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Management Shadowing for Developing Hospitality Managerial Competencies through Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

Structured Management Shadowing Program supports the development of managerial competencies among undergraduate hospitality students. This empirical research utilizes deductive thematic analysis based on weekly reflection reports of shadows and evaluates the development of hospitality managerial competencies through the lens of experiential learning stages. The thematic analysis reveals that shadows engaged most strongly in reflective observation, followed by concrete experience, while abstract conceptualization and active experimentation appeared less frequently throughout 13-week shadowing process. Competency development is most effective in terms of self-management, interpersonal communication, and problem-solving, suggesting that shadowing particularly strengthens shadow's ability to reflect on professional behaviour, self-management, and navigate interactions at workplace. The results also reveal a developmental progression over 13-week period such as: Beginning with basic interpersonal engagement, moving on to adaptive problem-solving, and gradually demonstrating more strategic and analytical thinking competencies. These findings support that structured Management Shadowing Program serves as an effective experiential learning platform in hospitality education and improving students' readiness for professional employability.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Managerial Competencies, Management Shadowing Program, Tourism and Hospitality Competencies, Qualitative Deductive Thematic Analysis
JEL Classifications: J24, L83, M12

1. INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning has always been an essential pedagogical strategy in hospitality education, like summer internships and on the job training. Yet, the literature reveals that the methods for evaluating its impact on managerial competency development remain under-explored. This study addresses this research gap by analysing reflective experiences using Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Raybould and Wilkins' (2005) managerial competencies.

This study offers an original dual-framework analysis based on student reflections during a Management Shadowing Program and provides insight for real-time learning experiences with concrete framework of managerial competencies. The study bridges experiential learning theory with hospitality sector relevant competency framework, which is relatively under-explored in the literature (Kolb, 1984; Zopiatis and Constanti, 2012).

The paper proceeds in five main sections. Literature review presents experiential learning stages and managerial competency development framework utilized in hospitality education. The methodology section explains the research design and analytical framework, followed by findings section discussing significance, and concludes with implications for educators and practitioners.

1.1. Experiential Learning in Hospitality Education

David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) provides the framework to understand how individuals learn from experience. Kolb claims that learning is a cyclical process of four stages namely

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and in logical order: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Figure 1). Kolb's model suggests that effective learning occurs when an individual goes through each stage of experiential learning cycle and transforms experiences into learning (Kolb, 1984).

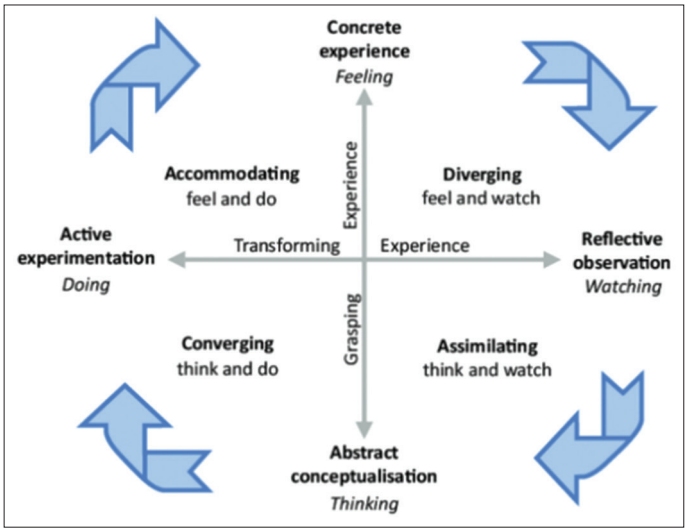
In tourism and hospitality education, summer internships and on-the-job trainings are best examples of Kolb's model emphasizing the importance of integrating practical experiences with classroom learning. During internship, students engage in a concrete experience by practicing day-to-day jobs, reflect on their experiences and hotel guest interactions, conceptualize their own strategies to improve their service quality, and then students try and test these strategies in real-job environment. This iterative process of experiential learning helps developing a deeper understanding of hospitality operations and enhances problem-solving skills of learning colleagues (Kiser and Partlow, 1999; Yiu and Law, 2012).

1.2. The Role of Internships for Experiential Learning in Tourism Education

Internships represent the most important bridge between classroom learning and real-life applications of experiential learning as they offer students to gain hands-on experience for their professional development. These day-to-day jobs allow students to apply theoretical classroom learning in real-world contexts, thereby enhancing students' competencies and employability (Busby and Gibson, 2010).

Many research emphasize that internships provide many benefits, including improved job readiness, stronger understanding of hospitality operations, and development of core soft skills such as communication and teamwork (Farmaki, 2018; Phoncharoen and Pantaratorn, 2025). Internships enable students to experience the operational challenges of the tourism sector, which are difficult to demonstrate in classroom settings. Although internships provide these opportunities, needless to say, the effectiveness of internships mainly depends on the quality of the placement and the continuous follow up by academia (Zopiatis and Constanti, 2012).

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle



Well-structured internship programs that include clear step by step learning outcomes, host and academia mentorship, and reflective feedback of students are more likely to result in highly effective and positive learning experiences. For example, Tse (2010) highlights that internship satisfaction of the student depends on factors such as supervisor support, meaningful day-to-day job assignments, and constructive feedback from supervisor and academic mentor. This proves that collaboration and cooperation between academia and sector partners is crucial not only to design but implement internships that are mutually beneficial.

1.3. Managerial Competencies in Hospitality

Parallel to evolution of tourism and hospitality industry and guest expectations, the demand for task force with developed managerial competencies that extend beyond operational skills has also increased (Şahin and Keskin Pulluk, 2025). Human resources with managerial competencies are the most difficult competitive advantage to develop and also to imitate (DiMicellik, 1998). Raybould and Wilkins (2005) identified ten key competency groups that are required for effective management in the hospitality sector.

Their study emphasizes that hospitality managers must develop not only technical competencies but also interpersonal competencies to manage the complexities of the industry. For example, strategic thinking competency enables managers to anticipate guest expectations and market trends to be able to make informed decisions, while strong leadership competencies are required to enhance team motivation and guest satisfaction (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005). Similarly, financial understanding helps managers optimize guest satisfaction, employee satisfaction and investor satisfaction in a balance, and human resource management competencies contribute to effective workforce planning as well as conflict resolution (Baum, 2002). In hospitality education, task force training and development, not only information-literacy but also prompt, practical management competencies are required (Stergiou and Nella, 2024; Ozturk, 2026).

Despite the recognition of these competencies, there is often a gap between the competencies expected by employers and competencies graduates acquired during education. Several studies suggest that hospitality programs may not be able to prepare students for managerial roles (Christou and Chatzigeorgiou, 2019) although academia has started implementing limited number and duration of management-focused experiential learning strategies, such as management shadowing programs (Busby, 2003).

Key managerial competencies identified by Raybould and Wilkins (2005; 2006) highlight adaptability and learning skills, which enable managers to adjust to changing environments and continuously develop their expertise. They also point at the significance of conceptual and analytical skills in assessing complex business situations and making informed decisions. Information management skills are crucial for understanding data and acting upon them, while interpersonal skills improve relationship-building within teams. Additionally, oral and written communication skills ensure that managers can conceptualize ideas clearly in both oral and written forms, coordinating and negotiating effective interactions with stakeholders. Problem-

solving skills play a crucial role in overcoming challenges and developing solutions, while self-management skills help managers stay organized and be accountable in their decisions. Finally, teamwork and leadership skills are very important for managing diverse teams of hospitality and leading a cooperative work environment. Ultimate goal of managerial competencies is to achieve organizational success in the hospitality sector.

Incorporating these skills into experiential learning programs, such as internships and Management Shadowing Program, ensures that students graduate with the competencies required to advance towards managerial roles.

1.4. Management Shadowing Program

Unlike traditional summer internships, which often focus on repetitive day-to-day operational tasks, Management Shadowing Program provides exposure to reporting, evaluating reports for decision-making, leadership coordination responsibilities, and planning for hospitality organizations (Ceylan and Özyeşil, 2019).

Management Shadowing Program gives and opportunity for prospective graduates to develop confidence, problem-solving skills, and leadership skills (Jack et al., 2017) and facilitates this development in real-life managerial scenarios, these programs foster development of competencies identified by Raybould and Wilkins (2005). Management shadowing program brings senior undergraduate students and experienced hospitality managers together like a matchmaking and students not only observe but also engage in day-to-day managerial tasks.

Prospective graduates participating in Management Shadowing Program show improved decision-making skills and a better understanding of human resources management as well as increased financial awareness.

1.5. Integrating Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Managerial Competencies

Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) integrated with Raybould and Wilkins' hospitality managerial competencies provides a well-established framework for developing essential managerial skills and helps academicians collaborate with hospitality professionals to bridge theoretical knowledge into real-world skills.

Four stage ELT model developed by Kolb aligned with specific managerial competencies of Raybould and Wilkins encourages shadows to practice, reflect, conceptualize, and apply skills in practical real-life contexts.

1.5.1. Concrete experience - hands-on practice of managerial competencies

- Interpersonal skills: Empathy and practice during guest and employee interactions, conflict resolution, and teamwork. Guest service roles ats front desk, guest relations or F and B service facilitate hands-on experience at interpersonal competency development
- Problem-solving skills: Dealing with real customer complaints under time pressure, managing crises with existing resources, and finding solutions develop with concrete experience
- Oral and written communication skills: Listening and practicing at staff briefings, communicating or listening to a guest, and preparing daily reports
- Teamwork and leadership skills: Hospitality services are a chain of events and follow each other like workplace where team members have to keep an eye of the other members advancements or shortcomings to compensate wherever needed, Case by case, day by day team based tasks and where individuals must take initiative becomes clearer in actual work place environments
- Information management skills: Gaining hands-on experience from reservation to check-in to service to complaint/satisfaction to check-out and user generated content as digital reputation all stages require data handling and at managerial level converting data into information is the key for success.

1.5.2. Reflective observation - analysing experiences for insight

- Self-management skills: Reflecting on yesterday, today and tomorrow from individual performance to, career objectives, weekly journaling or reflective discussions with mentor's support developing self-awareness and planning
- Interpersonal and communication skills: Rethinking the daily interactions, developing empathy and cultural awareness, developing flexibility to adjust behaviours to meet diverse guest needs
- Problem solving and adaptability: Observing manager in stormy days and conducting reflective discussions with the manager to understand what was observed and what was really happening, how challenges were handled, provides insight for future crisis management and adaptability
- Information management skills: Understanding the importance of how data and digital tools were used for decision-making including not only operational but also financial reports, guest complaints, and key performance indicators for service delivery.

1.5.3. Abstract conceptualization - formulating strategies and understanding concepts

- Conceptual and analytical skills: Developing an understanding of the big picture in hospitality, interpreting reports into service excellence, preparing and striving to achieve budgeted results
- Information management skills: Utilizing bigdata analysis and past performance indicators to build strategies to enhance operational efficiency and service excellency
- Problem solving skills: Understanding the roots and results of problem areas, solving the problems at hand and developing safety nets and recovery plans, forecasting the future and taking precautions to eliminate problems before they happen.

1.5.4. Active experimentation - applying new concepts in real-world scenarios

- Adaptability and learning skills: Testing the wings for creative solutions in diverse contexts and learning from feedback to improve flexibility and adaptability to new and unforeseen situations
- Teamwork and leadership skills: Applying ideas successfully in new contexts by teamwork and delegation, trying new techniques and assessing their impact on service outcomes

- Problem solving skills: Guest and employee conflicts that cannot be solved by pretested methods require newer and more effective solutions by experimenting with trying new and creative approaches
- Information management skills: Managerial decisions based on data-driven techniques are essential for increased efficiency as well as enhanced guest and employee satisfaction

Hands-on experience, reflection, conceptual understanding, and real-world experimentation develops future managers of hospitality who are equipped with technical and interpersonal expertise essential for guest-focused service.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Education literature has widely accepted Kolb's model (1984) as method for skill-based training and Hospitality literature validated Raybould and Wilkins (2005) essential competencies for hospitality managers. Sufi et al. (2025) reviews changing expectations of tourism and hospitality employers in the post-pandemic era and suggests that graduates are now expected to demonstrate a wider set of competencies including digital data processing, adaptability, precautions for health and safety protocols at workplace, creativity, guest service, and psychological resilience. Their study investigates how cooperation of academia and industry together can effectively build these competencies in prospective graduates and emphasizes the importance of integrating management competencies into academic curricula. Table 1 shows the detailed literature review on the hospitality education and experiential learning.

The theoretical framework of experiential learning and hospitality managerial competencies needs integration to practice of structures learning setting. Summer internships and 6 + 2 semesters of cooperative education programs are very effective in developing industry-specific technical competencies but may lack the design for direct managerial level involvement. Management shadowing programs provide a managerial perspective to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How the students' weekly reflection reports match with the stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle?

RQ2. Which managerial competencies emerge the most obvious and frequent in students' reflective reports?

RQ3. How does the focus of managerial competencies evolve as shadows approach towards week 13?

3. METHODOLOGY

Based on qualitative research design guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) framework is used to focus on how experiential learning helps develop managerial competencies. Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) integrated with Raybould and Wilkins' (2005; 2006) managerial competency framework enabled the study to utilize deductive thematic analysis approach, aligning data interpretation with established theoretical construct.

Deductive thematic analysis is preferred because the aim of the study was not to generate an entirely new theory, but to review student reflection reports through integrated lens of these two frameworks.

Thematic analysis is well recognized as a flexible, trans-theoretical tool that enables identification, analysis, and reporting the patterns in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2019). TA provides clear analytic procedures without binding to fixed ontological or epistemological commitments. Based on clear roadmap provided by Braun and Clarke's (2019), this study adopted a reflexive TA perspective, recognizing the researcher's interpretive role in constructing themes rather than treating themes as pre-existing entities to be "discovered." The methodology emphasizes transparency and acknowledges the theoretical framework.

3.1. Participants, Setting and Data Collection

Participants were undergraduate hospitality students in Antalya, Türkiye enrolled in Management Shadowing Program that formed part of their experiential learning curriculum. The eligibility criterion for Management Shadowing program are completion of 2 summer internships and minimum 6 semesters of education and lastly receiving an offer from partner company. Students must be prepared for job interviews during fall semester and get Management Shadowing job offer in order to be able to participate in the program during spring semester. As per guidance of Braun and Clarke (2021) this research participants were selected purposively rather than representative. Which aligns with qualitative research principles prioritizing information-rich cases over statistically generalized samples.

The study setting is Hospitality companies who agreed to foster Management Shadowing program in cooperation with university and selected departments are mainly Guest Relations, Front Office, Food and Beverage Services, General Management where guest interactions and management decision making on day-to-day basis is most frequent. Each shadow sends a weekly reflection report and a mentor from academia provides weekly feedback to recognize the achievements and encourage to test the wings further. All mentors on academia side are equipped with sector experience for most realistic mentoring. Shadows are expected to hold weekly meetings with their managers at sector for weekly reflection as well as exchange of ideas and experience.

This study utilizes weekly reflection reports of ten purposefully selected shadows during spring semester of 2025. The reflections of shadows are processed through Kolb's experiential learning cycle and Raybould and Wilkins (2005; 2006) competencies demonstrated and developed are reported. Reflective weekly reports of shadows were chosen as they offer authentic, self-reflections of students' experiential learning, aligning with the experiential orientation of qualitative inquiry (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

3.2. Data Analysis

The study pre-established theoretical categories for coding and under preset themes as per deductive thematic analysis principles

Table 1: Literature review on hospitality education, hospitality competencies and experiential learning

Authors, year	Name of the article	Journal name	Index	Keywords	Abstract summary	Sample size and nature	Method used	Study type	Sector involved
Kolb 1984	Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development	Prentice-Hall	Not Indexed	Experiential Learning Theory	Learning is a cyclical process that transforms experience into knowledge through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.	N/A	Conceptual	Theoretical	General
Leslie and Richardson 2000	Tourism and Cooperative Education in UK Undergraduate Courses: Are the Benefits Being Realized?	Tourism Management	SSCI Indexed	Cooperative education, hospitality education, experiential learning	Evaluates cooperative education, including management shadowing, in UK undergraduate tourism and hospitality programs to assess if outcomes align with industry expectations.	UK undergraduate tourism students	Mixed Methods	Empirical	Hospitality
Raybould and Wilkins 2005	Overqualified and Under Experienced: Turning Graduates into Hospitality Managers	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	SSCI Indexed	Hospitality management, graduate skills, industry expectations	Investigates hospitality managers' expectations of graduate skills compared to student perceptions, finding managers prioritize interpersonal, problem-solving, and self-management skills.	850 hospitality managers and 211 students	Quantitative	Empirical	Hospitality
Cho 2006	Student Perspectives on the Quality of Hotel Management Internships	Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism	Not Indexed	Internship quality, hospitality education, student perceptions	Assesses student perceptions of internship quality, identifying factors that affect their experiences in hospitality settings.	Hospitality students	Qualitative	Empirical	Hospitality
Raybould and Wilkins 2006	Generic Skills for Hospitality Management: A Comparative Study of Management Expectations and Student Perceptions	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	Not Indexed	Generic skills, hospitality management, student perceptions	Examines generic skills deemed essential for hospitality management and compares management expectations with student perceptions, suggesting curriculum adjustments.	850 hospitality managers and 211 students	Quantitative	Empirical	Hospitality
Kiser and Partlow 1999	Experiential Learning in Hospitality	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education	SSCI	Hospitality education, experiential learning	Practical experience enhances student learning and industry readiness, emphasizing hands-on engagement in hospitality curricula.	Hospitality students	Qualitative	Empirical	Hospitality
Busby and Gibson 2010	Tourism and Hospitality Internship Experiences Overseas: A British Perspective	Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education	Not Indexed	Hospitality internship, international experience, shadowing	Examines British students' internship experiences abroad, focusing on benefits and challenges of international shadowing programs in hospitality.	British students in international internships	Mixed Methods	Empirical	Hospitality

(Contd...)

Table 1: ***(Continued)***

Authors, year	Name of the article	Journal name	Index	Keywords	Abstract summary	Sample size and nature	Method used	Study type	Sector involved
Zopiatis and Constanti 2012	Managing Hospitality Internship Practices	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education	Not Indexed	Internship effectiveness, industry-academia collaboration	Collaboration between academia and industry improves learning outcomes, emphasizing the role of structured internship programs.	Hospitality students	Mixed Methods	Empirical	Hospitality
Chen and Shen 2012	Today's Intern, Tomorrow's Practitioner? The Influence of Internship Programs on Students' Career Development in the Hospitality Industry	Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education	SSCI Indexed	Internship satisfaction, employability, career development	Explores how hospitality internship experiences impact students' career paths, linking satisfaction to career intentions.	459 students in Taiwan	Quantitative (SEM)	Empirical	Hospitality
Jack et al. 2017	An Examination of the Role Played by Internships in Nurturing Management Competencies in Hospitality and Tourism Management Students	Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism	Not Indexed	Management competencies, internships, hospitality education	Examines how internships contribute to nurturing management competencies, comparing students' experiences across different placements.	Hospitality students	Qualitative	Empirical	Hospitality
Lai et al. 2017	A Blended-Experiential Learning Model: An Action Research Case Study	Lecture Notes in Computer Science	WOS Indexed	Blended learning, experiential learning, action research, hospitality education	Proposes a blended-experiential learning model validated through action research, demonstrating its application in hospitality education.	8 students operating a restaurant	Qualitative (Action Research)	Empirical	Hospitality
Amissah, et al., 2020	Students' Perceptions of Careers in Ghana's Hospitality and Tourism Industry	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education	SSCI Indexed	Hospitality careers, student perceptions	Explores students' perceptions of hospitality careers in Ghana, examining intentions to pursue industry careers.	441 hospitality students	Quantitative	Empirical	Hospitality
Ceylan and Özyeşil 2019	Management Shadowing Program: An Incubator for Prospective Managers in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry	Mediterranean Journal of Humanities	Not Indexed	Management shadowing, hospitality education, experiential learning	Introduces a Management Shadowing Program designed to develop managerial skills in tourism and hospitality by bridging academic knowledge with practical application.	20 hospitality management students	Qualitative	Empirical	Hospitality
Christou and Chatzigeorgiou 2019	Experiential Learning through Industrial Placement in Hospitality Education: The Meat in the Sandwich	Journal of Contemporary Education Theory and Research	Not Indexed	Experiential learning, industrial placement, hospitality education	Analyzes the impact of experiential learning through industrial placements, emphasizing practical exposure in hospitality.	Hospitality students in placements	Mixed Methods	Empirical	Hospitality

(Contd...)

Table 1: ***(Continued)***

Authors, year	Name of the article	Journal name	Index	Keywords	Abstract summary	Sample size and nature	Method used	Study type	Sector involved
Baum et al. 2020	COVID-19 and Hospitality Education: Challenges and Innovations	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	SSCI Indexed	Crisis management, digital learning, hospitality education	Examines the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality education, emphasizing crisis management training and digital learning methods as essential skills for future professionals.	Hospitality educators and students	Qualitative	Conceptual	Hospitality
Zopiatis et al. 2021	A Systematic Review of Literature on Hospitality Internships	Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education	SSCI Indexed	Hospitality internships, experiential learning, student engagement	A systematic review identifying trends, gaps, and implications in hospitality internship literature, focusing on experiential learning approaches like internships aligned with Raybould and Wilkins competencies.	69 articles reviewed	Content Analysis	Conceptual	Hospitality
Koerich et al. 2024	Learning experiences in the culinary classroom: Identifying barriers and enablers in the practical teachinglearning process in gastronomy	Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education	SSCI Indexed	Gastronomy education, practical classes, hands-on learning, barriers, enablers	Investigates students' perspectives to identify what helps or hinders practical/cooking classes; highlights importance of teacher–student interaction; based on questionnaire data and content analysis	Students from two Portuguese higher education gastronomy programs (exact number not specified)	Bardin's content analysis (qualitative)	Exploratory qualitative, empirical	Higher education – Gastronomy/ Culinary Education
Sufi et al. (2025)	Investigating Industry-Academia Collaborations in Hospitality and Tourism Education: A Post-COVID-19 Perspective	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	SSCI Indexed	Industry-academia collaboration, hospitality education, graduate employability, post-COVID-19, experiential learning, soft skills	The study explores the evolving expectations of the hospitality and tourism industry in the aftermath of COVID-19. It identifies a shift in the required skill set for graduates and examines how academic institutions can collaborate with industry partners to address this gap. Key competencies include digital literacy, adaptability, health and safety awareness, and strategic thinking. The paper emphasizes embedding management skills into curricula and enhancing experiential learning opportunities.	22 qualitative interviews with industry professionals and academic leaders across different countries.	Qualitative research using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.	Exploratory, qualitative study.	Hospitality and tourism education and industry sectors.

(Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of iterative, theory-driven themes are utilized to read the reports several times for familiarization. Following these repeated report data groups are coded in relation to Kolb's (1984) four experiential learning stages and these stages are mapped to hospitality managerial competencies of Raybould and Wilkins (2005; 2006). The main groups are 4 stages of experiential learning and subgroups consist of managerial competencies where same competency can be developed in different stages at different levels. The data coding revealed the relationships between experiential learning cycles and managerial competency development and this theory-driven deductive coding framework ensured that analysis remained dedicated to Kolb's learning cycle and Raybould and Wilkins' competencies, while still allowing flexibility to researchers to understand the overlapping and intersecting competencies in more than one stage.

Consistent with reflexive TA principles (Braun and Clarke, 2019), the researcher assumes an interpretive role in theme construction and rather than prioritizing coding reliability in the positivist sense, the emphasis is given to methodological integrity, transparency, and coherence. To enhance exactness, findings were cross-checked against both theoretical expectations and unexpected patterns to ensure robustness and relevance.

Ethical approval is secured from the University by Management Shadowing Directives and Syllabus and from the Partner companies with protocols. Shadows share their experiences in weekly reflection reports for research and curricula development purposes. Confidentiality of shadow and partner company is ensured by anonymizing all identifying details. Ethical guidance of Braun and Clarke (2021) is not only procedurally but also crucial how shadows' voices were represented and respected in the analysis.

3.3. Shadowing Process and Responsibilities

Management Shadowing program requires all shadows to attend minimum; 2 internal meetings, 2 external meetings, 2 job interviews and make 1 presentation with specific requirements. The shadows are expected to complete all program requirements during the first half and run the extra mile during second half of the program. After each meeting or interview attended, the shadow is encouraged to evaluate with the manager to decrypt the meeting content like subtitles of what was spoken, what was heard and what was meant. All shadows are required to make decisions regardless of the fact that those decisions may or may not be implemented and yet shadows are strongly encouraged to make decisions.

Rotation between departments and among managers is allowed as per communication and coordination skills of the shadow evolve. In calms and sunny days when operations is calm and routine, shadows can take more initiative and test their wings. In more controversial days, exposure to crisis situations and guest relations challenges provides students with valuable observations opportunities and reflect on alternative actions.

The shadows work at the partner company for a minimum of 3 maximum 6 days a week depending on their course schedule at university. During early years of education most shadows took the initiative to organize their own curricula by taking 8th semester courses in prior semester to leave more days available for management shadowing program.

The weekly reflection reports consist of program requirements such as internal meetings attended, external meetings attended, job interviews attended, presentations made or attended and their comments, feelings, experiences, and mental notes for these program requirements. Weekly report also includes informal section where open-ended reflective questions of: "What was funny this week?", "What was interesting this week?," and "Other comments." The balanced combination of structured and informal open-ended question invites students to share personal reactions as per program requirements as well as unexpected insights, and miscellaneous observations that fell outside the formal program requirements leading to a more holistic understanding of the shadowing experience.

Reflective weekly reports of shadows, offering rich, authentic qualitative narratives on the shadows' experiential learning processes and self-perceptions of professional practice serves as the primary data source for this study.

3.4. Data Coding

Reflections reports of the shadows are systematically analysed and responses are categorized into four key experiential learning stages and respective hospitality managerial competencies. Table 2 presents managerial competencies embedded into each experiential learning cycle used for data coding.

The following sections explore the patterns and themes that emerged from this analysis, providing insights into the development of key managerial competencies in hospitality.

Table 2: Raybould and Wilkins hospitality managerial competencies embedded into the experiential learning model of Kolb

1	Concrete experience - hands-on practice of managerial competencies
1.a.	Interpersonal skills
1.b.	Problem solving skills
1.c.	Oral communication skills
1.d.	Written communication skills
1.e.	Teamwork and leadership skills
1.f.	Information management skills
2	Reflective observation - analysing experiences for insight
2.a.	Self-management skills
2.b.	Interpersonal and communication skills
2.c.	Problem solving and adaptability
2.d.	Information management skills
3	Abstract conceptualization – formulating strategies and understanding concepts
3.a.	Conceptual and analytical skills
3.b.	Information management skills
3.c.	Problem solving skills
4	Active experimentation – applying new concepts in real-world scenarios
4.a.	Adaptability and learning skills
4.b.	Leadership and teamwork skills
4.c.	Problem solving skills
4.d.	Information management skills

4. RESULTS

Deductive thematic analysis utilizing experiential learning theory (ELT) of Kolb as the learning stage framework, revealed the most dominant emphasis on Reflective Observation (n = 44), which indicates that shadows predominantly presented weekly reports seeking meaning to their experiences. The second most frequent stage emerged in data coding is Concrete Experience (n = 37), which highlights strong emphasis on real life environment, hands-on learning in operations. Instances of Abstract Conceptualization stage (n = 15) and Active Experimentation stage (n = 6) emerged considerably fewer in data coding. This distribution of data between 4 stages of experiential learning suggests that while shadows are highly engaged in reflecting on their week and actively experiencing managerial tasks, they demonstrated inferior movement toward theorizing their experiences, grounding theories or testing new strategies. This result may be the outcome of basing the data on reflective weekly reporting rather than live day to day reporting as the shadow has time to experience and also reflect on the experience before writing the weekly report.

As per Raybould and Wilkins' (2005) hospitality managerial competency framework, the analysis of students' reflective reports revealed key areas of competency development most frequently in Self-Management Skills (n = 21), indicating behaviors such as proactive career planning and preparation for post-graduation. Self-management skills are followed by Interpersonal and Communication Skills (n = 12), as shadows frequently encounter interactions with not only guests but also colleagues and managers that enhanced their ability to communicate effectively in service-oriented environments.

Following managerial competencies are Information Management skills (n = 11), reflecting shadows' engagement with organizing operational data and task management, and Problem Solving and Adaptability skills (n = 11), which emerged mainly involving crisis response and situational decision-making situations. Lastly, competencies related to Conceptual and Analytical Skills (n = 10) emerged related to strategic thinking and planning processes.

Shadows mostly reflect on interpersonal and adaptive competencies, especially self-management and present comparatively limited interest in experimentation and conceptualization.

Figure 2 presenting competency development trajectory over 13-week program emphasizes that weeks 5 and 6 are the peak for shadows' involvement in Interpersonal and Communication Skills, as shadows settle in the work environment, settle in comfortably for guest interactions as the summer season starts to pick up and also shadows mentors form academia encourage all shadows to run the extra mile and do not settle with minimum program requirements. By trimester of program (Weeks 8-10), the focus of shadows shift towards Problem-Solving and Adaptability skills as shadows understand the value of problem solving in between midterm exams and shadowing program which requires a more flexible and adaptive approach towards success and also needless to say week 8-10 indicates closer to summer season and number of guests increase exponentially as of Easter Sunday. During the last weeks of Management Shadowing program (Weeks 12 and 13), reflections of shadows highlight a noticeable increase in Conceptual and Analytical Skills as well as Leadership and Teamwork, suggesting the emergence of strategic thinking and the internalization of a managerial mindset also supported by academic mentors reminding that shadow is about to graduate and it's time to read all weekly reports chronologically and see the achievements, developments and growth. This progressive evolution of shadows indicates structured learning curve from foundational competencies towards higher-order managerial competencies consistent with experiential learning stages and competency-based development frameworks.

Managerial competency development patterns across different types of program requirements and weekly reflective reports presented in Figure 3 indicate that formal assignments, especially presentation task, served as a comprehensive learning platform, including interpersonal communication, teamwork, oral communication, problem-solving, and adaptability. The presentation task is especially tough for shadows as the only definition of this task is minimum 8 slides maximum 20 min. Unlike theoretical classroom learning student presentations

Figure 2: Weekly competency development heatmap

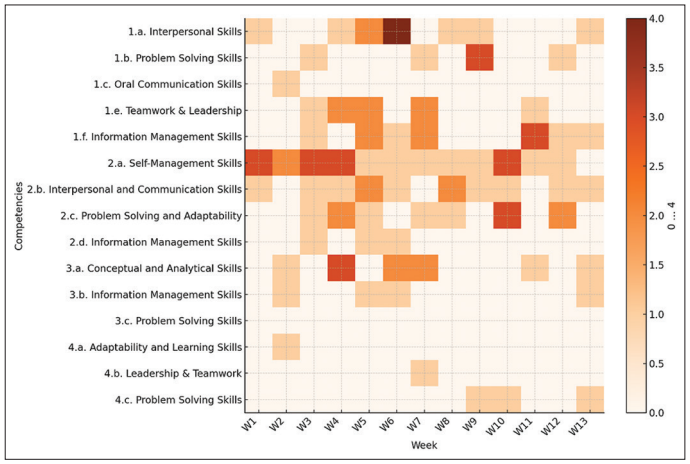
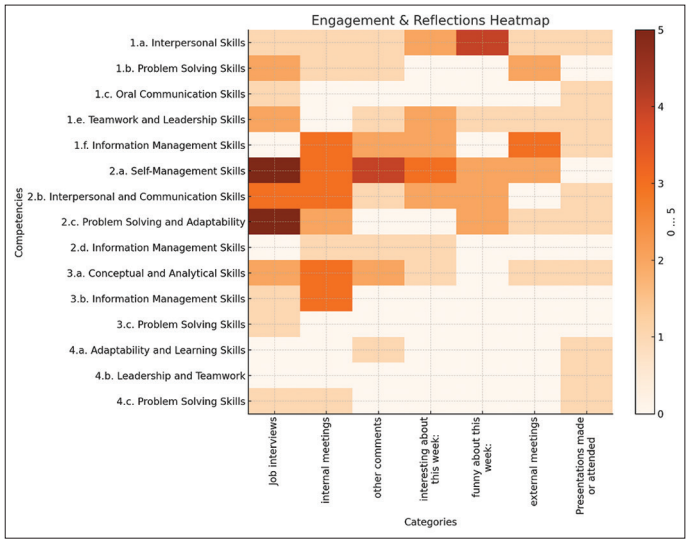


Figure 3: Engagement and competency development heatmap



where the instructor defines the topic and presentation content, the real-life iterative process between shadow and manager requires more than 1 week to complete this task. The shadow needs to find alternative presentation topics, communicate and if needed negotiate with the manager about not only content of the presentation but also the list of attendees for the presentation. Although the attendees are working in the same hotel it's not easy to convince all participants to be present at the same meeting room for the same 20 min where shadow experiences many difficulties and learning curve exponentially increases. Similarly, reflections related to job interview observations are important thresholds emphasizing self-management, communication, and adaptive thinking as job interviews create a window for the shadows to look at their own resume and their own employability readiness from employers' perspective.

The responses to the open-ended questions—particularly the "What was funny this week?"—Tended to concentrate on interpersonal (n = 4), self-management (n = 2), communication (n = 2), and problem-solving and adaptability (n = 2) competencies. The humor in day-to-day operations emerged from spontaneous social interactions with colleagues, guests or managers served as informal yet meaningful opportunities for personal relationship building. Similarly, "What was interesting this week?" comments indicate development of softer skills of interpersonal awareness and situational reflection. Collectively, these open-ended semi structure reflections suggest that while formal program requirements are instrumental in cultivating multi-competency professional skills, spontaneous casual observations provide valuable contexts for reinforcing personal, interpersonal, and reflective growth. As of year 2026, one more open-ended question is included in the weekly reflective reporting namely "the person/subject you have helped/received help from" which will be the topic of further enlargement of this research testing the impact of personal help asked/given on managerial competency development.

5. DISCUSSION

This study addressed how effectively Management Shadowing Program can establish the structured bridge between classroom learning and real-life experiences to develop hospitality managerial competencies within experiential learning framework. While experiential learning theory is widely valued in the field of education, limited research is available about how well students' workplace experiences correspond to develop managerial competencies and respective experiential learning stages. This reserach findings address this gap by presenting how students progressed through Management Shadowing Program experiential learning processes and how this progression is reflected in the managerial competency development of self-management, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and strategic thinking.

The findings of this research reinforce Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle framework and illustrate step by step progression through its four stages. Shadows initially engaged in Concrete Experience stage through hands-on experience in hotel operations, that leads to Reflective Observation stage which is the most prevalent learning mode identified in the data. This reflection facilitated development of Abstract Conceptualization, where the shadow began to extract broader meaning from the experiences. Humorous interactions observed during Ramadan fasting periods for Muslim employees and guests is both culturally significant and also served as example for developing emotional intelligence of shadows which is a essential interpersonal competence.

This study analyzes how hospitality students learn and grow through experiential management shadowing program. Kolb's model explains how learning occurs through cycles of action and reflection; the competency framework reveals what is being developed.

This dual lens offers valuable insight for curriculum design in hospitality and tourism education and helps embedding structured reflection, competency-based assessment, and iterative feedback mechanisms in order to better align academic objectives with industry expectations. Management shadowing program establishes a multi-dimensional bridge between academia and sector for reverse mentoring from shadow to manager as well as from shadow to academia. Management Shadowing Program presents a proven strategy towards work-ready graduates equipped with skills necessary for managerial success in an evolving and changing hospitality sector.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study emphasizes structured experiential learning supported by reflective practice, fosters managerial competencies of hospitality prospective graduates. Integration of ELT and hospitality managerial competency frameworks provides a dual lens to magnify learning process and managerial competency development simultaneously. Reflective observation as the dominant learning stage, highlights the value of structured reflection in bridging experience to competency development in self-management, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and strategic awareness.

Experiential learning programs can be more effective when students are guided from hands-on engagement towards abstract reasoning and active experimentation. Incorporating structured academic and sectoral mentorship, regular feedback and reflection reports covering beyond anecdotal recounting can enhance the impact of workplace learning. Informal reflection questions, such as "what was funny" or "what was interesting this week," clearly support the development of very important hospitality sector competencies such as emotional intelligence and cultural awareness.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study enhances hospitality literature as well as education literature by bridging experiential learning with hospitality managerial competency framework and offers an integrated understanding of how managerial learning develops through structured workplace experiences. Competency development during Management Shadowing Program may follow a developmental perspective from interpersonal engagement and

self-management toward problem-solving, adaptability, and strategic thinking.

6.2. Practical Implications

Aligning experiential learning principles with managerial competencies and embedding competency-based assessment, structured reflection, and opportunities for abstract conceptualization may better prepare students for the evolving expectations of the hospitality industry. The findings also suggest that hospitality sector can benefit from structured internal training or shadowing models for early-career employees' exposure to managerial processes, decision-making practices and cross-departmental coordination to incubate prospective managerial talent while strengthening workforce readiness. Students can benefit from field-based learning opportunities that integrate experiential learning as tool for professional preparation.

This study offers evidence that structured management shadowing program can serve as a meaningful experiential learning model for hospitality education for managerial competencies and strengthening students' readiness for professional practice.

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