

Tourism in the Digital Age: *Preparing the Workforce for a Sustainable Future*

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Abstract

In the general framework of the country's economic development, tourism has a significant importance. This is also because Albania offers potential maritime, mountainous tourists, etc. In these conditions, the need to advance the development of this economic sector becomes present. Determining the way of functioning, the evisceration of development problems posed by the tourism sector, the connection of mutual influences with other phenomena, etc., as environmental conservation and innovative developments should be preceded by study work.

In recent decades, there has been an increase in the field of digital development, which has enabled the fundamental transformation of the way business is done in many areas of the economy. Digital developments are applications that have given a different meaning and perspective to the tourism and hospitality industry as one of the most impactful areas of this development.

This study investigates the digital abilities that are most in-demand in Albanian tourism. The present spread of these abilities among workers in tourism-related businesses, including hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and travel agencies, is examined. Significant gaps exist between the digital capabilities of the workforce now and the digital skills that will be required in the future, according to quantitative study that includes surveys.

ICT enables innovative and advanced digital solutions that have improved and revolutionized tourism products and services by increasing the productivity of tourist businesses on the one hand and empowering and consolidating the sustainability of the tourism sector on the other. Both of these directions require that the workforce of this sector possesses competencies and digital skills.

Introduction

International tourism recovered to 96% of its pre-pandemic levels in the seven months ending July 2024, thanks to strong demand in Europe and the reopening of markets in Asia and the Pacific. Nearly 790 million tourists visited other countries in the first seven months of 2024, an 11% increase over 2023 and a mere 4% decrease from 2019. According to data, the year had a strong start, but the second quarter was more muted (*The World Tourism Barometer by UN Tourism, 2024*).

The Mediterranean and Southern Europe continue to be the most popular travel destinations in Europe, both traditional and non-traditional, based on year-to-date data. The European tourism industry started to recover again in the second quarter of 2024. Both international arrivals (+6%) and overnights (+7%) surpassed 2019 figures, signifying year-over-year gains of 12% and 10%, respectively. The expansion is being driven by strong intraregional travel from Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands (*the European Travel Commission, ETC, 2024*).

Compared to 2019 levels, arrivals to lesser-known locations like Serbia (+40%) and Bulgaria (+29%) also increased significantly, in addition to popular ones like Malta (+37%), Portugal (+26%), and Turkey (+22%). Part of the reason for these places' ongoing appeal is that they all offer reasonably priced experiences with generally pleasant weather.

The Nordic countries are also growing in popularity, as seen by the rise of international overnights in Denmark (+38%), Norway (+18%), and Sweden (+9%). This implies that success is expanding outside of Southern Europe and in areas that are somewhat more expensive. The Baltic region, however, is also struggling, with foreign arrivals in Latvia (-24%), Estonia (-16%), and Lithuania (-15%) continuing to fall

well below 2019 levels.

One of the most well-liked travel destinations in the Balkans is Albania. In 2024, the country experienced an unprecedented surge in tourism, drawing visitors from all around the world. The World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) reports that since 2019, or prior to the outbreak, Albania's tourism-related revenue has increased by 128%. Globally, this is the highest number.

In the first nine months of 2024, the country's tourism season ended with approximately 9.7 million foreign visitors. International visitor arrivals are somewhat below last year's record levels and below the 14 million visitors, Albanian officials had planned to draw. Albania witnessed a 56% increase in foreign visitor visits in 2023, ranking fourth globally for the largest percentage gain, according to UN Tourism.

The major drivers of Albania's strong 3.3% economic growth in 2024 are expected to be private consumption, tourism, and construction. Growth is expected to moderately accelerate to 3.4% in 2025. It is anticipated that poverty will continue to decline as incomes and employment rise. The nation's medium-term prospects are largely dependent on structural reforms and the global recovery (*The World Bank, Oct 2024*).

Literature Review

Tourism represents one of the largest industry branches in the world. Based on Pshenichnykh & Novi (2023): "The tourism and hospitality industry has developed quite quickly over the past decades, remaining one of the most attractive sectors of the economy." This branch of industry is a significant source of income and enables employment growth in the country. According to Cárdenas-García, et al. (2015): "The tourism sector is an essential income source, especially for developing countries with tourism potential. "Tourism also enables the increase of social emancipation, as it allows people to create ideas and understand the culture, civilization and religious problems of another country.

According to Pektas (2022): "People's desire to travel outside of their residence for different reasons is old, at least as written history. Trade, religion, holiday, Olympic Games, and the desire to regain health were the main reasons of people's travel." (Casson, 1994). Regarding the subjectivity of destination choice by tourists, Vengesai et al (2009) define that: "Destination attractiveness is distinguished from destination." Competition between destinations should be a focal point of attention for tour operators in their entirety. In the competition, tourism environment takes importance in its complexity, with the aim of sustainable tourism.

Sustainable tourism refers to sustainable practices and the attention of researchers to recognize all positive and negative impacts of tourism. The tourism sector represents a specific opportunity with considerable impact on citizens to build a more inclusive and sustainable future. Knowing the impacts increases people's commitment to minimizing or avoiding negative impacts. The study focuses on the negative impacts of tourism, because it is related to some aspects of the tourism perspective, such as economic aspects, damage to the natural environment and tourist overpopulation.

One of the negative impacts that are of worry about is increasing the intensity of emissions. The UN Environment Programme reports that, "A 42% reduction in current global emissions overall by 2030 (and 57% by 2035) is needed." In this context, they also refer to the cause of this situation: "The main cause of the increase in emissions is the high growth of tourist demand. The rapidly expanding carbon footprint is mainly from aviation (21%), the use of gasoline and diesel vehicles (17%) and utility services such as electricity supply (16%)." Higham & Sun (2024).

The international community's 2015 Paris Agreement establishes ambitious targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and calls for worldwide cooperation and commitment to combating climate change (UNFCCC, 2015). Fennell (2022) states that the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 13) is to reduce emissions and increase climate resilience. (*Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2022*).

The performance of all tourism-related businesses is affected by environmental issues. The hotels are most affected. Because of their large fixed asset investments and lack of flexibility due to the difficulty of moving their operations, hotels are among the most vulnerable tourism enterprises to climate change (Gössling, 2011; Su et al., 2013). The service-oriented character of the hotel industry, which involves a high level of human participation in operations and great visibility to stakeholders, makes responding to climate change difficult. (Fennell, 2022).

In addition to emission minimization, over tourism is an influential factor in sustainable tourism. Leahy (2023) admits that: "Basically, over tourism is a lot of people in one place at any given time. While there is not a final figure that determines the number of visitors allowed, a bunch of economic, social and environmental factors determine if and how numbers are growing."

A clean environment is a preference of tourists, regardless of the tourist destination. Environmental management is therefore an important factor present and future, as it conditions the development of successful and sustainable tourism. According to Söderholm (2020), tackling climatic and environmental issues obviously calls for both engineering and natural science knowledge of the several technical solutions that can be implemented to lessen adverse effects (e.g., carbon-free energy systems).

"Circular economy (CE) is a more holistic approach that advocates towards extracting value from waste and achieving sustainability goals.", Sharma et al. (2020). This is how we can preserve the clean environment. Neves & Marques (2022) acknowledges that: "A paradigm shift from a linear economy to a circular economy is essential to reduce pressure on the environment and improve the security of primary raw material supply." The development of green technologies is a condition towards a new world. Wu & Strezov (2023) emphasize that: "Green technologies will help create new relationships between humans, nature as well as the new world."

Human/nature relations are important for any economic sector, but it is very important in the tourism sector. This is why the WEF (World Economic Forum) in 2018 considered it a problem of focus. "Members of the Travel and Tourism industry community actively work together to shape the future of the sector, foster innovation and new business practices, and inform new policymaking." (WEF).

The innovation we refer to requires a faster orientation to information technology developments. Based on UNWTO (2023): "Tourism was one of the first sectors to digitalize its business processes worldwide, pioneering online booking of air travel and hotels."

While Morozov & Morozova (2019) admit that: "Area with the most active introduction of digital technologies is tourism services." In the future, there will be an increasing necessity to use IT applications. Regarding the digital trend in the 2030s, Statista (2022) predicts that the travel, hospitality, and airline sectors would employ mobile applications, artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing, automation tools, and self-service more and more. These goals are difficult to meet because, according to WEF (2018), two major barriers to the global adoption of technologies are a lack of capital investments (39%) and skills gaps in local labor markets (89%).

For Lazić et al (2023): "ICT has revolutionized the sector structure by removing barriers to entry, reducing costs, ensuring price transparency, and reforming and increasing the efficiency of services." While for Milovanović et al. (2022), "The implementation of modern ICT solutions through new and improved tourism products and services can alter the customer experience while increasing the sector's productivity and resilience."

According to Carlisle et al. (2021), the EU as a whole will require future digital skills. Similar to Zaragoza-Sáez et al. (2022), this is likewise it. It is acknowledged by Carlisle et al. (2021) that the respondents' country of origin affects these needs. A nation's degree of digitalization is determined by its internet infrastructure, laws and regulations, and how both individuals and companies employ digital solutions, according to the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD, 2021).

Tourism development requires a host of digital continuities. Sousa & Rocha (2019) consider that "Different technologies require different skill sets." For Ferrari's et al. (2013) the list of digital competencies includes amongst others, information management, communication and sharing, and technical operations. While Minor et al (2024) stress that: "The hard skills, however, include technical, operational, strategic and basic work skills." UNESCO 2024 report 'Green and Digital Skills for Hospitality and Tourism', highlights the intersection of green and digital transformations within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems. Professional growth in the benefit of digital skills now is a necessity because "Considering the deep penetration of digital technologies in everyday life, digital literacy offers a set of transversal skills that could improve a whole area of activities, from banking operations to civic participation. However, these skills are diverse and vary according to the development of technologies and society." Voda et al (2022).

Research Methodology

From the standpoint of the tourism industry (demand side), the goal of this study is to identify and evaluate the current tourism skills, trends, and developments as well as future needs in relation to digital and sustainable skills (the latter including green and socio-cultural skills).

The capacity to locate, assess, use, distribute, and produce content through the Internet and information technologies, including artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, mobile technologies, and (big) data analytics, is known as digital skills.

Sustainability skills (green and socio-cultural) are environmental management skills, such as resource management to manage waste, water and energy services, and recycling; and sustainable tourism. It has to do with hotel management techniques and sustainable tourism (packages); customer sustainability awareness campaign; events, visitor attractions, and sustainable restaurants; circular economy in the design and management of the tourism value chain, etc. Social and cultural competencies include behavioural and attitude competencies in interpersonal communication (soft skills); intercultural understanding; customer service orientation; interpersonal relationship management, empathy, and collaboration; exhibiting a positive attitude, respect, and intercultural sensitivity; active listening; social progress-promoting competencies that acknowledge the needs of all; accessible tourism for individuals with disabilities; and gender equality.

The relevant data gathered through a (1-5) Likert Scale Questionnaire based Survey were processed and analysed accordingly and a summary of the adequate findings will be projected regarding respondent's perceptions about the current tourism skills, trends and developments, as well as future needs in relation to digital and sustainable skills (green and socio-cultural skills), from the perspective of the tourism industry. For the purpose of this study it's been used a cluster sampling technique reaching a number of 358 respondents who gave their anonymous responses through an online survey conducted by researchers from August to October 2024. They were randomly selected employees, professional, experts, managers, and business owners in tourism and hospitality industry in Albania.

For the purpose of data analysis such techniques as Descriptive Statistics and Comparison based Methods were used. The findings among other things, showed a significant gap between the existing knowledge on tourism skills, and necessary future needs in relation to digital and sustainable skills (green skills and socio-cultural skills), from the perspective of the tourism industry (demand side).

Data analysis and research findings

Performance of tourism sector in Albania

The tourism season in Albania ended with 9.7 million international visitors in the first nine months of 2024. The number of foreign visitors is slightly below the 14 million tourists that Albanian officials had planned to draw, as well as below the record figures reached last year.

From neighbouring Kosovo, about 3.4 million tourists came to Albania, followed by nearly 900,000 from Italy and over 600,000 from North Macedonia. This year also saw an increase in the number of visitors from France (more than 157,000), China (almost 16,000), India (13,000), and the Netherlands (nearly 92,000).

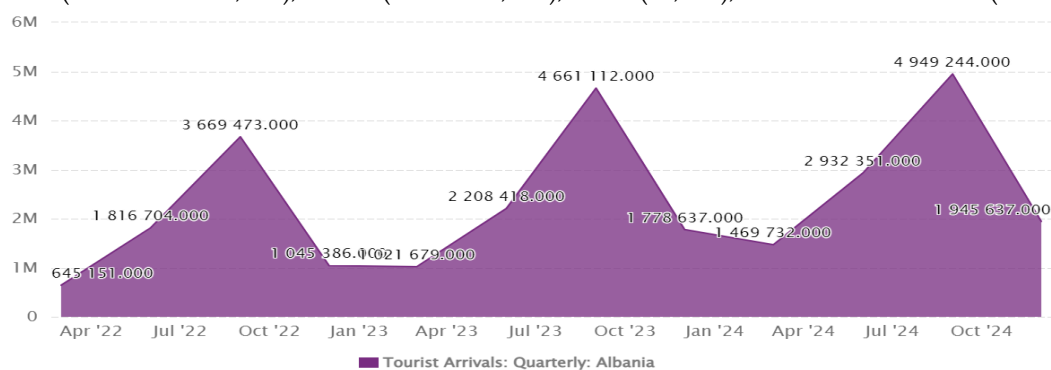


Chart 1. Albania's Visitor Arrivals from Jan 2022 to Dec 2024

The international tourist organization's most current research shows that the sector's GDP contribution in 2023 climbed by more than 37% compared to its 2019 peak. The industry's success is demonstrated by the fact that in 2023, travel and tourism made up one in four of Albania's GDP. The travel and tourism sector supported around 269,000 jobs nationwide, or one in five jobs in Albania. This is a more than 10% increase in jobs supported by the sector compared to 2019. Expenditure on domestic travel exceeded 2019 levels in 2023, and expenditure on foreign travel surged to more than 45% above the 2019 peak (*The World Travel & Tourism Council's – WTTC, 2024*).

Green skills in tourism and hospitality

Environmental management abilities are shown in this chart in a number of categories. It contrasts the present skill level (orange line) with the anticipated or intended level in the future (gray line). This is a thorough analysis: In the majority of skill categories, there is a persistent discrepancy between the present and intended future levels, suggesting room for development. Although they are comparatively good, existing abilities to manage garbage, recycling, and composting (3.93) and reduce energy and water usage (3.86 current score) nevertheless fall short of the intended future levels (4.13 and 4.12, respectively). In contrast, climate change knowledge has a significant gap (current score 3.70), compared to the target level (future score 4.20).

There are a few areas that require serious improvement:

- There is a clear disparity in the promotion of eco-friendly products and activities (3.81 present vs. 4.13 future).
- The promotion of sustainable transportation has the lowest current competence among the categories, with a notable difference between 3.23 current and 4.04 future.
- There is also space for improvement in biodiversity protection (3.83 present vs. 4.07 future).

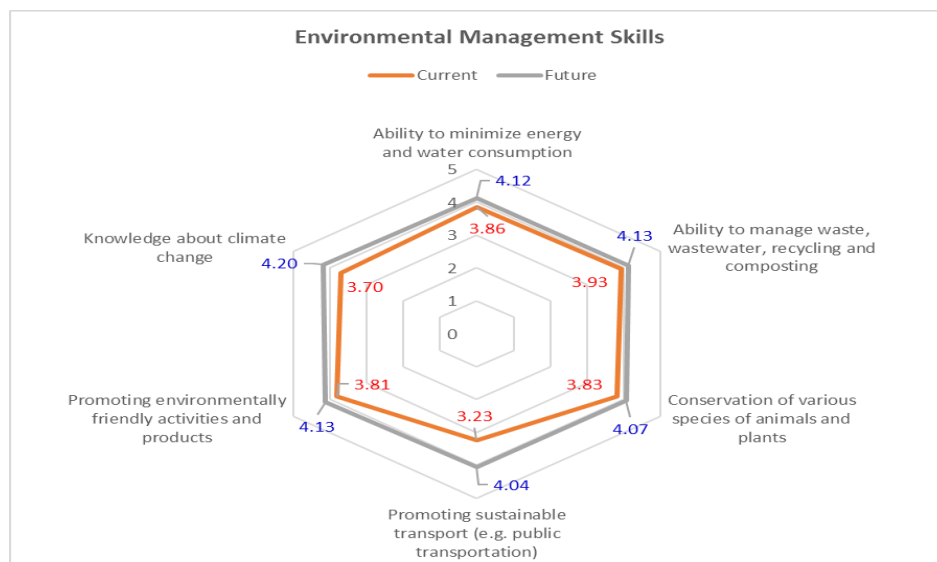


Chart 2. Current and future green skills in tourism and hospitality

The fact that the intended future levels are continuously higher than the existing ones indicates that there is a general desire to raise environmental management proficiency in all domains. Initiatives to support environmentally friendly transportation methods should be the main focus because they exhibit the biggest disparity.

Also enhancing training or awareness initiatives in this field in order to build on the current strength in climate change knowledge. Finally, strengthening initiatives to support biodiversity preservation and eco-friendly products in order to meet future objectives.

Social skills in tourism and hospitality

The orange line in this graphic represents the present level of social skills, while the gray line represents the desired level in the future across a spectrum of social competencies. This is a thorough analysis: The expected strongest skill across all areas, willingness to learn and perform, currently has a score of 4.43 and is expected to reach a desired future level of 4.59. Another strength is creativity, which now has a score of 4.22 with a potential target of 4.48. A strong present capability is demonstrated by fostering a positive work atmosphere (4.38 current vs. 4.52 future).

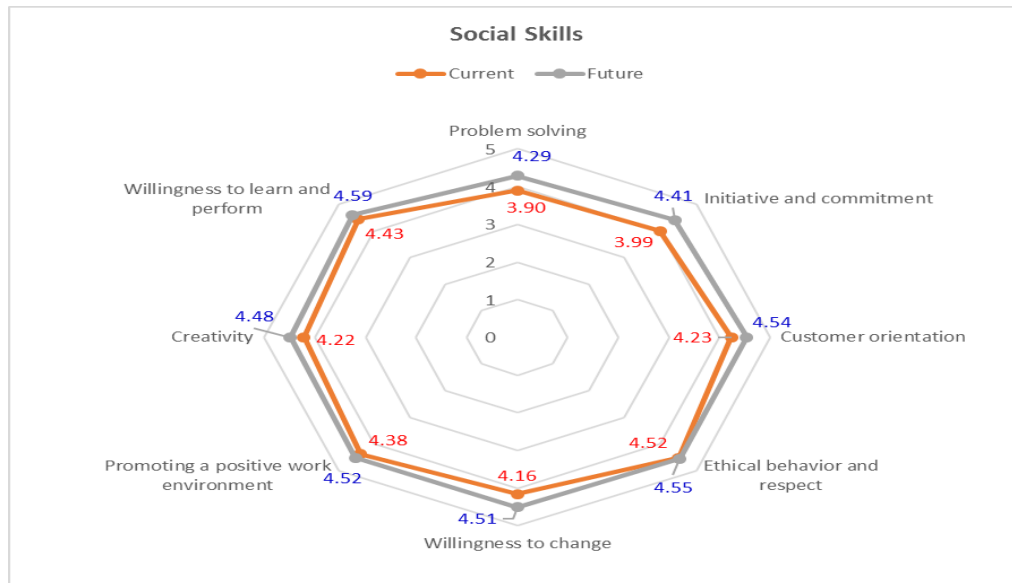


Chart 3. Current and future social skills in tourism and hospitality

A clear discrepancy between the present and desired problem-solving abilities scores—3.90 versus 4.29—indicates the need for substantial improvement in this area. With a current score of 3.99 and a projected target of 4.41, initiative and involvement also require attention. Additionally, there is space for improvement in customer orientation (4.23 current vs. 4.54 future). Aspirations for improvement are shown in the continuously higher projected future levels across all categories. The biggest disparities are found in initiative and commitment, and problem-solving abilities, indicating that these are priority areas for improvement.

Training programs should be the main focus:

- Usage of problem-solving exercises and seminars to improve decision-making and critical thinking.
- Usage of organized group projects and incentives for participation to promote proactive conduct and activities.
- To achieve the intended future levels of client orientation, offering of trainings on excellent customer service.

Through performance incentives and innovation challenges, keep encouraging creativity and a readiness to learn. Enhance the existing favorable work atmosphere by encouraging teamwork and acknowledgment initiatives.

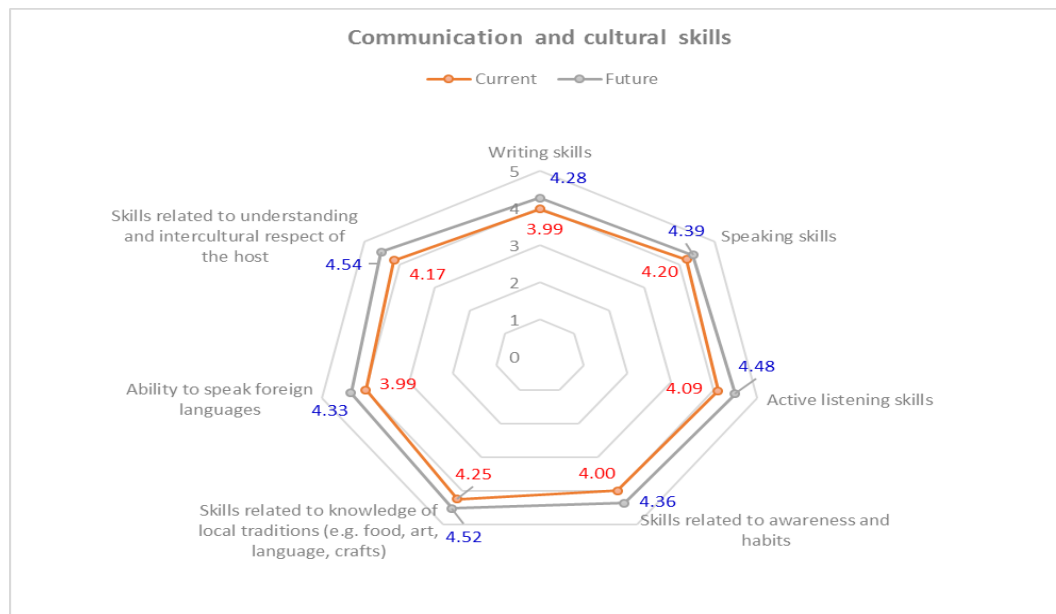


Chart 4. Current and future communication & cultural skills in tourism and hospitality

Communication and cultural skills are compared between the current level and the necessary future level in the above chart. Currently, the average score is about 4.10, with certain categories having somewhat higher or lower values. Every skill has to be improved, with the average rising to about 4.41.

Although writing and speaking abilities are currently at a respectable level (3.99 for writing and 4.20 for speaking), future advancement is anticipated (4.28 for writing and 4.39 for speaking).

With an expected improvement to 4.48, active listening abilities are currently evaluated at 4.09. The awareness and expression abilities are performing well at the moment (4.00), but they will need to increase to 4.36 in the future. And the same improvements are needed for Knowledge of local traditions, Foreign language, and Intercultural respect.

The necessary adjustments show that improving intercultural and communication skills is a top priority. This implies that in order to successfully meet future expectations, further training or exposure in these areas is required.

Digital skills in tourism and hospitality

A comparison of digital skills across different categories is seen in chart 5. It contrasts the expected or anticipated level of digital abilities for the future (shown by the gray line) with the existing level (shown by the orange line). Each axis on the chart symbolizes a digital skill, and the categories are arranged around it. Here is a breakdown of the key elements:

Significant progress is required in the skills with the biggest gaps, where the gray line is significantly farther away than the orange line. Skills with reduced gaps between the two lines indicate that the present level is getting closer to the target level. Social media management (4.01 current score), Skills in using the operating systems (3.96 current score), and Online marketing and communication skills (3.86 current score) are the strongest current talents.

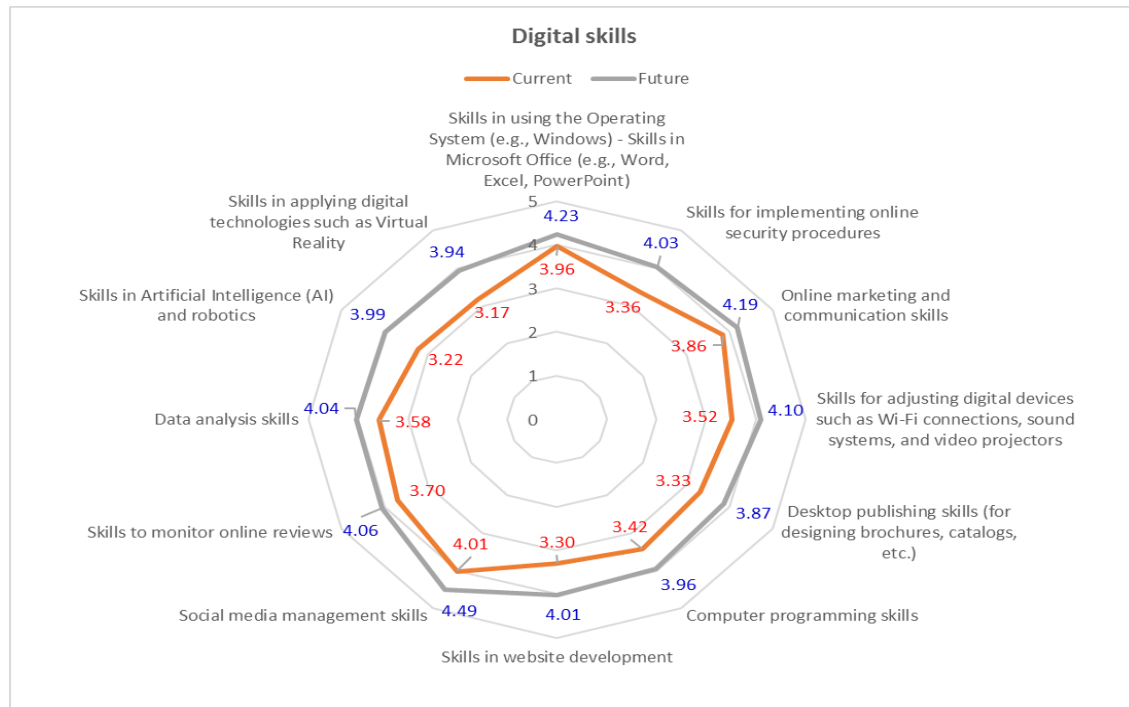


Chart 5. Current and future digital skills in tourism and hospitality

Improvements are required in the following areas:

- Robots and artificial intelligence (AI): present (3.22) versus future (3.99).
- Skills in programming: Present (3.42) versus Future (3.96).
- Online security and safety: present (3.36) against future (4.03).
- Skills in applying digital technologies (e.g. VR): present (3.17) against future (3.94).
- Skills in website development: present (3.30) against future (4.01).

Conclusion & Recommendation

From the viewpoint of the Albanian tourism business, the study outlined the current tourism skills as well as the necessary future skills, trends, and advancements in relation to digital and sustainable skills (green and sociocultural skills).

The intended future levels for green skills in tourism are continuously higher than the existing levels, indicating a general goal to raise environmental management proficiency in all domains. Since this demonstrates the biggest disparity, efforts should be made to encourage environmentally friendly transportation methods.

Also, another aspect is enhancing existing climate change expertise by growing awareness or training initiatives in this field. Last but not least, strengthening initiatives to support biodiversity preservation and eco-friendly goods in order to meet future targets.

Aspirations for improvement are shown in the consistently higher desired future levels across all social skills categories. The areas with the biggest gaps are in initiative, commitment, and problem-solving abilities, indicating that they should be prioritized for improvement.

To achieve the intended future levels of client orientation, training programs that improve critical thinking and decision-making should be prioritized. Proactive behavior and initiatives should be encouraged through organized team projects and prizes for involvement and exceptional customer service.

Writing and speaking abilities, active listening abilities, awareness and expression abilities, familiarity with regional customs, foreign language proficiency, and intercultural respect all require the same enhancements.

The strongest current skills are social media management (4.01 current score), operating system proficiency (3.96 current score), and online marketing and communication skills (3.86 current score). Main improvements are needed accordingly: Robots and artificial intelligence (AI): present (3.22) versus future (3.99); Skills in programming: Present (3.42) versus Future (3.96); Online security and safety: present (3.36) against future (4.03); Skills in applying digital technologies (e.g. VR): present (3.17) against future (3.94); and Skills in website development: present (3.30) against future (4.01).

Among other things, the results demonstrated a notable discrepancy between the current understanding of tourism skills and the future demands for digital and sustainable skills (the latter including socio-cultural and green skills) as seen from the demand side of the tourism industry.

Based on the study's findings, the authors suggested that training programs be put in place to close the knowledge gap between the current and future demands for digital, soft, and green skills in Albania's tourist and hospitality sector.

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