

New perspectives on soft skills and cross-cultural skills development in curricula in Tourism and Hospitality in Ireland¹

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Introduction

This research aims to analyse the offer of soft skills and cross-cultural skills in Ireland's tourism and hospitality training curricula. It also aims to explore how these skills are being developed at the moment, and the future needs for social skills in the educational and industry landscape, building sustainability for the sector.

Building on research developed by two European Commission Erasmus+ funded projects, Next Tourism Generation Alliance, between 2018 and 2022, and Pantour, which started in 2022 (Next Tourism Generation Alliance, 2022), this paper also aims to explore how the training and higher education landscape in Ireland have been working on the social skills, seen in literature as fundamental for the development of competencies to the workforce in the sector, bridging gaps between knowledge and practice.

Literature Review

The development of sustainable practices related to people and culture is cited in Ireland's main policy (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media 2015), which establishes the importance of developing social skills for the future growth of the industry, with a focus on local development. However, initiatives to implement social skills and cross-cultural skills in training curricula are still relatively hidden in policies, and in curricula in education training institutions, with most curricula focusing on customers' services and care, and communication or soft skills in all tourism subsectors.

The literature related to the importance of social and cross-cultural competencies and skills in the tourism and hospitality areas is extensive. Soft skills and cross-cultural skills are seen as essentially important to the industry. As Wilks and Hemsworth (2011) and Sisson and Adams (2013) investigate, the soft skills competencies in tourism are not only essential among functional areas but for management as well. Weber et al (2009), Jefferis & Hutchinson (2020), and Wesley et al. (2016) also analyse the importance of soft skills for management roles and competencies in hospitality and tourism. Jefferis and Hutchinson analyse as well how there is a gap in the hospitality industry regarding the perception of the industry of student possession of soft skills, and the actual soft skills students acquire for work. According to Wilks and Hemsworth, attitudinal skills such as work ethic, interpersonal traits, and responsibility are important soft skills, and these are still rarely offered in university and training for hospitality, which needs to be addressed as an important gap in the industry.

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Social skills related to increasing awareness of cultural diversity, inclusion and equality of opportunities, also need to be addressed in the curriculum in higher education providers and further education institutions in Ireland, although cross-cultural skills related to acknowledgement of heritage, local culture and language are more commonly seen in the curricula. Many of these skills are recognised as fundamental to building the future workforce in Ireland and across the sector, as numerous studies have shown that employers in the tourism and hospitality and events sector place value on soft skills when recruiting employees (O’Leary and Mottiar 2019, Carlisle et al. 2021, Silva et al 2019, and Tankovic et al. 2021).

This study has originality because it is based on up-to-date and extensive primary and secondary research undertaken in the last four years with industry stakeholders and education providers in Ireland, with an aim to understand and map new skills needs, focusing on debating how social skills, are important to build sustainability in the sector and are an important part of the curricula in tourism and hospitality.

Methodology

This research builds on primary and secondary research on soft and cross-cultural skills development in the Irish context, which aimed: to provide information mapping literature related to the development of social and cross-cultural competencies and skills, to identify curricula offer across education providers, to identify needs of stakeholders in the sector on soft and cross-cultural skills, and to build recommendations on future skills needs in curricula.

The content analysis was conducted on existing literature on soft and cross-cultural skills and curricula design in tourism and hospitality in Ireland between 2021-2023. The sample analysis is academic papers published in journals related to hospitality, tourism, leisure and education and curricula studies. This research also builds on an analysis of written documents/curricula documents provided by technological universities and further education providers offering tourism and hospitality courses in Ireland.

The primary research was conducted with interviewing 33 industry stakeholders from different tourism subsectors, through NTG and Pantour projects (2019-2020 and 2022-2023), and interviews from a focus group of 7 lecturers in different technological education institutions in Ireland, in the first semester of 2022, in which they analysed the importance of the development of social skills content/lessons produced by the NTG project across curricula. Skills assessment from industry providers on emerging and needed social skills will also be conducted with stakeholders from different tourism and hospitality subsectors, in the first semester of 2022, in a total of 74 survey answers.

As a qualitative and exploratory research, this research is based on a thematic and in-depth analysis of interviews, exploring their views on the importance of soft and cross-cultural skills in tourism and hospitality training.

Results & Implications

It was identified through the focus group the need for reflection on emotional intelligence; soft skills such as how to communicate with customers, and social skills such as dealing with customers haven’t been highlighted recently in curricula in universities. It was also identified gaps in social skills, as intercultural and cross-cultural awareness, and different soft skills, such as ethics, active listening,

effective communication, and gender equality. In one higher education institution, there has been a particular focus on intercultural awareness as part of the programmatic review and therefore, the social skills content was thoroughly discussed. One focus group member recommended a review/survey of time dedicated to social skills. It has also been highlighted that this area has been reduced on programmes to make way for discipline-specific rules/management modules and so there is an increasing gap across colleges in this area.

The tour operators and travel agents interviewed all placed most emphasis on social skills, with one participant mentioning: *'this business is about people'*. The ability to interact with others in work terms, in groups, and person-to-person in a customer service context are highly prized. Basic skills such as listening *'to be able to read between the lines'* and telephone techniques were mentioned; these were skills that it was felt could be trained for or taught. Communicating with other people was seen as *'the ability to hold a conversation with customers...be able to initiate a conversation'* as a most desired skill. Empathy with a variety of customers was thought to be a very important skill for employees. Negotiation skills and management skills were mentioned as being useful.

Social and soft skills were highlighted by participants as the most important skills to have for those working in destination management. Soft skills were seen as hugely important because, as highlighted by a destination management Interviewee: *'tourism is a personal business; you have to relate to individual clients, and they trust you to deliver a product [so] good customer relation skills are essential'*. Similarly, interviewees noted that interactions with local people are very important in influencing a visitor's view of a destination. Soft skills were described as: customer service skills including communication skills, multicultural awareness, diversity awareness, friendliness, and attention to detail; leadership skills including management capability, social influence and strategic planning; teamwork skills including networking, relationship building, co-operation and communication with co-workers; and personal management skills such as flexibility and emotional intelligence.

Interviewees noted that social skills/soft skills are a very important skill requirement in the visitor attractions sub sector. Three key themes emerged from the interviews regarding social skills: customer service and customer relationship skills, basic communication skills and storytelling, i.e. the ability to engage with visitors and create a unique experience through storytelling. Key customer service skills mentioned included: understanding customer needs, dealing with diverse customers, having a flexible/positive attitude, the ability to adapt to the needs of different audiences, the ability to communicate with people from different backgrounds, basic customer care, listening skills and the 'human' element of the visit, i.e. providing visitors with a warm welcome. One interviewee argued that: *'we're all about visitors so it's all about people and people skills'*.

The food and beverage participants placed most emphasis on soft/social skills. Social skills that are of particular importance for the industry currently and in the future include: communication skills, listening skills, the ability to read and understand body language (i.e. understand and pre-empt customer behaviour), good eye contact, team building skills, be able to engage with customers and cultural awareness'. Most participants noted that employees need to have a good attitude and a good personality; these are the most important attributes, staff need to be 'a people person' and *'people buy into people, not the product'*.

In general, participants in the accommodation sector emphasised the importance of soft skills, with one participant identifying them as *'the most important skills'*. They explained that the quality of service and customer satisfaction 'is determined by the experience that customers have', and their

experience with front line staff impacts directly on this. Good communication and interpersonal skills were considered to be essential, as the *'meet and greet'* side of the business is *'hugely important'*.

Social and cultural skills are also identified in the curricula analysis as one of the sets of skills mostly uncovered by education providers and trainers in the tourism and travel sector in Ireland. Although many courses focus on developing knowledge about heritage importance and cultural competencies in understanding history, cultural differences and heritage in destinations, many of them have gaps in developing intercultural awareness in training. Focus on soft skills such as communication, customers care and management of teams/customers or clients are the main skills seen.

It was not identified visible content on diversity, equality and inclusion awareness (only in one higher education provider with one intercultural awareness module across all tourism and hospitality management courses). Additionally, there is a gap in courses related to diversity and inclusion related to ageing groups, LGBTQ+ communities, immigrant communities and women. There were no courses identified that had modules or training specially designed for tourism and travel global citizenship and lifelong capabilities, competencies to promote social progress and to promote fair pay and working conditions in tourism. Certainly, these key issues should be addressed in research at European and local levels as part of a strategic plan and in developing content in curricula and training to address social and cross-cultural skills.

Conclusion

Partial results of this research show that the development of curricula that include social skills and cross-cultural skills needs to be addressed in higher education institutions in Ireland. Although courses related to intercultural awareness, languages and communications with customers are usually common, there is a need to address equality and inclusion in the sector, and also to include more cross-cultural skills, such as religious diversity, cultural diversity, gender equality, and diversity management.

Research Limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic has reflected in the changing importance of soft and cross-cultural skills in the tourism and hospitality industry. Although the return of the industry in 2022, debates related to attracting and retaining professionals at all levels in all tourism subsectors, and research related to changes in curricula are still being addressed, as much as new skills needed in cross-cultural understanding and building equity in the industry to attract a more diverse workforce.

Limitations from this research also exist on possible hidden modules across curricula in the tourism and hospitality sector. Although there are embedded topics on soft and cross-cultural skills in disciplines, for example in one higher education provider, these skills are not clearly identified and named in the high-level course documentation. Instead, they are named in the documents providing detailed information about module content. This is an issue in itself as the importance of sustainability skills is not being emphasised, but more in-depth research may be able to clarify this issue across curricula in education providers' courses and training curricula.

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