

Soft skills in the tourism industry of the future: a comparison between Italy and Spain

Laura Rienda, Lorena Ruiz-Fernández and Rosario Andreu

Abstract

Purpose – *The harmonisation of university degrees at the European level leads us to believe that training needs are addressed in the same way in different countries. However, the inevitable adaptation to the changing environment faced by companies requires a continuous adjustment between training and future needs, according to the sector. The aim of this paper is to compare two leading and culturally similar countries in the tourism sector in order to determine whether training is being provided homogeneously in tourism higher education and whether more specific training is desired to meet the needs of the sector in each country.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This study is part of the European Next Tourism Generation (NTG) Project, the first European partnership to foster a collaborative and productive relationship between the education system and the tourism industry. A mixed research study was conducted with the purpose of development, i.e. with the intention that the results of one method (qualitative) are used to assist the development of the other method (quantitative) and an exploratory sequential design. Both qualitative (29 interviews) and quantitative (509 tourism organisations) methods are used.*

Findings – *For a sector that has undergone significant changes in recent years, the results show the differences between countries around the current level of soft skills of employees, the level they will need to develop in the future and the gaps that those responsible for training future employees in the sector need to focus on for the 2030 horizon.*

Practical implications – *Several recommendations have emerged from this paper: to complement higher education, to achieve a better link between the business world and future workers; to provide much more incentives for international student mobility, which will allow students to develop intercultural soft skills before they enter the world of work, and to propose the creation of a social network to share, communicate and learn about resources specific to the tourism industry.*

Originality/value – *Since the Bologna Plan, higher education institutions have been tasked with preparing students for the world of work and developing the employability of graduates. The link between the professional world (companies) and the educational world (training centres) is a crucial factor in determining students' future skills and needs. When educational programmes respond to the needs of industry, the university can gain a competitive advantage. Therefore, some authors suggest the need for coordination and regular communication between business and training centres, thus improving the competitiveness of companies and reducing the gap that currently exists. In this paper, comparing two culturally similar countries with a recognised trajectory in the tourism sector, we will try to observe this gap and propose interesting options for the future of the sector.*

Keywords *Soft skills, Higher education, Cross-cultural differences, Europe, Future skills, Training*

Paper type *Research paper*

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, the European model of university management was considered to be ineffective because it did not succeed in applying the knowledge generated in the productive process (Seixas et al., 2016). University and research institutions in the United States and in some

Asian countries such as China and South Korea were attracting greater investment and, consequently, a greater number of students and researchers interested in developing their activities there. In order to regain its central and strategic position in the production and dissemination of knowledge, which it had held since the emergence of the modern university, Europe revitalised its higher education by creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Although initially only France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom participated (Sorbonne Declaration in 1998), in 1999 other European countries joined and the Bologna Declaration was signed (Salaburu *et al.*, 2011) in which it was agreed to develop a EHEA by 2010 (Pagani, 2002).

The European Union (EU) began developing convergence processes in economic aspects that today extend to different areas, including education. The student mobility programmes in higher education (currently Erasmus+) discovered the need to develop a system of equivalences and recognition of studies. Thus, the Sorbonne Declaration proposes the need to promote convergence between national higher education systems at the European level.

In addition, these mobility programmes are seen as a key instrument for developing a European Education Area (EEA) and supporting strategic European cooperation in the field of education and training. The main objectives pursued are (European Commission, 2023):

1. Promote educational mobility of individuals and groups, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of education and training;
2. Promote mobility in non-formal and informal learning and active participation amongst young people, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the youth field;
3. Promote educational mobility of staff in the field of sport, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of sport organisations and policies.

This international model and the creation of a common space, reinforcing European higher education, propose a more homogeneous model, whose guidelines are applied to the different higher education policies in the world (Seixas *et al.*, 2016). The consideration of the teacher–student relationship, as well as the importance of the excellence of the teaching staff, acquires greater prominence with the creation of the EHEA.

One of the most important new features of the Bologna Plan was the commitment to a competence acquisition model. There was a shift “from teaching focused on the teacher and the transmission of a series of academic subjects that are disconnected, abstract and decontextualised, to teaching focused on students and their process of acquiring generic and specific competences throughout their degree” (López, 2011). The novelty lies in the adoption of a competences model to the detriment of a content-centred model (Seixas *et al.*, 2016), so universities must focus on producing highly qualified students and, therefore, competent workers (Callejas Albiñana *et al.*, 2022).

Since the Bologna Plan, higher education institutions have been tasked with preparing students for the world of work and developing the employability of graduates (Suleman, 2018). The link between the professional world (companies) and the educational world (training centres) is a crucial factor in determining students' future skills and needs (Queiruga *et al.*, 2022). When educational programmes respond to the needs of industry, the university can gain a competitive advantage (Lo, 2005). Therefore, some authors suggest the need for coordination and regular communication between business and training centres, thus improving the competitiveness of companies and reducing the gap that currently exists (Blesia *et al.*, 2021; D'Souza *et al.*, 2022).

In the tourism sector, one of the sectors that has undergone the most changes in recent years, soft skills have the most direct impact on the customer and their perception of the service received (Nedry, 2016). In this way, this type of skill has a decisive impact on the results of tourism companies (Wesley *et al.*, 2017). That is why this study puts the focus on soft skills, which enable holistic development by enhancing learners' attitudes, values, beliefs, motivation, desires, feelings,

willingness to learn, willingness to share and adopt new ideas and inculcate future-oriented thinking (Pandey and Pandey, 2015).

Focussing on soft skills, the aim of this paper is to compare two leading and culturally similar countries in the tourism sector, in order to determine the future needs in each country. The study will test whether these needs are homogeneous or whether training should be adapted country by country to meet them in the future. As a result of this main objective, this paper poses the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the main current soft skills in the tourism sector in two leading European tourism countries? Are they the same for Italy and Spain?
- RQ2. What are the future skill needs most valued by tourism companies? Do these skills differ between Italy and Spain?
- RQ3. In view of the future needs of both countries, can soft skills training be homogeneous or should it incorporate country-specific elements?

2. Literature review

2.1 Soft skills: the tourism sector

As Heckman and Corbin (2016) point out, a distinction is sometimes made between capabilities, which are more linked to basic education and skills, which have to do with training. Skills are more generic and can be transferred to different contexts or situations. However, when talking about skills, the training activities developed in each country take centre stage. In this sense, higher education providers must adapt and respond to the demands of the labour market (Suleman, 2018).

Also, technical skills were traditionally considered essential for the development of any job. However, the current environment leads to consider other skills, soft skills, which allow workers to better perform their tasks (Wesley *et al.*, 2017). These soft skills are defined by Pandey and Pandey (2015) as “that combination of personal qualities, interpersonal skills and additional knowledge/skills”. According to these same authors, these soft skills complement academic intelligence or cognitive abilities, with human understanding of problems (emotional intelligence).

These soft skills will be 22% more in demand by 2030, as pointed out by a McKinsey study (2018). Moreover, in an increasingly data-driven economy, soft skills such as teamwork and communication will be in high demand (Claxton *et al.*, 2016).

As Succi and Canovi (2020) rightly point out in their study, many EU and European Commission documents, as well as human resources experts, highlight that soft skills are closely related to employability, particularly for young people. Some authors, such as Branine (2008), also point out that the labour market values and looks for more person-oriented rather than job-oriented skills, i.e. attitude, personality and transferable skills.

In the tourism sector, these skills come to the forefront as they enable the creation of a positive customer experience (Wesley *et al.*, 2017). Being unable to interpret the cultural signals of the customer is often a critical factor in failing to deliver a high level of service (Caruana and Mcpherson, 2015).

In this sector, there are currently different challenges, such as the increasing digitisation of the industry and the development of sustainable destinations, which raises the possibility of a significant skills gap between the current workforce and the future needs of the industry (Ferrer-Roca *et al.*, 2021; Carlisle *et al.*, 2023). As Ring *et al.* (2009) point out, graduates need to be prepared for a changing environment because, at the time of training, it is difficult to predict future industry needs or levels of complexity. This implies that students have to be educated to be analytical and, at the same time, able to use creative and new ways of thinking to solve problems and adapt easily to change. This is where these soft skills come into their own today.

2.2 Influence of national culture on higher education

Some authors identify differences between countries in terms of skills development ([Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008](#); [Breton, 2023](#)). Nevertheless, the EU supports and complements member states' actions, in accordance with Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. Whilst fully respecting member states' responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems, the EEA is based on a shared vision: by 2025, everyone should have access to quality education and training in a genuine common European learning area. Both students and teachers should be able to move easily between the education systems of different member states, whilst a culture of lifelong learning should become the norm ([EU, 2023](#)).

Notwithstanding the above, some authors argue that the culture of the country has an important influence on the development of certain skills ([Da'as, 2017](#)). That is, cultural values at the national level can impact on training and be decisive for graduates of tourism-related studies ([Caruana and Mcpherson, 2015](#)).

Considering that the country can develop and enhance certain skills, the international mobility that the EHEA launched years ago with the aim of increasing students' international experiences stands out. The Erasmus + programme, created by the European Commission, enables cooperation and mobility in higher education by promoting interculturality ([Fernández-Sanz et al., 2017](#)). This is why it can be a key condition for acquiring live experience for the professional and personal development of graduates, future employees in the tourism and hospitality sector.

3. Method

This study is part of the European Next Tourism Generation (NTG) Project, the first European partnership to foster a collaborative and productive relationship between the education system and the tourism industry.

The NTG Project approach, modules and learning methods will be integrated into the current EEA and the tourism industry itself, providing a benchmark, tools and best practices for green and social competences to support sustainable development and digital and technological innovation within the operations of five sub-sectors: Destination management, Food and beverage, Tourist attractions, Travel agencies and Tour operators, and Accommodation.

Different multidisciplinary partners make up this alliance: 7 industrial partners and representatives of the tourism sector, 6 universities and Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS). Partners from 8 EU countries (Italy, UK, Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Netherlands, Germany and Ireland).

In order to answer the RQs, we have focused on one type of skills, soft skills, and on two countries, Italy and Spain.

3.1 Sample and tools used

Given that the general objective of the study is to find out whether the gap in terms of current and future skills in the sector can be filled by homogeneous training provided in tourism degrees at the European level, it was thought appropriate to focus the research on the two leading countries in terms of tourism activity and with a similar Mediterranean culture. According to the latest data obtained by the World Tourism Organisation, Italy and Spain occupy second and fourth place respectively in terms of European tourist arrivals and third and fifth place respectively if we take data at the world level ([WTO, 2021](#)). This shows the importance of focussing on these two major world powers in this industry. Furthermore, if we compare the dimensions of national culture developed by [Hofstede et al. \(2010\)](#), both countries present similar values in the different dimensions.

A mixed research study was conducted with the purpose of development, i.e. with the intention that the results of one method (qualitative) are used to assist the development of the other method

(quantitative); and an exploratory sequential design. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The two methods are not mutually exclusive, but allow a better approximation of the phenomenon to be studied, with the use of these methods being common in areas such as education or health sciences, amongst others (Tari Guilló *et al.*, 2017). The use of these two methods together allows for a number of advantages (Truong *et al.*, 2020), in particular, for the purpose of development the main advantage lies in the fact that one of the methods helps to improve the subsequent execution of another method. In this case, the integration is carried out with the construction strategy so that the results of the first qualitative phase were used to develop the instrument for the second quantitative phase (semi-structured questionnaire). This strategy allows the questionnaire to be relevant to the specific context in which it is used, especially when the first qualitative phase is conducted with a sample of participants who also belong to the target population of the quantitative phase (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

3.1.1 Qualitative study. The first phase focused on the qualitative study. It started with structured interviews, with the above-mentioned questions, of about 45 min on average. The interviewer was part of the NTG alliance as a partner and collected relevant information on soft skills from a script that helped to collect this information. There were 29 interviews with companies located in Italy and 35 interviews with companies located in Spain.

3.1.2 Quantitative study. Regarding the quantitative study, the different organisations responded to a questionnaire sent online, through the Qualtrics programme, between January and June 2019. This questionnaire was developed in English and subsequently translated into the native language of each country. Finally, the level of each skill was measured on five-point Likert scales, from a value of 1 (when the skill is lacking) to a value of 5 (fully developed skill). The use of Likert scales allows for simplicity in displaying the results, and respondents are not forced to express one opinion or the other, but this type of question allows the participant to be neutral and concise (Carlisle *et al.*, 2021; Alhassan *et al.*, 2022). A total of 509 tourism organisations from the 5 sub-sectors studied participated (370 from Italy and 139 from Spain).

3.2 Procedure

3.2.1 Qualitative phase. The interviews identified key themes regarding current and future levels of soft skills. The managers were asked about: (1) the current level of competence/skills of their organisation's employees with respect to their personal, communication and cultural and diversity skills and (2) the future level of competence/skills that their employees should have in 2030. Based on the managers' responses, the teams of the 14 alliance members developed a list of key soft skills. In doing so, the experts relied on a review of existing literature and the responses from this qualitative study.

3.2.2 Quantitative phase. Several analytical techniques were used in this phase. First, to examine differences in the level of soft skills attained or possessed by tourism workers in the two countries analysed, and to determine whether future needs differ, a comparison of means was made using parametric and non-parametric statistical tests, as appropriate. Second, mean comparisons were also carried out, this time for paired samples, in order to find the gap between current skills and future needs, both at a general level and independently by country. The analyses were carried out with the SPSS v.28 statistical package.

4. Results

4.1 Qualitative results

In the qualitative phase, we can observe the distribution of the 64 interviews carried out in Italy and Spain for each sub-sector. A large part of these interviews (more than 40% of the total) focused on staff in the accommodation sub-sector in both Italy and Spain, as it is the most relevant sub-sector in the field of study. Some descriptive data of the sample analysed in this phase are presented below (Table 1).

Table 1 Sample description: Qualitative study (interviews)

| Sub-sector | Country | |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| | <i>Italy</i> | <i>Spain</i> |
| Destination management | 5 | 6 |
| Food and beverage | 5 | 7 |
| Tourism attractions | 2 | 3 |
| Travel agents/Tour operators | 3 | 3 |
| Accommodation | 14 | 16 |
| Total | 29 | 35 |

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Through the interviews with the different managers a list of skills was developed. The answers to different questions allowed for the development of different items (social skills) grouped under three groups: personal (8 items), communication and cultural (7 items) and attention to diversity (5 items). These groups were also identified in previous studies (Succi, 2019; Weber *et al.*, 2019). These items were subsequently used in the second phase (quantitative study) (Carlisle *et al.*, 2022).

4.2 Quantitative results

Regarding the quantitative phase, we also observed the distribution of the 509 questionnaires answered in Italy and Spain by sub-sector. Again, around 50% of the responses were received from the accommodation sub-sector in both Italy and Spain. This is, therefore, the most represented sub-sector in our sample, as opposed to the Travel Agencies and Tour Operators sub-sector from which we received only 26 questionnaires, being the least represented in this study (Table 2). However, taking into account the representativeness of the general tourism population, this distribution is appropriate.

Based on the survey results, it is also interesting to show the ranking of soft skills present in the tourism industry, according to the country. In this way, we can observe the soft skills that are currently developed in tourism companies in Italy and Spain, allowing us to compare and identify whether they are the same or different. The following table shows the significant differences when comparing the two countries (Table 3).

To calculate these differences, we first analysed the distribution of respondents' answers by examining the kurtosis and asymmetry. Next, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and Levene's test were performed for the two samples to see if they were normally distributed and if equal variances are assumed. With these results, the difference of means for the sample of Italian and Spanish companies was performed using parametric (Student's *t*-test) and non-parametric (Mann–Whitney U) tests, depending on whether the sample followed normality.

As we observe in Table 3, the social skills most present in Italian tourism companies are ethical behaviour and respect, willingness to learn and customer orientation; all skills categorised as personal skills. This same category, personal skills, also turns out to be a priority in the case of Spain. Specifically, customer orientation, ethical conduct and respect and promoting a positive work environment stand out. At a general level, the last positions of the ranking are for the social skills of attention to diversity in both cases, except for the skill related to gender equality, which is in the 6th position of the ranking only for Spain.

As for the mean differences between the skill levels of the professionals in each country, in all skill categories we find significant and positive differences. As can be seen, Italian employers perceive a higher level of social skills in their employees than Spanish employers. The main differences by category are found in creativity, cultural awareness and expression and attention to the adaptation of infrastructures for the disabled, where the average level of skills of Italian professionals is significantly higher than that of Spanish professionals in the tourism sector.

Table 2 Sample description: Quantitative study (questionnaire)

| Sub-sector | Country | |
|------------------------------|---------|-------|
| | Italy | Spain |
| Destination management | 31 | 22 |
| Food and beverage | 61 | 15 |
| Tourism attractions | 58 | 27 |
| Travel agents/Tour operators | 19 | 7 |
| Accommodation | 201 | 68 |
| Total | 370 | 139 |

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Table 3 Ranking and differences found between the current soft skills most pointed out by companies in the tourism sector (Italy and Spain)

| Actual skills | Italy | | | Spain | | | Difference |
|--|-------|-----------------|---------------------|-------|-----------------|---------------------|------------|
| | Media | General ranking | Ranking by category | Media | General ranking | Ranking by category | |
| <i>Personal</i> | | | | | | | |
| Problem solving | 3.86 | 14 | 8 | 3.74 | 11 | 7 | 0.12 |
| Initiative and commitment | 4.08 | 5 | 5 | 3.81 | 7 | 5 | 0.27** |
| Customer orientation | 4.17 | 3 | 3 | 4.14 | 1 | 1 | 0.03 |
| Ethic conducts and respect | 4.31 | 1 | 1 | 4.07 | 2 | 2 | 0.24** |
| Willingness to change | 4.01 | 9 | 7 | 3.81 | 7 | 5 | 0.20* |
| Promoting a positive work environment | 4.11 | 4 | 4 | 3.96 | 3 | 3 | 0.15* |
| Creativity | 4.03 | 8 | 6 | 3.68 | 12 | 8 | 0.35*** |
| Willingness to learn | 4.19 | 2 | 2 | 3.91 | 4 | 4 | 0.28* |
| <i>Communication and cultural</i> | | | | | | | |
| Written communication | 3.94 | 12 | 5 | 3.77 | 9 | 2 | 0.17* |
| Oral communication | 4.05 | 7 | 2 | 3.76 | 10 | 3 | 0.29*** |
| Active listening | 4.00 | 10 | 3 | 3.55 | 16 | 7 | 0.45*** |
| Cultural awareness and expression | 3.76 | 16 | 6 | 3.49 | 17 | 6 | 0.27** |
| Awareness of local customs | 4.06 | 6 | 1 | 3.65 | 14 | 5 | 0.41*** |
| Ability to speak foreign languages | 3.52 | 19 | 7 | 3.67 | 13 | 4 | -0.15 |
| Intercultural host-guest understanding and respect | 3.96 | 11 | 4 | 3.87 | 5 | 1 | 0.09 |
| <i>Diversity</i> | | | | | | | |
| Gender equality | 3.87 | 13 | 1 | 3.84 | 6 | 1 | 0.03 |
| Age-related accessibility | 3.82 | 15 | 2 | 3.63 | 15 | 2 | 0.19* |
| Diets and allergy need | 3.64 | 18 | 4 | 3.46 | 18 | 3 | 0.18 |
| Disabilities and appropriate infrastructures | 3.76 | 16 | 3 | 3.27 | 20 | 5 | 0.49*** |
| Diversity in religious beliefs | 3.51 | 20 | 5 | 3.35 | 19 | 4 | 0.16 |

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.010$; * $p < 0.5$; † < 0.10

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Similarly, using the same procedure, we ranked the skills that these two countries consider most important for the year 2030, i.e. what the future needs in the tourism industry will be, analysing the differences we found between the two countries (Table 4). This analysis allows us to observe whether the most in-demand soft skills in the future will differ depending on the country, taking the 2030 horizon as a reference.

We can observe that, once again, future needs are mostly focused on personal skills, both for Italy and Spain. Amongst the needs that will be most in demand are the willingness to learn, customer orientation, ethical conduct and respect, as well as promoting a positive working environment, for Italy. In the case of Spain, the most in demand will be customer orientation, ethical conduct and respect, promoting a positive work environment and intercultural understanding and respect for the tourist, the latter a skill related to communication and culture. Once again, the soft skills of attention to diversity are the least highlighted, although in the case of Spain, the skill related to gender equality is placed in a very important position, specifically in 6th position. It is a skill that Spanish workers in the sector already have and, according to employers, will continue to be essential for the year 2030.

Regarding the mean differences in future soft skills needs between the two countries, positive and significant differences are also found in many of the soft skills. Willingness to learn, from the personal skills; knowledge of local customs, from the communication and cultural skills; and appropriate infrastructure for disabled people, from the diversity skills, show the biggest differences. These results allow us to observe that there are significant average differences in the perception of future social skills needs between Spain and Italy. As can be seen, these differences reveal a greater future importance of these skills for Italian employers compared to Spanish ones.

These results are complemented by the study of the gaps when we compare the existing skills with the future needs of employers in the sector, i.e. we observe the gap that will exist in the social skills of future graduates in the tourism sector. As can be seen in Annex 1, there are again differences between countries. If we focus on personal soft skills (Figure A1), in general terms there are no significant gaps, i.e. the skills considered most necessary already have a high score. However, if we analyse these gaps by country, we see that in Italy there is a gap in skills related to creativity and willingness to change, whilst in Spain the gap is related to promoting a positive work environment. This means that although these skills are considered necessary for the 2030 horizon, the average level of current workers is not high enough (it is below the general average level). Training efforts should be focused on these skills in order to be able to meet the future needs detected by employers, emphasising the differences that appear between these two European countries.

If we now turn to the communication and cultural soft skills (Figure A2), for the whole sample, it seems that the skills that will be most in demand are those that are currently most developed, hence many are located in the upper right quadrant of the figure. In addition, some skills that are currently highly developed, e.g. written communication skills, seem not to be as important in the future, or at least less important than other soft skills according to the perception of employers in the sector (as they are below the general average value, blue line indicated). Again, there is a gap to be taken into account when separating the sample between the two countries. In the case of Italy, the skill related to cultural awareness and expression is underdeveloped and will be considered important in the coming years (its value is above the overall average, blue line). However, in terms of these communication and cultural skills, no major differences are observed in Spain between current training and the most important skills for the 2030 horizon. The skills that will be most in demand in the 2030 horizon are those that already have a level above the general average.

Finally, if we delve deeper into the skills of attention to diversity (Figure A3), those related to attention to adequate infrastructures for the disabled stand out, which has a very low current value and employers consider that it may be an important and necessary skill in the future. However, when we analyse the sample by country independently, no significant gaps are observed. One could highlight the attention to dietary or allergic needs, in the Italian case, or the skills focused on accessibility by age, in the Spanish case; although in both cases the gap is not very pronounced. In

Table 4 Ranking and differences found between the soft skills most in demand by companies in the tourism sector for the year 2030 (Italy and Spain)

| Future skills | Italy | | | Spain | | | Difference |
|--|-------|-----------------|---------------------|-------|-----------------|---------------------|------------|
| | Media | General ranking | Ranking by category | Media | General ranking | Ranking by category | |
| <i>Personal</i> | | | | | | | |
| Problem solving | 4.31 | 14 | 8 | 4.22 | 9 | 5 | 0.09† |
| Initiative and commitment | 4.41 | 7 | 6 | 4.25 | 6 | 4 | 0.16* |
| Customer orientation | 4.48 | 2 | 2 | 4.58 | 1 | 1 | -0.10 |
| Ethic conducts and respect | 4.48 | 2 | 2 | 4.51 | 2 | 2 | -0.03 |
| Willingness to change | 4.41 | 7 | 6 | 4.14 | 15 | 7 | 0.27** |
| Promoting a positive work | 4.46 | 4 | 4 | 4.42 | 3 | 3 | 0.04 |
| Creativity | 4.45 | 5 | 5 | 4.14 | 15 | 7 | 0.31** |
| Willingness to learn | 4.52 | 1 | 1 | 4.20 | 11 | 6 | 0.32*** |
| <i>Communication and cultural</i> | | | | | | | |
| Written communication | 4.32 | 13 | 6 | 4.20 | 11 | 5 | 0.12 |
| Oral communication | 4.38 | 9 | 2 | 4.27 | 5 | 2 | 0.11 |
| Active listening | 4.38 | 9 | 2 | 4.24 | 8 | 3 | 0.14 |
| Cultural awareness and expression | 4.33 | 12 | 5 | 4.08 | 17 | 7 | 0.25*** |
| Awareness of local customs | 4.45 | 5 | 1 | 4.18 | 13 | 6 | 0.27*** |
| Ability to speak foreign languages | 4.23 | 18 | 7 | 4.22 | 9 | 4 | 0.01 |
| Intercultural host-guest understanding and respect | 4.38 | 9 | 2 | 4.35 | 4 | 1 | 0.03 |
| <i>Diversity</i> | | | | | | | |
| Gender equality | 4.27 | 16 | 2 | 4.25 | 6 | 1 | 0.02 |
| Age-related accessibility | 4.29 | 15 | 1 | 4.15 | 14 | 2 | 0.14† |
| Diets and allergy need | 4.16 | 19 | 4 | 4.08 | 17 | 3 | 0.08 |
| Disabilities and appropriate infrastructures | 4.26 | 17 | 3 | 3.97 | 19 | 4 | 0.29*** |
| Diversity in religious beliefs | 4.09 | 20 | 5 | 3.86 | 20 | 5 | 0.23* |

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.010$; * $p < 0.5$; † < 0.10
Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

both cases the skills are considered necessary in the future (taking a value close to the average) and the perceived level of ability is also close to the average (3.67 out of 5 points).

5. Discussion and conclusions

One of the ever-present challenges at the economic level is the demand by companies for a better adjustment of training to business needs. The employability of graduates is therefore one of the main institutional missions of higher education (Suleman, 2018).

This is also the case in the tourism sector, a sector where the final outcome is highly conditioned by who serves the tourist and where soft skills are particularly important (Wesley et al., 2017). Therefore, in this paper we have compared the soft skills developed in the tourism industry, as well

as the perceived needs for the future, of two leading tourism countries in Europe and the world, Italy and Spain.

For this purpose, two complementary methodologies were used. Firstly, based on a qualitative study of different leading actors in the sector, key soft skills were identified and divided into three groups: personal, communication and cultural and attention to diversity. Secondly, with the skills identified, and using a quantitative methodology, a questionnaire was sent to companies in the tourism sector in Italy and Spain.

Based on the perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs, the main current soft skills in the tourism sector in two leading European tourism countries were reflected (R1). There are differences in the personal social, communication and cultural skills and in the attention to diversity that workers in the tourism sector currently have. The greatest difference is found in the skills related to attention to diversity, specifically with infrastructures for the disabled, followed by active listening or knowledge of local cultures, both communication and cultural skills. All these differences are positive, indicating that Italian employers perceive that workers in the sector have a higher average level in these skills. These differences in the key skills of the tourism industry in both countries can be explained by the delay in the implementation of tourism studies in Spain compared to Italy. It was not until 1996 that Spain began to offer these studies at university level, despite the importance of this industry in the country, whilst Italy did so some 70 years earlier (Ceballos Hernández *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, these results provide insight into employer satisfaction, which would be an indicator of the quality of higher education, particularly in relation to the “fitness for purpose” of the training (Suleman, 2018).

Moreover, a ranking of the future skills most valued by Italian and Spanish companies in the tourism sector has been drawn up (R2). This will allow students and graduates to know the preference of employers in the sector in each country, in order to be able to adapt professionally to this reality in the near future. Different perceptions between Italian and Spanish employers were detected, especially in the needs related to the skills of willingness to learn or creativity, both personal soft skills (finding very remarkable and significant differences). Again, although Italian employers perceive that their employees are more trained in these aspects, they also believe that in the future they will be of great importance, and therefore, the difference is positive.

At this point, different gaps were highlighted for Italy (willingness to learn, customer orientation, ethical behaviour and respect, as well as promotion of a positive working environment) and Spain (customer orientation, ethical behaviour and respect, promotion of a positive working environment and intercultural understanding and respect for the tourist). In addition, the importance attached by industry managers to these skills also differed between the two countries. In a sector where the service is offered at the place where the activity is carried out, it is necessary for employees to offer and meet the needs demanded at the place where the activity is being developed.

The existence of differences in the gaps identified by the companies of both countries leads us to reflect on the validity of a homogeneous higher education at the European level or whether there are aspects that are more specific to the country and therefore entail different training needs (R3). In this way, given the existence of differences in the needs for certain skills, teachers would have to complement this more homogeneous higher education with other more specific training in order to achieve a better future link between company-university at a national level. In agreement with other authors, this paper emphasises that it is crucial that there be regular communication between companies and training centres and that representatives of the tourism industry participate in the process (Regalado Pezúa and Montoya, 2012; Blesia *et al.*, 2021; D’Souza *et al.*, 2022). Curricula and delivery methods should be updated, upgraded and refreshed to address the new industry skills and requirements (Sigala, 2021).

In the search to reduce these differences and achieve a better fit with industry requirements, adapting to each country, some ideas arise. Firstly, university training could be complemented with other more specific additional training such as seminars, internships, etc., to achieve a better link between the business world and future workers. Secondly, the educational institutions should

provide much more incentives for international student mobility (S raphin and Mansfield, 2017). Li and Wang (2023) stated that cross-cultural learning is an essential element of skills formation. In addition, mobility can be seen as an opportunity for personal growth, acquiring new educational and professional aspirations (Ansch tz and Mazzucato, 2023). In this way, cross-cultural training can be envisaged, so that university programmes should also address and develop intercultural soft skills before students enter the world of work. The absence of these skills could clearly hinder the promotion of effective international mobility, which is of great importance in a sector as global as tourism. Thirdly, the implementation of an innovative social network to benefit academics, students and tourism companies in the two countries. As S raphin and Mansfield (2017) point out, it could be interesting to create a platform to enable academics to share good practice and resources, students to share their experience and tourism companies to meet and communicate their needs.

One of the limitations of the study relates to the countries on which it has focused. Limiting the study to two countries may reduce the generalisability of the results obtained. However, it is also true that by focussing on needs, it may be more interesting to know what is happening in specific destinations and to expand the study at a later stage. It could also be interesting to increase the number of sectors included. Although the tourism sector has been one of the most affected in recent years, due to the incessant changes that have taken place in the environment, other sectors have also been affected, so the idea is to continue to expand this study.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Figure A1 Gaps in personal skills (skills present and needed for the year 2030)

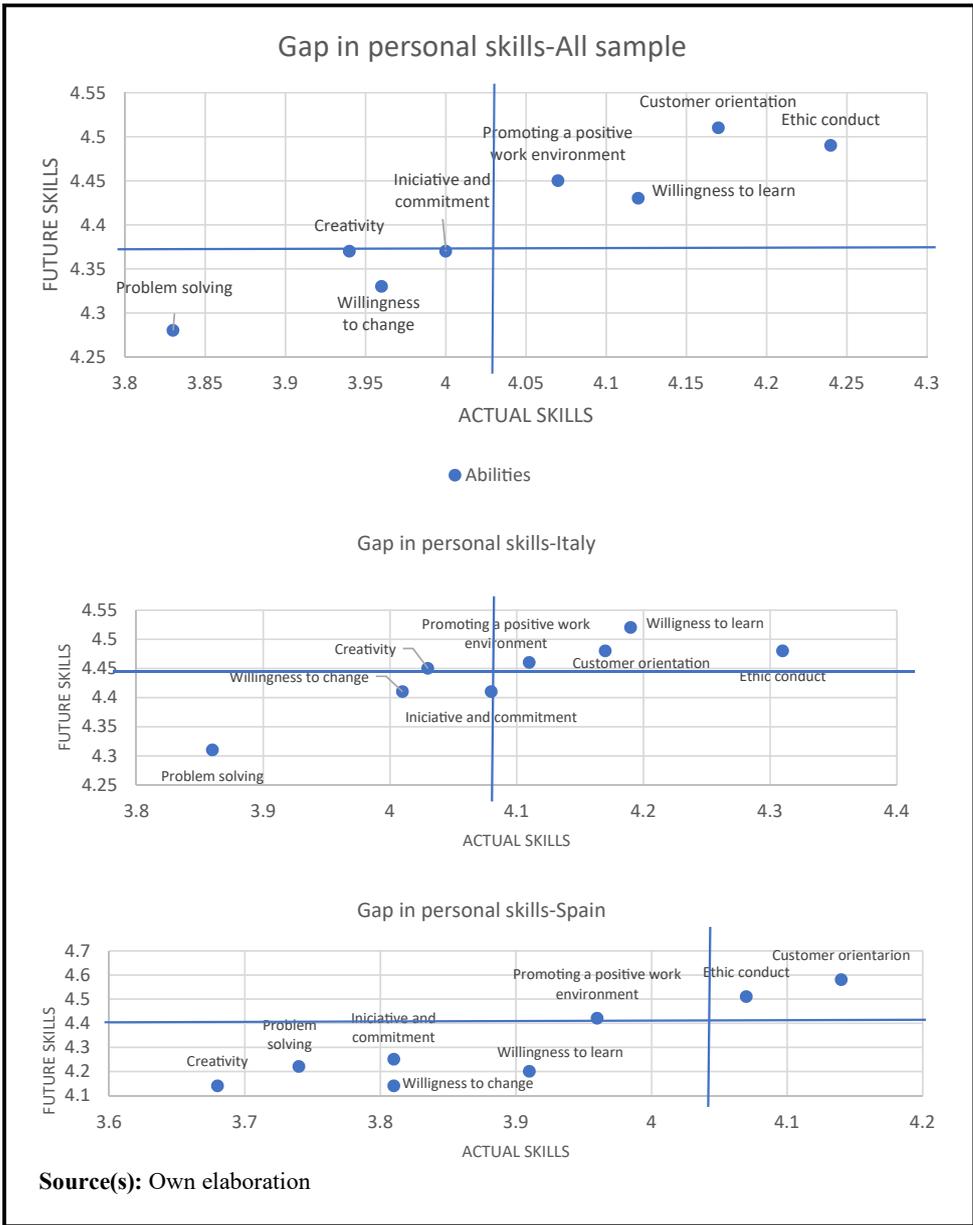


Figure A2 Gaps in communication and cultural skills (skills present and needed for the year 2030)

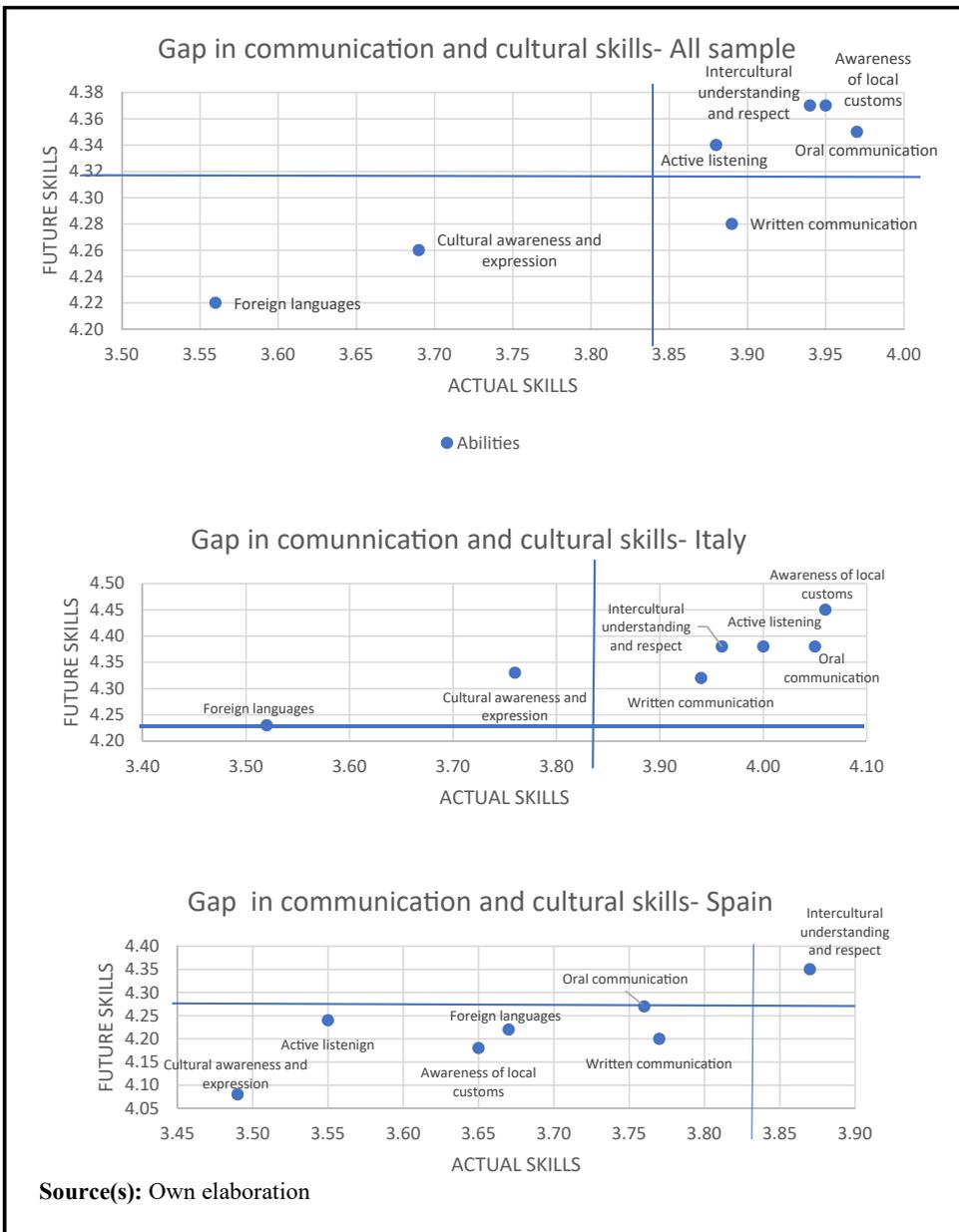
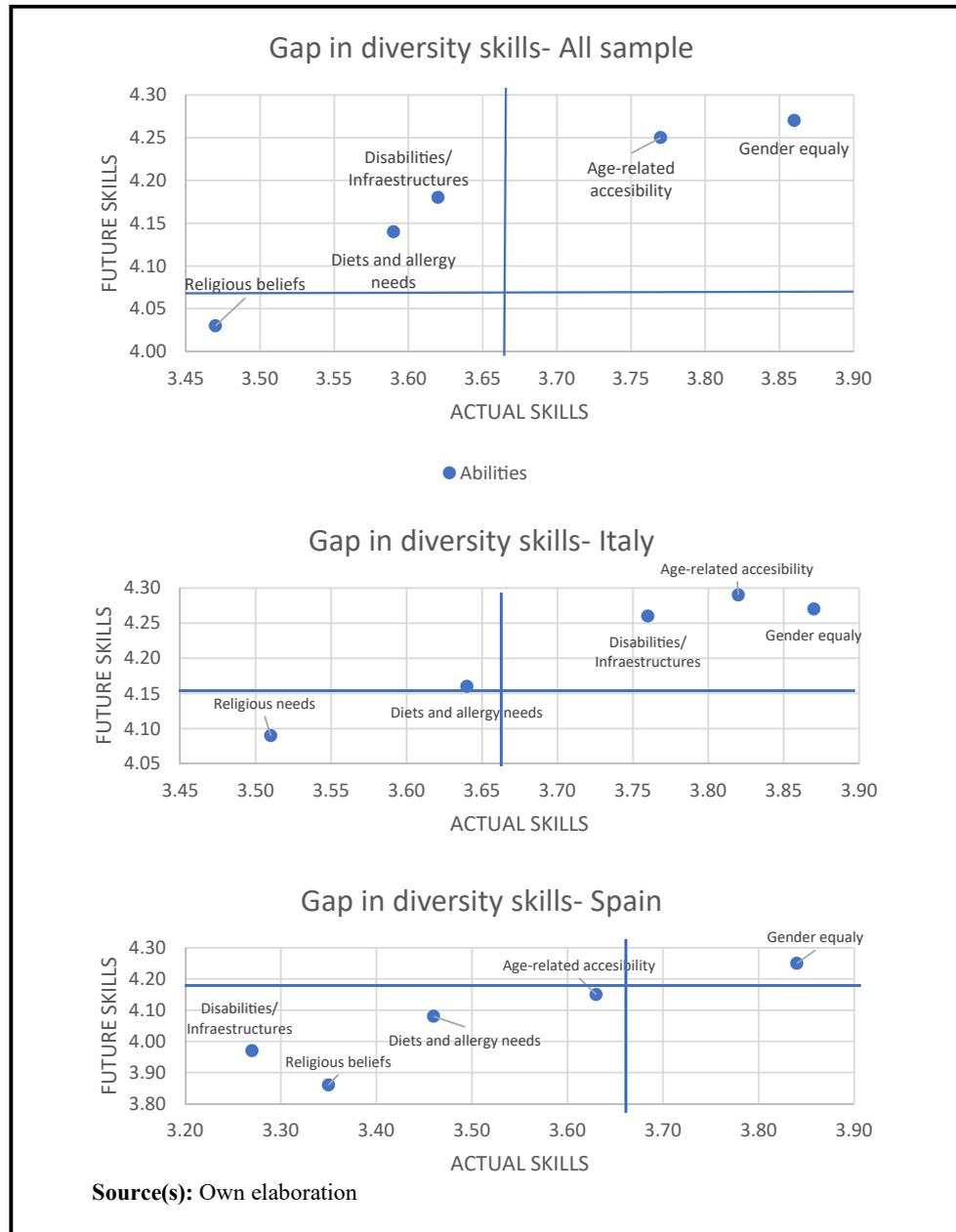


Figure A3 Gaps in diversity skills (skills present and needed for the year 2030)



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