

## Bridging the gap in skills, competencies, and knowledge: Identifying businesses' perception of Slovak and Czech tourism graduates

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### Abstract

Recognising the needs of the tourism business in terms of graduate students' skills, competencies, and knowledge is a prerequisite for high employability. This study examines these needs and identifies the gap in soft, hard, and sustainability skills of tourism graduates. This empirical research addresses the following research question: What skills, knowledge, and competencies should be considered essential by higher education institutions? This subject is yet to be thoroughly explored in the Central European context. This study delves into the business perspective and analyses their expectations of tourism graduates. To offer meaningful insights, this study employs an innovative methodology, namely an importance-performance analysis, to gain insights into these skills gaps and businesses' expected hard and soft competencies. The implications of these results extend beyond the immediate region as they may apply to the broader European Union by equipping graduates with the skills to thrive in its open market.

**Keywords:** labour market; tourism university graduates; importance-performance analysis; tourism businesses.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of tourism education is connected to the changing needs of the tourism industry. A noticeable increase can be seen in the industry's demand for graduates with various skills. This aligns with a focus on continuous learning and skill enhancement. In 2023, the European Commission's announcement of the European Year of Skills emphasises this priority based on the need for green and digital transitions, as well as investment in reskilling and upskilling to enable a workforce with the right tools to boost Europe's competitiveness (European Commission, 2023). This need prompted universities to revise and tailor their educational curricula to meet the specific needs of the hospitality and tourism industries (Nolan *et al.*, 2010). This initiative also challenges educators to adopt innovative teaching methods (Kimeto *et al.*, 2019) that foster the development of critical competencies.

To improve teaching, three main factors determine the quality of tourism education: how things are taught, the resources available for learning, and the structure of the educational programmes (Kimeto *et al.*, 2019). These factors are crucial in explaining what makes tourism education beneficial, given the industry's changing demands. In response to this evolving landscape, it has become evident that higher education institutions in the field of tourism must continually reassess their programmes to ensure that they remain relevant and effective. This necessity is reflected in the demand for graduates with updated skills and practices. Hospitality and tourism managers prefer well-trained graduates who possess job-related skills and exhibit the desired attitudes (Leiper *et al.*, 2007). Employers are continuously searching for a diverse set of skills and competencies amongst graduates of tourism and hospitality programmes to remain competitive (Batinoluho, 2022) and appreciate graduates possessing practical and transferable skills along with appropriate attitudes (Kimeto, 2021). Consequently, this study aims to identify the gap between the significance and execution of the soft, hard, and sustainability skills of tourism graduates. When individuals receive comprehensive training, acquire job-relevant abilities, and demonstrate the desired attitudes in terms of soft, hard and sustainability skills, they are well-prepared to meet the challenges of the tourism industry.

## 2. Literature review

In the tourism and hospitality sectors, the significance of skills, competencies, and knowledge among graduates cannot be overstated. As industries evolve and consumer demands shift, the ability to adapt is essential. Understanding both soft and hard skills, competencies, technical expertise, and specific knowledge is crucial. Moreover, with growing concerns regarding sustainability and environmental responsibility, sustainability skills are crucial components of the tourism sector. In this context, bridging the skills gap through comprehensive education and training programmes is essential.

### 2.1. *Soft and Hard Skills in Tourism and Hospitality*

Several studies in tourism and hospitality underscore the importance of soft and hard skills for graduates. Balcar (2016) emphasises that soft and hard skills significantly boost individual productivity and have contributed to a substantial rise in employment in occupations demanding high levels of both. While hard skills can help individuals secure job interviews, soft skills ultimately secure their position in a company. Successful careers in the tourism industry often depend on the interplay between hard and soft skills. While hard skills serve as entry points for candidates, soft skills foster successful recruitment and long-term employment in the field. Therefore, the harmonious integration of both hard and soft skills empowers individuals to establish and sustain their careers in the dynamic tourism industry (Moura *et al.*, 2021). Other authors argue that in tourism, soft skills are even more critical than technical skills (Patacsil and Tablatin, 2017; Huang *et al.*, 2021). These skills include communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, and are vital for entrepreneurship, innovation, and working in diverse environments (Patacsil and Tablatin, 2017; Aghion *et al.*, 2019). Soft skills are also important for innovation in the service industry. Research shows that soft skills contribute to finding innovative solutions and processes, especially in lower-skilled jobs (Aghion *et al.*, 2019). Integrating soft

skills training into higher education and providing relevant training programmes can enhance employability in the service sector (Singh and Jaykumar, 2019; Booyens, 2020).

### *2.2. Soft and Sustainability Skills in Tourism Education*

Several authors contributed to the discussion of skills in education and the hospitality industry by emphasising the importance of leadership soft skills, which include communication (Čuić Tanković, 2023), technology usage, teamwork, and interpersonal relationships, particularly among educational administrators (Ariratana *et al.*, 2015). These studies highlight effective communication, collaborative work, and reflexivity as crucial to special education teachers (Fernandes *et al.*, 2021). They also discuss the role of soft skills in employability, such as handshaking, conversation, and asking the right questions (Bartel, 2018). In contrast, the literature places less emphasis on hard skills, such as technical or cognitive knowledge (Guillet *et al.*, 2019). Some studies discuss other missing skills, such as strategic planning, entrepreneurial education, and training (Peters and Buhalis, 2004), and business planning and marketing competencies in tourism (Phelan and Sharpley, 2012). Tourism graduates must be able to navigate diverse and unpredictable situations, as they often work in multicultural environments and interact with international tourists from a wide array of nationalities and ethnic backgrounds (Sangpikul, 2009).

Sustainability skills have recently attracted significant attention in the tourism industry. They refer to the attitudes and behaviours that contribute to the sustainable development and management of tourism destinations (Saleh *et al.*, 2022). With growing concerns about environmental degradation, climate change, and social responsibility, tourism organisations are increasingly focusing on sustainability practices (Wattanacharoensil, 2014). Ivanova *et al.* (2021) point out that green skills are crucial for the sustainable development of tourism and hospitality businesses and significantly contribute to their overall performance. Proficiency in green skills is necessary to foster a sustainable and resource-conscious tourism industry that serves as a vital component of employment within the tourism sector (Renfors, 2024).

### *2.3. Bridging the Skills Gap in Tourism Education*

Tourism education must focus on applying multidisciplinary knowledge, skillful management of team dynamics, decision-making in uncertain situations, and effective real-life management (Abdullah *et al.*, 2013). This requirement underscores the need for comprehensive social skills training and education programmes that improve customer experience while meeting the criteria for sustainable tourism (Carlisle *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, universities and educational institutions bridge the gap between these missing pieces. As highlighted, the tourism and hospitality industries face a skills gap that makes it difficult for businesses to find graduates who possess the required skills and competencies (Batinoluho, 2022). This skills gap makes it essential for educational institutions to provide new comprehensive training to ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills and competencies.

This study identifies the skills, competencies, and knowledge tourism businesses require from graduate students. This study aims to address the gap in our understanding of this subject in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. By employing an innovative methodology, this study examines both the soft and hard skills, as well as sustainability skills, providing insights through an importance-performance analysis (IPA).

## **3. Methodology**

This study aims to identify the gap between the significance and execution of soft, hard, and sustainability skills among tourism graduates. Based on the literature and an assessment of contemporary demands within education, professional practice, and the labour market, this study aims to determine the key skills, knowledge, and competencies that higher education institutions must

consider. To address this study's research question, the selection of these factors (Table 1) was based on a comprehensive review of prior surveys conducted within the field (Wang, 2009; Carlisle *et al.*, 2021; Zaragoza-Sáez *et al.*, 2022), studies on the evolving landscape of hospitality education and its alignment with industry shifts (Popely *et al.*, 2021), and insights into the future of work and skills development in the tourism sector from the UNWTO (2019) and European Commission (2023).

In conjunction with desk research, the requirements publicly available on the websites of prominent employers in the tourism industry were analysed. The outcome of this analysis identified 20 soft, 14 hard, and 9 sustainability-related skills, competencies, and knowledge areas, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Identified skills, competencies, and knowledge

Category	Skills, competencies, and knowledge
Soft (20)	Creative problem-solving, flexibility, adaptability, proactive approach to work, innovativeness, critical thinking, customer orientation, empathy, communication (face to face, online, phone, e-mail), teamwork, diversity / cultural awareness, ethical conduct, ability to create a positive work environment, ability to speak foreign languages, ability to serve customers with various types and degrees of disability, market overview, knowledge of trends and actual situation, hospitality, willingness to help
Hard (14)	Online marketing (e.g., SEO, search engine marketing), website analytics (e.g., Google Analytics), social media analytics (e.g. Meta Business Suite), content development (copywriting), skills to monitor online reviews, (big) data analytics (machine learning, natural language processing), robotic engineering, applying digital hardware (e. g., augmented and virtual reality skills), database skills, the ability to use different hardware/devices (computers, tablets, mobiles, WIFI), desktop publishing (to design brochures, catalogues), office software skills (e.g., MS Word, Excel, Adobe), descriptive data analysis (descriptive statistics), tourism information system skills (e.g., hospitality PMS, GIS, GDS)
Sustainability (9)	Understanding of sustainability principles, ability to promote environmentally friendly activities and products, ability to work with local producers, internal sustainability management (applying sustainability principles in a workplace), skills to help improve the sustainability of suppliers, ability to motivate customers to make more sustainable choices, ability to deal with host-guest interactions and communities, ability to make and implement a sustainability mission statement, policy and action plan, skills related to awareness of local customs (e.g., food, arts, language, crafts)

Source: Based on Carlisle *et al.*, 2021; Zaragoza-Sáez *et al.*, 2022; Popely *et al.*, 2021; UNWTO, 2019, EC, 2023.

Field research was conducted using a questionnaire administered to Czech and Slovak tourism businesses. The relevant tourism businesses in both countries were identified and the survey conducted using the CAWI method. The initial database of contact details for tourism businesses operating in these countries contained 2,650 entities, including 2,161 accommodation establishments, 287 travel agencies, 110 destination management organisations, 92 catering facilities, 2 national tourism organisations, and other businesses. The questionnaire comprised three main parts. The initial section

compared the importance of soft, hard, and sustainability skills, competencies, and knowledge with their performance by tourism graduates, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1" for the lowest value to "5" for the highest value. The second part consisted of open-ended questions to ensure an unbiased exploration of employers' diverse views on the requirements and characteristics of current graduates. The final section of the questionnaire identified the characteristics of tourism businesses by category. Subsequently, in October and November of 2022, these businesses were engaged via e-mail. After two rounds of e-mail correspondence, 124 businesses responded, as summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Research sample structure and characteristics

		<b>N</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
Type of business	Accommodation establishment	65	52.4
	Travel agency	23	18.5
	DMO	23	18.5
	Catering facility	9	7.3
	National tourism organisation	2	1.7
	Tour guide	2	1.7
Number of employees	1–5	34	27.4
	6–10	11	8.9
	11–20	7	5.6
	21–50	11	8.9
	>50	9	7.3
Level	Local	74	59.6
	Regional	25	20.2
	National	25	20.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The IPA methodology was employed to analyse employers' perceptions and compare the importance and performance of skills, competencies, and knowledge. It was chosen for its systematic evaluation and visual illustration of the significance and execution of skills, competencies, and knowledge (Azzopardi and Nash, 2013). Notably, this method offers a robust diagnostic tool for categorising elements within the IPA framework and validating its reliability and validity (Sever, 2015). This method can also identify and prioritise various factors based on their importance and performance. Evaluating the significance (importance) of factors and their current adequacy (performance) allows us to pinpoint areas in need of attention or enhancement. Moreover, the insights generated from IPA can provide information about strategic decision-making processes. By identifying key areas with significant gaps between importance and performance, organisations can prioritise the initiatives with the greatest impact. The IPA combines quantitative data with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of perceptions. This dual approach enables us to capture both the magnitude of importance-performance gaps and the underlying reasons behind them, which can be seen as an innovative approach to studying critical skills and knowledge gaps. A data-centric approach with mean values was used to determine the intersections and to eliminate the tendency to record high importance for all attributes (Azzopardi and Nash, 2013). An IPA can help decision makers select appropriate strategies to address disparities between perceived importance and actual performance (Marasinghe *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, the proposed methodology incorporating 3 areas of skills, competencies, and knowledge, provides a reliable foundation for decision-making in the tourism sector.

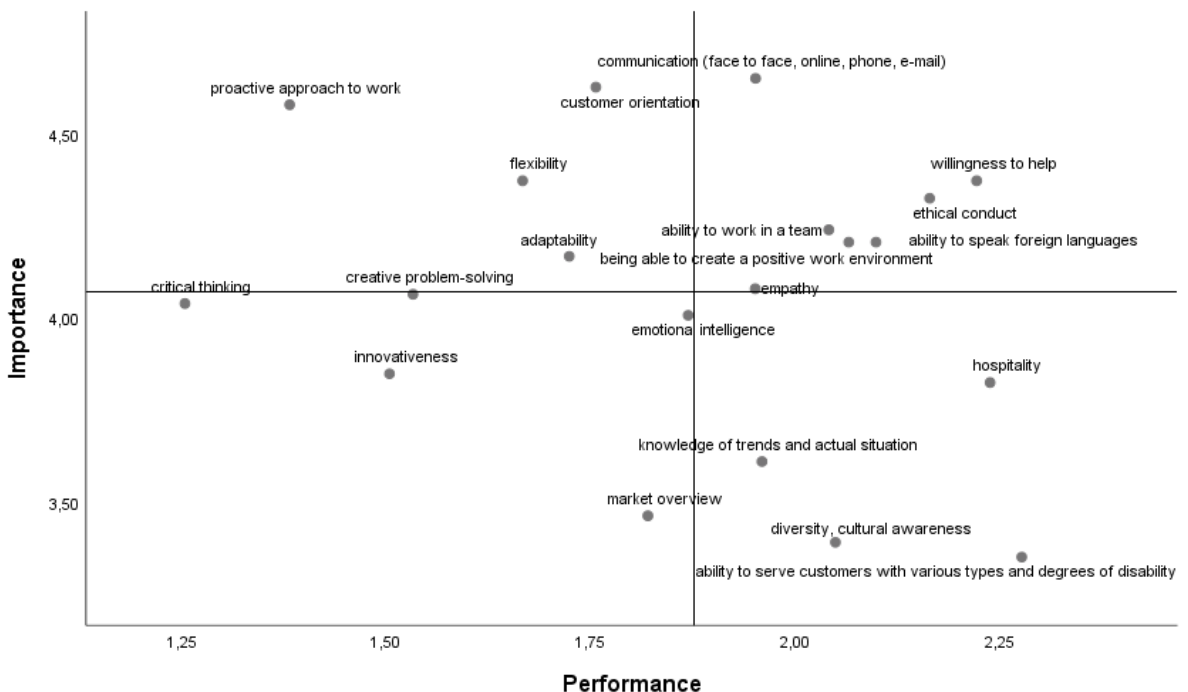
The qualitative analysis was executed using computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) through Atlas.ti software, incorporating Word Cruncher Analysis to unveil the most frequently occurring words and employing word clouds to represent the results graphically.

#### 4. Results

Employing the data-centred quadrant approach, the results were analysed using the mean values of the dataset to pinpoint the most pivotal attributes. Consequently, this can suggest the most effective distribution of resources in education, thereby aligning more closely with employers' demands and bolstering graduates' employability.

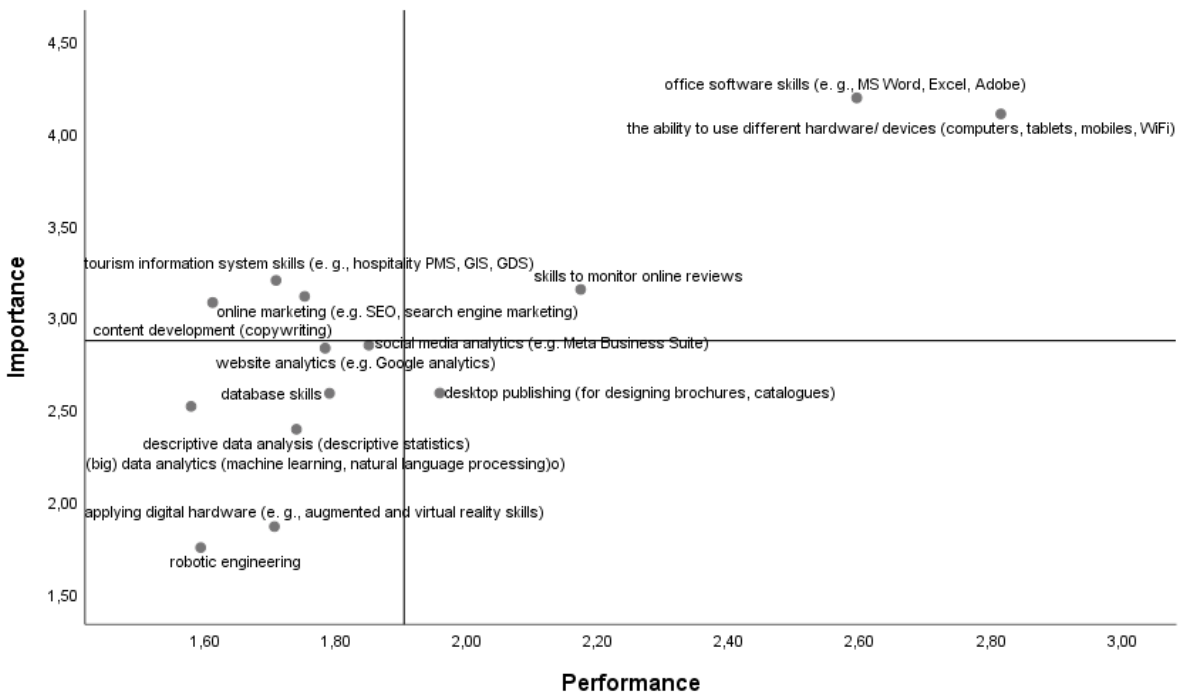
With regard to soft skills, competencies, and knowledge, as illustrated in Figure 1, the areas of utmost urgency are located in the upper-left quadrant as they contain the skills, competencies, and knowledge in high demand amongst employers. However, graduates' current proficiency in these areas is relatively low. Employers agree that critical thinking, proactive work approaches, creative problem-solving, flexibility, adaptability, and customer orientation need to be strengthened in the educational process. Notably, the results indicate a significant disparity between the perceived importance of employers and the students' actual performance levels. On a positive note, both importance and performance are robust in the case of communication, willingness to assist, ethical conduct, foreign language proficiency, teamwork capabilities, and the ability to foster a positive work environment. Similar research (Baum *et al.*, 2016; Hjalager, 2010) shows that in the tourism sector, employers highly value soft skills such as communication, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, adaptability, and emotional intelligence.

These results indicate that educational institutions should maintain their current strengths. While some skills may currently exhibit lower performance levels among graduates, they represent crucial competencies highly valued by tourism sector employers. Graduates who focus on improving these skills can position themselves as strong candidates for rewarding careers in this dynamic industry, ultimately contributing to their professional growth and employers' success.



**Figure 1.** Importance-performance analysis of soft skills, competencies, and knowledge

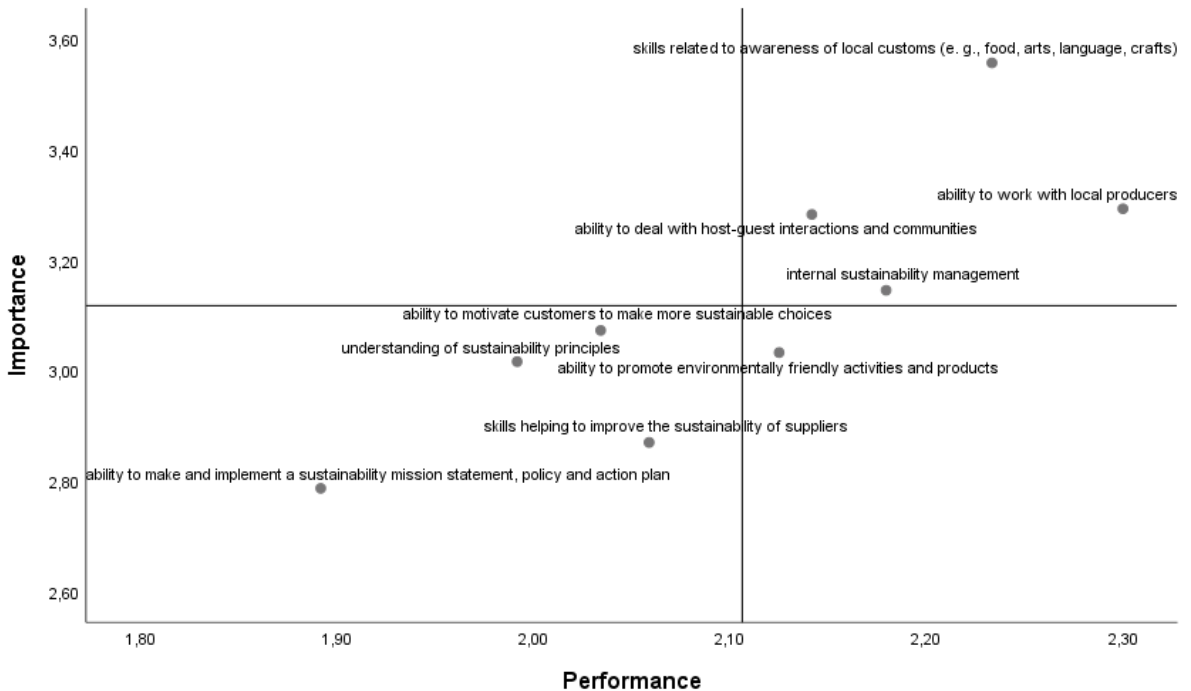
Exploring hard skills, a notable pattern of concern and potential was found in the upper-left quadrant of Figure 2. Here, some skills are in high demand but graduates currently fall short. These skills relate to tourism information systems, online marketing (including SEO and search engine marketing), and content development, particularly copywriting. Marketing and social media skills are vital in today's tourism industry. Many tourism businesses rely heavily on digital marketing for success. High-level SEO and search engine marketing skills are necessary to remain visible online and competitive. Moreover, the ability to write compelling content is crucial to shaping how people view and engage with tourism offerings. Crafting persuasive content can showcase the unique aspects of tourism products and turn potential visitors into customers. Graduates who focus on improving these skills can enhance their employability and contribute to the growth and success of tourism businesses, particularly in the modern digital environment. The UNWTO (2019) indicates that big data and data analytics, along with environment-related technologies, are the most valued technologies to consider in future skills development. Moreover, the advent of smart tourism initiatives gives importance to the skills, competencies, and knowledge necessary for jobs such as data scientists, artificial intelligence engineers, experts in blockchain protocols, augmented and virtual reality systems, and digital twin managers (Segittur, 2023), may become inevitable.



**Figure 2.** Importance-performance analysis of hard skills, competencies, and knowledge

In exploring sustainability skills, a distinct pattern is observed in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 3. This quadrant indicates better performance in skills related to awareness of local customs and the ability to handle host-guest interactions and communities. However, compared with previous figures depicting hard and soft skills, this quadrant has fewer items. Employees demonstrate lower proficiency in skills such as motivating customers to make more sustainable choices; understanding sustainability principles; promoting environmentally friendly activities and products; and crafting and executing sustainability mission statements, policies, and action plans. Nonetheless, these skills are regarded as less important to employers in the tourism sector, as is evident from the figure.

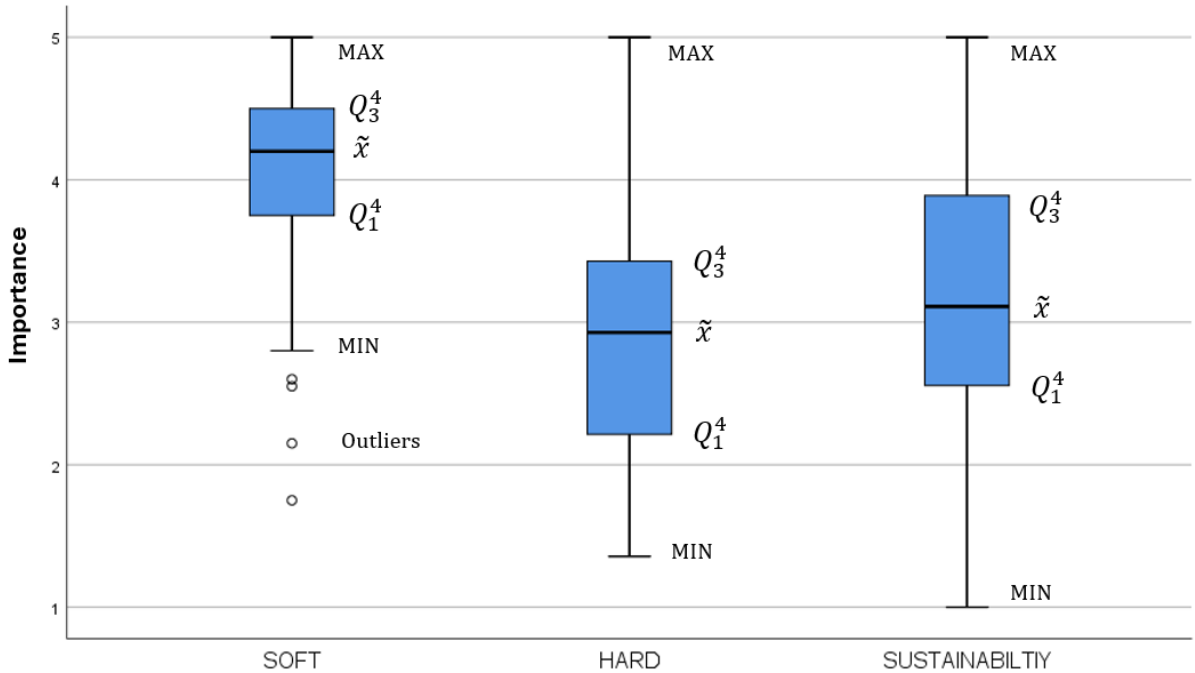
As for sustainability skills in the tourism industry, Saleh *et al.* (2022) note that employers increasingly value candidates possessing knowledge and commitment to sustainable practices. Although certain sustainability skills may result in stronger performance among employees, employers may not view them as being critical. This highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the specific sustainability skills and competencies the industry will value. Graduates seeking to excel in this sector should consider aligning their skillsets with the changing demands of sustainability in tourism, ensuring that they are well equipped to address emerging challenges and opportunities.



**Figure 3.** Importance-performance analysis of sustainability skills, competencies, and knowledge

#### 4.1. Importance of skills, competencies, and knowledge

The boxplots in Figure 4 provide valuable insights into the perceived importance of various skill sets, competencies, and areas of knowledge in tourism. Notably, the findings highlight the significance of soft skills, with particular emphasis on communication, customer orientation, and a proactive approach to work. Following closely in importance are sustainability-related skills, primarily those associated with demonstrating an understanding of local customs, the capacity to collaborate with local producers, and effectively managing host-guest interactions and communities. By contrast, the importance attributed to hard skills, such as proficiency in office software tools, versatile hardware utilisation, and tourism information systems, is slightly lower than that of soft and sustainability skills. These observations shed light on tourism businesses' nuanced preferences and priorities.



Legend:  $\tilde{x}$  – median;  $Q_1^4$  – first quartile;  $Q_3^4$  – third quartile;  
 MIN/MAX, minimum/maximum value excluding outliers.

**Figure 4.** Comparison of skills, competencies, and knowledge importance

#### 4.2. Requirements for an “ideal” employee

The word cloud that illustrates an “ideal employee” in tourism services provides insights into the changing industry. This indicates that adaptability, proactivity, strong technological skills, and teamwork have become increasingly important for success in this rapidly changing field. While honesty and friendliness are considered fundamental qualities that every employee should possess, the tourism industry seeks to balance employees’ practical skills and inherent characteristics.



**Figure 5** Requirements for an “ideal” employee

#### 4.3. Characteristics of university graduates according to employers

Employers have mixed views of university graduates, and most of which tend to be somewhat negative. Graduates often lack practical experience, have high expectations, show little interest, and spend too much time in the virtual world while struggling with communication skills. These negative opinions might reflect concerns about recent graduates regarding their preparedness to smoothly transition into the job market and handle real-world challenges. However, employers identified positive qualities amongst graduates. They are acknowledged for their skills in using information and communication technologies (ICT), professional education, creativity, sense of responsibility, and flexibility. Their awareness of current trends and travel experiences was also regarded as strengths. However, the prevalence of negative perceptions among employers suggests that a notable difference could exist between what graduates offer and what employers anticipate regarding practical skills and job market readiness. This gap may be influenced by factors such as the evolving nature of job roles and the need for more comprehensive university career readiness programmes.



Figure 6. Characteristics of university graduates according to employers

#### 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the critical skills and knowledge gaps amongst recent graduates according to employers in the tourism industry. The results indicate a pressing need for substantial adjustments to educational curricula, teaching methodologies, and pedagogical techniques to overcome the gap between graduates' skills and actual job market requirements, a concept previously proposed by Batinoluho (2022).

To address this research question, this study primarily analyses soft skills, in line with previous studies (Patacsil and Tablatin, 2017; Booyens, 2020; Huang *et al.*, 2021). Soft skills are crucial for enhancing employability and addressing the employment challenges young professionals in the tourism sector face. Tourism graduates need to improve their critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, which corresponds with the findings of Patacsil and Tablatin (2017). Employers want

graduates to be better at thinking critically, being proactive, solving problems creatively, and being adaptable to different situations. They also want graduates to be more customer oriented. As the industry increasingly relies on technology and digital marketing, graduates with technical proficiency will undoubtedly become more competitive in the job market. Thus, this study's results suggest that graduates should work on skills related to tourism information systems, online marketing (such as SEO and search engine marketing), and content development, particularly copywriting. Employers' expectations of graduates align with the findings of Ivanova *et al.* (2022), who emphasise the importance of digital skills such as proficiency in operating systems, MS Office software, and digital equipment adjustment. These authors found a notable deficiency in skills related to artificial intelligence, robotics, augmented and virtual reality, and computer programming. These skills are essential for remaining competitive in today's digitally driven tourism industry (Patacsil and Tablatin, 2017). Regarding sustainability skills, employers value candidates with knowledge of and a commitment to sustainable practices. However, as Carlisle *et al.* (2022) highlight, environmental skills training for tourism managers is lacking. As the tourism industry faces growing scrutiny regarding its environmental impact, candidates who understand sustainability principles will play a crucial role in shaping the industry's future. This study addressed its research question by identifying the key soft, hard, and sustainability skills that institutions responsible for the training and education of the future tourism industry workforce should prioritise.

This research indicates that tourism graduates require the right knowledge and skills to adapt to changing industries (Sigala, 2021). This underscores the idea that education is a dynamic process that evolves in response to shifting job market demands. Therefore, universities and instructors in tourism and hospitality should evaluate their curricula to ensure that soft skills are included as learning goals in any specific classes (Pranić *et al.*, 2021). All stakeholders involved in improving the skills and employability of university graduates in the tourism sector can benefit from this research. Furthermore, institutions must consider current expectations and anticipate future job requirements.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the skills and knowledge gaps perceived by employers in the tourism industry, it has some limitations. First, the findings are based on a specific context and may not be universally applicable. Future research could explore these issues in different geographical regions or sectors of the tourism industry to provide a better understanding. Second, this research mainly examines employers' perspectives. Thus, future research could involve recent graduates to gain insight into their perceptions of their skills and job market challenges. This would provide valuable information for educational institutions and policymakers. Additionally, as the tourism industry evolves, future research could delve into emerging trends and technologies that affect the skills graduates require, such as green or digital skills, as the European Commission highlights in its declaration of 2023 as the European Year of Skills.

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