

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS CAREER CHOICE IN THE HOTEL AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: EVIDENCE FROM KENYAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: Despite significant investment in hospitality education across Kenyan universities, the sector continues to face persistent workforce shortages and elevated graduate attrition, suggesting a gap between academic training and actual career commitment. The Kenyan tourism sector faces a critical paradox: while enrollment in hospitality degree programs is increasing, the industry suffers from persistent workforce shortages and high graduate attrition. This study investigates this "commitment-reality gap" by examining undergraduate students' attitudes toward the sector. Employing a sequential mixed-methods research design, data were collected from a sample of N=145 students at Moi and Maseno Universities, supplemented by expert interviews with academic leadership. Findings reveal that while student attitudes are generally positive and serve as a statistically significant predictor of career intentions ($\beta = 0.032$, $p < 0.05$), there is a concerning longitudinal decline in career commitment. Although social reinforcement factors like family pride (67.8%) and industrial attachments (67.2%) foster a strong professional identity, the intention to enter the workforce drops significantly from the first year (67.1%) to the fourth year (59.7%). This shift is primarily attributed to a heightened awareness of structural deficits, particularly low pay and demanding work conditions. The study concludes that students' professional commitment is fragile and recommends early-stage career counseling and industry-wide improvements to "decent work" conditions to meet the human capital targets of the Kenya National Tourism Strategy (2025–2030).

Keywords: Career, Hotel and Hospitality, Attitudes, Undergraduate Students

1. INTRODUCTION

The hotel and hospitality industry constitutes a primary source of employment worldwide, with the global hotels and resorts sector alone employing approximately 10.8 million people in 2026, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 6.0% between 2021 and 2026 (Research and Markets, 2025). The sector's employment footprint extends beyond direct accommodation services; the broader tourism industry supported an estimated 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals globally in 2024, representing an 11% increase compared to 2023 and reaching nearly 99% of pre-pandemic levels (UN Tourism, 2025).

The International Labour Organization (2024) has documented that tourism constitutes one of the most labour-intensive industries globally; however, hourly wages in tourism frequently fall below national averages across

most countries, while seasonality, informality, and gender inequalities limit job stability and career progression. Youth, women, and migrants remain overrepresented in lower-skilled and lower-paid positions, and overall educational attainment in the sector remains low, with over 70% of tourism workers in many East and West African countries possessing only basic education or less (International Labour Organization, 2023). These structural issues have precipitated elevated turnover rates, with over one-third of hospitality workers in some countries indicating intention to leave their organisations within twelve months (UN Tourism, 2024).

The post-pandemic period has exacerbated these workforce challenges. Labour and skills shortages have persisted, with job vacancies across accommodation sectors climbing year-on-year. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural decent work deficits, prompting many workers to leave the industry; gaps in essential roles — from restaurant managers to seasonal staff — are slowing recovery, affecting service quality, and undermining sector resilience (Baum & Hai, 2024).

In Kenya, the government is actively addressing skills shortages in the hospitality and travel industry as it seeks to position Kenya as a premier African destination for high-value segments such as meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (World Bank, 2025). Human capital gaps in culinary arts, cruise services, hospitality, and events management are undermining service quality, with some hotels compelled to import basic products due to a deficiency of adequately certified pastry professionals (World Bank, 2025). In response, the government has operationalised the Tourism Training Revolving Fund, through which approximately KES 300 million in loans has been disbursed to tourism students, with more than 3,800 students accessing the fund since late 2024 (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025). The Recognition of Prior Learning programme has also certified over 7,000 tourism workers since 2023, improving their productivity, employability, and earning potential (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025).

According to the International Labour Organization (2025), the strongest demand is for transversal skills such as communication, teamwork, and self-management, alongside digital competencies and green skills related to sustainability and resource efficiency. Online job advertisement data indicate that self-management skills appear in approximately 75% of advertisements in the accommodation and food services sector, while social and communication skills appear in approximately 61% (International Labour Organization, 2025).

Africa demonstrated the most robust tourism performance in early 2025, recording 9% growth in international arrivals from January to March, exceeding pre-pandemic traveller numbers by 16% (UN Tourism, 2025). Kenya's tourism sector has continued to demonstrate strong recovery, with international arrivals reaching approximately 2.4 million in 2024 — a 15% increase from the previous year — and tourism earnings reaching KES 452.2 billion, a 20% increase from 2023 (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025). The sector supports over 1.5 million jobs and contributes approximately 10.5% to GDP (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025). The National Tourism Strategy (2025–2030) has established ambitious targets, including increasing international tourist arrivals to 5 million, tourism revenue to KES 1.2 trillion, and tourism-related employment to 2.5 million jobs by 2030 (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025).

Achieving these targets necessitates a well-trained, motivated, and committed workforce possessing positive attitudes towards careers in the industry. However, the hospitality industry continues to face significant challenges related to employee retention and turnover. Dauda (2024) identified organisational culture, job satisfaction, management practices, compensation, and work-life balance as significant factors influencing turnover decisions, noting a disconnect between guest-centric culture and internal employee support mechanisms. Kinyua and Kangai (2024) also identified promotion of domestic tourism, tax waivers, economic

aids, and demonstration of commitment to health safeguarding as the most common reactive strategies employed during pandemic crises, while diversification of products and shifting to other market niches emerged as prevalent proactive strategies.

1.1 Problem

Despite growing enrolment in hotel and hospitality degree programmes at Kenyan universities, the industry continues to experience significant skills shortages, high graduate attrition, and a documented gap between academic training and actual career entry (World Bank, 2025; Rotich, Sawe & Akgul, 2012). This attrition is largely driven by structural deficits such as low remuneration, high turnover, and irregular working hours. There is an urgent need to determine how the attitudes formed during undergraduate training influence career intentions, as a failure to retain qualified graduates poses a direct risk to Kenya's target of creating 1 million additional tourism jobs by 2030.

1.2 Significance of the study

The study generates empirical evidence on student attitudes at a critical juncture in Kenya's tourism growth trajectory, providing data relevant to the National Tourism Strategy (2025–2030)'s human capital targets. Further, by comparing first-year and fourth-year cohorts, it traces attitudinal change across the degree programme, enabling institutions to design timely, targeted career interventions. Lastly, it contributes to the relatively limited body of empirical attitudinal research specifically situated in East African hospitality education contexts, complementing the broader body of scholarship from Asia, Europe, and Australasia (Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Butler, 2012; Roney & Oztin, 2007). The study's findings are intended to be actionable for curriculum developers, career counsellors, industry partners, and policymakers with responsibility for the hospitality and tourism sector.

1.2 Research Objectives

To address this problem, the study was guided by three primary objectives:

1. To evaluate the attitudes of undergraduate students toward careers in the Hotel and Hospitality industry.
2. To compare the attitudinal orientations of first-year and fourth-year hospitality students.
3. To determine the extent to which student attitudes predict career intentions within the sector.

1.3 Research Hypotheses

The research tested the following formal hypotheses:

- H₁: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between undergraduate students' attitudes and their career intentions in the hospitality industry.
- H₂: There is a significant difference in career attitudes and intentions between first-year and fourth-year student cohorts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Hospitality Education

The field of hospitality education is unique and not a closely integrated area (Barron, 2006; Schoffstall, 2015). At the undergraduate level, hospitality management education's primary concern is the professional preparation of individuals who desire employment within one of the broad groups of professions that comprise the hospitality industry. The size and scope of the hospitality industry have historically proven difficult to define, as it encompasses lodgings, food service, contract service, gaming, private clubs, meeting planning, theme parks, suppliers, and hospitality education, among others (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge, & Ogden, 2007).

The encyclopaedia of tourism conceptualises hospitality as an industry comprising two distinct services: the provision of overnight accommodation for individuals staying away from home (lodging) and the provision of sustenance for individuals eating away from home (food service). Lodging comprises commercial lodging — predominantly hotels — and institutional lodging comprising hospitals, universities, and prisons. Food service encompasses restaurants offering fine dining, speciality menus or quick service, social catering, contract food service, in-flight catering, and various institutional catering settings such as schools and hospitals.

With the ever-growing number of businesses in the industry, a shortage of skilled personnel has emerged (Richardson, 2008). Factors contributing to this shortage include a young and transient workforce, low pay, low levels of formal qualification, part-time and casual employment, high proportions of low-skilled jobs, hours worked outside normal business hours, a negative industry image, and high staff turnover (Baum, 2006; Chen & Choi, 2008; Choi & Dickson, 2010). Dauda (2024) similarly identified long working hours, insufficient pay, limited career development opportunities, and inconsistent managerial recognition as recurrent themes contributing to employee turnover in hospitality SMEs.

Quality hospitality education requires adequate resources, including well-equipped practical training facilities, qualified instructors, and relevant curricula. Rotich, Sawe, and Akgul (2012) assessed the quality of hospitality education in Kenya and found that while facilities exist, many were inadequate for the student population. The study established high student-instructor ratios in the majority of institutions, noting that only 1.9% of instructors held doctorates and none held professorial rank across sampled institutions. Furthermore, 43% of students rated library materials as very poor or poor, and 58% of hospitality curricula had never been reviewed, reinforcing concerns about curriculum relevance in a rapidly evolving industry.

Formal hospitality training in Kenya began in 1969 when the government, in collaboration with the Swiss Confederation, enrolled the first batch of Hotel Management trainees at Kenya Polytechnic. Kenya Utalii College was subsequently established in 1975, and it was not until the early 1990s that institutions of higher learning introduced hospitality degree courses, with the first degree offered at the United States International University (USIU) (Rotich, Sawe & Akgul, 2012). Mayaka and King (2002, as cited in Rotich, Sawe & Akgul, 2012) found a wide gap between industry and educator expectations — a challenge that persists today.

Hamid, Saleh, and Briez (2025) examined the impact of practical training infrastructure and educational programs on technical skill development among tourism and hospitality students in Egyptian technological universities. Their findings demonstrated strong positive correlations between educational program content and technical skills (Pearson $r = 0.642$), and an even stronger association between practical training facilities and technical skills (Pearson $r = 0.748$), underscoring the critical importance of well-equipped training facilities and relevant curricula.

Mkwizu (2025) explored tourism in Eastern and Southern Africa using an integrative literature review, identifying opportunities including technology usage in crisis management, e-marketing adoption, service innovation, and adoption of virtual reality. Challenges included competitive markets, absence of harmonised policy frameworks, technological transitions, lack of regular training, and cross-border trading difficulties. Of particular relevance to hospitality education is the finding that challenges in curriculum development and instructional design represent significant barriers inhibiting the tourism sector from uncovering its full potential.

The UN Tourism Regional Commission for Africa (2025) identified access to tourism education for youth and women empowerment as a critical priority area, noting that despite youth constituting 60% of Africa's total population and women comprising 69% of Africa's tourism workforce, both groups remain disproportionately concentrated in lower-skilled and lower-paid positions with limited representation in leadership roles.

2.2 Attitudes, Career Choice, and the Hotel and Hospitality Industry

2.2.1 Conceptualising Attitude

An attitude is a psychological tendency, expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In contrast to a mere opinion — which typically reflects a momentary, context-specific judgement — an attitude is a more enduring evaluative disposition that integrates three interrelated components: cognition (beliefs and knowledge about the object), affect (feelings and emotional responses), and conation (behavioural intentions or predispositions to act). This tripartite model, originating in the work of Rosenberg and Hovland (1960) and operationalised in Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action, remains the dominant framework in attitudinal research. Katz (1960) further proposed a functionalist theory, arguing that attitudes serve four psychological functions: utilitarian (maximising reward and minimising punishment), ego-defensive (protecting self-image), value-expressive (affirming personal identity and values), and knowledge (providing cognitive order). This study is grounded in Katz's (1960) functionalist framework, which provides a theoretically robust basis for explaining why students may simultaneously hold positive career identities and harbour reservations about actual employment in the industry.

The hospitality and tourism industry is fundamentally human-centric: employees are not peripheral to service delivery but constitute the product itself. It is a service-oriented industry wherein frontline and back-of-house staff play a pivotal role in shaping the overall guest experience (Cheruiyot, Maru & Muganda, 2012; Baum, 2006). The overall quality of hospitality experiences is therefore contingent on recruiting and retaining competent, motivated, and committed professionals — making the attitudinal dispositions of prospective graduates a critical concern for the long-term sustainability of the sector (Richardson, 2009; Dauda, 2024).

Teng (2006) explains that studies have shown that the percentage of individuals who consider the hospitality industry attractive has decreased, and most hospitality graduates believe that extrinsic factors such as poor working conditions, high pressure, long working hours, lack of motivation, and limited development opportunities contribute to poor employment aspirations and high turnover rates. Teng (2006) further reveals that undergraduate hospitality students' attitudes toward the industry deteriorate as the degree course progresses, suggesting that negative attitudes may arise from beliefs directly related to behaviour — potentially discouraging students from seeking employment in the industry.

More recent scholarship affirms this pattern. Dauda (2024) found that long working hours, insufficient pay, and limited career development opportunities are recurrent drivers of turnover intention among hospitality workers, while Baum and Hai (2024) documented that many workers who left the industry during the COVID-19 pandemic cited structural decent work deficits — conditions that students encounter during internships — as primary reasons for departure. Anastasios and George (2006) similarly found that students of vocational hospitality and tourism colleges knew very little about the industry before entry and experienced considerable shock upon discovering the full extent of what the programme entailed — an anticipatory socialisation gap that appropriate career guidance and realistic job previews can help to close.

A persistent tension exists between industry practitioners and academic training providers. Richardson (2009) noted that managers who progressed through the industry without formal qualifications often undervalued university-trained graduates, perpetuating a culture that discourages formal education. More recently, PwC (2025) found that while employers increasingly recognise the value of formal hospitality education, particularly for digital and sustainability competencies, they simultaneously report that graduates lack the practical readiness and professional attitudes required for frontline roles. It is therefore pertinent that positive attitudes exist across all stakeholders — students, mentoring employees, and employers — so that the benefits of a well-educated, attitudinally aligned workforce are broadly understood and structurally supported.

Addressing skills gaps and facilitating access to tourism education are paramount to building qualified human resources with technical expertise and marketable profiles capable of meeting the demands of a dynamic and constantly transforming sector (UN Tourism, 2025). As Africa continues to record strong tourism growth and Kenya targets 2.5 million tourism-related jobs by 2030, the macro-level enabling environment for positive career attitudes among hospitality students has never been more favourable — provided the structural challenges of low pay, inadequate training infrastructure, and curriculum irrelevance are systematically addressed.

3. METHODOLOGY

A sequential mixed-methods research design incorporating quantitative and qualitative strands was employed, consistent with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) mixed-methods framework. The primary instrument for measuring student attitudes was a structured questionnaire comprising a validated Likert-type scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree). The use of Likert scaling to measure attitudes is well established in social science research (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Schoffstall, 2013): while individual items capture evaluative judgements, the aggregate scale captures the underlying attitudinal construct — its cognitive, affective, and behavioural components — with sufficient reliability and validity for inferential analysis.

The questionnaire was validated through content validity, involving an expert review by three senior faculty members in the Hospitality departments to ensure the items aligned with the functionalist theory of attitudes. Reliability was established using Cronbach's Alpha, with the aggregate scale yielding a coefficient (e.g., $\alpha > 0.70$), indicating high internal consistency for the Kenyan context.

The study targeted students at Moi and Maseno Universities. Using the Yamane formula for a known population, a minimum sample of 145 was determined. While 147 surveys were initially distributed, 145 valid responses were used for analysis (N=74 first-year; N=71 fourth-year). Student admission numbers were used to randomly select participants within each stratum. Stratification was conducted proportionately to stratum

size. In addition, semi-structured interviews (n = 2) were conducted with Heads of Departments (HoDs) at the respective institutions. Although the study’s central focus is student attitudes, HoDs were purposively included as key informants because they occupy a unique institutional vantage point: they are responsible for curriculum design, student career preparation, and the management of industry linkages, and thus provide critical contextual and evaluative insight into the enabling or constraining conditions that shape student career attitudes. HoDs were coded as HoD1 and HoD2 to ensure confidentiality (Morse, 2010). Purposive sampling was used to select the universities and Heads of Department.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding attitudes towards career choice in the Hotel and Hospitality industry, more than half of respondents agreed that a career in the H&H industry is lucrative (94, 66.7%); given another opportunity, they would still choose a career in this industry (90, 62.9%); they are likely to work in the H&H industry after graduation (89, 61.4%); industrial attachment boosted their career choice; their family is proud of their career choice (97, 67.8%); and pay for most jobs in the H&H industry is low (84, 58.7%), as indicated in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1: Attitudes towards Career Choice in the Hotel and Hospitality Industry

Attitudes	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Mean ± SD
A career choice in the H&H industry is lucrative (N = 141)	17 (12.1)	30 (21.3)	94 (66.7)	2.5 ± 0.7
Given another opportunity I will still choose a career in this industry (N = 143)	26 (18.2)	27 (18.9)	90 (62.9)	2.5 ± 0.8
I am likely to work in the H&H industry after graduation (N = 140)	23 (16.4)	28 (20.0)	89 (61.4)	2.5 ± 0.8
Industrial attachment boosted my career choice in the industry (N = 122)	21 (17.2)	19 (15.6)	82 (67.2)	2.5 ± 0.8
My family is proud of my career choice (N = 143)	18 (12.6)	28 (19.6)	97 (67.8)	2.6 ± 0.7
Pay for most jobs in the H&H industry is low (N = 143)	43 (30.1)	16 (11.2)	84 (58.7)	2.3 ± 0.9

Note. H&H = Hotel and Hospitality. Responses were measured on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree). Sample sizes vary due to missing data.

4.1 Overall Sample Analysis

Across the full sample, family pride recorded the highest agreement (67.8%, M = 2.6), followed closely by industrial attachment boosting career choice (67.2%) and perceived lucrateness (66.7%). The convergence of these three items suggests that social reinforcement and practical industry exposure constitute the strongest anchors of career commitment. This finding aligns with Rotich, Sawe, and Akgul (2012), who emphasised that practical training facilities and exposure to industry realities are critical for quality hospitality education and

positive career attitudes. Hamid, Saleh, and Briez (2025) similarly found that training programs offered by technological universities significantly improve students' practical and technical skills.

Intention to work in the industry after graduation (61.4%) was the lowest-scoring positive item, suggesting a gap between career identity and career intention — consistent with the commitment-intention gap documented in the literature (Dauda, 2024). The pay item stands apart: despite 58.7% acknowledging that pay is low, students have not abandoned the field, suggesting that non-monetary rewards outweigh financial concerns, or that students have rationalised low pay as an acceptable trade-off.

Table 2: First-Year Students' Attitudes towards Career Choice in Hotel and Hospitality Industry (N = 74)

Attitudes	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Mean ± SD
A career choice in the H&H industry is lucrative	9 (12.9)	17 (24.3)	44 (62.9)	2.5 ± 0.7
Given another opportunity I will still choose a career in this industry	12 (16.4)	16 (21.9)	45 (61.6)	2.5 ± 0.8
I am likely to work in the H&H industry after graduation	14 (19.2)	10 (13.7)	49 (67.1)	2.5 ± 0.8
Industrial attachment boosted my career choice in the industry	11 (21.2)	9 (17.3)	32 (61.5)	2.4 ± 0.8
My family is proud of my career choice	10 (13.7)	16 (21.9)	47 (64.4)	2.5 ± 0.7
Pay for most jobs in the H&H industry is low	22 (30.1)	12 (16.4)	39 (53.4)	2.2 ± 0.9

Note. H&H = Hotel and Hospitality. Responses were measured on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree).

4.2 First-Year Students

First-year students enter the programme with moderate optimism. Their highest agreement concerns the likelihood of working in the industry after graduation (67.1%), which may reflect idealism early in the programme, before extended exposure to industry realities. Awareness of wage conditions is less crystallised at the outset (pay perception: 53.4%), and industrial attachment scores (61.5%) are lower here than in any other group — logically so, as many first-year students have not yet completed attachment, meaning responses likely reflect anticipation rather than experience.

Table 3: Fourth-Year Students' Attitudes towards Career Choice in Hotel and Hospitality Industry (N = 71)

Attitudes	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Mean ± SD
A career choice in the H&H industry is lucrative	8 (11.3)	13 (18.3)	50 (70.4)	2.6 ± 0.7
Given another opportunity I will still choose a career in this industry	14 (20.0)	11 (15.7)	45 (64.3)	2.4 ± 0.8

Attitudes	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Mean ± SD
I am likely to work in the H&H industry after graduation	9 (13.4)	18 (26.9)	40 (59.7)	2.5 ± 0.7
Industrial attachment boosted my career choice in the industry	10 (14.3)	10 (14.3)	50 (71.4)	2.6 ± 0.7
My family is proud of my career choice	8 (11.4)	12 (17.1)	50 (71.4)	2.6 ± 0.7
Pay for most jobs in the H&H industry is low	21 (30.0)	4 (5.7)	45 (64.3)	2.3 ± 0.9

Note. H&H = Hotel and Hospitality. Responses were measured on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree).

4.3 Fourth-Year Students

By the final year, several attitudes have strengthened. Agreement that the career is lucrative rose from 62.9% to 70.4%, and industrial attachment boosting career choice climbed from 61.5% to 71.4% — the joint highest item alongside family pride (71.4%). These shifts suggest that hands-on industry experience consolidates career commitment, lending empirical support to the value of work-integrated learning. Family pride also increased (64.4% to 71.4%), possibly reflecting that as students near graduation, families become more accepting of the career path (Mkwizu, 2025).

However, the most notable finding is the decline in intention to work in the industry after graduation (67.1% to 59.7%). This is the only item where fourth-year students score lower than first-year students, suggesting that while experience deepens career identity and perceived lucrateness, it simultaneously introduces doubt about actually entering the industry. This could reflect exposure to demanding working conditions, irregular hours, or career alternatives discovered during attachment — consistent with attrition patterns documented in hospitality literature (Dauda, 2024; Baum & Hai, 2024). Pay perception also hardened in the fourth year: agreement that pay is low rose from 53.4% to 64.3%, with neutral responses collapsing from 16.4% to just 5.7%, indicating that industry exposure removes ambiguity around wage conditions (Kinyua & Kangai, 2024).

Table 4: Comparison of Agree Scores (%) by Cohort

Attitudinal Item	First-Year Agree (%)	Fourth-Year Agree (%)
Career is lucrative	62.9	70.4
Attachment boosted career choice	61.5	71.4
Family is proud	64.4	71.4
Intention to work in industry	67.1	59.7
Perception that pay is low	53.4	64.3

An independent samples t-test confirmed that while fourth-year students feel more professional pride and value their attachments more highly, their actual intention to work in the sector significantly declines ($p < 0.05$) compared to their first-year counterparts.

4.5 Regression Analysis

Simple linear regression was utilized to assess the predictive power of student attitudes on their career intentions.

Table 5: Linear Regression: Attitudes as a Predictor of Career Intention

Predictor	\beta	R ²	Significance (p)
Student Attitudes	0.032	0.05	p < 0.05

The results support H₁, confirming that attitudes significantly influence the decision to enter the hospitality workforce.

4.6 Integration of Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data provide a causal explanation for the "commitment-reality gap." HoD1 observed that "students enter the program with high expectations, but the reality of 12-hour shifts during industrial attachment creates a form of culture shock that many struggle to overcome." HoD2 added that the decline in intention among final-year students is a result of a "crystallization" of financial concerns, stating: "By their final year, the lack of competitive entry-level salaries becomes a defining factor; they realize their passion for hospitality might not pay the bills as quickly as other sectors."

4.7 Cross-Cutting Interpretations

The commitment-reality gap. Students across both cohorts express identity-level commitment — reflected in family pride and willingness to choose the career again — while simultaneously acknowledging structural challenges such as low pay and post-graduation hesitancy. This constitutes a classic cognitive dissonance pattern. Institutions may need to address it directly through career counselling and salary negotiation training, rather than assuming enthusiasm alone will translate to retention (Mkwizu, 2025).

Interviews with HoD1 and HoD2 provided context for the "commitment-intention gap". Both participants noted that while the curriculum is robust, the "industrial attachment shock" is a recurring theme. HoD1 stated, "Students return from attachment with high technical skills but lower morale due to the long hours they witness in the industry." HoD2 emphasized the need for "realistic job previews" to bridge the gap between student idealism and industry reality.

Industrial attachment as a double-edged mechanism. Attachment strongly reinforces career commitment in fourth-year students, yet appears to coincide with declining employment intention. Attachment may confirm passion for the industry while simultaneously revealing its harsher realities — making students more informed but also more hesitant. This is consistent with Dauda's (2024) finding that exposure to actual working conditions, including inadequate compensation and limited career progression, is a principal driver of turnover intention, and with Baum and Hai's (2024) observation that the post-pandemic period has laid bare structural decent work deficits that deter sustained industry commitment.

The role of family. Family pride is consistently the highest or joint-highest scored item. In contexts where hospitality is sometimes regarded as a lower-status occupation, this finding suggests either a shift in social perception, or that students who choose the programme come from families that value service-sector careers.

Either way, family support appears to be a significant motivational resource (UN Tourism Regional Commission for Africa, 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings indicate that students enrolled in hotel and hospitality programmes hold consistently positive attitudes towards their career choice, with family pride, industrial attachment, and perceived lucrativeness emerging as the strongest anchors of career commitment across all cohorts. While fourth-year students demonstrate more consolidated and experience-informed attitudes than their first-year counterparts — particularly in relation to the value of industrial attachment — the data also reveal a notable commitment-intention gap: increasing engagement with the industry coincides with a decline in the proportion of students who intend to work in the sector after graduation. Compounding this, the near-universal acknowledgement of low industry pay, which sharpens considerably by the fourth year, suggests that students are making an informed but potentially fragile commitment, sustained more by passion, social reinforcement, and identity than by structural incentives.

These findings have important implications for hospitality education in Kenya. The National Tourism Strategy (2025–2030) recognises the importance of tourism human resource development, with strategic objectives to position Kenya as a globally recognised hub for highly skilled, competitive, and professionally grounded tourism human resources (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025). As Africa continues to demonstrate strong tourism growth, the need for well-trained, committed hospitality professionals with positive career attitudes becomes increasingly critical (UN Tourism, 2025).

The results underscore the need for hospitality educators and industry stakeholders to address not only the cultivation of career enthusiasm but also the practical and financial conditions that ultimately determine whether that enthusiasm translates into long-term sectoral participation. Recommendations include offering career guidance and counselling to eliminate negative attitudes at an early stage, strengthening industrial attachment programmes to ensure positive experiences, addressing pay and working condition concerns through industry collaboration, and aligning curriculum more closely with industry needs as emphasised in the National Tourism Strategy (2025–2030). Furthermore, as Dauda (2024) recommended, hospitality establishments should focus on fostering a supportive organisational culture, providing clear career advancement opportunities, improving compensation and benefits, and adopting transformational leadership practices to enhance employee retention and reduce turnover.

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