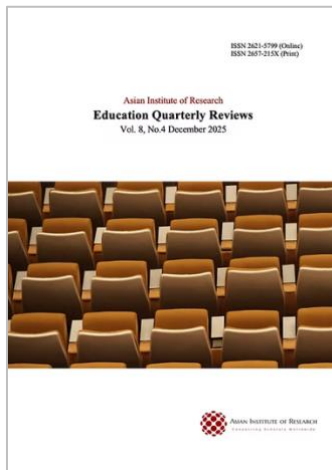




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E-Learning as a Field for the Development of Soft Skills in Tourism Education and Training Executives: Evaluating Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the perspectives of tourism education and training professionals regarding the development of soft skills in e-learning environments. Specifically, it seeks to examine their views on the possession of soft skills, the concept of e-learning, the potential for developing soft skills in e-learning settings, and the usefulness of acquiring these skills in the context of their professional work. The study sample consisted of ten tourism education and training professionals, employed either as instructors or holding senior administrative positions in the tourism sector. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via the MSTEAMS e-learning platform during the period from October 2024 to February 2025. The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The analysis conceptually defined the terms “soft skills” and “e-learning,” identified the soft skills that can be developed in e-learning environments, and examined their relevance to teaching and professional practice. The findings indicate that the development of soft skills in e-learning environments requires consideration of factors influencing the educational process, which are deemed critical for the effectiveness of any educational intervention, such as the instructor, instructional material, the use of modern teaching and assessment techniques, and the design and operation of distance learning programs

Keywords: Soft Skills, E-Learning, Tourism Education, Training

1. Introduction

In a world characterized by continuous change, rapid technological and scientific advancements, widespread internet use, the advent of artificial intelligence, and multiculturalism, it becomes necessary to transform education so that individuals are equipped with the essential skills to meet the challenges of the 21st century. In this context, e-learning can serve as a field for skills development, offering the possibility of creating modern learning environments tailored to the needs of today's learners, who are required to engage in continuous learning to adapt to ongoing developments.

However, regarding the term “skills,” there is still no unified theoretical framework for understanding them, nor a universally accepted definition. Similarly, the concept of “competencies” is marked by “conceptual confusion” (Telling & Serapioni, 2019: 390). According to Tsolis and Babalis (2023), a skill is defined as the set of knowledge and experiences an individual possesses, which are necessary for completing a task or duty, and skills are distinguished into cognitive and practical. For Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos (2019), skills consist of “a set of achievements, knowledge, and personal characteristics that enable individuals to be employed and succeed in their personal and professional lives.”

Particular importance for personal growth and professional development is attributed to soft skills (Borboulis, 2023), although there is no clear and unified definition. Their conceptualization is often made by contrasting “soft” with “hard” skills. James and James (2004) consider soft skills as a way of describing a set of abilities or talents that an individual can bring to the workplace. In the international literature, soft skills are mainly described as personal behaviors, attributes, values, or traits, including ethics, communication, leadership, interpersonal, and teamwork skills. In contrast, “hard” skills are defined as a combination of technical and cognitive abilities (Ling, Ofori, & Low, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2010; Shub & Stonebraker, 2009; Sutton, 2002; Towner, 2002).

Despite their importance, soft skills are not cultivated to the required extent in educational programs and are rarely systematically assessed (New European Skills Agenda). Therefore, it is necessary to transform education and training to meet the needs of citizens, the labor market, and society, aiming for personal development as well as social and economic progress (European Council, 2000).

E-learning can play a crucial role in the educational process, substantially contributing to the cultivation of soft skills through an applicable pedagogical framework. The term “e-learning” is described in various ways, which, however, converge on the general definition of learning conducted electronically (Abbadetal., 2009). In formal and non-formal education, policymakers, researchers, and professionals often use the terms “distance education” and “e-learning” interchangeably, emphasizing the distinction between conventional and distance education (AFT, 2000, 2001; Evans & Nation, 2000; Ryan et al., 2002; Twigg, 2001). In some cases, the term is used to describe the use of ICT in teaching and learning; in others, to indicate a combination of face-to-face and distance education; and in others, it refers exclusively to online learning, which can be asynchronous, synchronous, or hybrid. Gradually, the term “e-learning” is increasingly used, replacing or being equated with the term “distance education,” as is the case in the present study, where e-learning is equated with both synchronous and asynchronous distance education.

2. Method

2.1 Purpose and Objectives

a. The purpose of this study is to investigate the contribution of e-learning to the development of soft skills in tourism education and training professionals. Based on the literature review and the research objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the views of tourism education and training professionals regarding soft skills?
- What are the views of tourism education and training professionals regarding e-learning?

- What are the views of tourism education and training professionals on the development of soft skills through participation in distance learning programs?
- What are the views of tourism education and training professionals regarding the usefulness of acquiring soft skills in the context of their professional duties?

2.2 Type of Research

This study follows a qualitative methodology. The analysis of interview data was conducted using thematic content analysis, which focuses on the diversity of meanings and interactions arising from the interpretation of a phenomenon by different participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). This approach allows for the categorization of data through the use of codes. Coding facilitates the transition from collected data to theoretical relationships and concepts, as well as their interpretation.

2.3 Sample

The study sample consisted of ten tourism education and training professionals. Participants were certified adult educators in the tourism sector and professionals holding senior administrative positions in hospitality and catering organizations.

2.4 Research Instrument

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which provide better communication with participants compared to a structured format, and enable a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions (Bryman, 2017).

Interviews were conducted online during the period October 2024 – February 2025 via the MSTEAMS platform, due to the geographical distribution of participants and for time efficiency. Each interview lasted between thirty (30) and forty (40) minutes.

2.5 Interview Structure

The first part of the interview focused on collecting participants' demographic information, including age, tourism-related education, work experience in the tourism sector, professional position within tourism education structures, and certification in new technologies. The second part included questions based on the research questions. Specifically, the interview topics addressed tourism education and training professionals' knowledge and views regarding soft skills, e-learning, the development of soft skills through participation in distance learning programs, their application in e-learning environments, and the usefulness of acquiring soft skills in the context of their teaching and professional duties.

3. Results

This section presents the results of the research

3.a Participants' Profile

The study sample consisted of ten participants: six women and four men. Their ages ranged from twenty-six to fifty-seven years, with most participants between forty-one and forty-six years old. Most were graduates of higher education tourism programs, while three held degrees from higher tourism schools. Six held a master's degree, one held a doctoral degree, and one was a PhD candidate. Work experience in the tourism sector ranged from seven to thirty-nine years. Nine out of ten participants were instructors at public Vocational Training Institutes in tourism, with two also holding senior positions in hospitality and catering establishments. Regarding digital literacy, almost all participants were certified in ICT.

3.b Participants' Views on the Concept of "Soft Skills"

Analysis revealed that the term "soft skills" was not uniformly understood by all participants and held different semantic meanings. Participants associated soft skills with personal characteristics and experiences acquired outside formal qualifications. For example: *"Yes, I know it, but not with certainty. I think it's about personal traits"* (P1), and *"Generally, anything acquired through experience, and for those who cannot understand it, as I put it, we could say anything that isn't on paper"* (P2).

Regarding the soft skills recognized by participants, communication emerged as the most frequently mentioned skill, often linked to problem-solving, empathy, and teamwork, with a distinction between verbal and non-verbal communication. Empathy was also highlighted as essential in workplace environments, particularly in tourism, affecting both client relationships and colleague collaboration. Time management appeared less frequently. Examples include: *"Communication is the primary soft skill; it supports all others. Even teamwork cannot exist effectively without communication"* (P3); *"It is communication and emotional intelligence—understanding others and putting yourself in their shoes. I consider them very important, sometimes even more than hard skills"* (P4); *"Also, being able to convey information verbally and non-verbally and be understood by others"* (P1).

3.c Participants' Views on the Concept of "E-Learning"

Participants expressed a multidimensional understanding of e-learning, describing it as learning through digital/electronic tools in both distance and face-to-face education. E-learning was equated with synchronous and asynchronous distance learning, emphasizing flexibility in time and space. Participants recognized the importance of digital tools (e.g., learning platforms, Kahoot) as supportive of the learning process. For instance: *"We're talking about distance learning. You meet people from everywhere. You exchange experiences. You can follow the program from home"* (P4); *"Distance and face-to-face learning using electronic tools like videos and slides"* (P5); *"It means learning via computer, either with a teacher or asynchronously without one"* (P6).

Synchronous e-learning was associated with interaction and immediate responses, while asynchronous learning offered flexibility but lacked personal contact between instructor and learner. Example responses: *"Synchronous in the form of an e-classroom and asynchronous learning. Communication via email"* (P5); *"...You save time because you can attend from home, without traveling. There's flexibility in both time and place"* (P1).

The absence of interaction and visual contact was noted as a barrier to active participation and personalized instructor intervention: *"In an e-classroom, you're not sure if they are following. Sometimes, you lack visual contact, which needs to be addressed"* (P6).

Digital tools for formative and summative assessment, such as quizzes and multiple-choice questions, were valued for providing immediate feedback: *"Comprehension tests... exam quizzes"* (P7); *"Critical thinking questions... not rote learning"* (P8).

3.d Participants' Views on Developing Soft Skills in E-Learning Environments

Participants identified communication, collaboration, time management, critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and problem-solving as soft skills developed through e-learning. Adaptability, though less frequently mentioned, was linked to technology use and learners' adjustment to new learning formats. Empathy and creativity could be developed through active participation and interaction with both learning material and peers. Time management emerged as essential in distance learning for meeting deadlines and organizing time. Illustrative quotes: *"It helped me develop teamwork because we worked in groups during synchronous distance learning"* (P1); *"Only time management and critical thinking, as I mentioned"* (P8); *"Yes, it helped me develop empathy. While I was communicative and collaborative, I saw as a learner how it can be achieved"* (P6).

Effective development of these skills depends on conditions such as using modern active teaching methods, clearly distinguishing instructor and learner roles, and incorporating non-verbal communication in distance learning: "...role-playing, e.g., one person as a client, another as employee, helps develop problem-solving" (P2); "...the instructor's clarity and well-structured, interactive material motivated me to participate" (P5).

Views on ICT's role in soft skills development were mixed. While some expressed concerns about impersonal communication and the lack of non-verbal cues, most acknowledged that skills like communication, creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration could be cultivated under specific conditions: "I think it's harder. In face-to-face, you get closer to learners. Distance is more impersonal" (P9); "It helped people become more social" (EZ); "They start opening up and developing collaboration" (P2). Preconditions included the instructor, program objectives, teaching techniques, and adapting program goals to learners' needs.

3.e Participants' Views on the Usefulness of Soft Skills in Professional Practice

Soft skills were deemed crucial for building relationships between instructors and learners, understanding learners, using modern teaching and assessment techniques, engaging learners, and managing time. Time management skills helped structure lessons effectively: "It helps in better time management. You need time limits because discussions can go off-topic. Time management helps plan lessons better" (P5). Empathy facilitated learner engagement: "Involving learners in class, not hiding behind desks or cameras" (P7).

Soft skills also supported the design and implementation of interactive lessons by selecting suitable teaching and assessment techniques and reorganizing methodology: "Soft skills help choose teaching methods and assessments. If learners do not meet expected outcomes, I adjust methods to engage them" (P1); "If the initial approach does not capture learners' interest, I modify teaching methods and use more participatory techniques. I once had a class that was disengaged, so I redesigned it to be collaborative, which worked effectively" (P6).

In professional practice, soft skills were considered more important than hard skills in the tourism sector. They support effective communication with colleagues and clients, foster collaboration, and facilitate problem-solving. Verbal and non-verbal communication and active listening were essential for interacting with people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. Empathy was crucial for understanding and meeting the needs of both clients and colleagues. Soft skills were seen as vital not only in tourism but broadly in professional relationships: "The more soft skills you have, the better you handle interactions with colleagues, supervisors, subordinates, and this extends to personal relationships" (P10).

Illustrative quotes: "Tourism is clearly about interacting with people, so soft skills are very important, whether behind a desk or in a hotel" (P6); "Soft skills help in tourism, managing client problems, and understanding others' perspectives. Same applies with colleagues" (P10); "Especially in front office roles, problem-solving and communication are key skills" (P5).

Overall, soft skills enable tourism employees to manage problems effectively and ensure smooth operations in hospitality and catering establishments.

4. Conclusions – Recommendations

Many of the research participants approach the term "soft skills" vaguely or are entirely unfamiliar with it. Their understanding was conceptually approached through the distinction between soft and hard skills. This perspective is consistent with the literature, where the conceptual definition of soft skills is often attempted in comparison to hard skills (Whitehurst, 2016). Soft skills were also identified as skills not evidenced by formal qualifications but primarily acquired through experience, a view supported by research indicating that most people distinguish hard skills (education, certified knowledge) from soft skills (interpersonal or intrapersonal skills) (Laker & Powell, 2011). Hard skills can be taught and measured, encompassing academic qualifications and any certified knowledge or practical experience. In contrast, soft skills refer to personal traits, individual

characteristics and communication skills (Hayes, 2002; Perreault, 2004), as also reflected in the findings of this study.

Participants identified communication, empathy and teamwork as key soft skills in the tourism sector (Shabir & Sharma, 2019; Suh, West & Shin, 2012), differentiating between verbal and non-verbal communication. Communication, in particular, emerged as the predominant soft skill, aligning with Levasseur's (2013) assertion that communication is the most important soft skill.

Time management was also recognized as a soft skill, described in terms of meeting deadlines, organizing time, and maintaining consistency in completing tasks. Its importance is confirmed by international literature, where time management appears in many skill models (Tsarpa, 2022; Deloitte, 2018; Sanchez & Ruiz, 2008; Pattanayak, 2020) and is considered essential for adult learners in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

Participants associated e-learning with the use of digital tools in both remote and face-to-face education, as well as with synchronous and asynchronous online learning. This finding aligns with Clark et al. (2020), who state that e-learning encompasses any form of education utilizing the internet, ICT, mobile devices, software, etc. They also equated it with distance learning, confirmed by multiple studies reporting that e-learning and distance education are often used interchangeably and share common characteristics (Evans & Nation, 2000; Ryan, 2002; Twigg, 2001).

Participants perceived that synchronous e-learning supports interaction and immediate responses from the instructor or learning tools, reflecting the high interactivity provided by new technologies, which facilitates both individual and collaborative learning processes (Gros & Salvat, 2004; Shi & Han, 2019; Byrd, 2018). Asynchronous e-learning was described as flexible in terms of time and place, allowing learners to participate from their chosen location and at their own pace, with or without the presence of an instructor (Pandey, 2013; Al-Din & AlRadhi, 2008; Beldhuis, 2012; Almosa, 2001; Papadopoulou & Pavli-Korre, 2025).

The soft skills that participants believed could be developed through e-learning included communication, collaboration, time management, critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, e-learning was considered a tool for developing learners' adaptability, reflecting the need to adjust to new technologies and educational formats, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic as well as in rapidly evolving technological environments, in order to maintain employability and foster active participation in processes of continuous improvement and digital innovation (Carvalho & Mourão, 2021).

There was some divergence of opinion regarding the contribution of new technologies to the development of soft skills. However, most participants recognized the potential for cultivating soft skills through distance education, emphasizing the need for specific conditions to be met. These conditions relate to the instructor's role, the use of active teaching techniques such as group work, simulations, role-playing (Karalis & Lintzeris, 2022; Williams, 2023; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022), the integration of non-verbal communication elements into the learning process (Stone, 2016), and the adaptation of program objectives to learners' needs (Karalis & Lintzeris, 2022).

Participants' main concerns related to the impersonal nature of communication and the absence of non-verbal interaction, a situation explained by the tendency of some learners to disengage or hide behind cameras during synchronous online learning (Elzainy, ElSedik & AlAbdulmonem, 2020).

Participants viewed soft skills in the tourism sector as more important than hard skills, a finding supported by studies showing that technical knowledge is often considered less significant than soft skills (Chung, 2000; Banupriya, 2011; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010; Shub & Stonebraker, 2009; Shabir & Sharma, 2019). Soft skills were considered crucial to professional success, facilitating effective communication with colleagues and clients, collaboration, and problem-solving (Sisson & Adams, 2013).

Verbal and non-verbal communication skills, along with active listening, were deemed essential, reflecting the need for tourism employees to interact with people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds (Tesone &

Ricci, 2006; Spowart, 2011; Bowen & Schneider, 1988; Wesley, Jackson & Lee, 2017; Youssef, 2017). Empathy emerged as a fundamental skill, particularly in the tourism sector, highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing the needs of both clients and colleagues (Barlow & Maul, 2000; Tucker, 2016).

The need to acquire soft skills was emphasized not only for the tourism sector but also for all professional relationships, as personality traits are key to providing quality customer service and contributing to individual professional development (Tang, 2020).

Overall, the study shows that most participants believe new technologies, particularly e-learning, can be transformed into a tool for developing soft skills in tourism, bridging the gap between technology and interpersonal skills. Their effectiveness depends on their use, the human factor, and pedagogical design, making e-learning a potentially effective approach for enhancing soft skills when implemented in a targeted and participatory learning environment, taking into account the findings of this study.

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