

## ESSENTIAL SOFT SKILLS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS IN TOURISM: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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**Abstract:** The role of soft skills in tourism remains an underexplored area, yet it holds both scientific and practical significance. As tourists' expectations evolve, traditional technical competencies may no longer suffice. Soft skills are increasingly essential for tourism professionals, enabling them to understand and respond effectively to shifting consumer behaviours, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction and contributing to the success of tourism service providers. This research aims to explore the conceptual foundations and growing relevance of soft skills, particularly within the context of the business and tourism sectors. Employing a systematic literature review (SLR), this study critically analyses, synthesises, and evaluates academic sources on essential soft skills for the employees of service providers in tourism. Academic articles published in English between 2001 and 2024 in Scopus were analyzed, and key themes were extracted to provide an overview of emerging trends and research gaps. The findings include a comprehensive synthesis of relevant literature and a clarification of key concepts such as skills, soft skills, and their application in tourism and furthermore, reinforces that soft skills are no longer complementary, but critical strategic assets for the tourism sector. The review highlights the increasing emphasis on soft skills as a strategic asset in tourism service delivery. The SLR has successfully contextualised and defined key terms, supporting the advancement of knowledge in this area. The findings reveal a persistent gap between tourism, education and employer expectations and needs. Addressing the existing challenges is critical for developing both academic understanding and industry practice. By establishing a theoretical background for the concepts of skills and soft skills, especially in tourism, this study provides a basis for future empirical research. The results underscore the importance of the systematic integration of soft skills into tourism education, workforce development, and policy frameworks to enhance service quality and sectoral resilience, thus supporting a more competitive, and future-oriented tourism industry.

**Keywords:** skill, soft skill, systematic literature review, tourism, business

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### INTRODUCTION

An increasingly fast-changing world is constantly transforming our society and economy. In this dynamic and constantly evolving environment, a range of skills and competencies will be essential for both employment and career success. The contemporary labour market demands a specific type of worker who possesses a certain level of competencies and skills. It is imperative that workers are adaptable and demonstrate a willingness to meet these expectations to develop skills required in the present and the future (OECD, 2024). As traditional forms of employment change or disappear, emerging types of roles demand more than just technical expertise, requiring a wider range of skills and competences (WEF, 2023).

Despite their importance, soft skills in tourism remain underexplored. Most studies focus on single competencies or isolated stakeholder perspectives, while prior reviews (e.g., Pranić et al., 2021) are often sector-specific or descriptive. To date, no comprehensive and updated SLR exists that maps two decades of research, addresses conceptual ambiguities, and integrates implications for both academia and practice – particularly relevant in the post-pandemic context of resilience, adaptability, and intercultural competence. Soft skills are vital for enhancing customer experience, strengthening employability, aligning education with industry needs, and supporting tourism resilience in times of crisis.

As digital transformation and sustainability reshape the sector, combining technical and soft skills becomes a strategic driver of competitiveness, innovation, and growth. According to El Archi et al. (2023), digital transformation in tourism supports sustainability by enhancing both operational efficiency and tourist experience.

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A clear research gap exists in the absence of a systematic and longitudinal analysis that integrates educational, employer, and policy perspectives over time. Moreover, the impact of recent global disruptions – including digital transformation, sustainability imperatives, and the post-pandemic recovery – has not yet been comprehensively reflected in the academic discourse. This study contributes by: (1) synthesizing the most recent literature (2001–2024), including post-COVID developments; (2) critically comparing perspectives from education, industry, and policy; and (3) proposing a structured categorization of essential soft skills that links conceptual definitions with practical requirements.

The aim is to systematically explore and synthesize the conceptual foundations and growing relevance of soft skills in tourism. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) of Scopus-indexed publications (2001–2024), the study applied predefined inclusion criteria, thematic coding, trend analysis, and cross-domain synthesis. This approach ensures rigor, transparency, and a comprehensive overview, paving the way for future empirical research.

This review is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** How have soft skills in tourism been conceptualized and defined in the academic literature between 2001 and 2024?
- **RQ2:** Which soft skills are most frequently identified as essential for tourism service providers?
- **RQ3:** What gaps exist between tourism education, employer expectations, and workforce preparedness regarding soft skills?

## METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify, analyze, and synthesize academic research on soft skills in tourism. The SLR approach was chosen for its methodological transparency, replicability, and comprehensive coverage (Tranfield et al., 2003), and it followed PRISMA guidelines to ensure a structured process of search, screening, and synthesis.

**Search strategy:** The literature search was conducted in Scopus, using the query *TITLE-ABS-KEY ("soft skill" AND "tourism")\**. The period 2001–2024 was selected to capture the evolution of research from early studies to recent developments shaped by digital transformation and post-pandemic recovery. Only peer-reviewed journal articles in English were considered (e.g., Succi & Canovi, 2020; Pranić et al., 2021; Čuić Tanković et al., 2023). Only articles indexed in Scopus were analyzed, as this database is widely recognized for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in social sciences and business, and ensures a high level of quality, consistency, and replicability in systematic reviews.

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria:** Articles were included if they explicitly addressed soft skills in tourism, hospitality, or related services and were either conceptual or empirical. Excluded were conference papers, book chapters, editorials, commentaries, non-tourism studies, and non-English publications.

**Data extraction and analysis:** Each article was coded for year, journal, country, definitions, research focus (e.g., education, employer expectations, sustainability, digitalization), key findings, and methodology. The data were organized into thematic categories and complemented by a bibliometric trend analysis. To explore temporal growth, a polynomial regression analysis (third-degree function) was applied to the annual number of publications. This method was chosen because it provides a more flexible fit to non-linear growth patterns than linear models, allowing for the identification of inflection points and projection of future trends. A polynomial regression (third degree) was applied, as linear and quadratic models failed to adequately reflect the nonlinear growth dynamics. This allowed more accurate forecasting of publication trends up to 2030, while highlighting both the acceleration and the relative nascency of the field. The regression results, with a high coefficient of determination ( $R^2 = 0.93$ ), support the interpretation of the field as an emerging but rapidly expanding research area. Additionally, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns, classify soft skills into conceptual, leadership, and interpersonal dimensions, and highlight gaps between education, employer needs, and industry practice.

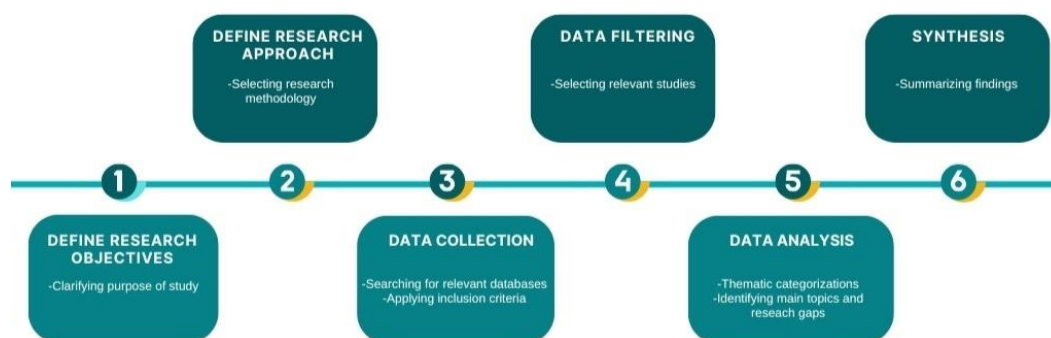


Figure 1. Methodological process (Source: Own elaboration based on the study)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Definition of Skills and Competences

In the context of defining and discussing skills, it is important to recognise that these competencies are not limited to a specific field, activity, or subject. Skills can be conceptualised in either a horizontal or a vertical dimension within a hierarchical structure. To complete a task, it is necessary to have the relevant skills and competencies, which can be categorised as simple, complex, lower, or higher level. From a human resources management perspective, this signifies that the task represents the demand, while the skills represent the supply. Skills can be defined as the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to perform tasks and solve problems, typically in the workplace (Cedefop, 2014).

In the context of skill development, it is important to acknowledge the variability of skills across various industries, disciplines, and sectors. The distinction between skills is fundamental to this approach.

- by profession;
- the level of skill, ranging from low skills to high skills;
- as a learning objective;
- individual utility with regard to the labour market;
- determined by either qualification or occupation. In this context, skills are understood to be job-related, valuable, generally learnable, and developable attributes (Cedefop, 2014).

## 2. Types of Skills

Skills can be categorised into two main groups: hard and soft skills (Figure 2). Hard skills are defined as professional knowledge, that means concrete, measurable and verifiable knowledge such as programming languages, engineering, accounting and other professional skills. The term 'hard skills' refers to the practical, technical knowledge that is essential for the effective fulfilment of a position (Cimatti, 2016). The term 'soft skill' refers to competencies that are not related to a specific job but rather define relationships with other people in the organisation, which are generally needed in all positions. While hard skills can be acquired through education and training, the development of soft skills requires self-development, self-reflection, and commitment (Chell & Athayde, 2011; Wisshak & Hochholdinger, 2020).

The current labour market is characterised by an expectation of both hard and soft skills. Achieving professional success requires a combination of both types of skills (Lyu & Liu, 2021). However, it is important to recognise that, in addition to the differences between them, hard and soft skills often overlap and reinforce each other in different situations (Lamri, 2023).

According to Cedefop (2018), future projections indicate a persistent increase in demand for highly skilled workers.

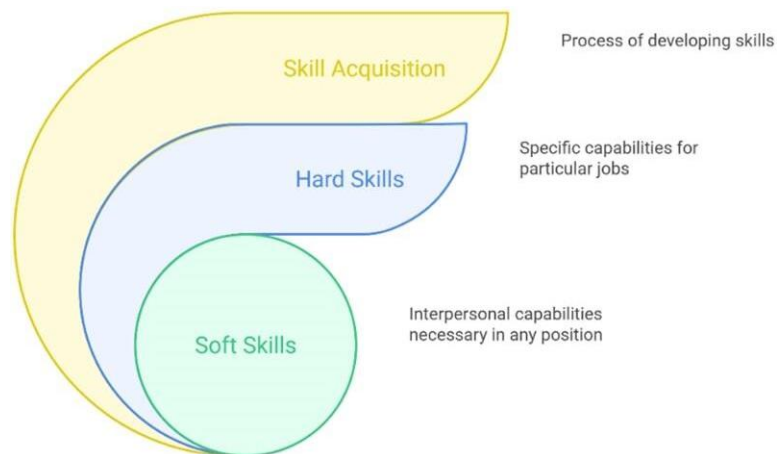


Figure 2. Types of skills (Source: Own research based on Cimatti (2016) with the usage of napkin.ai)

## 3. Soft skills in businesses/services in tourism

The dynamic and customer-centric nature of the tourism sector has emphasized the need for integrating soft skills within the business domain. Soft skills, often referred to as interpersonal or people skills, encompass a range of attributes such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence. These skills are crucial for effective functioning in the workplace and are increasingly valued alongside technical competencies.

However, there is no universally accepted definition, leading to variations in understanding and application across different contexts (Joie-La Marle et al., 2022). According to Ogutu et al. (2023) knowledge management and the development of specific skills are essential components of tourism enterprises' long-term success and competitiveness. This knowledge and these skills can be converted into new products and processes in tourism, enhancing overall competitiveness. In the business sector, soft skills are essential for fostering effective communication, collaboration, and adaptability. Employers prioritize these skills as they contribute to improved team dynamics, customer satisfaction, and overall organizational performance (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

At the same time, employer branding has become a strategic tool for attracting and keeping employees whose skills and values correspond with the organization's culture (Daud & Dávid, 2025).

Recent studies underscore the critical role of soft skills in tourism and hospitality, highlighting their significance for customer satisfaction and workforce readiness. The distinction between soft and hard skills in tourism has also been emphasized, with studies arguing that while hard skills help secure job interviews, it is soft skills that ultimately lead to employment and career progression (Moura et al., 2021). There is growing evidence that current tourism curricula often fail to sufficiently integrate soft skills, resulting in a gap between graduate competencies and market demands (Savelieva, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2021). Pranić & Vuković (2025) revealed in the tourism industry that leadership and conceptual/creative skills, like problem-solving, decision-making, and fostering innovation, emerged as particularly underdeveloped. The research highlights the urgent need for higher education institutions to adapt their curricula to better integrate soft skill development and prepare graduates for the demands of the T&H industry (Vasconcelos, 2022).

Research highlights the effectiveness of experiential and interactive methods – such as role-playing, teamwork exercises, and real-life simulations – in building key competencies like empathy, leadership, and customer service (Binytska, 2023); (Susanto et al., 2023). Foreign language education – particularly English – also plays a substantial role in improving soft skills related to cross-cultural communication and customer interactions (Radovanović & Mitrović, 2022; Bortnikova & Dolzhenkova, 2024). As Manhas et al. (2021) highlight, responsible tourism practices rely heavily on human interaction. Moreover, soft skills are increasingly linked to sustainability and long-term competitiveness in tourism. A SLR has identified a set of 30 essential soft skills, categorized into conceptual/creative, leadership, and interpersonal dimensions, which should guide future training and curriculum design (Pranić et al., 2021). This categorization underscores the multifaceted nature of soft skills required in the industry.

Lazić & Bradić-Martinović (2023) explored the growing interdependence between digital and soft skills in tourism, emphasizing that digital transformation requires strong communication and teamwork abilities to leverage new technologies effectively (Carlisle et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the demand for soft skills (Gnecco et al., 2023). Table 1 provides an insightful overview of the key research findings on essential soft skills for tourism service providers. It systematically highlights the major themes, the core conclusions from each study, and the implications for practice, recommendations, and potential applications in tourism.

Table 1. Comparative table summarizing the key research findings in soft skills in tourism (Source: Own editing)

Key Theme/Focus	Findings	Implications / Recommendations / Application	Citation
Communication and customer satisfaction	Communication and soft skills significantly influence tourist satisfaction.	Service providers should prioritize communication training to boost tourist satisfaction and improve overall service quality.	(Čuić Tanković et al., 2023); Coffelt & Grauman (2019).
Digital transformation	Digital transformation requires complementary soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork) for successful implementation in tourism businesses.	Tourism businesses and educators must integrate soft skills development with digital tools to foster competitive advantage and sector resilience.	Lazić & Bradić-Martinović (2023).
Sustainability	Sustainability implementation in tourism relies heavily on soft skills like teamwork and conflict resolution.	Training programs should prioritize soft skill development to address sustainability challenges and ensure effective environmental and social initiatives in tourism.	Carlisle et al. (2021); Asonitou & Kottara (2019).
Differences in perception	Tourists and future professionals both value soft skills but perceive their importance differently.	Training programs should address the mismatch in perceptions by aligning student curricula with tourist expectations.	(Čuić Tanković et al., 2021)
Soft vs. hard skills	Hard skills secure job interviews, but soft skills ensure recruitment and career success.	Tourism educators should balance hard and soft skills in curricula to meet employer expectations and enhance employability.	(Moura et al., 2021)
Education and curriculum gaps	Current tourism curricula often do not sufficiently integrate soft skills.	Institutions should update tourism programs to explicitly incorporate soft skills and reduce the employability gap.	(Savelieva, 2021); (Ahmed et al., 2021); (Grigoliene et al., 2023); (Pranić & Vuković, 2025)
Experiential and interactive training	Role-playing, teamwork, and practical exercises enhance key soft skills.	Teaching methods should integrate real-world scenarios, case studies, and teamwork to build practical soft skills among tourism students.	(Binytska, 2023); (Susanto et al., 2023)
Language instruction	Foreign language education (especially English) enhances intercultural and communication skills.	Language courses should be seen as tools to foster intercultural understanding and soft skill development, not just for linguistic competence.	(Radovanović & Mitrović, 2022); (Bortnikova & Dolzhenkova, 2024)
Career adaptability	Soft skills directly influence career adaptability and perceived employability among tourism students.	Educational institutions should integrate soft skills development into experiential learning to improve student career adaptability.	Tavitiyaman et al. (2025); (Kiryakova-Dineva et al., 2019)
Social soft skills and COVID-19 resilience	Social soft skills (empathy, adaptability) became critical for workforce resilience post-pandemic.	Post-pandemic recovery strategies should include developing social soft skills to strengthen employee adaptability and organizational flexibility.	Gnecco et al. (2023).
Policy-level responses and soft skills	Tourism agencies increasingly recognize soft skills as part of digital and sustainability skills development strategies.	Policymakers should design targeted upskilling initiatives that balance digital and soft skills for a future-ready tourism workforce.	Parsons et al. (2023).
Key soft skills identified	A systematic review identified 30 essential soft skills grouped into conceptual, leadership, and interpersonal.	This list can guide educators and employers in revising training modules, ensuring graduates have well-rounded soft skill sets aligned with industry needs.	(Pranić et al. (2021)

These findings emphasize the urgent need for tourism educators, policymakers, and industry leaders to collaboratively update curricula and professional development programs.

Doing so will ensure that tourism professionals are equipped not only with technical know-how but also with the critical soft skills needed to thrive in a dynamic and customer-centric environment.

#### 4. Narrowing the role of soft skills in tourism

Establishing a scientific background for this subject, it is important to examine the Scopus scientific database, which will allow us to systematize the current state and directions of research to present a global picture of soft skills in tourism. The aim is also to point out the selected skills that are crucial for the tourism industry.

Based on Scopus scientific database filtering analysis, the filter was used: “TITLE-ABS-KEY (soft AND skill AND tourism)” for a narrow selection of scientific documents. Figure 3 shows the number of papers by year registered in Scopus base for soft skills in tourism in general, which represent the progress in “soft skills” implementation in tourism.

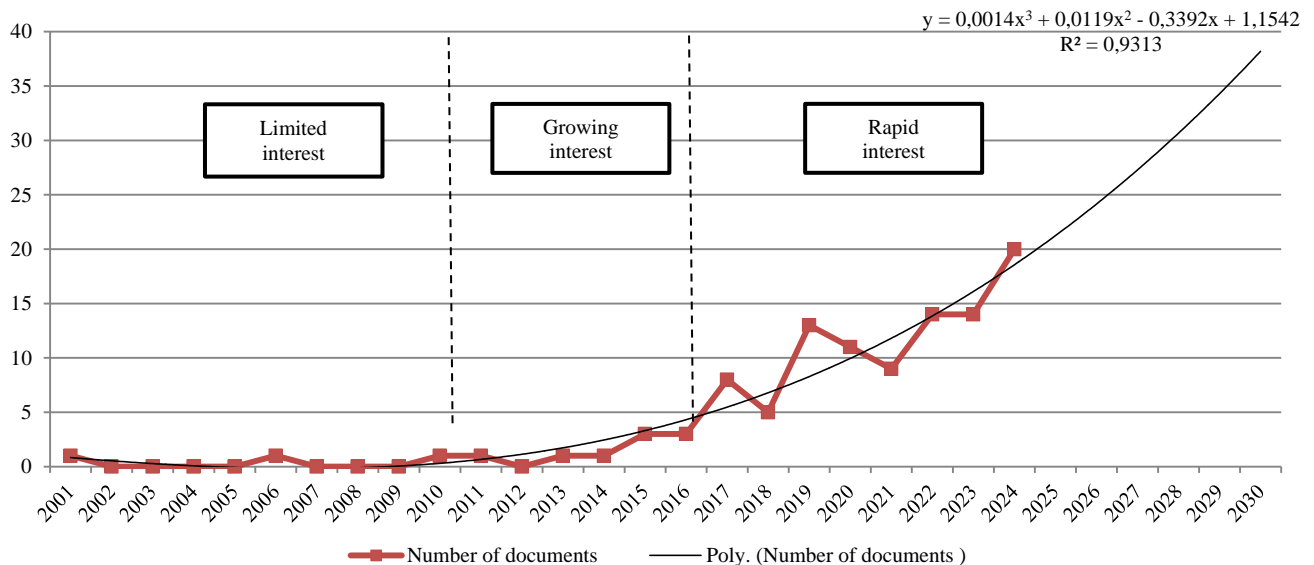


Figure 3. Number of papers for soft skills in tourism by year (Source: Own elaboration based on Scopus data. Trendline prepared by the authors using Excel [https://www.scopus.com/results/results.uri?st1=soft+skill+tourism&st2=&s=TITLE-ABS KEY%28soft+skill+tourism%29&limit=10&origin=searchbasic&sort=cp-f&src=s&sort=b&sdt=b&sessionSearchId=919c4d711b3d60089e08a1fbd14dd46e](https://www.scopus.com/results/results.uri?st1=soft+skill+tourism&st2=&s=TITLE-ABS+KEY%28soft+skill+tourism%29&limit=10&origin=searchbasic&sort=cp-f&src=s&sort=b&sdt=b&sessionSearchId=919c4d711b3d60089e08a1fbd14dd46e)).

The dataset in Figure 3 presents the annual number of documents recorded from 2001 to 2024. The data reflects the document publication's temporal distribution and growth over this period with three characteristic segments. The first period is from 2001 to 2010, when it is seen that the research output was minimal, with several years showing zero publications. This suggests limited academic focus on soft skills in tourism or possible gaps in documentation during this period. During the second period from 2011 to 2016, the growth phase shows a gradual increase in publications, indicating rising scholarly interest. This period likely corresponds to the initial recognition of soft skills as a distinct research area within tourism studies. The third phase may be named as “rapid phase”, because from 2017 to 2024, it is observed a sharp and sustained increase in the number of publications was observed, peaking at 20 documents in 2024. This trend reflects a global acknowledgment of the importance of soft skills, driven by both academic inquiry and industry needs, but still at the beginning of its growth and understanding on a wide scale. A polynomial trend line (cubic regression) extends to 2030. The trend line represents a fitted third-degree polynomial function:

$$y=0.0014x^3+0.0119x^2-0.3392x+1.1542$$

with a coefficient of determination  $R^2=0.9313$ , indicating a strong fit to the data. The analysis is based on data extracted from the Scopus database. The annual number of publications was exported and processed in Microsoft Excel. The polynomial regression trendline was then calculated by the authors. The projected curve indicates continued growth, potentially reaching or exceeding 30 documents per year by 2030, assuming current trends persist. This may signal broader recognition of its importance or increased funding and institutional support. Despite the accelerating trend, the absolute number of documents remains relatively low, even during the recent rapid growth phase.

The PRISMA diagram provides a clear and straightforward picture of how a systematic review was done. Figure 4 presents the systematic review done for soft skills in tourism. The PRISMA diagram in Figure 4 shows the clear and careful process used to find and select relevant studies on soft skills in tourism from the Scopus database. Starting with 139 records, the selection was narrowed down step-by-step to 48 studies for the final review. This transparent filtering ensured only the most relevant research was included, and then the narrowed list by relevance was chosen 10 sources.

Analyzing the most relevant scientific publications on the topic “soft skills in tourism” scientific publications is crucial to point out the main streams of the discussion in the field and what is the most important from the business perspective – what soft skills are needed in the field.

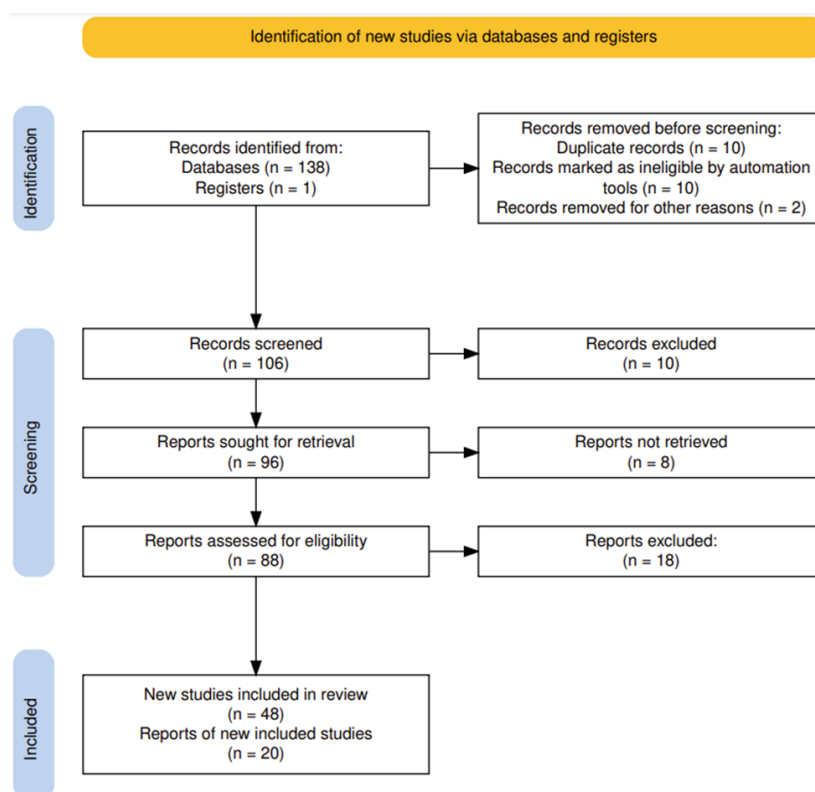


Figure 4. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process

(Source: authors' elaboration with the usage of PRISMA Flow Diagram tool: [https://estech.shinyapps.io/prisma\\_flowdiagram/](https://estech.shinyapps.io/prisma_flowdiagram/))

The selection in the Scopus database was done by further narrowing the filter to “most relevant” papers in the topic “soft skill in tourism”. Selected 10 most relevant papers were analyzed to find the main streams of research and thoughts in the field. Selected papers were grouped into eight main groups to build a picture of the current state of soft skills in tourism.

Table 2 provides a concise synthesis of the findings drawn from the analysis of selected publications in the literature.

Table 2. Key Insights from Literature Analysis about Tourism Soft Skills (Source: author's analysis based on: Wesley et al., 2017; Pranić et al., 2025; Davis et al., 2025; Vasconcelos et al., 2022; Moura et al., 2021; Joseph, 2024; Andreu et al., 2024; Arnott, 2022; Hussain, et al., 2024.)

Research Stream	Main Findings	Examples from Publications
Importance and Ranking of Soft Skills	Communication is universally regarded as most important; rankings differ among students, faculty, and employers, indicating misalignment in educational and industry expectations.	Wesley et al. (2017): Communication is most valued, with discrepancies in skill importance between groups.
Integration in Higher Education	Need for universities to embed soft skills in curricula; validated measurement tools now enable assessment of soft skills development in students.	Pranić et al. (2025): Developed a reliable scale for measuring soft skills integration; two major dimensions were identified (conceptual/creative and leadership/interpersonal).
Development Strategies	Innovative, experiential, and interdisciplinary techniques (e.g., group art therapy, collaborative projects) are effective in building critical soft skills and resilience.	Davis et al. (2025): Group art therapy improves coping abilities; Vasconcelos et al. (2022): Interdisciplinary projects bridge academia–industry gaps.
Soft versus Hard Skills	Hard skills open career doors, but soft skills are decisive in recruitment, retention, and career progression. The combination is essential for industry competitiveness.	Moura et al. (2021): Hard skills get interviews, soft skills get jobs; Joseph (2024): Both types are needed for quality service and career growth.
Sectoral and Subsectoral Analysis	Different tourism sub-sectors emphasize different soft skills; understanding these distinctions is key to targeted training.	Andreu et al. (2024): Employers' surveys reveal skill needs vary by subsector; future training should be tailored accordingly.
Transferability and Employability	Many soft skills are transferable across tourism, hospitality, events, and sports, enhancing employability and adaptability. Lifelong learning and professional development are crucial.	Arnott (2022): Soft skills are transferable and vital for employability in related service industries; need for ongoing professional development.
Interpersonal and Service Effectiveness	Skills like empathy, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and proactive communication enhance customer satisfaction and service quality.	Hussain et al. (2024): Interpersonal skills are a subset of soft skills; both are critical for exceptional service experiences.
Bridging Academia with Industry Gaps	Collaborative, project-based learning helps align student competencies with industry needs, preparing graduates for real-world challenges.	Vasconcelos et al. (2022): Interdisciplinary, hands-on projects improve student readiness and employer satisfaction.

Those main concepts focused on soft skills in tourism show that the most important skills nowadays are communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, creativity with innovation, adaptability and resilience, collaboration and interdisciplinarity, lifelong learning, and proactive work ethics.

While technical abilities often help candidates land job interviews, it is the possession of strong soft skills such as communication, empathy, and adaptability that typically clinches the job offer. In truth, lasting success in the tourism industry depends on blending both hard and soft skills. This combination not only boosts individual career prospects but also helps tourism companies stand out in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

## DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review set out to clarify the conceptual foundations and practical relevance of soft skills in the tourism sector. The findings confirm that soft skills are no longer complementary to technical expertise but have become central to service quality, employability, and long-term competitiveness. In particular, communication, adaptability, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence consistently emerge as critical competencies across studies. However, the review also reveals persistent gaps and tensions that carry both theoretical and practical implications.

**Comparison with existing literature:** Previous reviews (e.g., Pranić et al., 2021; Poláková et al., 2023) highlighted the growing importance of soft skills, yet they often remained descriptive or restricted to specific sub-sectors. The study extends this line of research by synthesizing the broader body of literature published between 2001–2024, capturing developments linked to post-pandemic recovery and digital transformation (Esposito et al., 2024). Unlike earlier reviews that mostly listed individual skills, our thematic analysis integrates perspectives from education, employers, and policy, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of how soft skills are framed in tourism studies.

**Research gaps and contradictions:** The analysis points to misalignments between tourism education and industry needs. While higher education institutions increasingly acknowledge the importance of soft skills, curricula remain largely oriented toward technical competencies, leaving graduates underprepared for workplace demands (Savelieva, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2021). Employers, on the other hand, consistently stress communication, adaptability, and teamwork as decisive for career advancement (Coffelt & Grauman, 2019). Another persistent issue is the lack of conceptual clarity. Studies frequently use overlapping terminology – such as transferable, interpersonal, or socio-emotional skills – without a consistent framework (Markard et al., 2023; Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017). This terminological fragmentation constrains theoretical advancement and complicates measurement.

**Original contribution:** The originality of this review lies in (1) integrating the most recent body of literature, including perspectives on resilience and sustainability (Filho et al., 2022), (2) categorizing soft skills into conceptual/creative, leadership, and interpersonal dimensions, and (3) linking bibliometric trends with thematic synthesis, which highlights both the accelerated growth of the field and its still-niche status. Together, these contributions provide a stronger foundation for future empirical research.

**Practical and theoretical implications:** For educators, the findings emphasize the urgency of embedding soft skills into tourism curricula through experiential learning and interdisciplinary projects (Ahmed et al., 2021). For employers, they underscore the role of structured training in enhancing employee retention and customer satisfaction (Coffelt & Grauman, 2019). From a policy perspective, acknowledging soft skills as a complement to digital and technical competences is essential for building resilience and long-term competitiveness (Esposito et al., 2024; Markard et al., 2023). Theoretically, the review demonstrates the need for a more unified conceptual framework that integrates employability models with service quality and sustainability perspectives (Pranić et al., 2021; Poláková et al., 2023). Overall, the discussion reinforces that soft skills are not merely “additional” attributes but constitute strategic assets for the tourism sector. Without stronger integration in education and more robust empirical validation, however, the field risks remaining fragmented and under-theorized. Addressing these challenges is critical for advancing both academic understanding and industry practice.

## CONCLUSION

The study confirms that soft skills are essential for tourism providers in tourism. The reviewed literature consistently emphasizes the importance of soft skills as a key factor in the success of tourism businesses. Mastering soft skills is no longer ancillary but forms the foundation for workforce readiness, innovation, and sustainable practices in the tourism sector. Findings show that hard skills are essential for efficiency yet insufficient alone to meet complex industry needs. Soft skills are critical for customer satisfaction and positive client experiences.

The findings underscore the urgent need for tourism educators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to revise curricula and development programs, ensuring that the tourism professionals are equipped not only with technical expertise but also with essential soft skills needed in a customer-centric environment. Practical recommendations include updating tourism curricula to reflect industry needs, with educational programs integrating both hard and soft skills. Tourism businesses should integrate soft skill training into their employee development programs. This means the use of hands-on learning methods, the integration of language and intercultural training, and the recognition of soft skills as a key factor in tourism development.

Like any systematic literature review, this study faces several limitations. First, it relied primarily on the Scopus database; although comprehensive, this may have excluded relevant work from sources such as Web of Science or Google Scholar. Second, the review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles in English, thereby omitting grey literature, book chapters, and non-English contributions, which may reduce the diversity of perspectives. Third, despite applying a structured coding framework, the thematic synthesis remains partly interpretive, and categorization may reflect subjective judgment. Moreover, the review concentrated on conceptual foundations and key soft skills without

empirically measuring their impact on business performance or customer satisfaction. Finally, the bibliometric trend analysis is constrained by the relatively small sample size, making long-term projections tentative.

Future research should address these limitations by broadening data sources and including grey literature, examining cross-cultural and sectoral differences in soft skill requirements, and conducting empirical studies that directly measure their impact on customer experience, employee performance, and organizational outcomes.

Scholars are also encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions, develop longitudinal designs to capture evolving skill demands, and integrate research on digital and soft skills to better understand their combined influence on workforce competitiveness. As a possible direction, studies could explore the role of soft skills for front office employees who interact directly with guests. Such studies should examine not only the role of soft skills but also their impact on the economic performance and competitiveness of tourism businesses.

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