged in selective follow-up clarification with participants via email, and maintained an audit trail documenting all stages of data collection and handling. This combination of methodological rigor and digital data management ensure both accessibility and robustness of the collected narratives, providing a solid foundation for phenomenological coding and analysis.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted with guidance from Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013), which emphasizes career adaptability and meaning-making, and School-to-Work Transition Theory (Bynner & Parsons, 2002), which situates individual experiences within structural labor market contexts. This dual framework captured both the personal narratives of graduates and the institutional and labor market structures shaping their transition.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework:

1. Familiarization – immersion in transcripts through repeated reading;
2. Generating initial codes – systematically coding significant data segments;
3. Searching for themes – grouping related codes into preliminary themes;
4. Reviewing themes – checking coherence against coded extracts and the entire dataset;
5. Defining and naming themes – refining thematic boundaries and meanings; and
6. Producing the report – integrating findings with relevant literature.

The process was guided by a phenomenological lens, with emphasis on horizontalization—treating all statements as having equal value before clustering them into meaning units and composite descriptions.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness: credibility (through prolonged engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing), transferability (via thick description of participants and context), dependability (through an audit trail of research decisions), and confirmability (via reflexive journaling to reduce bias).

Ethical standards is strictly observed in line with Palompon Institute of Technology and international guidelines. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation and the right to withdraw. Anonymity and data confidentiality was assured, with information used solely for academic purposes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Graduates' Post-Graduation Transition Experiences.

Theme	Key Codes / Subthemes	Illustrative Quote	Participants (IDs)
Mixed Emotions in the Transition Period	Joy & pride; pressure; confusion/uncertainty; missing school; hope; fear	"The first months... were a mix of joy and pressure... after the celebration, I felt the weight of 'what's next?'" (p1)	p1, p2, p3, p5, p6, p9, p10
Taking Action Amidst Uncertainty	Processing papers; rest & recovery; interim work; OJT; TESDA training; pragmatic job shifts	"I immediately processed my papers for employment—important cards needed when applying." (p3)	p1, p3, p4, p5, p7, p8, p11
Expectations Shattered by Reality	Expected easy/fast hiring; employers want experience; competition; rejections; slow process; administrative burdens	"Before I graduated, I expected finding a job would be fast and easy... in reality, it was harder." (p1)	p1, p2, p3, p4, p6, p7, p8, p9, p10, p11
PIT as a Source of Preparation and Identity	Institutional belonging; perceived preparedness; OJT/WIL; TESDA credentials	"My 2nd home is PIT—it's so memorable about teachers and friends." (p8)	p7, p8,

The data gathered from 11 graduates (p1–p11) were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Coding and clustering yielded **four overarching themes** that capture the lived transition from academic completion to job-seeking ventures.

### Theme 1: Mixed Emotions in the Transition Period

The first few months after graduation were often described as an emotional crossroads. While participants celebrated pride, joy, and relief at completing their degrees, they also articulated pressure, fear, and uncertainty about what lay ahead. Missing the familiar routines of school life (p1, p3, p5) further compounded these feelings. This suggests that the transition to professional life is not linear but marked by emotional turbulence, consistent with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which underscores the psychological adjustment to change. Graduates revealed a blend of pride, relief, and lingering anxiety or confusion post-graduation. This emotional complexity aligns with Magier's (2025) qualitative study, which uncovered distress, self-doubt, and pressure among newly graduated



students navigating their next steps. These emotional fluctuations underscore the importance of psychological preparedness during the academic-to-career transition. As one participant expressed, *“The first months... were a mix of joy and pressure... I felt the weight of ‘what’s next?’”* (p1). Another echoed this sentiment, stating, *“I feel pressure because I didn’t know how and where to start”* (p10).

## **Theme 2: Taking Action Amidst Uncertainty**

Despite emotional ambiguity, graduates navigated their post-graduation phase through concrete, pragmatic strategies. Several processed documents and employment requirements (p3, p8), while others took interim jobs (p7 at Tubby Café) or enrolled in training programs such as TESDA Bread and Pastry NC II (p7). Some opted for a temporary pause to rest before beginning job hunting (p5). These deliberate actions reflect how agency and coping mechanisms help manage uncertainty in the transition period.

These proactive behaviors align with findings from Ho (2022), who demonstrated that career development learning (CDL) significantly enhances students’ perceived employability by empowering them to navigate the transition from study to work. Similarly, Dewantara (2025) highlighted how structured career resources—like career development courses and practical learning modules—are pivotal in helping graduates secure quality employment.

*“After graduating from PIT, I was able to get a long vacation and relax myself. Then after, I plan job hunting.”* (p5)

*“In my first few months after graduating, I continued working at Tubby Café... I also enrolled in TESDA where I took Bread and Pastry with NC II.”* (p7)

## **Theme 3: Expectations Shattered by Reality**

Expectations of easy, fast job placement following graduation were dispelled by the realities of competition and experience demands. The most dominant theme was the discrepancy between expectations and reality. Many anticipated that a diploma would guarantee easy and immediate employment, but reality proved otherwise: competition was fierce, employers prioritized applicants with experience, and bureaucratic hurdles (traffic, paperwork, delays) slowed progress (p1, p2, p3, p8, p11).

This aligns with recent findings from Jobs and Skills Australia (2025), which reported that many graduates even with technical qualifications are deemed not “work-ready” due to deficiencies in hands-on experience and employability skills like teamwork and communication. Similar patterns emerge globally. ZipRecruiter surveys found that while 82% of recent graduates expected to secure employment within three months, only 77% achieved this, indicating a mismatch between expectations and reality. Further reinforcing this, the *Financial Times* reported the class of 2025 in the UK faces a particularly tough market with only 27% securing jobs by February, well down from previous years. Graduates’ narratives mirror these trends:

*"I expected finding a job would be fast and easy... but it was harder."* (p1)

*"I thought it's easy to find a job with a bachelor's degree, but I guess I'm wrong."*  
(p6)

*"Hotels were finding applicants with experience... I applied to a restaurant instead to gain experience."* (p3)

*"I'm expecting a smooth application... but it's very hard to find a job without taking risks."* (p10)

This gap between academic credentials and market readiness mirrors broader labor market challenges. Employers often value work experience and soft skills over diplomas, as found in multiple reports. Despite these obstacles, graduates demonstrated resilience. Their accounts reveal that initial disillusionment can spur adaptability and persistence continuing applications, adjusting expectations, and finding alternative pathways to employment.

#### **Theme 4: PIT as a Source of Preparation and Identity**

Graduates voiced a strong institutional attachment to PIT, describing it as a "second home" (p8) and affirming that their education prepared them for future challenges (p9). Work-Integrated Learning (OJT) and TESDA certifications were cited as critical bridges from school to work (p7). This theme underscores the role of higher education institutions not only in skill development but also in shaping graduate identity, belongingness, and employability confidence.

*"My second home is PIT—it's so memorable about teachers and friends."* (p8)

*"Still, I remind myself that everything I went through in PIT prepared me for this moment."* (p9)

This resonates with empirical findings from the *Australian Educational Researcher*, which show that a strong sense of institutional belonging correlates positively with students' well-being and academic outcomes (Kessel, 2025). Similarly, Rowe, Jackson and Fleming (2021) found that work-integrated learning (WIL) fosters engagement and belonging in workplace environments enhancing confidence and social integration.

Quew-Jones's (2024) conceptual model of Degree Apprenticeship Identity (DAI) further reinforces this, illustrating how belonging, peer engagement, and shared experiences within work-integrated learning settings can reinforce professional identity development.

Together, these studies substantiate how PIT's environment through meaningful relationships, practical training, and institutional culture functions as a vital anchor during the post-graduation transition, strengthening graduates' identity, confidence, and readiness for employment.

Taken together, the findings portray post-graduation as a liminal stage characterized by emotional turbulence, proactive coping, unmet expectations, and enduring institutional



influence. While graduates hoped for quick employment, most encountered the reality of a competitive labor market demanding experience. In response, they turned to pragmatic strategies rest, paperwork processing, upskilling, and interim work demonstrating adaptability and resilience. Importantly, PIT remained a source of strength, with graduates framing it as both a home of memories and a springboard for professional readiness.

These insights reinforce the value of career preparation, alumni support, and work-integrated learning in smoothing graduate transitions. They also highlight the need for institutions to manage graduate expectations by aligning career guidance with the realities of labor market demands.

**Table 2. Job-Seeking Challenges**

Theme	Key codes / subthemes	Illustrative participant excerpt	Participants (IDs)
A. Experience & Employer Demand	Lack of experience; preference for experienced hires; need for interim roles	“One difficulty... was the lack of experience. Many hotels preferred applicants who already had training.” (p1)	p1, p3, p4, p6, p7, p11
B. Market Competition & Limited Opportunities	Strong competition; limited matching vacancies; sectoral downturns	“The main difficulty... was the strong competition, since many applicants already had experience.” (p11)	p1, p2, p9, p11
C. Practical & Financial Barriers	Travel/commute; paperwork; travel costs; administrative burdens	“Sometimes, the location of the job was also far, which made it hard to accept even if I qualified.” (p1)	p1, p3, p5, p8, p10
D. Protective Factors & Alternative Pathways	OJT→continuity; family referrals; sector pivot (real estate)	“While doing my OJT, I was already working part-time... I continued working until my pay increased.” (p7)	p3, p7, p9

### Theme 1: Experience and Employer Demand

One of the strongest and most consistent challenges expressed by graduates was the lack of prior work experience, which limited their chances of securing positions in the hospitality industry. Respondents noted that many hotels and companies preferred applicants who already had training or employment background, even for entry-level roles. This often left fresh graduates at a disadvantage, compelling some to take interim jobs, enroll in short vocational courses (such as TESDA certifications), or accept work outside their field of study as a way to build credibility.

This reflects a broader structural issue in graduate employability: the “experience paradox,” where employers expect experience but graduates are unable to acquire it without being first employed. National-level studies confirm that work-integrated learning (WIL)

substantially improves early labour-market outcomes by giving students applied workplace exposure before graduation (Jackson, 2024). Similarly, Green et al. (2023) emphasize that internships and placements are essential in bridging the gap between academic preparation and employer expectations, particularly in service industries where soft skills and customer-facing experience are critical.

*Illustrative participant voices:*

“One difficulty... was the lack of experience. Many hotels preferred applicants who already had training or work background.” (p1)

“They prefer who has experience.” (p4)

## **Theme 2: Market Competition and Limited Opportunities**

Respondents also highlighted the intense competition they faced when entering the job market. Several graduates mentioned that even when they met minimum qualifications, there were many others applying for the same position, often with stronger work backgrounds. The combination of limited openings and high applicant numbers resulted in repeated rejections and prolonged job searches, intensifying frustration and self-doubt.

This aligns with recent labour-market reports documenting the post-pandemic tightening of graduate opportunities. Jobs and Skills Australia (2025) found that graduates often struggle to secure roles despite technical qualifications, as employers increasingly prioritize “work-readiness” and practical experience over academic attainment. Likewise, data from the Australian Government’s Graduate Outcomes Survey (2024) indicated that while overall graduate employment is improving, graduates in service and hospitality sectors face stiffer competition, which often delays stable job placement.

*Illustrative participant voices:*

“Another challenge was the competition, since a lot of graduates also applied for the same positions.” (p1)

“The main difficulty... was the strong competition, since many applicants already had experience.” (p11)

## **Theme 3: Practical and Financial Barriers**

Apart from employer expectations and competition, respondents emphasized the practical burdens of the job search process. These included the high cost of processing documents, travel expenses to attend interviews, and logistical issues such as job postings being located far from their hometowns. For many, these barriers added stress to an already difficult transition period, particularly when family expectations for immediate employment were high.

This resonates with wider research showing that transportation and administrative hurdles are significant barriers to employment access. The National Disability Institute (2023) and Richmond Fed (2023) both found that job seekers often decline or miss

opportunities due to unreliable transport, prohibitive commute distances, and out-of-pocket costs associated with interviews and job processing. For provincial and rural graduates like those from PIT, these challenges are especially salient, limiting access to urban hospitality hubs where most opportunities are concentrated.

*Illustrative participant voices:*

“Sometimes, the location of the job was also far, which made it hard to accept even if I qualified.” (p1)

“Process the requirements and apply for jobs.” (p8)

#### **Theme 4: Protective Factors and Alternative Pathways**

Interestingly, not all graduates experienced the same degree of difficulty. A few respondents benefitted from protective factors that eased their transition. For instance, one participant continued working part-time at Tubby Café where they had trained during their OJT, while another relied on family networks to find job opportunities online. Others demonstrated adaptability by pivoting to careers outside hospitality (such as real estate) when local opportunities were limited.

These narratives emphasize the importance of social capital and institutional pathways in shaping graduate outcomes. Studies have shown that graduates with strong network ties—whether through family, alumni, or employer connections—are more likely to secure employment faster (Rózsa et al., 2022). Similarly, Clarke (2020) underscores the role of career adaptability, highlighting how some graduates actively reshape their trajectories to align with emerging opportunities, even outside their original discipline.

*Illustrative participant voices:*

“While doing my OJT, I was already working part-time... I continued working until my pay increased.” (p7)

“None so far, it's because my cousin and aunt are helping me in finding jobs online.” (p3)

**TABLE 3. Influence of Academic Preparation**

Theme	Key codes / subthemes	Illustrative participant excerpts	Participants (IDs)
1. Applied skills, confidence & interview readiness	Interview confidence; resume building; domain knowledge; self-efficacy	“The skills... gave me confidence to face interviews.” (p1)	p1, p3, p5, p11
2. Transferability of skills	Communication; discipline; customer-facing; adaptability	“My internship taught me discipline, communication skills... applied to fieldwork.” (p1)	p1, p9, p4, p7
3. Internship relevance	OJT relevance; hands-	“It is relevant as I am working	p3, p4, p7, p11

to first job	on; immediate applicability	in a Japanese restaurant... internship taught me what to do.” (p3)	
4. Soft skills & professionalism	Attitude; patience; teamwork; emotional regulation	“Being a cumlaude means nothing if you have a bad attitude... good attitude and respect are very important.” (p7)	p6, p7, p8, p11
5. Internship quality & access gaps	Internship quality; supervision; unpaid/menial tasks; access inequality	“Supervisor was smiling... agency will call me if accepted.” (p3); “I don't have a first job as for now.” (p8)	p3, p8, p9

### Theme 1 — Applied Skills, Confidence, and Interview Readiness

Participants emphasized that their PIT-acquired skills enhanced their confidence during job applications. One graduate shared, *“The skills and knowledge I gained in PIT really helped me during my job search. My training and lessons gave me confidence to face interviews”* (P1). Similarly, P3 mentioned that PIT training allowed her to stay calm, smile, and avoid eye contact avoidance during interviews.

This aligns with Jackson (2023), who found that work-integrated learning (WIL) and applied classroom training foster self-efficacy and confidence in interviews, allowing graduates to communicate competence more effectively. Mabungela and Mtiki (2024) further highlight that WIL strengthens graduate employability by preparing students for high-stakes selection processes, such as interviews. Thus, PIT’s focus on technical and soft-skill training provided graduates with psychosocial resources to navigate competitive hiring processes.

### Theme 2 — Transferability of Skills across Careers

Several graduates demonstrated how PIT training extended beyond hospitality. P1 explained that although his first job was as a PSA enumerator, his internship *“taught me discipline, communication skills, and how to deal with different people,”* which he applied during fieldwork. Similarly, P9 noted, *“I actually didn’t pursue a job in the hospitality industry. Instead, I started working in real estate... I had to adapt, learn new skills, and adjust to an entirely different industry.”*

These accounts echo Tu et al. (2022) and Frontiers in Education (2025), who report that internships often yield transferable competencies—teamwork, adaptability, and communication—that support employment even in unrelated sectors. In other words, hospitality graduates benefit not only in their chosen industry but also in broader service-oriented professions, making their skills highly portable.

### Theme 3 — Internship (OJT) Relevance to First Employment

Respondents consistently pointed to their on-the-job training (OJT) as highly relevant to their first employment. P3 shared, *“It is relevant as I am working in a Japanese restaurant and I experience it in my internship what to do in a restaurant and what to expect serving*

guest.” Similarly, P11 emphasized, “*My internship was very relevant because it gave me hands-on experience and helped me understand the real demands of the hospitality industry.*”

Pianda (2024) confirms that internship participation significantly enhances employability by providing practical experience and smoother workforce entry. The CCWT literature review (Hora, 2024) also stresses that internships not only reduce time-to-employment but also provide graduates with insider knowledge of workplace norms. For PIT alumni, this meant translating classroom knowledge into industry practice, easing their transition into hospitality and related careers.

#### **Theme 4 — Soft Skills, Professionalism, and Attitude**

Beyond technical knowledge, participants highlighted the importance of values and professional behavior. P7 stressed, “*Being a cumlaude means nothing if you have a bad attitude... good attitude and respect are very important in the workplace.*” Similarly, P6 noted, “*Patience must be our best friend.*” These reflections reveal that graduates recognize how professionalism and emotional intelligence shape employability outcomes.

This view is reinforced by hospitality education research. A study in *Frontiers in Psychology* (2024) emphasized that soft skills—such as adaptability, patience, and respect—are key determinants of workplace success in hospitality and tourism. Likewise, Ruhanen et al. (2021) found that employers consistently rank communication, teamwork, and emotional regulation as more critical than purely technical expertise. PIT’s embedding of discipline and interpersonal training thus appears to prepare graduates for long-term career adaptability.

#### **Theme 5 — Internship Quality and Access Gaps**

While many participants found their internships beneficial, some reflected on the variation in quality and accessibility. P3 described a discouraging recruitment experience: “*The supervisor was smiling while interviewing me, but after all of that he just said that the agency will call me if I am accepted.*” Meanwhile, P8 mentioned, “*I don’t have a first job as for now*”, indicating a delayed transition despite training.

These disparities reflect findings by Hora (2024), who argued that internship benefits are not uniform and depend heavily on quality, supervision, and accessibility. The Business-Higher Education Forum (2024) similarly noted a shortage of structured, high-quality placements, creating inequities in career outcomes. PIT graduates’ mixed experiences confirm that while OJT is powerful, its effectiveness hinges on meaningful design and fair access.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that the transition of Hospitality Management graduates from Palompon Institute of Technology (PIT) to the labor market is marked by emotional turbulence, pragmatic coping strategies, unmet expectations, and strong institutional attachment. Graduates experienced a mix of pride, relief, and anxiety, yet demonstrated resilience through actions such as document processing, interim employment, and skills upgrading. A significant barrier was the “experience paradox,” where employers required

prior work exposure even for entry-level jobs. Practical and financial challenges, such as costly application requirements and geographic barriers, further compounded job-seeking difficulties. Despite these setbacks, PIT's role as a source of preparation and identity was consistently highlighted, with graduates crediting OJT, TESDA certifications, and institutional culture for shaping their skills, professional confidence, and adaptability. Ultimately, employability was determined not only by technical competencies but also by transferable skills, professionalism, and social networks.

## RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends strengthening curriculum–industry alignment by integrating more structured Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), enhancing the quality of internships, and embedding employability-focused modules that develop resilience, adaptability, and career preparation among students. Employers should create entry-level pathways to address “experience paradox” by offering mentorship programs and structured onboarding opportunities tailored to fresh graduates. Policymakers, should provide targeted employability programs and financial support to ease logistical burdens which often disadvantage provincial graduates. Finally, graduates themselves are encouraged to leverage transferable skills, maintain adaptability, and actively build professional networks to maximize employment opportunities both within and beyond the hospitality industry.

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