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The Soft Skills Gap between Vocational Tourism Students and the Needs of the Hospitality Industry: Implications for Global Competitiveness

Ade Ela Pratiwi
STP AMPTA Yogyakarta
Corresponding Author: Ade Ela Pratiwi; keluargamuhtadi@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

The competitiveness of tourism human resources (HR) is largely determined by both technical competencies and the mastery of soft skills aligned with industry requirements. This study aims to analyze the soft skills gap among students of SMK Negeri 6 Semarang in relation to the needs of the hospitality industry and to formulate strategies for addressing the gap. The study employed a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, involving 103 Grade 12 Hospitality students and 12 industry respondents from six three- to five-star hotels, followed by in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and industry representatives. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Mann–Whitney U test, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal significant gaps across all seven dimensions of soft skills. The largest gaps were identified in critical thinking and problem-solving skills (0.85983), leadership and supervision (0.77265), and effective communication (0.66646). The qualitative findings indicate that these gaps are associated with learning processes that remain predominantly theoretical and insufficiently contextualized, suboptimal teacher competency development and role modeling, the absence of standardized soft skills assessment systems, and industry-based learning experiences and mentoring that require further strengthening. The findings imply the need to strengthen active and contextual learning, implement more practical and applicable soft skills assessment, enhance teacher competencies and role modeling, strengthen school–industry partnerships, and foster students' character development and mental readiness to reduce competency gaps and better align vocational education with industry requirements

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism and hospitality industry is a service sector that relies heavily on the quality of its human resources (HR), particularly because interactions between employees and tourists play a significant role in shaping visitor experiences and service quality (Ishak et al., 2025; Balillah et al., 2026). Human resources in the hospitality industry are expected to possess competencies demonstrated through technical skills, effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving abilities, adaptability, service orientation, responsibility, and leadership (Kokt, 2020; Marneros et al., 2020). Tourism workers operate in dynamic and culturally diverse work environments with increasingly competitive service standards, requiring them to possess a comprehensive range of competencies to meet workplace demands effectively.

The need for competent tourism workers is reflected in national policy through Minister of Manpower Decree No. 125 of 2024 concerning the Establishment of the Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (SKKNI) for the Hotel Sector, which serves as one of the national references for occupational competencies in the hospitality industry. The existence of competency standards within the vocational education context indicates that graduates of hospitality vocational schools are expected to possess competencies that are relevant to the characteristics and demands of actual industry workplaces. Vocational education is therefore expected to produce graduates who are capable of performing technical procedures while also demonstrating interpersonal and intrapersonal readiness to respond to workplace demands and changes in the industrial environment (Suparyati & Habsya, 2024; Mediatama, 2021).

However, current conditions indicate that the competencies developed within educational institutions are not yet fully aligned with those expected by industry. Previous studies on soft skills development among hospitality students in vocational high schools have shown that communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork are essential skills for students preparing to enter the tourism labor market (Wynda, 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2024). The soft skillsdevelopment gap in vocational education represents an important issue because learning processes take place in school environments that do not fully replicate the complexity of workplace situations in the industry (Rosba et al., 2025; Wrahatnolo, 2026). Differences between learning environments and actual workplaces may result in students possessing adequate technical abilities but lacking sufficient training in decision-making, problem-solving, guest communication, working under pressure, and adapting to unexpected situations.

SMK Negeri 6 Semarang, which offers a hospitality specialization and maintains partnerships with various three- to five-star hotels, faces challenges in developing students' soft skills. Vocational education programs have a direct relationship with workforce competency requirements in the hospitality sector; therefore, alignment between students' soft skills and industry needs is essential (Muttaqin et al., 2025; Sukmana et al., 2025). The students involved in this study were in the final stage of vocational education and had completed learning activities and industrial work placements relevant to their preparation for

entering the workforce. Their position at the end of the vocational education cycle makes them particularly relevant for assessing the extent to which their soft skills correspond to actual industry expectations.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the gap between the soft skills possessed by students of SMK Negeri 6 Semarang and the requirements of the hospitality industry, identify the perceptions of students, teachers, and industry representatives regarding priority soft skills, and formulate soft skills development strategies that can be integrated into vocational learning. This study employs a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design to combine quantitative measurement of competency gaps with an in-depth exploration of stakeholder perspectives through qualitative inquiry. This design is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between students' competency readiness, industry requirements, and the development of tourism and hospitality vocational education. The study is expected to contribute to the advancement of vocational tourism education by strengthening the alignment between school-based learning and the competency requirements of the hospitality industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft Skills in Tourism Human Resources

Soft skills refer to a set of non-technical abilities related to an individual's capacity to manage oneself, interact with others, and respond appropriately to various situations in the workplace (Poláková et al., 2023; Lamri & Lubart, 2023). In the tourism and hospitality industry, soft skills are particularly important because the service-oriented nature of the sector places employees in direct interaction with guests, colleagues, and other stakeholders with diverse backgrounds and needs. Technical skills therefore need to be complemented by communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, and professional behavioral competencies to ensure that services are delivered effectively.

The development of soft skills in vocational education can contribute to students' work readiness, as vocational education is fundamentally oriented toward producing graduates with competencies aligned with workplace requirements. However, soft skills in vocational learning processes often develop as an indirect outcome of learning activities rather than as competencies that are systematically and measurably developed. This condition may result in an imbalance between students' technical competencies and their interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities. Soft skills are an integral requirement for hospitality students because work in this sector involves adherence to standard operating procedures, handling guest complaints, responding to changing operational conditions, coordinating across departments, meeting service demands, and addressing various situations that require rapid and appropriate responses.

Dimensions of Soft Skills in The Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry requires seven dimensions of soft skills that represent the interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities needed in hotel work environments (Indrayani et al., 2025; Purnama & Komariah, 2025). The first dimension is effective communication, which refers to the ability to convey and receive information clearly and to establish appropriate interactions with guests and colleagues. Communication in the hospitality industry involves verbal communication, politeness, appropriate language use, active listening, and sensitivity to differences in guests' characteristics and cultural backgrounds.The second dimension is teamwork, which refers to an individual's ability to collaborate with others in achieving shared goals. Hotel operations involve extensive coordination among multiple departments and personnel, requiring employees to coordinate effectively, share responsibilities, respect the contributions of team members, and complete tasks collaboratively. The third dimension is customer service orientation, which involves the ability to understand guests' needs and provide services in accordance with professional standards. High-quality service requires customer orientation, empathy, friendliness, responsiveness, and the ability to address guests' needs and concerns effectively.

The fourth dimension is critical thinking and problem-solving, which refers to the ability to identify problems, analyze situations, consider alternative solutions, and determine appropriate courses of action. Hospitality employees must be able to exercise professional judgment when dealing with complaints, changes in operational conditions, and guests with specific or unexpected needs. The fifth dimension is adaptability and flexibility, which reflects an individual's ability to adjust to changes in situations, tasks, work environments, and customer characteristics. The dynamic nature of hospitality operations requires employees to respond effectively to changing circumstances and service demands. The sixth dimension is integrity and responsibility, which concerns an individual's consistency in performing tasks honestly, diligently, reliably, and responsibly. These qualities are essential for maintaining professional standards and ensuring that employees can be trusted to fulfill their assigned responsibilities. The seventh dimension is leadership and supervision, which involves the ability to provide direction, make decisions, coordinate work, and ensure that tasks are performed in accordance with established standards (Djadjuli, 2028; Arini et al., 2025).

Vocational Education and the Industry Competency Gap

A major challenge in vocational education is maintaining alignment between the competencies developed by educational institutions and those required by industry. In needs analysis, a competency gap refers to the difference between the level of competency required by industry and the actual level of competency possessed by prospective workers. Industry requirements represent the demand side, while students' mastery of soft skills represents the supply side. Schools and industry therefore have a strong relationship through the link and match concept, which is essential for reducing the gap between graduate competencies and workforce requirements.

The integration of technical competencies and soft skills can be facilitated through industrial work placements, problem-based learning, project-based learning, service-situation simulations, and the involvement of industry practitioners as learning resources (Mardizal, 2025; Waqif, 2024). Collaboration between schools and industry is necessary to provide practical learning environments, align competencies and learning experiences with workplace realities, introduce students to professional work culture, and ensure that assessment standards remain consistent with evolving industry requirements. Such collaboration can strengthen the transition from school-based learning to the workplace and contribute to the development of graduates who are technically competent while also demonstrating the interpersonal and intrapersonal capabilities required in the hospitality industry.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, consisting of three stages: quantitative, qualitative, and integration of findings. The quantitative stage involved 103 Grade 12 Hospitality studentsat SMK Negeri 6 Semarang, selected from a population of 139 students using proportionate stratified random sampling, as well as 12 respondents from six three- to five-star hotels. Data were collected using a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire measuring seven dimensions of soft skills.

Table 1. Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design

Stage	Data Sources	Data Collection Technique	Data Analysis
Quantitative	103 students; 12 industry respondents	5-point likert-scale questionnaire	Descriptive statistics, gap analysis, and Mann–Whitney U test
Qualitative	7 students; 6 teachers; 4 industry respondents	In-depth interviews	Thematic analysis
Integration	Quantitative and qualitative findings	Integration and interpretation	Combined interpretation

Source: Researchers (2026)

The qualitative stage involved 7 students, 6 teachers, and 4 industry informants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by the findings from the quantitative stage. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Mann–Whitney U test at a 5% significance level. The competency gap was calculated based on the difference between the level of soft skills required by the hospitality industry and the level of soft skills possessed by the students. The qualitative

findings were then used to explain and contextualize the quantitative results, particularly the dimensions in which the largest competency gaps were identified

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Soft Skills Gap between Students' Competencies and Industry Requirements

The quantitative analysis revealed a gap between the level of students' soft skills and the level required by the hospitality industry across all seven dimensions examined. The gap was calculated as the difference between the industry-required competency scores and the students' competency scores. The results of the Mann–Whitney U test showed significance values below 0.05 across all dimensions, indicating that the differences between students' current competency levels and industry requirements were statistically significant.

Table 2. Gap between Students' Soft Skills and Industry Requirements

Soft Skills Dimension	Students	Industry	Gap	Priority
Critical thinking and problem-solving	3,8277	4,6875	0,85983	Very High
Leadership and supervision	3,8107	4,5833	0,77265	Very High
Effective communication	4,1044	4,7708	0,66646	Very High
Adaptability and flexibility	4,0291	4,6458	0,61671	High
Teamwork	4,2063	4,8125	0,60619	High
Guest service	4,3131	4,8125	0,49939	High
Integrity and responsibility	4,3447	4,8333	0,48867	High

Source: Processed Research Data (2026)

The data analysis demonstrates that gaps exist across all seven soft skills dimensions, with the magnitude of the gaps indicating different levels of priority. The three dimensions with the largest gaps are critical thinking and problem-solving (0.85983), leadership and supervision (0.77265), and effective communication (0.66646). The smallest gaps are found in integrity and responsibility (0.48867) and guest service (0.49939). The largest gap in critical thinking and problem-solving indicates that students have not yet fully achieved the level of competency expected by the industry when dealing with situations requiring analysis, decision-making, and initiative. This issue warrants particular attention because hotel work does not always involve situations that can be addressed through routine procedures. Hospitality employees must be able to identify problems, evaluate alternative courses of action, and make appropriate decisions. This finding reinforces the view that critical thinking and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world situations are important components of work

readiness among vocational education graduates (Utari et al., 2026; Sunardi & Hasanuddin, 2019).

The second-largest gap occurs in leadership and supervision (0.77265). The students' competency score of 3.8107 remains below the industry requirement of 4.5833. This condition indicates that students have limited experience in assuming leadership roles, providing direction, coordinating activities, and demonstrating initiative. This finding is consistent with studies indicating that leadership is an essential soft skill in the hospitality industry but remains insufficiently developed among newly graduated workers (Akbar et al., 2025; Yudhaputri, 2020).

The third-largest gap is found in effective communication (0.66646). Although the students' score is relatively higher than those of the two previously discussed dimensions, the industry requirement reaches 4.7708, resulting in a substantial gap. This condition suggests that students' basic communication abilities do not yet fully meet the demands of professional communication in hospitality workplaces. Effective communication in this context extends beyond the ability to convey information and includes professional language use, active listening, responsiveness, and the ability to communicate appropriately with guests and colleagues in diverse situations.

A further finding emerges from the comparison between interpersonal and intrapersonal soft skills. The average gap in intrapersonal soft skills is 0.65507, which is higher than the average gap in interpersonal soft skills at 0.63617. This finding suggests that although students face challenges in interacting with others, the more pronounced gaps are associated with internal competencies, particularly critical thinking, self-management, and readiness to make decisions. These findings indicate that soft skills development should not be limited to communication and service competencies but should also strengthen internal capabilities that serve as the foundation for professional behavior (Costa & Cipolla, 2025; Sharma, 2021).

Qualitative Exploration of Priority Soft Skills

The quantitative findings were subsequently explored in greater depth through interviews with students, teachers, and industry representatives. The interviews focused on the three dimensions with the largest competency gaps: critical thinking and problem-solving, leadership and supervision, and effective communication. The selection of these three dimensions reflects an important characteristic of the sequential explanatory design, in which quantitative findings are used to determine and guide the focus of subsequent qualitative exploration.

Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

The dimension of critical thinking and problem-solving demonstrates the highest level of competency gaps. Interview findings reveal a relatively consistent pattern across the three groups of informants. Students reported that they tended to panic, become confused, fear making mistakes, and rely on instructions when confronted with situations requiring decision-making.

Teachers also observed that students tended to be passive and had difficulty generating ideas, while industry representatives identified limited initiative, insufficient experience, and inadequate ability to make quick decisions.

These findings indicate that weaknesses in critical thinking are not merely individual shortcomings among students, as the learning environment also contributes to shaping these patterns. Student interviews revealed that learning activities remain predominantly theoretical, the cases presented are not yet fully relevant to actual industry conditions, and opportunities for simulation and practical learning remain limited. Teachers further emphasized that the integration of soft skills into the curriculum has not been optimal and that its implementation remains highly dependent on individual teachers. The gap in critical thinking can therefore be understood as a consequence of an imbalance between procedural learning experiences and the situational demands of the hospitality industry. Students who are more frequently exposed to instructions and assignments based on predetermined procedures have fewer opportunities to practice analyzing problems, making decisions, and taking responsibility for their choices.

Leadership and Supervision

The qualitative findings indicate that students still lack confidence in taking leadership roles, are afraid of making mistakes, and have limited experience in coordinating activities. Teachers also identified limited opportunities for students to exercise leadership and a lack of role models, while industry representatives observed that students remained passive and demonstrated limited initiative in coordinating tasks. The three perspectives reveal a strong convergence, indicating that leadership is a competency that requires improvement, with both schools and industry sharing relatively similar views regarding the need to strengthen this capability. Leadership in hotel operations can be demonstrated through managerial positions and encompasses the ability to take initiative, coordinate tasks, provide direction, and take responsibility for work outcomes (Ermawati & Anggraini, 2026; Ayu, 2024).

Effective Communication

Industry representatives assessed that students already possess basic communication skills but still lack confidence when interacting in professional environments. Several weaknesses were identified, including inappropriate language use, suboptimal body language, passive communication tendencies, and difficulties communicating with hotel employees. These findings indicate that communication problems are closely associated with language proficiency, self-confidence, and professional communication experience. Improving effective communication requires repeated practice, simulations, and experiential learning within contexts that closely resemble actual workplace conditions (Sung & Hsu, 2025; Sultan et al., 2019).

Convergence of Perceptions Among Students, Teachers, and Industry

The integration of results reveals a strong convergence across three priority dimensions: critical thinking and problem-solving, leadership and supervision, and effective communication. These aligned perceptions have implications for vocational education development; while teachers' understanding largely matches industry needs, they face obstacles in implementing instruction that optimally fosters these competencies. Teachers rate students' foundational teamwork skills as satisfactory based on school-based activities, whereas the industry identifies a need for further development, particularly regarding coordination. This discrepancy suggests a potential difference in standards between the school environment and the industrial workplace. However, students perceive themselves as competent in service delivery and responsibility—assessments that largely align with the views of both teachers and industry. Development strategies should address all aspects comprehensively, leveraging relatively strong competencies as a foundation to strengthen weaker areas.

Factors Contributing to the Soft Skills Gap

An analysis of the findings indicates that the soft skills gap is systemic in nature, driven by four factors:

- Instruction that remains predominantly theoretical and lacks sufficient contextual relevance. Students report that learning scenarios do not always mirror actual industry situations and that simulation opportunities are limited.
- Teacher roles and instructional quality. Teachers do not always consistently model effective communication and professional behavior, while administrative burdens and time constraints hinder the development of instructional practices.
- Soft skills assessment systems. Teacher interviews reveal a lack of standardized, measurable assessment instruments; evaluations tend to be subjective, and industry validation is not yet a routine part of the process.
- Suboptimal industry experience. Preparation and mentoring require strengthening, even though industrial internships (PKL) are considered highly beneficial for soft skills development. Industry representatives cite a lack of practical experience and real-world simulations as key contributors to the gap. These four factors indicate that the gap is an issue within the learning ecosystem, involving the curriculum, teaching methods, teachers, assessment, school culture, and industry partnerships.

Industry Needs-Based Soft Skills Development Strategies

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings resulted in five main strategies for strengthening students' soft skills.

Table 3. Students' Soft Skills Development Strategies

Strategy	Form of Implementation
Active and contextual learning	PBL, PjBL, role-play, industry-based case simulations, and repeated practice
Applied soft skills assessment	Standardized and measurable assessment instruments involving industry validation
Strengthening teacher competencies and professional role modelling	Training, teacher internships, and reinforcement of professional role modeling
Strengthening industry partnerships	Guest lecturers, industry visits, industry-based classes, and industry feedback
Character and student mental readiness development	Discipline-building, character building, confidence development, initiative, and mental readiness for the workplace

Source: Research Data Analysis (2026)

The findings demonstrate that the primary issue lies in the mismatch between the competencies possessed by students and the standards required by the hospitality industry. Seven dimensions demonstrate significant gaps; however, the largest gaps occur in competencies that require experience, decision-making, initiative, and self-management. Therefore, soft skills development in vocational education needs to shift from an approach that primarily emphasizes the transmission of values or theoretical knowledge toward an approach that provides students with opportunities to experience and practice the relevant behaviors. Students need to develop the ability to think critically and recognize problems that require analysis and decision-making.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the finding that students' soft skills gaps are multidimensional and rooted in the relationship between individual competencies and the learning ecosystem. The school possesses relatively strong resources, including its reputation, industry networks, students' attitudes and discipline, and teachers' understanding of industry needs. However, these resources have not yet been fully translated into systematic learning experiences for developing students' soft skills. Enhancing the competitiveness of tourism human resources requires the integration of soft skills into the curriculum, as well as changes in how these skills are developed, practiced, assessed, and connected to the world of work (Jauhar, 2025).

This approach can position schools and industry as integral components of a unified competency development ecosystem. The most strategic direction for development at SMA Negeri 6 Semarang is to strengthen authentic learning experiences through PBL, PjBL, role-play, simulations, more structured PKL programs, behavior-indicator-based assessment, and more intensive industry partnerships

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study demonstrates significant gaps across all seven dimensions of students' soft skills in relation to the needs of the hospitality industry. The largest gaps were identified in critical thinking and problem-solving (0.85983), leadership and supervision (0.77265), and effective communication (0.66646). These gaps are influenced by learning practices that are not yet sufficiently contextualized, teacher competency development, soft skills assessment systems, and industry experiences that require further strengthening. The findings have important implications for soft skills development in vocational education. Priority should be given to active and contextual learning, applied assessment, strengthening teacher competencies, school–industry partnerships, and the development of students' character and mental readiness. These strategies are expected to improve the alignment between graduate competencies and the requirements of the hospitality industry.

FURTHER STUDY

This study still has limitations, so further research on The Soft Skills Gap between Vocational Tourism Students and the Needs of the Hospitality Industry: Implications for Global Competitiveness is needed to refine this study and enhance the insights of readers and the authors.

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