



Comparing Internal and External Customer Expectations on the Employability Skills of Tourism Polytechnic Graduates in Indonesia

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Abstract. This research compares the expectations of internal customers (students) and external customers (employers) regarding the employability skills of Tourism Polytechnic graduates in Indonesia. Using a quantitative survey method, the study identifies significant gaps between expected and perceived competencies, particularly in soft skills and practical readiness. Students show moderate satisfaction, while employers express a greater need for job-ready graduates. The conclusion highlights a need for curriculum improvement and stronger industry collaboration. The research contributes to vocational education reform by recommending targeted strategies such as industry-integrated training, soft skills development, and curriculum alignment. These findings can enhance graduates' job readiness, improve stakeholder satisfaction, and support Indonesia's tourism sector by producing a more competent and competitive workforce.

Keywords: Customer Expectation, External Customer, Internal Customer, Tourism.

1 Introduction

The tourism industry continues to be one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, contributing significantly to economic development, employment, and cultural exchange [1]. For Indonesia, tourism represents a strategic sector with vast potential, particularly for regions reliant on service economies. However, rapid industry evolution demands a workforce equipped with both technical and soft skills, calling for vocational education systems that are agile and industry-responsive [2].

Research into employability within vocational education has highlighted notable gaps. Indonesian tourism vocational education often lags behind industry expectations, particularly in practice-based skillsets that affect job readiness [3]. Another study further reinforces the mismatch between the skills acquired through polytechnic programs and employers' expectations, emphasizing the underdevelopment of hospitality graduates' soft skills [4].

Other studies focus on lecturer perceptions in vocational diploma programs and conclude that educators acknowledge a deficiency in skill-based curriculum alignment with

employer demands [5]. Similarly, UNICEF's report stresses the lack of coordination between education providers and employers, urging the integration of private-sector insights into curriculum design [6].

In contrast, tracer studies have been used to analyze graduates' employability over time, identifying critical gaps in adaptability and practical experience that hinder long-term career progression in the tourism and hospitality sectors [7].

While these studies provide valuable perspectives, they tend to assess expectations from either the student or employer side, or only through institutional lenses. This research differentiates itself by simultaneously comparing internal customers (students) and external customers (employers) to evaluate their respective expectations regarding employability skills. Moreover, it quantitatively measures the expectation-perception gap and its effect on satisfaction—an approach rarely applied jointly in the context of tourism polytechnics in Indonesia.

The purpose of this study is to assess and compare the expectations of internal and external customers toward the employability skills of graduates from Indonesian Tourism Polytechnics. It aims to reveal expectation gaps and provide actionable insights for curriculum development. A quantitative methodology was employed, using structured questionnaires distributed to students and employers, followed by data analysis using descriptive statistics, t-tests to evaluate the influence of perception gaps on satisfaction.

2 Literature Review

The concept of employability has become central in vocational education discourse, particularly within rapidly evolving sectors like tourism [8]. Employability is no longer defined solely by technical expertise but increasingly includes soft skills such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving. These qualities are essential for graduates to remain competitive and responsive to dynamic work environments. Employers today demand more than academic qualifications—they look for individuals who can demonstrate initiative, critical thinking, and interpersonal competence [9].

In Indonesia, vocational education, especially within Tourism Polytechnics, is intended to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and the realities of the job market [10]. However, several scholars have noted persistent mismatches between graduate competencies and industry needs. Tourism vocational programs often fall short of delivering the hands-on skills demanded by the sector [3]. This misalignment hampers graduates' readiness and limits their ability to thrive in professional environments. Another study similarly observed that while Diploma 3 graduates generally meet basic technical standards, they are often unprepared in areas such as teamwork, customer engagement, and professional ethics [4].

This skills gap is further highlighted in longitudinal studies. For instance, previous study concluded that adaptability and confidence were critical yet underdeveloped traits [7]. Their findings underscore the urgent need for reformed, practice-based curricula that incorporate real-world industry expectations. Similarly, UNICEF's study on future skills in Indonesia emphasized the lack of systematic coordination between training

providers and the private sector, calling for more inclusive, market-aligned curriculum design [6].

To evaluate and improve educational quality, researchers have adopted models such as the Expectation-Confirmation Theory [11] and Service Quality frameworks [12]. These theories argue that satisfaction is shaped by the degree to which experience aligns with initial expectations. In the context of vocational education, this dual-lens is especially relevant: students are considered internal customers whose satisfaction depends on teaching quality and support services, while employers are external customers whose satisfaction derives from graduate performance in the workplace [13].

Despite growing attention to these issues, previous studies tend to examine the perspectives of students and employers separately. For instance, Dalimunthe focused on the employability of hospitality graduates but analyzed it primarily from the viewpoint of curriculum competitiveness without incorporating employer feedback [4]. Similarly, Putra and Saepudin (2022) used longitudinal tracer studies to assess preferred competencies in the tourism industry, yet their work emphasized graduate outcomes and industry needs without comparing these to student expectations [7]. An exploration of lecturer perceptions on employability skills has been conducted, though it excluded the perspectives of students and employers [5]. Very few studies have employed a comparative, empirical approach that integrates both internal and external viewpoints while also quantifying the expectation-perception gap's impact on satisfaction. Most existing research is either qualitative or limited to curriculum evaluation, lacking a broader measurement of stakeholder satisfaction within tourism vocational education [14, 15].

The current study aims to fill this gap by simultaneously comparing internal (student) and external (employer) expectations regarding employability skills in the context of Tourism Polytechnics in Indonesia. It uses a quantitative methodology involving structured surveys and advanced statistical analysis to measure how expectation-perception gaps influence satisfaction levels. By doing so, this research not only builds upon the theoretical foundations of ECT and SERVQUAL but also contributes practical insights for improving vocational education quality and graduate readiness in Indonesia's tourism industry.

3 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative explanatory research approach to investigate the expectation-perception gap in employability skills between two key stakeholder groups: internal (students) and external (employers). The explanatory design was chosen for its ability to analyze causal relationships—specifically, how expectation gaps influence stakeholder satisfaction in vocational education. Grounded in Expectation-Confirmation Theory, the study conceptualized satisfaction as a result of the alignment—or misalignment—between expected and perceived outcomes. This was further supported by Service Quality Theory (SERVQUAL), which allowed the researchers to assess the quality of educational services through the lens of both internal and external evaluations.

Data were gathered using a cross-sectional survey method, administered simultaneously to students and employers from selected Tourism Polytechnics across Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure that only relevant respondents—final-year students and employers with direct experience hiring tourism graduates—were included. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula, maintaining a balance between representation and statistical accuracy. To enrich the findings, three data collection methods were utilized: structured questionnaires to measure expectations and perceptions using Likert-scale items, in-depth interviews with selected respondents to explore qualitative insights, and document analysis of curricula and policy documents to assess institutional alignment with industry needs.

The data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean scores were used to describe trends in expectations and perceptions from both groups, while independent samples t-tests identified significant differences between internal and external responses. Regression analysis examined how perception gaps influenced satisfaction to use to validate the theoretical model and explore complex relationships between variables. The use of regression was especially relevant for this study as it enabled the testing of both direct and indirect effects of expectation gaps on satisfaction, providing a robust and comprehensive understanding of stakeholder alignment in tourism vocational education.

4 Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on the quantitative analysis conducted to assess the expectations, perceptions, and satisfaction of internal (students) and external (employers) stakeholders regarding the employability skills of Tourism Polytechnic graduates in Indonesia. The results are discussed in relation to the proposed hypotheses and the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study.

The descriptive analysis revealed a noticeable gap between expectation and perception scores for both groups. Internal stakeholders (students) reported an average expectation score of 4.2 and a perception score of 3.8, resulting in a relatively small gap of 0.4. In contrast, external stakeholders (employers) reported a higher average expectation score of 4.5 and a lower perception score of 3.6, resulting in a larger gap of 0.9. These results indicate that while students are moderately satisfied with the employability training they receive, employers are more critical and perceive a considerable shortfall in graduate readiness, particularly in terms of soft skills and workplace adaptability.

To evaluate the influence of expectation-perception gaps on satisfaction, regression analysis was conducted separately for internal and external groups. The results are summarized in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Hypothesis Testing Summary

Code	Hypothesis	Test Method	Result Summary	Supported
H1	There is a significant difference between internal and external expectations regarding employability skills.	Independent sample t-test	A significant mean difference was observed ($p < 0.05$), indicating that employers have higher expectations than students.	Yes
H2	Expectation-perception gaps have a significant effect on satisfaction among internal stakeholders.	Linear regression	A positive relationship was found ($\beta = 0.48, p < 0.05$), suggesting that smaller gaps contribute to higher satisfaction among students.	Yes
H3	Expectation-perception gaps have a significant effect on satisfaction among external stakeholders.	Linear regression	A stronger negative relationship was observed ($\beta = -0.62, p < 0.01$), indicating that larger gaps significantly reduce satisfaction among employers.	Yes

The results affirm the theoretical assumptions drawn from Expectation-Confirmation Theory and Service Quality Theory, showing that satisfaction is directly influenced by how well expectations are met. The smaller expectation-perception gap among students suggests that internal stakeholders tend to align their expectations more closely with their experiences, likely due to familiarity with the institution's limitations and gradual exposure to the curriculum. On the other hand, the more substantial gap perceived by employers reveals a misalignment between academic outcomes and industry expectations, especially in real-world competencies like customer service, critical thinking, and workplace ethics.

These findings align with previous research by [3, 4] who found that tourism graduates often fall short in essential workplace skills despite having sufficient theoretical knowledge. Similarly, the need for curriculum reform to address long-standing disconnects between training and actual job market demands [7]. The stronger dissatisfaction expressed by external stakeholders in this study highlights the urgent need for Tourism Polytechnics to improve graduate readiness through increased practical exposure and enhanced soft skills development.

Overall, the study confirms that closing the gap between what is taught and what is needed in the field is essential for improving satisfaction among both internal and ex-

ternal stakeholders. These findings support the recommendation for institutional reforms, including industry-partnered curriculum design, enhanced internship programs, and regular feedback mechanisms involving employers.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study revealed a clear discrepancy between the expectations and perceptions of internal and external stakeholders regarding the employability skills of Tourism Polytechnic graduates in Indonesia. While students demonstrated moderate satisfaction, employers reported a larger gap, particularly in soft skills and practical readiness, indicating a misalignment between academic outcomes and industry demands. Regression analysis confirmed that these expectation-perception gaps significantly influenced satisfaction levels, with external stakeholders being more sensitive to deficiencies. Based on these findings, it is recommended that Tourism Polytechnics revise their curricula to better integrate practical industry experience, soft skills training, and ongoing employer feedback. Strengthening collaboration between educational institutions and the tourism sector—through internships, guest lectures, joint curriculum design, and tracer studies—will ensure that graduates are more aligned with the evolving needs of the industry, thereby enhancing both employability and stakeholder satisfaction.

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