

# THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE TOURISM LABOUR MARKET FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** Aim of the article is to identify the most important expectations of professional practice in terms of professional skills that can be promoted into tourism education programmes focused on education of future tourism professionals.

**Methods.** To find out the differences between the expectations of tourism service providers towards graduates of tourism study programmes and the actual knowledge and abilities of graduates of the programmes we performed an IPA analysis (Importance-Performance Analysis).

**Results.** We found that, for example, educational programmes need to pay more attention to soft skills like critical thinking as well as to teaching students to have a more proactive approach. It is also important to have subjects that enhance work and time flexibility and customer orientation.

**Conclusion.** The article provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders by identifying key areas for improvement, such as the emphasis on soft skills (e.g., critical thinking, proactive approaches, and customer orientation) and essential hard skills (e.g., online marketing and content development). Additionally, it offers a strategic perspective on sustainable workforce development in Slovakia's tourism sector, contributing to a broader discourse on education reform and economic growth within the industry.

**Cognitive value.** The cognitive value of this article lies in its analysis of the alignment between tourism education programmes and the evolving needs of the tourism labour market. By employing an Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), it highlights the gap between the skills tourism graduates acquire and the expectations of employers.

**Keywords:** tourism education programmes, professional skills, proactive approach, customer orientation

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism represents a multifaceted activity with significant socio-economic implications within various economic sectors. It constitutes a crucial component of our state's economy and has emerged as an increasingly vital economic sector in recent years. The development and quality of the tourism industry are contingent upon the availability of appropriately skilled human resources. The primary drivers of success in the tourism sector are the human resources, who, through higher education, acquire the qualifications necessary to become proficient managers in the tourism and hospitality industry. The tourism industry is a significant economic sector that relies heavily on a skilled workforce to meet the demands of an ever-evolving market. As such, the training and education of future professionals in the tourism labour market is crucial to ensure sustainable growth and development. With the rapid pace of globalisation and technological advancements, the skills needed in the tourism industry are constantly changing. It is essential for training programs to adapt

to these changes and equip future professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in the industry. By reflecting on the needs of the tourism labour market, we can identify key areas for improvement in current training programs and develop strategies to better prepare future professionals for the challenges they will face. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on sustainable training in the tourism industry and provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders.

## BACKGROUND

Tourism higher education in Slovakia has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, reflecting broader trends in the global tourism industry and educational advancements. As the tourism sector continues to expand, there is an increasing demand for well-educated professionals who can navigate the complexities of this dynamic field. This necessitates a robust and adaptive educational framework to equip students with the requisite knowledge and skills. In Slovakia, higher education institutions have responded to this need by developing comprehensive programs that integrate theoretical knowledge with practical experience, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared to meet industry demands (Machlica et al., 2017). Tourism higher education serves as a crucial platform for the development of human capital within the tourism industry. Its mission is to ensure the quality of graduates by equipping them with specific skills, competencies, and knowledge, enabling them to function as advanced professionals. Starting in the latter half of the 1950s, there was a systematic shift towards the scientific examination of tourism, which established it as a subject of academic inquiry across multiple disciplines and an essential component of higher education (Gúčik et al., 2015).

The Department of Tourism offers training for future tourism professionals in the study programmes Regional Tourism (BA) and Regional Tourism Management (MA). Both degree programmes are offered within the field of study Economics and Management, which replaced the field of study Tourism from 2019. The 3rd year of study within the BA study programme is atypically organised in trimesters, but this is an advantage over the usual semesters because during the third trimester, students complete a continuous 3-month work placement (training) in tourism companies and institutions. During this professional practice, students gain valuable practical experience in tourism management and organisation, which increases their chances of better employment on the labour market. The training and further education institution is contracted by over 40 tourism organisations that offer internships for students. During the continuous professional internship, the students' activities are continuously recorded, communicated with representatives of organisations and a random check is carried out at the place of professional practice. At the end of the placement, a questionnaire is distributed to the representatives of the organisations to evaluate the student's professional work—minutes and a 'diary' are also produced. These documents are then used to make an overall assessment of the student's activities and subsequently

graded according to the standard A-FX scale. Students can earn a total of 30 Credits, the achievement of which is a prerequisite for the successful completion of the course and the possibility of applying for the final examinations at bachelor level.

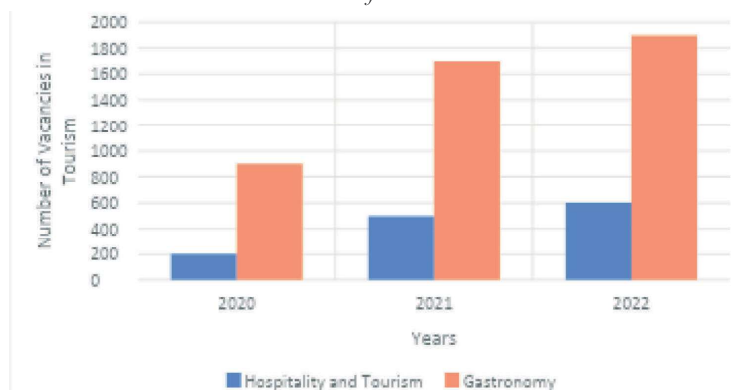
## TOURISM LABOUR MARKET IN SLOVAKIA

The tourism industry in Slovakia plays a vital role in the national economy, contributing significantly to employment and economic growth. Total tourism contribution to Slovakia's GDP was 4.8% in 2023. While this contribution represents a decrease of 26.2% from the pre-covid year 2019, the year-on-year increase was 25.6%. Thus, we can see a continuous increase and gradually tourism in Slovakia is getting back to pre-pandemic values. The same trend can be seen in employment in tourism in Slovakia. Travel and tourism contributed 6.4% to total employment in Slovakia, which corresponds to approximately 167,700 jobs. Compared to 2019, tourism's contribution to employment is 2.1% less, but the year-on-year increase was 2.6% (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2024). The tourism sector in Slovakia is characterised by a diverse range of occupations, including hotel management, food services, travel agencies, and cultural tourism. According to Marian Gúčík et al. (2015), the sector demands a mix of skilled and semi-skilled labour, with an increasing need for professionals who possess advanced competencies in management, marketing, and digital technologies.

Despite the fact that unemployment in Slovakia is gradually declining (reaching 5.8% in 2023) (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, 2024), the tourism labour market still reports a shortage of employees. According to Trexima (2024) there were approximately 2500 unfilled tourism jobs in 2022 which was a 227% increase from the year 2020. This large increase is mainly due to the pandemic restrictions in 2020, due to which many tourism establishments did not function or ceased operations.

**Figure 1**

*Vacancies in Tourism in Slovakia from 2020 to 2022*



Source. Own finding according to Trexima, 2024.

Moreover, demographic trends such as an ageing workforce and migration of young talent to other European Union (EU) countries exacerbate the problem. Data from the Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky (2024) shows that while the tourism sector's demand for labour has increased due to rising tourist numbers, the supply of adequately trained and willing workers has not kept pace. This mismatch leads to significant gaps in service quality and operational efficiency.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the absence of any global standard for the curriculum design of tourism and hospitality programs, schools have tried to tailor their curricula based on local stakeholders' talent demands and their own institutional objectives and desired outcomes (Wattanacharoensil, 2014). Lea Dopson and Richard Tas (2004) underscore the importance of integrating practice into study. Feedback from various stakeholders is essential in this process (Tribe, 2002). Furthermore, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019) advocates for advancing research to identify skills mismatches along the tourism value chain and ensuring that study processes are responsive to labour market needs (Coll-Ramis et al., 2023).

The main component in effectively providing a valuable tourism product is highly qualified employees. The common perception is that an impressive collection of knowledges in different regions and countries are required in order to find the right track that provides adequate training for the students. Universities are nowadays focusing on scaling up courses to respond to the rapidly changing sector (European Commission, 2024; World Tourism Organization, 2022). In the case of Israel, the development of education in hospitality and tourism has been gradual and highly connected to geopolitical (Reichel, 2005). The analysis of Laura Grassini et al. (2024) confirmed that tourism is going through a phase of global restructuring in the paradigm of tourism experience, competitiveness, and new technologies. Furthermore, there were highlighted the requirement of transversal skill (mainly the ability to adapt to change, but also other skills, like communication and teamwork). The importance of soft skills is also highlighted by Stepan Chalupa and Karel Chadt (2021), who emphasise that soft-skills directly influence the guest experience and the entrepreneur's point of view of his employees' work performance.

The key requirements for graduate skills are (Kekelidze & Kvachantiradze, 2023):

- Focus on practical training, organisation of practice, internship;
- Readiness to review and change training programmes in order to bring them in line with market demands and technological changes;
- Improve the provision of qualified personnel in the field of tourism and hospitality based on the alignment of educational programmes.

The tourism workforce is generally less qualified than the EU working population, with up to 25% possessing low-level qualifications (Pact for Skills, 2024). In the National

Reform Programme of the Slovak Republic (2022) it is stated that the educational system in Slovakia is marked by poor results at all levels. Universities are losing their attractiveness, which is reflected in the outflow of a high proportion of domestic students to universities abroad. According to the European Sustainable Development Report 2021 (2021) that presents the progress on the Sustainable Development Goals Slovakia ranks 18th out of 34 European countries in the level of achievement. Regarding the goal for “Quality Education” Slovakia has been marked as “orange” (Significant challenges remain) with progress level “Moderately Increasing”.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In our research, we focused on the question of how to capture the expectations of the Slovak labour market in the field of tourism in order to ensure sustainable training of future professionals. Our aim was to identify the most important expectations of professional practice in terms of professional skills that can be promoted into tourism education programmes focused on education of future tourism professionals. The research sample consisted of representatives of professional practice in tourism in Slovakia who are contractual partners of the Department of Tourism—an institution providing higher education and training questionnaires.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We created a questionnaire that consisted of 11 questions for tourism service providers focused on their requirements toward tourism students. We identified 15 soft skills, seven hard skills, five sustainability skills based on UNWTo (2019) (Table 1). Respondents were asked to answer questions and indicate the importance and presence of skills they require from their future employees on Likert scale. The data were analysed by importance-performance analysis.

**Table 1**  
*Identified Skills, Competences and Knowledge*

Skills, competencies, knowledge	
Softs skills	communication
	ability to speak foreign languages
	critical thinking
	creative-problem solving
	flexibility
	ability to work in a team
	proactive approach

<b>Skills, competencies, knowledge</b>	
Hard skills	hospitality
	knowledge of trends
	diversity awareness
	adaptability
	creating positive working environment
	market overview
	customer orientation
	disability awareness
	tourism information system skills
	descriptive data analysis
	online marketing
	content development
	database skills
	computer skills
Sustainability	social media analytics
	ability to work with local producers
	internal sustainable management
	understanding sustainability principles
	skills related to awareness of local customs
	ability to motivate customers

*Source.* Based on UNWTO, 2019.

## PARTICIPANTS

The research sample (n=131) consisted of representatives of professional practice in tourism in Slovakia who are contractual partners of the Department of Tourism, an institution providing higher education and training ( $n_1=39$ ), and tourism services providers operating in Slovakia ( $n_2=92$ ).

**Table 2**

*Structure of Research Sample*

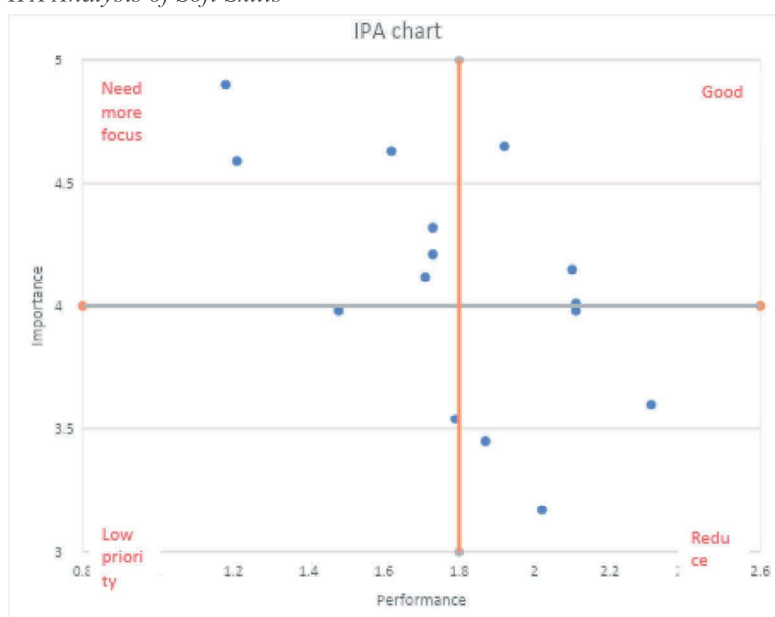
<b>Structure of the research sample</b>	
Business	Number
Accommodation facility	59
Catering facility	33
Tourism destination organisation	12
Travel agency	20
Tour guide	15
Total	139

*Source.* Own research.

## FINDINGS – RESULTS

Utilising a quadrant-based approach centred on data, the analysis was conducted using the mean values derived from the dataset. By pinpointing the most critical attributes, the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) provides insights into which skills, competencies, and knowledge areas should be emphasised in educational programs. This method prioritises actions to optimise the allocation of educational efforts, aligning them more effectively with employers' needs, while simultaneously enhancing and sustaining graduates' employability within the labour market. The graphical representation of the IPA results is shown in Figures 1–3.

**Figure 2**  
*IPA Analysis of Soft Skills*



Source. Own research.

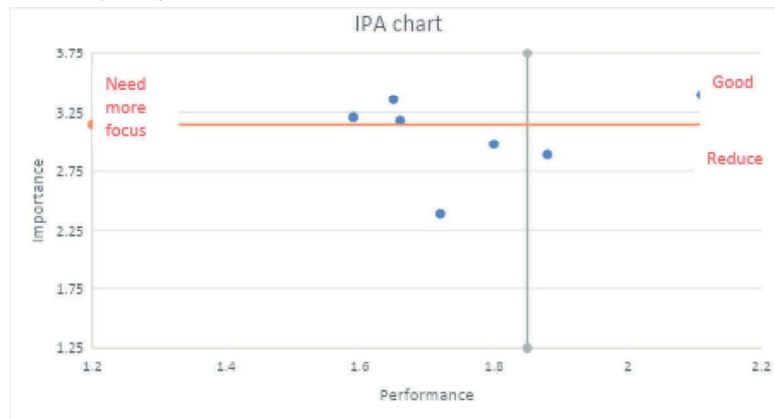
Talking about soft skills educational programmes need to pay more attention to those skills pictured in quadrant “upper left”. We can see that focus needs to be laid on critical thinking as well as teaching students to have a more proactive approach. It is also important to have subjects that enhance flexibility and customer orientation. Unarguably, it is also important to pay attention to the ability to speak foreign languages. Tourism service providers agreed that it is not that important to pay much attention to building more hospitality and for example knowledge of trends.

Regarding the development of essential hard skills for students (Figure 2), including competencies and knowledge relevant to the labour market, attention should be prior-

itised in areas where the largest discrepancies between importance and performance are observed. These areas include online marketing, content development and tourism information systems skills. In contrast, according to businesses, less emphasis is needed on skills related to website and social media analytics, and descriptive data analytics.

**Figure 3**

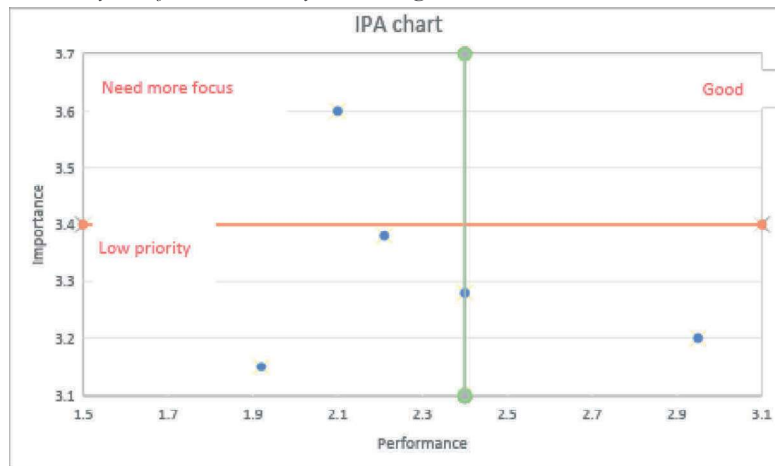
*IPA Analysis of Hard Skills*



Source. Own research.

**Figure 4**

*IPA analysis of sustainability knowledge*



Source. Own research.

The IPA analysis of sustainable competences shows that in the education system, much more attention should be placed on skills that will help future industry leaders with awareness of local customs. From the results, we can see that employers' minimal

focus is required on robotic engineering and the application of digital hardware. Graduates are already well-prepared in terms of proficiency with office software, the use of various hardware and devices, and the ability to monitor and manage online reviews.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Slovakian tourism labour market presents a number of distinctive challenges and opportunities for sustainable growth, particularly in terms of aligning the skills of tourism students with the demands of the industry. The findings indicate that in order to foster sustainable development, it is essential to bridge the gap between the academic training provided and the practical industry requirements that exist.

In both society and the field of education, there is an increasing recognition of the value of key skills such as digital literacy, foreign language proficiency, customer service, and sustainability awareness. Our research findings indicate that there is a need for greater focus on several other fields as well. In addition, the following skills are required: content development, online marketing, critical thinking, a proactive approach and flexibility.

From the perspective of Slovak employers operating in the tourism sector who participated in our research, it is evident that soft skills play a pivotal role in the skill set. Therefore, it is imperative to adapt the education and training of future tourism professionals in such a way that, in addition to professional knowledge, this area is also developed. Furthermore, it is recommended that developments in society, technology and employers' expectations are systematically monitored and the information obtained used to innovate education. By focusing on these aspects, Slovakia's tourism labour market can achieve long-term growth, contributing to both economic development and the sustainability of the tourism industry. Additionally, stronger collaboration between educational institutions and tourism businesses will be crucial in enhancing skills development and creating a workforce that can meet the dynamic needs of the sector.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The article was supported by the Cultural and Educational Grant Agency (KEGA) of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic based on the project: Cultural and Ethical Values in Education of Social Workers. No. 016UKF-4/2025; by the grant VEGA 1/0578/24 of the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education Science Research of the Slovak Republic as well as the EU NextGenerationEU through the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Slovakia under the project: Søren Kierkegaard within the East-European Context, No. 09IXX-03-V04-00594.

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