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Transversal Competencies for Future Tourism Graduates: Stakeholder Alignment and Curriculum Innovation in European VET

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Abstract

This article examines stakeholder expectations regarding transversal competencies required of future tourism graduates in European vocational education and training (VET). Drawing on survey data collected among VET students, teachers and tourism industry representatives from six countries (Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain), the study investigates how different stakeholder groups (n = 214) perceive graduate preparedness in the context of digitalisation, sustainability transition and changing labour market requirements. The study was performed in the period February – July 2025. The analysis combines descriptive interpretation of stakeholder responses with thematic synthesis focused on areas of convergence and divergence. The findings show that communication, adaptability, digital collaboration, sustainability mindset, inclusiveness and entrepreneurial initiative are repeatedly identified as essential competency domains, although stakeholders interpret and operationalise them differently. Students emphasise employability, confidence and practical learning; teachers foreground pedagogical feasibility, institutional support and professional development needs; while industry representatives stress operational readiness, service quality and applied sustainability practices. On this basis, the article develops the European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework (ESACoF), a conceptual framework designed to support tourism VET curriculum innovation. The study contributes to debates on graduate employability, transversal competencies and stakeholder-informed curriculum development by showing that competency frameworks should not be constructed as generic lists of skills, but as structured responses to empirically identified areas of stakeholder alignment.

1. Introduction

The transition towards more sustainable, digital and resilient economies is reshaping the conditions under which contemporary industries operate and challenging long-established assumptions about workforce preparation (World Economic Forum, 2025; European Commission, 2020). Rather than relying primarily on occupation-specific knowledge, employers increasingly expect graduates to perform effectively in complex professional environments characterised by technological innovation, sustainability imperatives and changing societal expectations (Busulwa et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024). These developments are particularly visible in tourism, where digital transformation, environmental responsibility, demographic change and evolving visitor expectations are redefining business models, service delivery and occupational roles (UN Tourism, 2024). Tourism VET institutions are therefore confronted with a demanding educational challenge: preparing graduates not only for existing jobs, but for professional contexts shaped by continuous technological, organisational and social change.

For tourism VET, these transformations require more than updating educational content. They call for a reconsideration of curriculum design and of the assumptions underpinning graduate preparedness. Educational programmes are increasingly expected to respond to current labour market requirements while also preparing learners for occupations that will continue to evolve throughout their careers (Cedefop, 2023). This shift challenges curriculum models organised primarily around stable occupational standards and highlights the need for approaches that connect educational objectives with dynamic industry expectations.

Research on tourism and hospitality education has consequently paid growing attention to employability, future skills and competency development (Derco & Tometzová, 2023; Busulwa et al., 2024). Although the term of soft skills remains widely recognised, recent educational and labour market frameworks increasingly adopt the broader concept of transversal competencies, understood as competencies that can be transferred across organisational, occupational and social contexts (Cedefop, n.d.; Bianchi et al., 2022). This conceptual shift reflects the recognition that professional performance depends not only on technical expertise, but also on the ability to communicate, collaborate, adapt to uncertainty and contribute to innovation and sustainable development.

At the same time, curriculum development can no longer be treated as an exclusively institutional process. The competencies expected from future graduates emerge at the intersection of educational practice, labour market requirements and learners' aspirations. Students, teachers and industry representatives therefore constitute three

complementary stakeholder groups whose perspectives jointly shape expectations regarding graduate preparedness. Students express expectations concerning learning experience and employability; teachers translate competency requirements into teaching and assessment practices; and employers evaluate graduates in real professional environments (Mahmud & Wong, 2022). Understanding how these perspectives relate to one another is therefore essential for evidence-informed curriculum development in tourism VET.

Despite substantial research on tourism competencies, employability and curriculum innovation, an important challenge remains insufficiently addressed. Existing studies have generated valuable knowledge about individual stakeholder perspectives and the competencies required of tourism graduates. However, less attention has been devoted to how expectations expressed by different stakeholder groups can be systematically integrated to support curriculum design. Curriculum innovation requires more than identifying desirable competencies; it requires understanding where stakeholder expectations converge, where they diverge and how these relationships can inform educational decision-making. Without such evidence, curriculum development risks reflecting isolated perspectives rather than the broader expectations of the tourism ecosystem.

The present study addresses this challenge by examining stakeholder expectations regarding transversal competencies among VET students, teachers and tourism industry representatives from six European countries participating in the TourXpeRience project, Nurturing Entrepreneurial Teaching and Learning for VET Excellence in Tourism Education (ERASMUS-EDU-2024-PEX-COVE, Grant Agreement: 101193962). Rather than focusing only on identifying competencies perceived as important, the study analyses areas of convergence and divergence among stakeholder groups and synthesises these findings into the European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework (ESACoF). Conceived as a conceptual framework, ESACoF organises empirically identified areas of stakeholder alignment into a structure intended to support curriculum innovation within European tourism VET.

Figure 1 presents the research logic underlying the study. It shows how stakeholder expectations are first identified, then compared across groups, thematically synthesised and translated into ESACoF as a curriculum-oriented conceptual framework.

Following the research logic presented in Fig. 1, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. Which transversal competencies are considered most important for future tourism graduates by students, teachers and tourism industry representatives?

RQ2. Where do stakeholder perspectives converge and diverge regarding these competencies?

RQ3. How can empirically identified areas of stakeholder convergence be synthesised into the European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework (ESACoF)?

RQ4. What practical implications do these findings have for curriculum innovation within European tourism vocational education and training?

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on tourism transformation, transversal competencies and stakeholder perspectives in curriculum development. Section 3 presents the methodology. Section 4 reports the empirical findings. Section 5 discusses the results in relation to previous research. Section 6 introduces ESACoF, while the final sections present practical implications, limitations and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Transformation of the tourism sector and changing competency requirements

The tourism sector has entered a period of structural transformation driven by the combined effects of digitalisation, sustainability transitions, demographic change and labour market volatility. These developments do not represent isolated trends. Together, they redefine the operating environment of tourism organisations, influencing service models, customer expectations and workforce requirements. As tourism services become increasingly technology-enabled, experience-oriented and sustainability-driven, graduates are expected to respond to changing professional contexts rather than perform narrowly defined occupational tasks (World Economic Forum, 2025; UNESCO, 2024).

Figure 2 synthesises the main transformation drivers discussed in this section. Its function is to show how digitalisation, sustainability, demographic and social change, and labour market volatility jointly reshape business models, professional roles and competency expectations in tourism VET.

Technological innovation in tourism extends far beyond the adoption of digital tools. Artificial intelligence, extended reality, data-driven decision-making and platform-based business models are reshaping service design, customer interaction and organisational processes. These changes increase demand for graduates capable of combining technical knowledge with adaptability, communication and problem-solving abilities (Busulwa et al., 2024). At the same time, sustainability has evolved from a specialised area of knowledge into a strategic principle influencing destination management, hospitality operations and tourism governance. Graduates are therefore expected to integrate environmental awareness, ethical judgement and social responsibility into professional practice rather than treating sustainability as a separate topic (Bianchi et al., 2022).

These developments coincide with persistent concerns about graduate preparedness in tourism and hospitality. Employers increasingly emphasise that successful performance depends not only on technical expertise, but also on collaboration, communication, adaptability and entrepreneurial initiative (Derco & Tometzová, 2023). Research on transferable skills in tourism and hospitality similarly indicates that employers value graduates able to integrate disciplinary expertise with broader competencies enabling performance under uncertainty and change (Stangl et al., 2024).

The implications for VET are direct. Educational institutions are no longer expected merely to provide occupation-specific knowledge, but to prepare individuals for lifelong learning, interdisciplinary collaboration and continuous professional adaptation (Cedefop, 2023). This requires moving beyond curriculum models organised around stable occupational standards towards approaches that recognise the dynamic relationship between education and labour market transformation. Identifying competencies relevant for future tourism professionals has therefore become both an educational and strategic challenge for VET systems.

2.2. From soft skills to transversal competencies

The concept of soft skills has long been used to describe interpersonal, behavioural and self-management attributes that complement technical expertise. In tourism and hospitality education, the term remains recognisable because it captures competencies associated with service quality, customer interaction, teamwork, communication and professional conduct. Previous research has shown that employers attach considerable importance to such skills and often regard them as decisive for graduate employability and early-career performance (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020). However, the term is also conceptually limited. It may imply a secondary status in relation to “hard” skills, even though the competencies it describes are increasingly central to professional effectiveness and career mobility.

For this reason, recent educational and labour market frameworks increasingly prefer the broader concept of transversal competencies. Unlike the narrower notion of soft skills, transversal competencies refer to learned and demonstrable abilities relevant across occupations, sectors and learning contexts. Cedefop defines transversal skills and competences as abilities commonly regarded as valuable for effective action in work, learning and life, while ESCO emphasises their relevance across occupations and economic sectors (Cedefop, n.d.; European Commission, n.d.). This conceptual shift reframes communication, adaptability, collaboration, problem-solving, intercultural awareness and sustainability-related abilities not as supplementary traits, but as core components of professional competence.

Table 1 clarifies the distinction between the two terms and explains why this article retains “soft skills” in the title while adopting “transversal competencies” as the primary analytical concept.

Table 1
Conceptual distinction between soft skills and transversal competencies

Dimension	Soft skills	Transversal competencies	Relevance for this study
Conceptual status	Often used in professional and employability discourse	Used in education, labour market and European policy frameworks	The title uses the recognisable term “soft skills”, while the analysis applies the more precise concept of transversal competencies
Scope	Usually associated with interpersonal and behavioural attributes	Covers interpersonal, cognitive, self-management, civic, digital and sustainability-related dimensions	Enables a broader interpretation of graduate preparedness in tourism VET
Relation to technical skills	Often presented as complementary to “hard skills”	Understood as reusable competencies supporting performance across occupations and sectors	Avoids treating communication, adaptability or sustainability awareness as secondary competencies
Educational implication	Frequently addressed through isolated training or employability modules	Requires integration into curriculum design, teaching, assessment and work-based learning	Supports the article’s focus on curriculum innovation rather than only skills identification
Analytical value	Useful but terminologically broad and sometimes imprecise	More suitable for systematic analysis of stakeholder expectations	Provides the conceptual basis for ESACoF

This distinction is particularly important in tourism VET, where graduate preparedness increasingly requires the integration of technical, interpersonal, digital and sustainability-oriented capabilities. A narrow interpretation of soft skills may lead institutions to treat communication, teamwork or adaptability as generic employability add-ons rather than competencies intentionally embedded into learning outcomes, pedagogical strategies and assessment practices. By contrast, transversal competencies can be analysed as transferable components of professional performance. This interpretation is consistent with evidence showing that employers value broad competency clusters related to self-management, socio-relational skills, basic job-related skills, entrepreneurship and professional responsibility (García-Álvarez et al., 2022).

The move from soft skills to transversal competencies also reflects the changing nature of tourism work. Tourism professionals increasingly operate in culturally diverse, digitally mediated and sustainability-sensitive environments. Competencies such as intercultural communication, ethical judgement, adaptability, entrepreneurial initiative and sustainability awareness are therefore not peripheral to professional practice; they shape how tourism services are designed, delivered and evaluated. GreenComp provides a useful example of this broader logic by conceptualising sustainability as knowledge, skills and attitudes enabling learners to think, plan and act with responsibility for the environment and society (Bianchi et al., 2022). In tourism education, sustainability must therefore be translated into operational, communicative and ethical decision-making.

For the purposes of this article, the term of soft skills is retained as a familiar entry point, while transversal competencies is used as the main analytical category. This terminology connects stakeholder expectations concerning communication, inclusiveness, adaptability, entrepreneurship, sustainability and digital collaboration with broader debates on employability, curriculum responsiveness and vocational education reform.

2.3. Stakeholder perspectives in curriculum development

Curriculum development in VET is increasingly understood as a process requiring the integration of multiple stakeholder perspectives. This is particularly relevant in tourism VET, where programmes are expected to respond simultaneously to

learners' aspirations, teachers' pedagogical expertise and employers' changing competency expectations. Graduate employability is therefore not determined only by the internal quality of educational provision, but by the extent to which educational objectives, learning experiences and labour market expectations are meaningfully connected (Cheng et al., 2022). Curriculum responsiveness depends not merely on identifying competencies, but on understanding how different actors interpret, prioritise and operationalise them.

Students constitute a crucial stakeholder group because they experience the curriculum directly and evaluate its relevance through engagement, career expectations and perceived preparedness for employment. Research on student participation and curriculum co-creation indicates that learners should not be treated only as recipients of educational reform, but as contributors to the design and improvement of learning processes (Bovill, 2020). In tourism education, students' perceptions of communication, digital collaboration, sustainability and practical learning opportunities may reveal whether curricula are experienced as meaningful preparation for professional environments.

Teachers represent a second key stakeholder group because they mediate between policy frameworks, curriculum requirements and classroom practice. Even when competency-based reforms are formally introduced, their effectiveness depends on teachers' capacity to translate broad learning outcomes into pedagogical strategies, assessment practices and work-based learning. This is especially important for transversal competencies, which cannot be developed through declarative instruction alone. They require active learning, authentic tasks, feedback, reflection and opportunities for practice across contexts. Earlier research has shown that employability-oriented teaching may produce limited outcomes when disconnected from authentic learning environments and institutional commitment (Cranmer, 2006).

Industry representatives constitute the third stakeholder group because they evaluate graduate preparedness in actual organisational contexts. Their expectations are particularly important in tourism, where service quality, customer interaction, adaptability and intercultural communication are central to professional performance. Previous studies show that employers often identify gaps between educational provision and workplace requirements, particularly in relation to transferable, behavioural and applied competencies (Derco & Tometzová, 2023). However, employer perspectives should not be treated as the sole basis for curriculum design. If curricula are shaped only by immediate labour market demands, they risk becoming overly instrumental and insufficiently attentive to learners' long-term adaptability, civic agency and capacity for sustainable development.

The value of stakeholder-based curriculum development lies in identifying areas of convergence and divergence between perspectives rather than privileging one group. Research on graduate employability shows that different stakeholders may define employability and graduate attributes differently, leading to misalignment between educational intentions, student expectations and employer requirements (Kinash et al., 2016; Rook & Sloan, 2021). Such discrepancies are not necessarily problematic; they may reveal productive tensions that can inform more balanced curriculum decisions. However, when differences remain implicit, curriculum reform may fail to address the actual sources of mismatch between education and work.

In tourism VET, stakeholder alignment is intensified by rapid sectoral transformation. Students, teachers and employers may agree on broad competencies such as communication or adaptability but attach different meanings to them. For students, communication may be associated with confidence; for teachers, with assessable learning outcomes; and for employers, with customer interaction, teamwork and service recovery. These differences matter because curriculum development depends not only on naming competencies, but on translating them into teachable, learnable and assessable practices. The present study therefore treats stakeholder perspectives relationally, as the empirical basis for identifying areas of alignment that can inform curriculum innovation.

2.4. Research gap

The literature demonstrates that tourism education is increasingly shaped by digitalisation, sustainability transition, changing labour markets and evolving expectations regarding graduate employability. It also shows that the concept of soft

skills, although still widely used, is insufficient to capture the full range of competencies required from tourism graduates. Transversal competencies provide a more appropriate analytical lens because they include interpersonal, cognitive, digital, entrepreneurial, intercultural and sustainability-related dimensions of professional performance.

Existing research remains limited in three respects. Firstly, studies on tourism and hospitality competencies often identify desirable skills or compare their perceived importance, but less frequently examine how different stakeholder groups collectively construct expectations regarding graduate preparedness. Secondly, research on employability and curriculum development has shown that students, teachers and employers may hold discrepant understandings of graduate attributes, yet these discrepancies are not always translated into operational frameworks for curriculum innovation. Thirdly, although recent work has examined digital readiness, transferable skills and employer expectations in tourism education, there remains a need for frameworks that synthesise stakeholder perspectives into a coherent structure suitable for VET curriculum design.

This study addresses these limitations by examining expectations among VET students, teachers and tourism industry representatives from six European countries. Its contribution lies not only in identifying transversal competencies considered important for future tourism graduates, but in analysing areas of convergence and divergence between stakeholder groups. On this basis, the study develops ESACoF as a conceptual framework intended to support evidence-informed curriculum innovation in tourism VET.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study adopted a stakeholder-comparative survey design aimed at identifying and interpreting expectations regarding transversal competencies in tourism VET. The research was embedded in the TourXpeRience project, which focuses on strengthening VET excellence in tourism through sustainable entrepreneurship, digital innovation and extended reality-supported learning. The methodological logic assumed that graduate preparedness cannot be adequately understood from a single institutional perspective. Instead, it requires comparative examination of expectations articulated by learners, educators and labour market representatives.

The study combined descriptive quantitative analysis with qualitative thematic interpretation of stakeholder responses (n = 214). This approach was appropriate because the research questions required both the identification of competency priorities and the interpretation of how these priorities were understood across stakeholder groups. The descriptive component was used to examine response patterns, while the qualitative component supported the interpretation of open-ended responses and the synthesis of competency domains. The design therefore followed a pragmatic logic in which methodological choices were guided by the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2. Data sources and participants

The empirical material was collected through three stakeholder-specific survey instruments addressed to VET students, VET teachers and tourism industry representatives. These groups were selected because they represent complementary positions within the tourism VET ecosystem. Students provide insight into perceived learning needs, educational experience and self-assessed preparedness for professional work. Teachers offer a pedagogical perspective on curriculum delivery, competency development and feasibility of innovation. Industry representatives contribute a labour market perspective by identifying expectations observed in professional settings.

The study was conducted in the context of a European partnership involving six countries: Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain. This cross-national setting allowed the analysis to move beyond a single VET system and identify expectations relevant across different European tourism education contexts. The study does not claim statistical

representativeness at the European level. Its value lies in providing stakeholder-informed empirical evidence from multiple national contexts and synthesising it into a conceptual framework for curriculum innovation.

Table 2 summarises the empirical sources and clarifies the analytical function of each stakeholder group. Its function is to show how the three data sources jointly support the development of ESACoF.

Table 2
Empirical sources and analytical role of stakeholder groups

Stakeholder group	Empirical source	Analytical role in the study	Contribution to ESACoF development
VET students (n = 94)	Student survey	Identification of learners' perceptions of preparedness, competency needs and expectations regarding future tourism work	Provides the learner-centred perspective on transversal competency development
VET teachers (n = 60)	Teacher survey	Identification of pedagogical perceptions, curriculum constraints and perceived needs for innovation in teaching and assessment	Provides the education-centred perspective on how competencies can be embedded in VET practice
Tourism industry representatives (n = 60)	Industry survey	Identification of labour market expectations, observed competency gaps and workplace relevance of transversal competencies	Provides the employer-centred perspective on graduate preparedness and sectoral needs
Cross-stakeholder synthesis	Comparative analysis of the three surveys	Identification of convergence and divergence across stakeholder groups	Forms the empirical basis for the European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework

3.3. Survey instruments

The survey instruments were designed to capture stakeholder expectations concerning tourism transformation, graduate preparedness and competencies required for future professional practice. Although adapted to the specific position of each stakeholder group, they shared a common thematic orientation, enabling comparison across groups while preserving the relevance of questions for each respondent category.

The student survey focused on perceived readiness for tourism employment, exposure to digital and XR-related learning, confidence in using tourism technologies, opportunities to develop transversal competencies and expectations regarding future learning needs. The teacher survey examined institutional support for pedagogical innovation, familiarity with digital and XR tools, perceived barriers to implementation, professional development needs and views on sustainability-oriented tourism education. The industry survey addressed competency expectations, perceived gaps in graduate preparedness and the relevance of transversal competencies in professional practice.

The use of stakeholder-specific instruments was necessary because identical questions would not have captured the different roles and forms of expertise represented by the three groups. At the same time, thematic consistency enabled cross-stakeholder comparison and made it possible to examine not only which competencies were considered important, but also whether their importance was shared across educational and professional contexts.

3.4. Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages. Firstly, survey responses were reviewed separately for each stakeholder group to identify main competency expectations, perceived gaps and recurring themes. Secondly, results were compared across groups to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Convergence was understood as the recurrence of similar competency expectations across at least two stakeholder groups, while divergence referred to differences in emphasis,

interpretation or perceived urgency. Thirdly, identified competency areas were grouped into broader thematic domains. Fourth, these domains were synthesised into ESACoF.

The qualitative component drew on principles of thematic analysis, particularly the identification, review and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim was not to produce a purely inductive qualitative account, but to support structured interpretation of stakeholder responses and organise them into analytically meaningful domains. Where appropriate, interpretation was supported by systematic coding, comparison and grouping procedures consistent with established approaches to qualitative data analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

The analytical process was guided by the research questions rather than by a predefined competency taxonomy. This was important because the study aimed to develop a stakeholder-aligned framework emerging from empirical evidence, not to test an existing model. Nevertheless, interpretation was informed by the literature reviewed in Section 2, particularly the distinction between soft skills and transversal competencies and the understanding of curriculum innovation as a multi-stakeholder process.

3.5. Methodological scope and limitations

The study should be interpreted within its methodological scope. The survey design enabled the collection of stakeholder perspectives from multiple European contexts, but it did not aim to produce statistically representative findings for the entire European tourism sector. The cross-national character of the dataset strengthens the relevance of the findings for European VET debates, while the non-probabilistic and project-based character of the sample limits statistical generalisation.

A further limitation concerns the comparative interpretation of stakeholder perspectives. Students, teachers and industry representatives responded from different institutional and professional positions, meaning that their answers reflect different forms of experience and expertise. This is not treated as a weakness but as an essential feature of the research design. The purpose of the analysis was precisely to examine how these perspectives relate to one another and how areas of stakeholder alignment can inform curriculum innovation.

ESACoF should therefore not be interpreted as a validated measurement model or universal competency standard. It is proposed as a stakeholder-aligned conceptual framework that organises empirical findings into a structure useful for curriculum reflection, programme development and further research in tourism VET.

4. Results

4.1. Overview of stakeholder expectations

The analysis indicates that tourism VET is perceived as operating in a context of substantial transformation, in which traditional occupational preparation is no longer sufficient. Across the three stakeholder groups, recurrent expectations concerned competencies enabling graduates to function effectively in changing, technology-mediated and sustainability-oriented professional environments. Graduate preparedness was therefore understood not only in terms of technical knowledge, but also through transversal competencies related to communication, adaptability, collaboration, sustainability awareness, inclusiveness, digital readiness and entrepreneurial initiative.

The findings also show that these competencies are not perceived identically by students, teachers and industry representatives. Students emphasised employability, confidence, practical exposure and engaging learning experiences. Teachers focused on pedagogical feasibility, institutional support, access to tools and professional development needs. Industry representatives highlighted the operational relevance of transversal competencies, particularly in relation to service quality, customer interaction, sustainability practices and changing workplace requirements.

Table 3 provides a condensed overview of the main empirical patterns across the three stakeholder groups. Its analytical purpose is to show that the same broad competency agenda appears across the dataset, but from different institutional and experiential positions.

Table 3
Main empirical patterns identified across stakeholder groups

Stakeholder group	Main empirical pattern	Key findings	Analytical interpretation
VET students	Moderate perceived preparedness, combined with strong interest in practical and technology-enhanced learning	Students reported moderate preparation for the tourism labour market, limited practical exposure to advanced technologies and strong interest in XR-supported learning experiences	Students recognise the importance of future-oriented competencies, but perceive a gap between current learning experiences and emerging professional requirements
VET teachers	Interest in innovation constrained by limited resources, confidence and institutional capacity	Teachers expressed interest in digital and XR-based learning, but identified barriers such as lack of equipment, insufficient time, limited technical support and need for professional development	Teachers are potential enablers of curriculum innovation, but require institutional and methodological support
Tourism industry representatives	Strong emphasis on applied competencies and workplace readiness	Employers highlighted the need for graduates who can communicate effectively, adapt to workplace demands, apply sustainability principles and engage with digitalised service environments	Industry expectations confirm the need to connect VET curricula more directly with real professional practice
Cross-stakeholder synthesis	Convergence around transversal competencies	Communication, adaptability, sustainability, digital collaboration, inclusiveness and entrepreneurial initiative emerged as recurring competency areas	These areas provide the empirical basis for developing the stakeholder-aligned framework

4.2. Student perspectives: preparedness, practice and future-oriented learning

Student responses suggest that learners are aware of the changing character of tourism work but do not always feel sufficiently prepared for it. A substantial proportion recognised that technology would influence their future careers, with 70% indicating that technology would largely affect their professional future. At the same time, exposure to advanced digital tools was limited. Awareness of XR technologies was mostly moderate, while 60% indicated that they used such technologies seldom or rarely. This contrast between perceived relevance and limited practical experience is one of the clearest findings in the student data.

Students also reported only moderate confidence in using tourism-related technologies. While 45% described themselves as moderately confident, 40% indicated that their preparation for digital innovation was limited. These findings suggest that students do not reject technological change; rather, they perceive a lack of structured opportunities to develop confidence through practice. The data therefore point to a readiness gap: learners recognise the importance of digital and immersive technologies but require more systematic integration of these tools into VET curricula.

This interpretation is strengthened by students' strong interest in XR-supported learning. Around 80% expressed interest in using XR technologies in tourism education, and 75% were very interested in applications such as virtual tours and guest service simulations. From the student perspective, XR is therefore associated not merely with technological novelty, but with practical learning, employability and realistic preparation for professional tasks.

The student data also reveal broader concerns about practical preparation. Half of the respondents assessed their overall preparation for the tourism industry as moderate. Reported gaps included reservation systems, data analysis and XR operation. At the same time, 55% assessed their development of soft skills as moderate, and 50% indicated that opportunities to practise such skills occurred only sometimes. Students therefore perceive transversal competencies as important but insufficiently embedded in practical learning environments.

4.3. Teacher perspectives: innovation readiness and implementation constraints

Teacher responses reveal recognition of the need for educational innovation, but also significant implementation constraints. Teachers generally acknowledged the relevance of digital and XR technologies for tourism education, yet institutional support for teaching innovation was most often assessed as moderate, with 50% selecting this option. Innovation is therefore present in VET institutions, but not yet sufficiently embedded as a stable organisational practice.

A key finding concerns teachers' familiarity with XR and digital tools. Forty percent reported very little or no awareness of XR technologies, while 45% indicated limited familiarity with digital and XR tools more broadly. Confidence in integrating such tools into teaching was also limited: 50% described themselves as not very confident. These results indicate that teacher readiness is not simply a matter of motivation; it depends on training, equipment, technical support and curriculum time.

The barriers identified by teachers were concrete. Lack of equipment was reported by 80% of respondents, limited curriculum time by 65%, and lack of technical support by 60%. These findings shift the interpretation away from individual teacher reluctance towards institutional capacity. Teachers may be interested in innovation, but their ability to implement new methods is constrained by resources, infrastructure and organisational conditions.

At the same time, teachers expressed interest in professional development. Practical workshops were selected by 60% as a preferred form of support, while online courses and industry mentoring were also frequently indicated. This matters because transversal competencies cannot be implemented effectively without teachers who understand how to teach, observe and assess them. Teacher responses also confirmed the relevance of sustainability in tourism education, with 70% agreeing that XR could support green tourism education. This suggests a pedagogical bridge between digital innovation and sustainability learning, particularly through immersive scenarios simulating responsible decision-making and destination-level challenges.

4.4. Industry perspectives: workplace relevance and applied competency gaps

Industry responses confirm that tourism employers increasingly expect graduates to demonstrate applied, transferable and context-sensitive competencies. While technical knowledge remains important, industry representatives emphasised communication with customers and colleagues, adaptation to changing service situations, understanding of sustainability expectations and engagement with digitalised tourism environments. These expectations reflect tourism work in which service quality depends on interpersonal performance, operational flexibility and responsiveness to diverse visitor needs.

A particularly important finding concerns the applied nature of sustainability expectations. Industry representatives did not treat sustainability as abstract awareness alone. They referred to operational skills connected with environmental practices, responsible resource use, waste separation, sustainable mobility, eco-certification and the translation of sustainability principles into everyday tourism operations. Sustainability competencies in tourism VET should therefore be embedded in realistic occupational tasks and assessed through applied scenarios.

Industry responses also highlighted digital readiness. Employers increasingly expect graduates to be familiar with digital customer engagement, online communication, reservation systems, data-informed service improvement and technology-

enhanced tourism experiences. However, the emphasis was not only on tool operation. Digital readiness was linked with adaptability, problem-solving and the ability to learn new systems. This supports the interpretation of digital collaboration as a transversal competency rather than a narrow technical skill.

The industry perspective also points to entrepreneurial initiative. Tourism organisations operate in competitive, experience-oriented and volatile environments. Graduates are therefore expected to demonstrate initiative, creativity, responsiveness to customer needs and the ability to contribute to service innovation. Such expectations are especially relevant for sustainable and experience-based tourism, where new products, local partnerships and responsible business models require action beyond routine task execution.

4.5. Cross-stakeholder alignment and divergence

The comparison of student, teacher and industry perspectives shows that the strongest convergence concerns the importance of transversal competencies. Communication, adaptability, sustainability awareness, digital readiness, inclusiveness and entrepreneurial initiative appeared across the dataset as recurring areas of expected graduate preparedness. However, convergence at the level of broad competency labels does not imply full agreement regarding meaning, implementation or priority.

Students tended to frame competencies in relation to employability and confidence. Teachers interpreted them through curriculum feasibility, pedagogical methods and institutional support. Industry representatives understood them primarily in terms of workplace performance and operational relevance. This distinction is analytically important because stakeholder alignment cannot be assumed simply because similar terms appear across responses. A competency such as communication may be shared across groups, but it carries different implications for learning design, classroom practice and workplace assessment.

Table 4 synthesises the main areas of convergence and divergence across stakeholder groups. Its function is to show how the empirical results move beyond a list of desirable skills towards the alignment logic that underpins ESACoF.

Table 4
Main empirical patterns identified across stakeholder groups

Competency area	Student perspective	Teacher perspective	Industry perspective	Alignment interpretation
Communication	Linked to confidence, employability and interaction in learning contexts	Treated as a learning outcome requiring practice and assessment	Linked to customer service, teamwork and service recovery	Strong convergence; requires authentic communication tasks
Adaptability	Associated with readiness for changing careers and technologies	Connected with flexible teaching and capacity to update curricula	Linked to changing workplace demands and problem-solving	Strong convergence; central to future-oriented VET
Digital collaboration	Strong interest in XR and technology-enhanced learning, but limited experience	Interest constrained by lack of equipment, time and technical support	Need for practical digital readiness and customer-facing technology use	Convergence on importance, divergence on implementation conditions
Sustainability	Recognised as relevant to future tourism work	Seen as compatible with XR-supported and scenario-based learning	Understood as applied operational practice, not only awareness	Strong potential for curriculum integration through applied scenarios
Inclusiveness	Linked to interpersonal and intercultural learning needs	Requires pedagogical strategies supporting diverse learners	Relevant to diverse customers, teams and visitor expectations	Convergence exists but requires clearer operationalisation
Entrepreneurial initiative	Connected with employability and future opportunities	Requires active learning and project-based pedagogies	Linked to innovation, responsiveness and service development	Important but less consistently operationalised across groups

The comparison shows that the main empirical contribution of the study lies not in confirming that transversal competencies are important, since this is already established in the literature, but in showing how different stakeholder groups position these competencies within the tourism VET ecosystem. Students emphasise learning relevance, teachers emphasise pedagogical feasibility and industry representatives emphasise workplace applicability. These perspectives are complementary but not identical.

This finding provides the empirical foundation for ESACoF. The framework should not be understood as a simple list of competencies extracted from survey responses. Rather, it is a synthesis of areas where stakeholder expectations demonstrate sufficient convergence to inform curriculum innovation, while preserving awareness of differences in interpretation and implementation. In this sense, the results support a stakeholder-aligned approach to tourism VET curriculum design, in which competency development is treated as a shared responsibility of learners, educators and industry actors.

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that tourism VET is increasingly shaped by expectations extending beyond occupation-specific preparation. Across the three stakeholder groups, graduate preparedness was associated not only with technical knowledge, but also with communication, adaptability, sustainability awareness, inclusiveness, digital collaboration and entrepreneurial initiative. This confirms the broader shift from narrowly understood employability skills towards transversal competencies required for professional performance in dynamic, digitalised and sustainability-oriented labour markets (World Economic Forum, 2025; Cedefop, n.d.).

The results also show that stakeholder expectations are neither identical nor contradictory. They are partially aligned around a shared recognition of transversal competencies, while differing in how these competencies are interpreted and operationalised. Students focus on confidence, employability and practical learning; teachers focus on pedagogical feasibility, resources and curriculum implementation; employers focus on workplace performance, service quality and operational readiness. As shown in Table 4, stakeholder convergence exists primarily at the level of broad competency areas, while divergence appears in relation to implementation conditions and practical meaning.

This finding adds nuance to existing research on tourism and hospitality competencies. Previous studies have shown that employers value transferable skills and that tourism work develops competencies applicable beyond job-specific tasks (Stangl et al., 2024). Studies on entry-level tourism competencies have also demonstrated strong employer emphasis on applied, behavioural and communication-related skills (Derco & Tometzová, 2023). The present study extends this discussion by showing that competency development should not be approached only as a matter of employer demand. It should be understood as an alignment challenge involving learners, educators and industry actors.

This distinction is particularly important for tourism VET. If curriculum innovation is based only on employer expectations, it may produce training that is immediately useful but insufficiently future-oriented. Conversely, if curricula are designed only from the institutional perspective of schools or training providers, they may fail to respond to the operational realities of tourism work. The results suggest the need for a balanced approach integrating workplace relevance, pedagogical feasibility and learner experience.

The findings concerning digital and XR-related learning illustrate this point clearly. Students expressed strong interest in XR-supported learning and perceived it as relevant to employability. Teachers recognised its pedagogical potential but reported barriers related to equipment, time, technical support and confidence. Industry representatives emphasised digital readiness in relation to customer engagement, service processes and workplace adaptability. Together, these perspectives show that digital innovation in tourism VET cannot be reduced to introducing new tools into the classroom. It requires curriculum design that connects student motivation, teacher capacity and workplace relevance. This is consistent with research showing that tourism and hospitality curricula need to respond to digital transformation by redesigning learning environments and competency development processes, not merely by adding digital content (Busulwa et al., 2024).

A similar interpretation applies to sustainability. Across the dataset, sustainability emerged as a relevant competency area, but the findings indicate that it should not be understood as general awareness alone. Industry representatives emphasised applied practices, including resource use, waste separation, sustainable mobility and eco-certification. Teachers recognised the potential of immersive and scenario-based learning to support green tourism education, while students associated sustainability with future professional relevance. This suggests that sustainability competencies should be embedded in practical, situated and assessable learning tasks. The findings are consistent with GreenComp, which frames sustainability as knowledge, skills and attitudes enabling responsible action (Bianchi et al., 2022).

The study also strengthens the conceptual movement from soft skills to transversal competencies. The term “soft skills” remains useful as a recognisable entry point, particularly in employability discourse. However, the empirical findings support the broader concept of transversal competencies. Communication, adaptability, inclusiveness, sustainability and digital collaboration are not merely personal qualities or supplementary attributes. They are professional capabilities that structure how graduates act in changing workplace contexts. This supports the distinction presented in Table 1 and reinforces the use of transversal competencies as the main analytical category.

From a curriculum perspective, the most significant implication is that stakeholder alignment should be treated as an analytical process, not as a rhetorical commitment. It is not enough to state that students, teachers and employers should cooperate. Their perspectives must be compared systematically to identify where expectations converge, where they diverge and what these patterns mean for curriculum design. Figure 1 reflects this logic by showing a sequence from

stakeholder expectations to alignment, thematic synthesis, ESACoF and curriculum innovation. This sequence prevents the framework from becoming an abstract list of competencies detached from empirical evidence.

The findings therefore support the development of ESACoF as a tourism VET-specific synthesis of stakeholder-aligned transversal competencies. Its value lies in connecting three dimensions often discussed separately: learner preparedness, pedagogical implementation and workplace relevance. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of recognising divergence rather than eliminating it. Differences between stakeholder groups may reveal productive curriculum tensions, such as the gap between students' desire for engaging technologies, teachers' limited resources and employers' emphasis on operational readiness. Such tensions indicate where curriculum innovation requires negotiation, institutional support and pedagogical design rather than simple competency listing.

6. The European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework

The findings provide the basis for the development of the European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework (ESACoF). The framework is proposed as a conceptual tool for organising transversal competencies in tourism VET according to areas of stakeholder convergence and curriculum relevance. ESACoF is not a measurement scale, formal qualification standard or validated predictive model. Rather, it synthesises empirically identified stakeholder expectations into a structure that can support curriculum reflection, programme development and further research.

The central premise of ESACoF is that transversal competencies should not be derived from a single source of authority. In tourism VET, competencies emerge at the intersection of student learning needs, teacher implementation capacity and industry expectations. For this reason, the framework is built around stakeholder alignment rather than around an abstract list of desirable skills. A competency domain is treated as particularly relevant when it appears across stakeholder perspectives and can be translated into meaningful curriculum action.

Based on the empirical analysis, ESACoF identifies six stakeholder-aligned competency domains: communication, adaptability, digital collaboration, sustainability mindset, inclusiveness and entrepreneurial initiative. These domains should not be interpreted as isolated categories. They are mutually reinforcing and frequently overlap in tourism practice. Sustainable tourism requires communication with visitors and local communities; digital collaboration often depends on adaptability and problem-solving; inclusiveness is closely connected with intercultural communication and ethical service delivery. The purpose of the framework is therefore not to separate competencies artificially, but to organise them in a way that is useful for curriculum design.

Table 5 presents the ESACoF structure and shows how each competency domain is grounded in stakeholder alignment, translated into curriculum relevance and connected with possible learning and assessment approaches. Its analytical function is to demonstrate how the study moves from empirical stakeholder expectations to a curriculum-oriented conceptual framework.

Table 5
European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework (ESACoF)

ESACoF domain	Stakeholder alignment	Curriculum relevance	Possible learning and assessment approaches
Communication	Students associate communication with confidence and employability; teachers approach it as a learning outcome; industry links it to service quality and teamwork	Central to customer interaction, teamwork, intercultural service and professional conduct	Role plays, service simulations, customer interaction scenarios, peer feedback, oral assessment
Adaptability	Students link it to career readiness; teachers connect it with flexible learning; industry associates it with changing workplace demands	Enables graduates to respond to technological, organisational and market change	Problem-based learning, scenario analysis, reflective journals, changing-task simulations
Digital collaboration	Students show strong interest in XR and digital learning; teachers need support and resources; industry expects practical digital readiness	Connects digital tools with teamwork, service innovation and technology-mediated tourism work	XR simulations, collaborative digital projects, reservation system exercises, digital customer journey mapping
Sustainability mindset	Students recognise sustainability as future-relevant; teachers see potential for scenario-based learning; industry emphasises applied sustainability practices	Translates sustainability from awareness into responsible operational decision-making	Eco-certification tasks, sustainable mobility planning, waste and resource management scenarios, destination case studies
Inclusiveness	Students associate it with interpersonal and intercultural readiness; teachers link it to inclusive pedagogy; industry connects it with diverse customers and teams	Supports ethical, accessible and culturally responsive tourism services	Intercultural communication tasks, accessibility audits, inclusive service design, reflective case analysis
Entrepreneurial initiative	Students connect it with employability and opportunity; teachers require active pedagogies; industry links it to innovation and responsiveness	Supports service development, initiative, creativity and responsible tourism entrepreneurship	Project-based learning, tourism product design, local partnership projects, business model exercises

The framework makes three contributions to tourism VET curriculum thinking. Firstly, it provides a structured way to move from stakeholder evidence to curriculum priorities. Rather than treating student, teacher and employer responses as separate datasets, ESACoF identifies competency domains emerging through comparison and synthesis. Curriculum innovation depends not only on recognising what different groups consider important, but on identifying where their expectations can form a shared basis for educational action.

Secondly, ESACoF reframes transversal competencies as curriculum design principles rather than supplementary employability skills. Communication, adaptability, inclusiveness and sustainability cannot be effectively addressed through isolated modules detached from professional practice. They require integration into learning outcomes, teaching methods, assessment strategies and work-based learning. The framework therefore encourages institutions to ask not only whether a competency is included in the curriculum, but how it is practised, assessed and connected with real tourism contexts.

Thirdly, ESACoF highlights the need to connect competency development with implementation conditions. Teacher data show that even when innovation is considered desirable, it may be constrained by lack of resources, limited time, insufficient training or weak institutional support. The framework should therefore not be understood as a list of expectations placed on teachers. It is better interpreted as a tool for institutional curriculum planning requiring coordination between VET providers, teachers, employers and learners.

A distinctive feature of ESACoF is that it preserves stakeholder divergence rather than masking it. The same competency may have different meanings for different actors: communication may refer to student confidence, teacher-assessed interaction or employer-valued customer service; sustainability may refer to environmental awareness, scenario-based learning or operational practice. These differences are precisely the reason why stakeholder alignment is needed. ESACoF provides a structure through which such differences can be made visible and translated into curriculum decisions.

7. Practical implications for tourism VET curriculum innovation

The findings have practical implications for tourism VET providers, teachers, curriculum designers and industry partners. The central implication is that transversal competencies should not be treated as additional or peripheral learning outcomes. They should be embedded across curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment practices and work-based learning arrangements. Communication, adaptability, sustainability mindset, inclusiveness, digital collaboration and entrepreneurial initiative are relevant because they connect educational preparation with changing professional realities in tourism.

Firstly, tourism VET providers can use stakeholder alignment as a curriculum diagnostic tool. The results show that students, teachers and industry representatives broadly recognise the importance of transversal competencies but interpret them differently. Curriculum development should therefore begin not only with identifying required skills, but with comparing stakeholder expectations. Such comparison can help institutions determine whether learning outcomes are meaningful for students, feasible for teachers and relevant for employers. ESACoF can support curriculum mapping by helping providers identify which domains are already addressed, which are underdeveloped and which require stronger links with professional practice.

Secondly, transversal competencies should be developed through authentic and practice-oriented learning. Competencies such as communication, adaptability or inclusiveness cannot be effectively taught through lectures alone. They require situations in which students act, communicate, solve problems, reflect and receive feedback. In tourism VET, this may include service simulations, intercultural scenarios, destination case studies, customer journey mapping, sustainability audits, project-based learning and work-based assignments.

Thirdly, the study highlights the importance of teacher professional development. Teachers are central to the implementation of competency-oriented curricula, but innovation may be constrained by limited equipment, lack of time, insufficient technical support and low confidence in using digital or XR-based tools. Curriculum innovation should therefore not be framed as an individual responsibility of teachers alone. Institutions need to provide structured support, including practical workshops, peer learning, access to digital resources, industry mentoring and time for curriculum experimentation.

Fourthly, sustainability should be integrated as an applied professional competency rather than a general awareness topic. Industry responses show that sustainability expectations are connected with resource management, waste reduction, sustainable mobility, eco-certification and responsible service design. Tourism VET curricula should therefore translate sustainability into tasks that students can analyse, perform and assess, such as designing low-impact tourism products, comparing certification schemes or simulating responsible decision-making in tourism operations.

Fifthly, digital and XR-supported learning should be linked with competency development rather than introduced as technological add-ons. Student interest in XR indicates strong potential for immersive learning, but teacher responses show that implementation requires resources and support. The value of XR lies in creating realistic learning environments for practising customer interaction, destination interpretation, accessibility planning, crisis response and sustainability-related decision-making.

Table 6 translates the ESACoF domains into practical curriculum actions. Its purpose is to show how the conceptual framework can be operationalised by VET institutions without reducing it to a generic skills checklist.

Table 6
Practical translation of ESACoF into tourism VET curriculum innovation

ESACoF domain	Curriculum action	Teaching and learning example	Assessment focus
Communication	Integrate authentic interaction tasks across modules	Customer service simulations, intercultural role plays, complaint-handling scenarios	Clarity, empathy, professional language, responsiveness
Adaptability	Expose students to changing and uncertain professional situations	Scenario-based tasks with changing customer needs, crisis-response exercises	Flexibility, problem-solving, reflection, decision-making
Digital collaboration	Use digital tools to support teamwork and tourism service design	Collaborative digital projects, XR-supported destination tasks, online customer journey mapping	Team coordination, digital fluency, task completion, service logic
Sustainability mindset	Translate sustainability principles into operational tourism tasks	Eco-certification analysis, waste and resource management scenarios, sustainable mobility planning	Applied sustainability reasoning, feasibility, responsible decision-making
Inclusiveness	Embed accessibility, diversity and intercultural sensitivity into service design	Accessibility audits, inclusive tourism product design, multicultural visitor scenarios	Ethical awareness, inclusivity, accessibility, cultural responsiveness
Entrepreneurial initiative	Connect learning with innovation and opportunity recognition	Development of sustainable tourism products, local partnership projects, business model exercises	Creativity, initiative, market relevance, responsible innovation

The practical value of ESACoF lies in supporting dialogue between education and work. For VET providers, the framework can be used to review curricula, redesign learning outcomes and identify opportunities for authentic assessment. For teachers, it provides a language for integrating transversal competencies into daily practice. For industry partners, it offers a clearer structure for communicating expectations and co-designing work-based learning. For students, it makes competency development more visible by connecting classroom learning with future professional roles.

Finally, ESACoF should be applied as a framework for continuous curriculum reflection rather than as a fixed template. Stakeholder expectations will evolve as tourism work changes. VET institutions can periodically revisit the six domains, compare stakeholder perspectives and adjust teaching, assessment and work-based learning accordingly. In this way, the framework can contribute not only to one-time curriculum reform, but to a more responsive model of tourism VET developmentent.

8. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. At first, the empirical material was collected within a European project partnership and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all tourism VET systems in Europe. The cross-national scope strengthens the relevance of the findings beyond a single national context, but the sample remains project-based and exploratory. The findings should therefore be understood as stakeholder-informed evidence for conceptual framework development rather than as a basis for broad statistical generalisation.

Secondly, the study relies on survey-based stakeholder responses. This made it possible to collect comparable data from students, teachers and industry representatives, but limited the depth with which individual interpretations could be explored. Competency domains such as inclusiveness, sustainability mindset and entrepreneurial initiative may carry different meanings across national, institutional and organisational contexts. Future research could complement survey data with interviews, focus groups or participatory curriculum workshops to examine how stakeholders define and negotiate these competencies.

Next, the study focuses on stakeholder expectations rather than direct measurement of competency development or learning outcomes. ESACoF is therefore not presented as a validated assessment model. It should be understood as a conceptual framework that organises stakeholder-aligned domains and translates them into curriculum-oriented implications. Future studies could examine how the framework performs when applied in curriculum redesign, teaching practice or work-based learning, including whether it supports clearer learning outcomes, authentic assessment and stronger school-industry cooperation.

Finally, further research is needed on the assessment of transversal competencies in tourism VET. Competencies such as communication, adaptability, inclusiveness, sustainability and digital collaboration require authentic and practice-based learning environments, but their assessment remains methodologically challenging. Future studies should therefore explore rubrics, simulation-based tasks and work-based evaluation methods capable of capturing these competencies in ways that are educationally meaningful and practically feasible.

9. Conclusions

This article examined stakeholder expectations regarding transversal competencies in tourism VET and developed the European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework as a conceptual response to the identified curriculum challenge. The study assumed that graduate preparedness in tourism can no longer be understood solely through technical skills or occupation-specific knowledge. It increasingly depends on transversal competencies enabling graduates to communicate, adapt, collaborate digitally, act inclusively, think sustainably and demonstrate entrepreneurial initiative.

The findings show that students, teachers and tourism industry representatives broadly converge around the importance of transversal competencies but differ in how they interpret and operationalise them. Students understand these competencies through employability, confidence and practical learning. Teachers emphasise pedagogical feasibility, institutional support and professional development needs. Industry representatives focus on workplace performance, operational readiness and service quality. These differences demonstrate that stakeholder alignment should not be assumed; it must be analysed and translated into curriculum decisions.

The main contribution of the article is ESACoF, which organises six stakeholder-aligned domains: communication, adaptability, digital collaboration, sustainability mindset, inclusiveness and entrepreneurial initiative. The framework does not replace existing competency models or qualification standards. Rather, it offers a tourism VET-specific structure for connecting learner expectations, teacher implementation conditions and industry requirements. Its value lies in moving beyond generic lists of desirable skills towards a curriculum-oriented understanding of how transversal competencies can be embedded in teaching, assessment and work-based learning.

The study also contributes to the conceptual shift from soft skills to transversal competencies. While the term of “soft skills” remains recognisable in employability discourse, it is insufficient for capturing the complexity of graduate preparedness in a changing tourism sector. Transversal competencies provide a more precise analytical lens because they emphasise transferability, contextual application and integration across learning and work environments.

In conclusion, the future of tourism VET depends on its capacity to prepare graduates not only for current jobs, but for changing professional environments shaped by digitalisation, sustainability and social transformation. A stakeholder-aligned approach to transversal competencies offers one way to strengthen this capacity. By integrating the perspectives of students, teachers and industry representatives, ESACoF provides a conceptual basis for more responsive, inclusive and future-oriented tourism vocational education.

Declarations

All participants provided informed consent to participate in this study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the intended use of the collected data. Survey responses and research data were collected and analyzed in accordance with applicable ethical standards and were used solely for scientific and research purposes.

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Figures

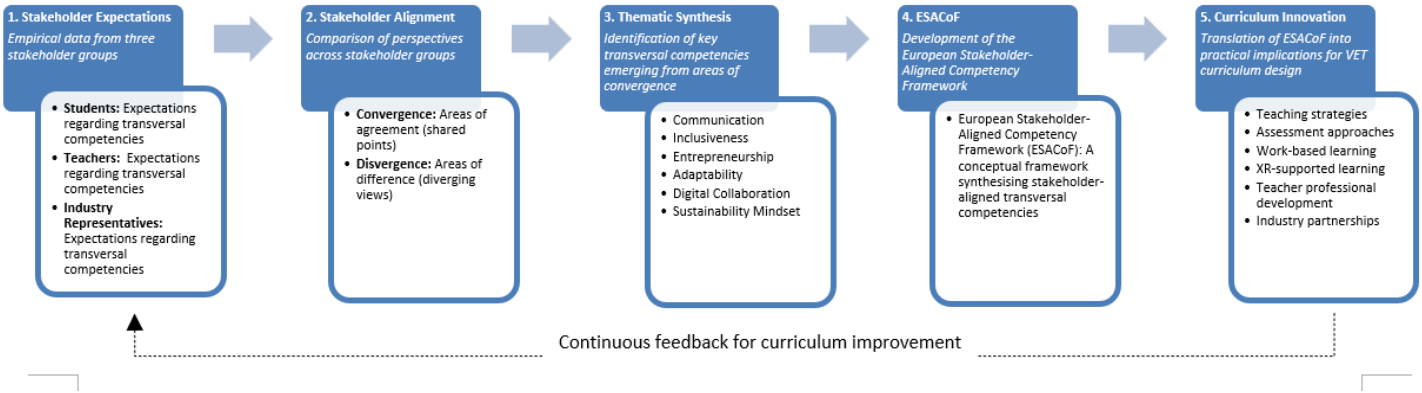


Figure 1

Research logic underlying the development of the European Stakeholder-Aligned Competency Framework (ESACoF).

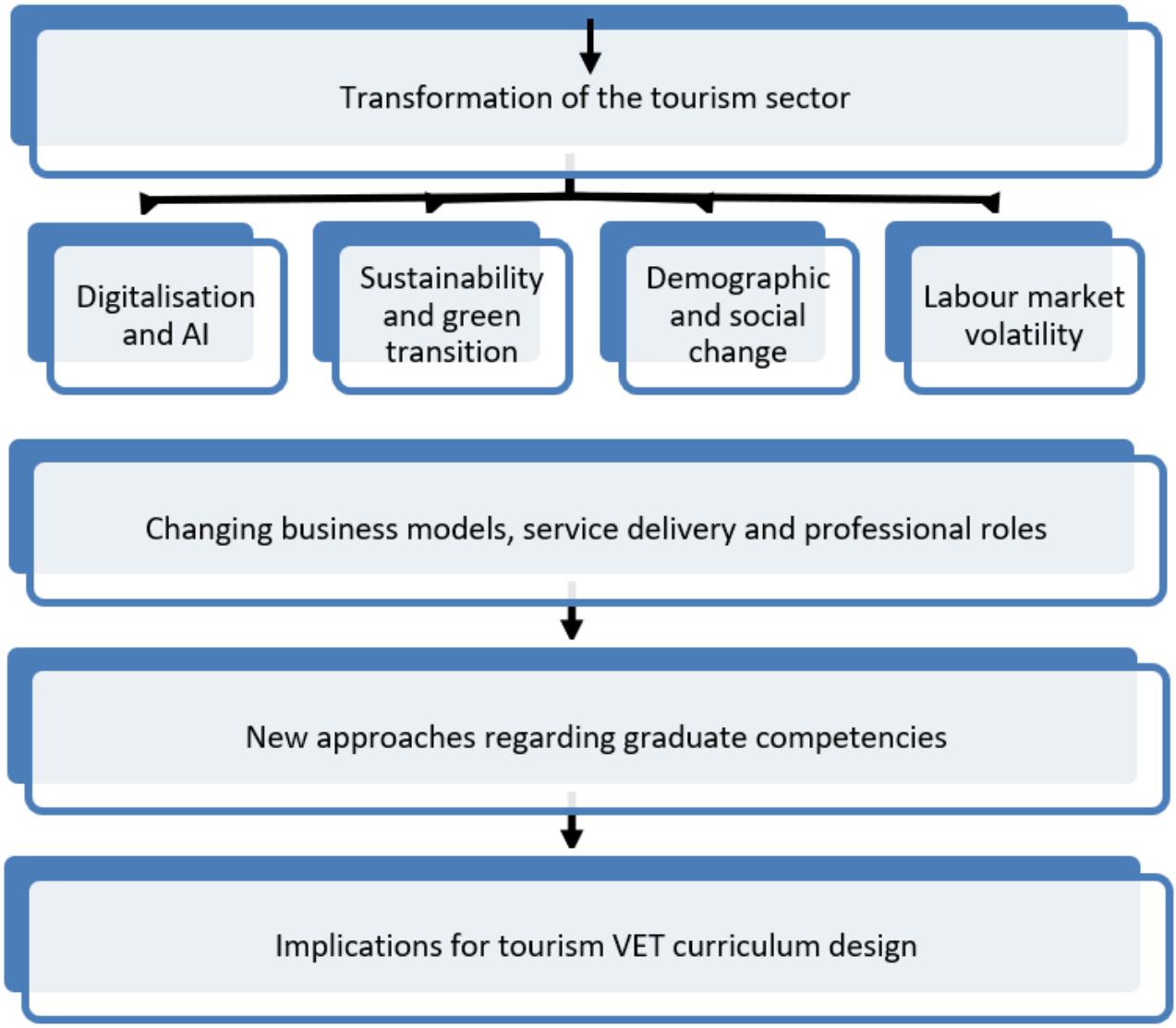


Figure 2

Key drivers transforming competency requirements in the tourism sector.