

Tourism employability in the digital age: Skills gaps and labor market responses

Dunja Demirović Bajrami^{a*} , Marko D. Petrović^a , Suzana Lović Obradović^a 

^a Geographical Institute “Jovan Cvijić” Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, Serbia

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Abstract

The tourism industry is going through rapid digital transformation, which is reshaping jobs, needed skills, and career paths. This paper analyzed the main skill gaps in the sector, focusing on digital and soft skills, and how education, industry, and policymakers are responding. The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey of 312 tourism students and graduates in Serbia with interviews with 25 industry professionals. The findings show a big mismatch between what universities teach and what employers need, especially in areas like data analytics, digital marketing, AI, CRM systems, and virtual collaboration. While most students have basic digital literacy, advanced skills are missing. Employers also stress the importance of adaptability, emotional intelligence, intercultural communication, and problem-solving, which are often missing in current curricula. The study points to responses such as company training programs, digitally focused internships, and work-based learning. It recommends integrating digital skills, soft skills, and cross-sectoral learning into education to build a more resilient tourism workforce in the digital era.

Keywords: tourism employability, digital skills, skills gaps, labor market, work-integrated learning

1. Introduction

Today, tourism is one of the fastest-changing industry within the global economy, which creates many jobs and supports local, social and economic growth. However, the sector is going through digital transformation that is changing how work is organized, what jobs look like, and which skills are required for certain positions (Bekele et al., 2025). Digital tools like artificial intelligence (AI), data analysis and customer relationship management (CRM) systems are reshaping the way tourism services are planned, presented and delivered (Kumar et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2023). These changes are guiding companies to look for different skills from employees and are creating new expectations from students when it comes to skills needed for entering labor market. Still, tourism is known as a people-centered industry, which means that soft skills like communication, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and intercultural competence remain important career development (Garcez et al., 2023).

Even though digitalization is becoming more important, there is a mismatch between what companies require and what tourism education systems provide for current and future students. Research shows that many tourism graduates leave school with only basic digital skills, while the industry is asking for more advanced abilities and soft skills like adaptability and creativity (Minor et al., 2025; Razack et al., 2025; Stylianou et al., 2025). The problem is especially visible in tourism markets, such as Serbia, where the sector is growing but digital topics are still not incorporated enough into university programs (Bradić-Martinović, 2023; Lazić et al., 2023). At the same time, new digital technologies are changing career paths, so both new graduates and experienced workers need to keep learning and upgrading their skills (Ivanov, 2020; Li, 2022). To address these challenges, it's important to understand how the tourism labor market is reacting to digital change and how higher educational institutions are adjusting their programs. Only a few research have analyzed the relationship between digital skills, employability, and labor market changes in transitional economies, while most studies focus either on general graduate employability or on how tourism businesses can adopt new technologies, without connecting digital skill gaps to employment outcomes (Stylianou et al., 2025; Lazić et al., 2023).

To address this gap, this study will analyze Serbia's tourism sector, focusing on where the biggest digital and soft skill gaps are and how faculties, businesses, and policymakers are reacting. Using a mixed-methods approach which combined

*Corresponding author

E-mail address: d.demirovic@gi.sanu.ac.rs

surveys with tourism students and graduates and interviews with tourism industry professionals, this study can offer a clearer picture of the main challenges and opportunities for employability in the digital age. The goal is to give insights that can help improve university programs, workplace training, and labor policies so that the future tourism employees can become better prepared for the future.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Tourism employability and changing labor market demands*

Tourism is a people-centered industry that depends on employees to deliver high-quality service and experiences. In the past, being employable in tourism mostly meant having industry knowledge, speaking foreign languages, and being good at customer service (Adeyinka-Ojo, 2018; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019). Today, digital change is reshaping the sector, bringing new types of jobs and shifting what employers look for. Many new roles now require digital marketing, online sales, data use, and virtual services, which include knowledge from both technical know-how and people skills (Zeqiri et al., 2025; Carlisle et al., 2023). This means employability is no longer just about having a degree, but about a mix of digital, cognitive, and social skills that help graduates to adjust to constantly changing workplaces (Zins, 2025). In transitional countries, such as Serbia, this change is especially important. The tourism sector is growing rapidly, but universities and training programs are often slow to add digital content and practical learning to their curricula (Lazić et al., 2023). Because of this, many graduates leave with skills that don't fully match what employers need, which can have negative impact on productivity and career path.

2.2. *Digital skills as emerging core competencies in tourism*

Nowadays, digitalization is one of the biggest forces that changes tourism industry. Key business activities like marketing, bookings, revenue management, customer relations, and daily operations are now shaped by digital tools and data (Polukhina et al., 2025; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Companies seek graduates who can use social media marketing, content management systems, customer data analysis, and AI tools. But many studies showed that tourism education system is still based on basic computer literacy instead of advanced digital skills (Stylianou et al., 2025; Carlisle et al., 2023; Minor et al., 2025). Since digital training is not enough incorporated into university curricula, graduates often lack the skills companies need, leaving businesses to provide extra training or to hire people from other fields. This problem is especially present in Serbia and the Western Balkans, where many tourism SMEs adopt digital tools too slowly due to limited staff skills. Building stronger digital competencies is therefore the key for better employability and more competitive tourism businesses.

2.3. *The role and importance of soft skills*

Even though digital skills are becoming more important, soft skills are still at the core of employability in tourism, since it is a very people-centered industry. Companies often highlight the importance of adaptability, communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving (Čuić Tanković et al., 2023; Rienda et al., 2024). These abilities can help employees work with different customers, drive service innovation, and handle a fast-changing business environment (Tavitiyaman et al., 2025). Still, many studies show that soft skills don't get enough attention in higher education, where theory often takes priority over practical learning (Rienda et al., 2024; Mike, 2024). In Serbia, companies like hotels, travel agencies, and event management offices often say that graduates do not have enough confidence, initiative, and the ability to put knowledge into practice. This points to the need for universities to build more soft skills courses into their programs, using group projects, role-play, internships, and work-based learning that will reflect real workplace situations.

2.4. *Skills Gaps and Labor Market Responses*

Gaps in both digital and soft skills are creating a wider employability problem in tourism. Companies often say it's hard to find people who have the right mix of technical know-how and interpersonal skills, which in turn affects service quality and overall productivity (Minor et al., 2025). To respond adequately, businesses are starting to create their own training programs and to mentor future staff so they could be ready for their workplaces. Partnerships between universities and tourism companies—through internships or dual study programs—are also becoming more common and effective way for closing the skills gap (Liu et al., 2024; Scerri et al., 2020). At the same time, lifelong learning and reskilling are becoming essential, especially for mid-career workers whose jobs are being reshaped or replaced by automation and AI. Global organizations like UNWTO and ILO are developing flexible education formats that support continuous training in tourism (Tamás et al., 2024), but in Serbia, these efforts are still limited and uncoordinated, showing the need for stronger policies and strategies.

In summary, research showed a growing gap between the skills tourism education provides and what companies actually need in today's digital age. As digital changes are more and more reshaping jobs and skill requirements, education systems—especially in emerging tourism markets—have been slow to keep up. Closing this gap means combining digital

training, soft skills development, and education models that are better aligned with labor market needs, so the tourism workforce can stay resilient to new changes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods approach to analyze the changing skill needs in tourism and to assess how big the gap is between what graduates can do and what companies want. The approach was chosen because it combines numbers on specific skill levels with insights from companies about their expectations, experiences, and strategies. Bringing these two types of data together makes the findings stronger and gives both a clearer picture of overall patterns and a deeper understanding of the perceptions around employability in the digital age.

3.2. Quantitative Component

The quantitative part of the study was based on an online survey with final-year tourism students and recent graduates (within the last three years) from Serbian universities. Respondents were recruited through email and social media from five major higher education institutions offering tourism and hospitality programs. In total, 312 valid responses were gathered between February and April 2024.

The questionnaire was designed to assess:

- Self-reported digital competencies (e.g., data analytics, social media marketing, CRM systems, virtual collaboration tools, AI applications);
- Self-assessed soft skills (e.g., adaptability, communication, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, intercultural competence);
- Perceived preparedness for employment, and
- Exposure to digital content and work-based learning in their study programs.

All items were measured using five-point Likert scales (1 = very low competence, 5 = very high competence). The instrument was pre-tested with 15 students to check clarity and reliability before full applications. Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests were used to examine skill levels and potential differences between students and graduates.

3.3. Qualitative Component

Besides the survey, qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with 25 tourism professionals in Serbia, covering hospitality, travel agencies, event management, and destination marketing organizations (DMOs). Participants were chosen purposively to reflect different types of organizations, sizes, and locations. Most interviewees worked in managerial or HR roles and were directly involved in hiring and staff development.

Interviews were conducted between May and July 2024, either face-to-face or online, and lasted 45–60 minutes each. The interview guide explored four main topics:

- Employers' perceptions of graduates' digital and soft skills;
- Skills most valued and required in recruitment decisions;
- Observed skills gaps and their implications for organizational performance, and
- Strategies adopted to address these gaps (e.g., training, partnerships with universities, internships).

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured to all participants.

3.4 Data Analysis and Integration

Survey data were analyzed in SPSS statistical software using descriptive and comparative methods to identify patterns in skill development and employability. The interview data were examined thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Codes were created inductively and then grouped into broader themes around digital skills, soft skills, and labor market responses. Results from both parts were brought together through triangulation, comparing how students saw their own skills with what employers expected. This helped us to identify where the views overlapped and where they differed, strengthening the credibility of the findings by giving different perspectives.

4. Results

4.1. Digital Skills Gaps

The survey results showed that although respondents rated themselves as strong in basic digital skills, they were less confident with advanced, job-related tools. On a five-point scale, students and graduates gave high scores for everyday tasks like using office software and online communication platforms, but lower ratings were reported for areas such as data analysis, digital marketing, AI tools, CRM systems, and virtual collaboration. Table 1 shows the self-reported skill levels, while Figure 1 compares these with what employers expect, highlighting the clear gap between education outcomes and labor market needs. Overall, the findings suggest that graduates may be digitally literate in general but lack the applied tech skills that are now required in many tourism workplaces.

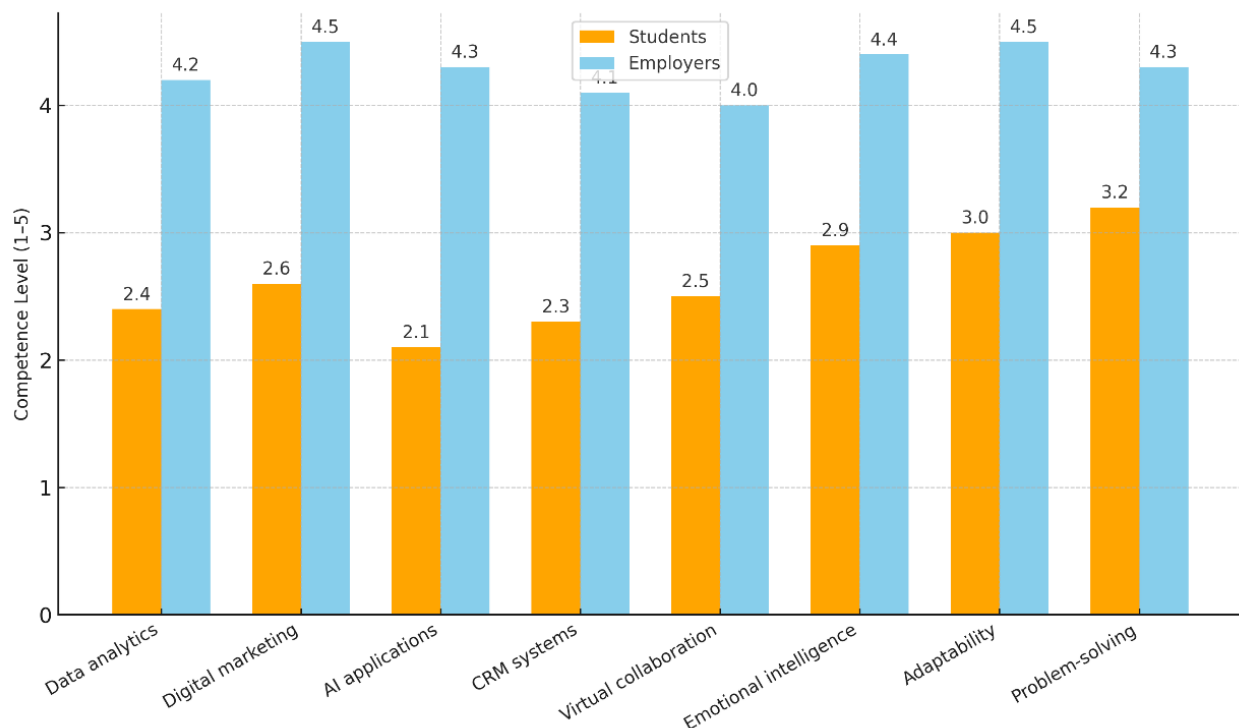
Table 1. Self-reported competence level of tourism students and graduates

Skill area	Mean score (1-5)	Standard deviation	Category
<i>Basic digital literacy</i>			
MS Office / productivity tools	4.2	0.7	High
Online communication platforms	4.0	0.8	High
<i>Advanced digital skills</i>			
Data analytics tools	2.4	0.9	Low
Digital marketing platforms	2.6	0.8	Low
Artificial intelligence applications	2.1	0.7	Very low
CRM systems	2.3	0.8	Low
Virtual collaboration tools	2.5	0.9	Low
<i>Soft skills</i>			
Teamwork	3.9	0.6	Moderate-High
Communication	3.7	0.7	Moderate-High
Problem-solving	3.2	0.8	Moderate
Adaptability	3.0	0.7	Moderate-Low
Emotional intelligence	2.9	0.8	Low
Intercultural communication	2.8	0.8	Low

Note: Mean values based on 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low competence; 5 = very high competence).

Source: Authors

Figure 1. Skills gap between education and labor market expectations



Source: Authors

Interviews with employers confirmed these concerns. Managers in hospitality, destination marketing, and event management said that entry-level candidates often don't know how to use the digital systems their organizations rely on. Several HR managers explained that new staff usually need a lot of in-house training to work with digital tools like CRM software, booking engines, or social media analytics. As one interviewee put it:

“Graduates can use social media as individuals, but not strategically as a marketing tool. They often don’t understand performance metrics or content scheduling.”

Employers connected this skills gap to university programs that aren’t keeping up with industry needs. Many suggested stronger cooperation between universities and tourism businesses so students can get practical experience with the digital tools actually used in companies.

4.2 Soft Skills Gaps

The survey also pointed to gaps in several key soft skills. Respondents rated themselves fairly high on teamwork ($M = 3.9$) and customer communication ($M = 3.7$) but gave lower scores in other important areas. Problem-solving ($M = 3.2$) and adaptability ($M = 3.0$) were only moderate, while emotional intelligence ($M = 2.9$) and intercultural communication ($M = 2.8$) were even weaker. This suggests that while graduates feel comfortable working in teams and dealing with customers, they may be missing the wider interpersonal and emotional skills that employers increasingly value in tourism’s fast-changing and multicultural environment.

Graduates often said they felt unsure about how to deal with difficult customers, how to manage cultural differences, or to adjust to fast-changing work situations. This points to an imbalance, since technical skills are stronger than interpersonal and emotional. Employers confirmed this, noting that soft skills often make the difference in workplace performance and career development. Several respondents gave examples of technically skilled graduates who still struggled with stress, teamwork, or communication with international guests. As one hotel HR director explained:

“They know theory but often lack confidence, flexibility, and initiative. It takes time to build their professional attitude.”

Interviewees linked these gaps to teaching that is too theoretical and to the lack of real workplace experience during study programs. They suggested adding project-based learning, role-plays, and cross-cultural teamwork activities to better develop students’ soft skills.

4.3 Labor Market Responses to Skills Gaps

Even with these gaps, the study found that the tourism labor market is starting to respond with new ways to address these skill shortages and to improve graduate employability. Industry-led training programs are becoming more common, especially in big hotel chains and destination management organizations. These often take the form of short digital courses in areas like revenue management, CRM systems, and social media analytics. Employers see them as necessary to close the gap between what students learn at university and what is needed on the job. Internships and work-based learning are also important. Some companies have redesigned their internship programs to give students more hands-on practice with digital tools and to place them in cross-functional teams. This helps students to build both technical and soft skills in real workplace settings. As one DMO manager explained:

“We treat internships like a talent pipeline now — they are our main way of building future staff with the right mix of skills.”

Interviewees also pointed to new collaborations between universities and industry. Some faculties have started piloting elective courses co-designed with companies to focus on new digital skills. Although still small in scale, employers are putting these efforts into producing graduates who are better prepared for work. A culture of lifelong learning is also starting to grow. Mid-career workers affected by automation and restructuring are increasingly taking short courses or online programs to refresh their digital skills. Many employers support this by offering stipends or flexible schedules, seeing it as important for keeping staff.

4.4 Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings show a clear skills gap between what tourism education provides and what the labor market needs. Students and graduates may have basic digital skills, but they often lack more advanced, job-specific abilities as well as key soft skills. Employers are trying to respond with training programs, new internship models, and closer ties with universities, but these steps are still not enough to keep up with digital change. Closing the gap will require better alignment between curricula, industry practices, and labor policies to build a tourism workforce that is more adaptable and ready for the future.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study analyzed Serbia's tourism sector, pointing out major gaps in both digital and soft skills among students and graduates, and examining how the labor market is dealing with them. The results show a clear mismatch between what universities provide and what employers expect, especially in advanced digital tools and broader interpersonal skills. These findings are in line with international research that has reported similar gaps between tourism education and industry demands (Minor et al., 2024; Razack et al., 2025; Stylianou et al., 2025).

Students and graduates in this study said they were confident with basic digital skills but had limited ability in areas like data analysis, digital marketing, AI, and CRM systems. Employers, however, expected much higher levels of competence in these areas. This supports earlier research showing that tourism education often lags behind technology, focusing on general ICT skills while leaving out applied, industry-specific content (Stylianou et al., 2025; Lazić et al., 2023). The fast step of technological change has left behind curriculum updates, leaving many graduates unprepared for today's digital workplaces. As a result, employers often have to spend a lot of time on in-house training or hire people from outside the tourism field, which can slow down innovation and reduces productivity. Building more digital tools and applied training into tourism curricula is therefore essential for improving graduate readiness (Bekele et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2024).

While digital skills are becoming more important, employers also stressed the need for soft skills like adaptability, emotional intelligence, intercultural communication, and problem-solving — areas where students rated themselves lower. Similar trends have been seen across Europe, where employers see soft skills as key for service quality, teamwork, and leadership potential (Čuić Tanković et al., 2023; Rienda et al., 2024; Tavitiyaman et al., 2023). These abilities are especially important in tourism, where employees work in diverse cultural settings and often face high-pressure service situations. Yet, university programs still focus more on theory than practice, giving students less chances to develop these skills (Mike, 2024). This highlights the need for more project-based learning, role-play, and cross-cultural teamwork that will reflect real workplace conditions (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2019).

The study also found some positive responses to these skill gaps, such as industry-led digital training programs, redesigned internships with more focus on digital skills, and stronger collaboration between universities and businesses. These efforts reflect international best practices, where partnerships and co-designed courses have been shown to boost graduate employability (Liu et al., 2024; Scerri et al., 2020). However, in Serbia such initiatives are still limited, short-term, and mostly happening in larger organizations. What's needed are more systemic solutions, including national policies that support work-based and lifelong training. Policymakers should encourage closer cooperation between universities and industry and promote flexible educational formats that can keep up with fast-changing digital skill needs (Molnár et al., 2024).

This study points to several practical implications for universities, tourism businesses, and policymakers. Universities should add more industry-focused digital skills to their programs, with hands-on training in areas like data analytics, CRM, digital marketing, and AI. They should also use project-based work, teamwork across cultures, and role-play to build soft skills like adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving. Employers can help by offering more structured internships and work-based learning so students can apply what they've learned and develop both technical and people skills. Universities and businesses could also work together on joint curriculum design to better align education with labor market needs. Policymakers can support all this by providing funding and policies that encourage collaboration, lifelong learning, and reskilling, since all of this can help the workforce to stay adaptable in the digital age.

This study offers useful insights into skills gaps and labor market responses in Serbia's tourism sector, but it has some limitations. First, the sample only included students and graduates from a few universities and 25 industry professionals. While this allowed for detailed analysis, the results may not reflect the entire tourism workforce or apply to other countries. Second, much of the data came from students' and graduates' self-assessments, which may be influenced by social desirability or inaccurate judgments of their own skills. Third, the cross-sectional design captures views at just one point in time, even though both skill needs and digital technologies are changing quickly. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to track skills over time and look at actual employment outcomes. They could also broaden the sample to include more tourism subsectors, regions, and mid-career professionals for a better picture of workforce dynamics. Finally, more research is needed on how specific initiatives—like work-integrated learning and university–industry partnerships—can close skill gaps and improve job outcomes.

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