

SUSTAINABILITY COMPETENCIES IN HOSPITALITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM INDUSTRY LEADERS

Abstract

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Purpose – The integration of sustainability in the tourism industry has become a priority, driven by environmental concerns, evolving regulatory frameworks, and technological advancements. However, while sustainability is increasingly recognized as a strategic line, a gap between the theoretical sustainability education offered in academic institutions and the practical competencies required by the industry still remains. This study focuses on how hotel industry managers perceive sustainability as part of their operations, the competencies they consider essential for future professionals’ performance, and how sustainability strategies influence recruitment and employer branding. Furthermore, it is discussed whether current academic programs sufficiently prepare students with the necessary skills and competencies to manage sustainable tourism operations.

Methodology – This study adopts a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, carried out with hotel industry managers responsible for sustainability initiatives in order to examine their views on sustainability-oriented competencies in recruitment and professional development. A content analysis was conducted based on the in-depth interviews and the sustainability reports from leading hotel industry stakeholders, identifying trends in sustainability commitments and workforce integration.

Findings – Findings indicate that sustainability is increasingly incorporated in hotel operations, but significant gaps remain in workforce competencies. Key findings include a general lack of practical training related with sustainability practices while for those already working in companies operating within sustainability concepts, the sustainability training that exists are often generic and don’t sufficiently prepare employees for operational challenges.

Contribution – In continuance, a gap between industry expectations and workforce readiness is indicated. This paper, as contribution, both to the academia and hotel industry, and may help to design and propose initiatives that bridge the gap in perception and expectations of HRM in the sustainable hotel industry.

Keywords Sustainability, tourism workforce development, competencies, green human resource management (GHRM), sustainable tourism

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INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is increasingly engaging in sustainability transformation due to environmental concerns, regulatory pressures, and evolving customer expectations. As a resource-intensive sector, hotels face significant challenges in aligning their operations with sustainable development goals while maintaining competitiveness and service quality (Bagheri et al., 2023; Ek Styvén et al., 2022). In response, many hotel groups have begun to implement formal corporate sustainability strategies (CSS) (Guerra-Lombardi et al., 2024). However, a critical issue persists: the successful operationalization of these strategies largely depends on the availability of qualified professionals with the competencies to drive and manage sustainability efforts across all organizational levels.

Moreover, the tourism and hospitality education system is under scrutiny. While academic institutions are expected to prepare students to meet the sector’s emerging sustainability demands, several studies question whether current programs adequately prepare graduates with the practical, interdisciplinary skills required for effective implementation (Mínguez et al., 2021; Scott & Willison, 2021). A growing body of literature calls for more applied, cross-cutting learning models and greater alignment between education and industry needs (Silva et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2020).

The intersection between education, corporate strategy, and human resources (HR) thus becomes a focal point in the discourse on sustainable tourism development. As emphasized in studies on green HR management (GHRM), workforce alignment is key to ensuring the internalization of sustainability values and practices in daily hotel operations (Tanova & Bayighomog, 2022; Hong et al., 2024). Yet, the integration of sustainability into HRM processes —particularly in recruitment, training, and staff development— remains underdeveloped in many organizations. Moreover, concerns have been raised about the growing gap between what graduates expect and what the industry can offer in terms of sustainable careers, generating friction or paradoxes at the point of entry into the workforce (Hall, 2011).

In this context, it becomes crucial to explore how sustainability is understood and operationalized by hotel industry leaders, and how they perceive the role, preparedness, and employability of future professionals. This paper seeks to address these gaps through a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with sustainability and HR managers from five hotel groups operating in

Spain and Croatia. The research explores how sustainability strategies are implemented internally, what barriers and competencies are most relevant, and how hotel groups are (or are not) integrating sustainability into their workforce management.

Based on this, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do hotel industry representatives perceive and operationalize sustainability within their corporate strategies and HR practices?
- RQ2. What specific sustainability-related competencies are valued in hospitality, and how are these assessed, developed, or lacking among current professionals?
- RQ3. To what extent is there alignment between higher education programs and the actual sustainability needs of hotel companies?

By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to the growing literature on sustainability in tourism and hospitality from a dual perspective, linking education and workforce practices to CSS. The findings offer valuable contributions for both academia and industry, helping to bridge the gap between future professional expectations and real-world implementation needs.

1. SUSTAINABILITY IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY: YOUNG PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTION AND EDUCATION ASPECTS - THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Current trends underscore sustainability as a fundamental principle within the hospitality and hotel industry. Incorporating sustainability into hotel operations yields multiple organizational benefits and encompasses a range of initiatives and strategies for effective implementation. Conceptually, corporate sustainability has been described using several terms, such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Corporate Environmental Responsibility (CER), and Corporate Sustainable Governance (CSG) (Guerra-Lombardi et al., 2024, 2). The recognition of responsible business practices and their significance is influenced by factors such as educational initiatives, corporate culture, and the developmental stage of society.

The concept of green hospitality is intrinsically connected to contemporary tourism trends that emphasize sustainability, innovation, and responsible travel practices. According to Gaafar et al. (2024), the impact of green human resource management (HRM) within the operations of green travel agencies is emphasized. Furthermore, current developments in the green hospitality sector encompass the use of environmentally sustainable materials and construction techniques, the integration of advanced energy management systems, the adoption of renewable energy sources, effective water resource management, sustainable waste management practices, the promotion of local products, the implementation of emerging technologies and digital solutions, adherence to green building standards, transparency in information dissemination, and ethical human resource management practices, as noted by Floričić (2020).

1.1. New approach to sustainability in hotel industry: human resources and corporate sustainability

In a dynamic tourism economy, young professionals and entrepreneurs involved in the hospitality industry focus interest in economic sustainability. The orientation stems from the assumption that they aim to rationalize business processes and implement innovations that are related with cost reduction and savings. Also, it influences better position of themselves in the market through sustainable business practices (Pham et al. 2020).

Sustainable entrepreneurship is associated with the pursuit of benefits and practices designed to identify opportunities that generate value for individuals, organizations, and society (Ivasciuc and Ispas, 2023; Garavan et al., 2023). Emerging business models are fundamentally reliant on innovation. Öztürkoğlu et al. (2019) explore the connection between the dimensions of service innovation and the triple bottom line (TBL), which encompasses social, environmental, and economic facets of sustainability. Tanova and Bayıghomog (2022) underscore the significance of green human resource management (HRM) in the service sector, investigating its constructs, antecedents, and effects on organizational performance. Their research builds upon the conceptual HRM model proposed by Ari et al. (2020), which serves as a foundation for implementation in business practices. Furthermore, Samaibekova et al. (2021) concentrate their research on corporate sustainability and social responsibility, focusing on the economic dimensions of sustainable initiatives, whereas Tandon et al. (2023) assess both green and non-green outcomes of green HRM within the tourism industry.

The contemporary roles occupied by young professionals in the tourism and hospitality sector—particularly in relation to the integration of green hotel entrepreneurship and sustainable development—are undergoing considerable transformation. Hong et al. (2024) assess the impact of green human resource management (HRM) on employee behavior within hotel settings, while Abbas et al. (2023) delineate the mechanisms through which green HRM contributes to environmental and social sustainability in hotels. Recent studies indicate a growing interest among young professionals in the advancement of green business practices. These individuals exhibit an elevated level of contemporary social skills, reflecting enhancements gained through practical experience.

The research underscores that digital proficiency, green competencies, and social acumen collectively establish an essential skill framework vital for success in the tourism and hospitality industries. This framework must be incorporated into sustainability-driven management strategies (Silva et al., 2025, p. 15). Young professionals offer innovative perspectives and exhibit strong motivation toward environmental conservation and sustainable development. They are instrumental in raising awareness about ecological issues and play a pivotal role in educating others on the significance of sustainable tourism practices. Moreover, they are actively engaged in developing innovative solutions and implementing sustainable practices.

Song et al. (2021) investigate the effects of green HRM on fostering green innovations and highlight the inclination of young professionals to promote international collaborations and network with peers in the field. The works of Pham et al. (2019) and Zhang et al. (2024) further explore how green HRM practices can influence organizational citizenship behaviors within hotel organizations.

In conclusion, fostering youth participation in the tourism sector is critical for ensuring its sustainable future. The involvement of a new generation of entrepreneurs is transforming tourism into a vital avenue for enhancing individuals' experiences and perceptions of quality of life within urban settings, while simultaneously reinforcing strong connections within local communities (Salvatore et al., 2021, 119).

Sustainable practices significantly impact consumer behavior, as discussed by Rana et al. (2023) in their exploration of consumer happiness and tourism expenditure trends. Building on this foundation, Khoi and Le (2025) delve into the relationship between green value, particularly in terms of co-creation experiences and customer brand engagement within the luxury hotel sector. Their research highlights the influence of green satisfaction, emotional attachment, and environmental apathy on consumer preferences.

As sustainable business practices gain traction, the challenge of greenwashing emerges as a critical concern for companies in the hospitality industry. Floričić et al. (2024) provide an analysis of greenwashing, characterizing it as a form of manipulative marketing where organizations or products are presented as more environmentally friendly than they genuinely are. Through strategic marketing and public relations efforts, these companies aim to enhance their public image to drive profits. As a result, consumers increasingly exercise caution when purchasing items labeled as "eco," "green," "organic," or "sustainable." Failure to recognize greenwashing can create challenges for emerging professionals, who may inadvertently invest in products that are not genuinely sustainable. Moreover, due to a lack of awareness or signs of negligence, some products may be misclassified as unsustainable. When integrating sustainability into business practices, it is vital to avoid the phenomenon known as green fatigue—a condition in which individuals experience exhaustion from persistent messaging that promotes an ecological and sustainable lifestyle as a remedy for the environmental crises caused by pollution (Čukušić, 2023).

In their study, Akhtar et al. (2023) examine the dimensions of responsible leadership, organizational ethics, and green innovations. They emphasize the critical importance of resource eco-efficiency, particularly in relation to waste management, including food waste reduction, as essential strategies for minimizing carbon footprints and promoting responsible conduct. Consequently, it is imperative for emerging professionals to be conscientious in their business practices, recognizing that the implementation of green and sustainable strategies is a complex undertaking. Successfully navigating this landscape requires a delicate equilibrium between genuine sustainable initiatives and pragmatic business objectives. Hall (2011) further elucidates that, in the quest for operational efficiency, local specialists frequently overlook the tangible advantages of embracing sustainability standards. This oversight persists despite ongoing challenges in local tourism development, such as seasonality, competition, high taxation, rising land costs, and various external factors that remain inadequately addressed. Additionally, while awareness of sustainability is on the rise, the tangible outcomes of global and national policies aimed at promoting local development remain disappointing, indicating substantial room for improvement regarding perceptions and initiatives. Consequently, tourism emerges as a pivotal mechanism for reshaping individual lifestyles and enhancing perceptions of quality of life, while simultaneously fostering stronger community connections—a transformation driven by the innovative efforts of a new generation of young entrepreneurs.

1.2. Sustainability values and awareness of human resources in the hotel industry

Alreahi et al. (2023) analyse green human resource management in the hotel industry and present systematic review of the contemporary knowledge related to sustainability and responsibility in employees' behavior.

Adoption of sustainability values play an important role in positioning the hotel identity in the market and therefore, employment of sustainability conscious professionals contributes to the company's perception in a competitive environment (Hameed et al, 2021).

Human resources engagement is essential for driving the technological and cultural changes that influence achievement of sustainability goals, discuss Huo et al. (2022). They address the modern trends in contemporary tourism management and point out the significance of hotel management transformations in the tourism environment. The sustainability within Smart concept reflects values of three basic pillars both, in business organization and services delivery. Smart hotel industry is designed to offer inclusive and accessible hospitality for all visitors, ensuring a seamless experience through multilingual services and digital tools.

These hotels are committed to sustainability through effective natural resource management, and creation of an environment that reduces the impact of seasonality. Additionally, they focus on actively involving the local community, which supports local entrepreneurship and contributes to a more diverse and resilient tourism economy (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

In the hotel industry, human resources management (HRM) plays a crucial role in implementing these smart hospitality industry concepts. Hotels must invest in training their staff to provide high-quality, personalized services that align with the principles of sustainability, technology, and accessibility. As digital technologies become integral to the tourist experience, HRM strategies in hotels focus on equipping employees with the skills to leverage these tools effectively, enhancing both operational efficiency and guest satisfaction. Furthermore, Moin et al. (2021) discuss that sustainability within Smart concept provides initiatives related with safety and security that influence psychological safety both of the employees and guests, while Sas et al (2021) research physical security and self-awareness of employees including knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. In addition, sustainable practices, such as energy-efficient heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (VACS) systems, water management, and waste reduction—including food waste—require hotel staff to be trained in resource conservation and eco-friendly practices (Floričić, 2022)..

Moreover, the integration of cultural heritage and creativity within the destination's offering means that HRM strategies must emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity, creativity, and continuous employee development to ensure that the tourist experience is both authentic and innovative (Sorokina, 2022). In continuation, Pham et al. (2020) in their study elaborate employee in-role green performance (EIGP) according to cultural and geographical aspects. They compare Western branded hotels and local hotels and measure employee environmental commitment and conclude that the commitment is stronger at hotels managed by Western hospitality companies that implement standards and procedures including those related with sustainability.

To effectively plan, implement, and maintain sustainability standards, hotels tend to hire experts, which could require a substantial investment. Amrutha & Geetha (2021) discuss the other more cost friendly solutions. These are to in house train employees and to empower their skills and know how related to sustainability values and initiatives or to hire young professionals, employees with sustainability empowered educational background. They explore linking of organizational green training and voluntary workplace green behavior that leads to employees' "green" satisfaction. Moreover, Bozionelos et al. (2020) explain advantages and possibilities of enhancing the sustainability of employees' careers through supervised training, pointing out the values of communication. In wider context, Jaworski et al. (2018) explain the effects of training satisfaction, employee benefits, and incentives on employees' commitment pointing out the importance of fair compensation.

In their study, Karatepe et al. (2022) investigate and compare the outcomes of employees working in green versus non-green hotels. They examine the interconnections between GHRM, perceived organizational support for environmental sustainability, work engagement, task-related pro-environmental behavior, and employees' intentions to quit. The findings indicate that the implementation of green human resource management practices positively influences employees' perceptions of organizational support for environmental initiatives. Furthermore, perceived organizational support for the environment is shown to enhance work engagement, encourage task-related pro-environmental behaviors, and reduce employees' intentions to leave the organization.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how hotel industry professionals perceive sustainability and evaluate the competencies they seek in future tourism employees. A total of five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with hotel managers from leading hotel chains in Croatia and Spain between December 2024 and February 2025.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling strategy (Etikan, 2016), targeting professionals actively involved in implementing sustainability strategies. The interviewees held either sustainability management or human resources leadership positions, allowing for diverse perspectives on sustainability implementation and workforce development. As shown in Table 1, the hotel groups vary significantly in size and geographical scope, with properties ranging from a single resort to over 50 establishments and capacities exceeding 20,000 rooms.

Table 1: **Sampling data**

Interview	Hotel group	Role of Interviewee	Country (Region)	N° of properties	N° of rooms	Sustainability strategy available
1	A	Sustainability manager	Croatia / Hungary / Austria / Germany / Serbia	29	>10.000	✓
2	B	General manager	Croatia (Istria)	1	233	X
3	C	Sustainability manager	Croatia / Austria	51	>21.000	✓
4	D	HR manager	Spain (Canary Islands)	5	1.145	✓
5	E	Sustainability manager	Spain (Canary Islands)	5	1.225	✓

Note: Hotel group names are coded for the purpose of anonymity. Data in the archive of authors.
 Source: Authors' research.

Three of the groups are based in Croatia, with operations also extending to countries such as Austria, Germany, Hungary, and Serbia. Two Spanish hotel groups, both located in the Canary Islands, contributed additional insights, providing a comparative framework across different regional and organizational contexts. While four out of five groups have formal sustainability strategies publicly available, one group (a recently established resort) is still in the process of consolidating its approach. This diversity strengthens the relevance of the findings and supports the exploration of varied stages of sustainability maturity within the hospitality sector.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol based on previous literature (Table 2) covering the following areas: (1) sustainability perceptions, (2) Sustainability competencies, (3) alignment between education and industry expectations, (4) challenges and barriers to sustainability, and (5) sustainability and employability. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 2: **Thematic areas of the study based on previous literature**

Key Themes	Interviews	References
Perceptions of sustainability	How sustainability fits into corporate strategies and branding.	<i>Guerra-Lombardi et al. (2024); Rana et al. (2023)</i>
Sustainability competencies	Industry perspective about the most valued competencies in sustainable hotel management.	<i>Garavan et al., (2022); Jithendran & Baum (2000)</i>
Alignment between education and industry expectations	Is there a gap between academic training and actual industry needs?	<i>Garavan et al., (2022); Wakelin-Theron et al. (2018)</i>
Challenges and barriers to sustainability	Operational, financial and regulatory challenges faced by hotels.	<i>Guerra-Lombardi et al. (2024); Akhtar et al. (2023)</i>
Role of future professionals in sustainability	What role do employers expect young professionals to play in sustainability initiatives?	<i>Jithendran & Baum (2000); Silva et al. (2025); Akhtar et al. (2023)</i>
Sustainability and employability	How do sustainability credentials impact hiring and employer branding?	<i>Garavan et al. (2022); Pham et al. (2020)</i>

Source: Authors' research

A content analysis of the interviews was conducted using MAXQDA24 (Bazeley & Jackson, 2007) adopting a thematic coding approach. Coding was guided by previous literature on GHRM and sustainability in tourism (e.g., Abbas et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2020), allowing for both deductive and inductive theme development. Major themes such as competencies for sustainability and perceptions of employer commitment were identified.

In addition, a content analysis of sustainability reports from selected hotel groups was carried out to contextualize the interview findings and identify patterns in sustainability commitments and workforce integration. This methodological triangulation supports a comprehensive understanding of the gap between workforce and industry sustainability expectations and provides relevant insights for both academic and practical applications.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews conducted with sustainability and human resources representatives from leading hotel groups based in Croatia and Spain provide relevant qualitative evidence into how sustainability is being integrated into operations, workforce expectations, and recruitment strategies within the industry. Table 3 summarizes the most salient findings derived from the interviews, demonstrating the diversity of experiences and implementation levels across different hotel groups.

Table 3: Key highlights by hotel group interviewed

Hotel group	Key highlights
A	Consolidated ESG strategy integrated in KPIs; emphasis on holistic understanding of sustainability; training challenges with seasonal/foreign staff.
B	Young resort focused on seasonality and international clients; electric transport initiatives; values attitude over experience; mismatch between graduate expectations and sector reality.
C	Strong corporate sustainability structure; dedicated teams and annual strategy; difficulty finding ESG-knowledgeable candidates; developing internal evaluation systems.
D	Sustainability not yet embedded in recruitment; growing interest in aligning training with strategy; emotional involvement and intrinsic motivation of staff seen as essential.
E	Challenges in implementing change without strong hierarchy; continuous learning and project-based training valued; competition for sustainability profiles in the market.

Note: Hotel group names are coded for the purpose of anonymity. Data in the archive of authors.
 Source: Authors' research

As shown in Table 3, the hotel groups interviewed show different levels of implementation in their sustainability strategies and workforce development practices. While some groups operate with well-established CSS frameworks integrated into corporate KPIs, others are still in the process of consolidating their sustainability strategies and plans. Current challenges include the training of seasonal and foreign staff, the lack of standardized criteria for hiring sustainability-competent professionals, and the difficulty in finding candidates with specific and practical ESG knowledge and skills. Despite these limitations, there is a shared recognition of the importance of continuous learning, project-based training, and aligning employee development with sustainability goals. Some interviewees also highlighted the unalignment between graduate expectations —such as immediate access to managerial roles— and the operational demands of the sector. Attitudes and intrinsic motivation are widely valued, yet structural limitations, market competition, and limited academic capacitation in sustainability remain significant barriers to advancing GHRM practices.

All participating companies reported having sustainability strategies —more or less formalized— aligned with long-term environmental goals, such as achieving carbon neutrality. These findings reaffirm the increasing strategic role of sustainability in the hospitality sector (Pham et al., 2020; Tandon et al., 2023). Despite this strategic commitment, three core challenges emerged consistently.

Table 4 presents a thematic synthesis of interviewee responses across six key themes. This allows for a structured comparison of how hotel groups interpret and operationalize sustainability. While each group articulated unique approaches, the table reveals similar patterns: all companies acknowledged gaps between educational preparation and workplace realities (KT3), emphasized soft skills and intrinsic motivation over formal sustainability training (KT2), and described sustainability as increasingly relevant, but still not fully embedded in employability criteria (KT6). These findings reinforce the notion that while sustainability is no longer marginal, it has yet to become a standardized component of HRM strategy. Additionally, the table illustrates that larger, more structured hotel groups (e.g., A and C) tend to report more advanced governance and evaluation mechanisms, whereas smaller or newer operations (e.g., B and E) place greater emphasis on adaptive learning and attitude-driven recruitment.

Table 4: Interviewees' perceptions on key themes across hotel groups

Key themes	Hotel Group A	Hotel Group B	Hotel Group C	Hotel Group D	Hotel Group E
KT 1. Perceptions of sustainability	Holistic view; ESG KPIs; long-term integration	Emerging model; seasonal resort; electric transport	Structured strategy; annual plans; dedicated ESG teams	Sustainability gaining ground; still incipient	Bottom-up implementation; context-dependent
KT 2. Sustainability competencies	Cross-cutting skills; operational understanding	Attitude over skills; learning by doing	Hard to find ESG-expert staff; internal evaluation	Intrinsic motivation; alignment with internal values	Continuous learning; project-based education

Key themes	Hotel Group A	Hotel Group B	Hotel Group C	Hotel Group D	Hotel Group E
KT 3. Alignment education and industry	Mismatch in practical readiness; internal training	Graduate expectations vs. sector reality	Educational gap; competencies missing	Gap between training and strategy	Lack of specialized profiles; education mismatch
KT 4. Challenges to sustainability	Seasonality; onboarding challenges	New team; early stage of integration	Recruitment issues; low awareness among candidates	Operational limits; unclear KPIs	Weak structure; market competition
KT 5. Role of future professionals	Understanding full picture; strategic role	Willingness to learn; new roles	Need for hybrid professionals; awareness-building	Staff enthusiasm; emotional engagement	Young staff key for transformation; committed
KT 6. Employability	ESG not central in hiring; growing awareness	Recruitment based on attitude; flexibility needed	Sustainability seen as advantage, not essential	Sustainability valued, not a selection criterion	Profiles hard to find; sustainability not formalised

Note: Hotel group names are coded for the purpose of anonymity. Data in the archive of authors.
Source: Authors' research

Interviewees highlighted a disconnect between graduate expectations and industry realities. Multiple managers voiced concern that young professionals often expect to access managerial roles immediately upon graduation, underestimating the value of operational experience. This finding relates to earlier critiques of unrealistic job expectations among tourism graduates, and points to the need for better career orientation and experience-based training in academic programs.

Moreover, the lack of sustainability-qualified professionals was emphasized by nearly all respondents. While many hotel groups are advancing in their sustainability efforts, they find it difficult to identify and recruit candidates with solid environmental and social governance knowledge. Sustainability competencies are often missing in CVs and not systematically evaluated during recruitment. In most cases, sustainability awareness is perceived as a personal value rather than a developed professional skill. This confirms previous findings by Ali et al. (2018), Ek Styvén et al. (2022), and Bagheri et al. (2023), and illustrates the ongoing need for hybrid professional profiles—individuals who can combine operational hotel knowledge with an integrated understanding of sustainability's environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

Furthermore, the interviews underline the key role of GHRM as a bridge between sustainability strategies and daily workforce practices. While only a few companies have begun integrating sustainability into recruitment and training policies, others are initiating internal learning processes through digital tools or project-based learning. Notably, in high-turnover contexts such as seasonal resorts, onboarding programs increasingly include sustainability-related content. This gradual shift toward GHRM mirrors Tanova & Bayighomog's (2022) call for embedding environmental values into all HR practices—from talent acquisition to development and retention. However, participants also noted market-related challenges, including competition for sustainability-literate professionals and the lack of standardized competency frameworks to guide recruitment (Ali et al., 2018).

The perceived gap between academic training and industry needs was another shared concern. Some interviewees called for more transversal education, integrating CSS frameworks into tourism degrees. Others questioned whether current curricula reflect the real-world constraints of sustainability implementation, especially in regions with weak infrastructure or ambiguous regulation. These concerns add to growing academic debates about the alignment of tourism education with sustainability demands (Mínguez et al., 2021; Scott & Willison, 2021).

Table 5 presents a thematic coding of key terms and expressions recurrent across all interviews. This frequency-based overview highlights the most salient ideas associated with sustainability and HRM from the industry perspective. The most frequently mentioned keywords were "Sustainability strategy integration", "Lack of trained professionals", and "Unrealistic expectations", each appearing in 7.94% of total references. These patterns confirm the centrality of corporate commitment to sustainability, but also reveal an operational gap in talent development and recruitment.

Importantly, challenges such as "Seasonality and staff turnover" and "Recruitment difficulties" (both 6.35%) remain prominent concerns, especially in regions highly dependent on seasonal labor. Across all key themes, interviewees consistently voiced concerns about the disconnect between academic training and real-world constraints, with "Disconnect with academia", "Training through internal processes", and "Call for applied learning" frequently cited. This resonates with broader debates on the need to reform tourism curricula to better integrate applied sustainability competencies (Mínguez et al., 2021; Scott & Willison, 2021).

The high frequency of terms like “Motivation/intrinsic engagement” and “Soft skills prioritized” also reinforces the idea that, in the absence of formal sustainability credentials, personal attitudes and emotional commitment are often used as proxies for employability. However, the recurring mention of “Sustainability not being a hiring criterion” and “Competition for sustainability talent” suggests that sustainability remains marginal in structured HR practices, underscoring the need for stronger adoption of green HRM frameworks (Tanova & Bayighomog, 2022).

Table 5: Presentation of frequencies related with key themes

Key themes	Keywords	Frequency of repeating (number)	Frequency of repeating (%)
KT 1. Perceptions of sustainability	Sustainability strategy integration	5	7.94 %
	Certifications	4	6.35 %
	Greenwashing concerns	2	3.17 %
KT 2. Sustainability competencies	Lack of trained professionals	5	7.94 %
	Sustainability understanding	4	6.35 %
	Motivation / intrinsic engagement	3	4.76 %
KT 3. Alignment education and industry	Disconnect with academia	4	6.35 %
	Training through internal processes	3	4.76 %
	Call for applied learning	2	3.17 %
KT 4. Challenges to sustainability	Seasonality and staff turnover	4	6.35 %
	Recruitment difficulties	4	6.35 %
	Infrastructure and regulatory gaps	3	4.76 %
KT 5. Role of future professionals	Unrealistic expectations	5	7.94 %
	Motivated but inexperienced	3	4.76 %
	Generational mindset shift	2	3.17 %
KT 6. Employability	Sustainability not a hiring criterion	4	6.35 %
	Soft skills prioritized	3	4.76 %
	Competition for sustainability talent	3	4.76 %
TOTAL		63	100 %

Source: Authors' research

The high frequency of terms like “Motivation/intrinsic engagement” and “Soft skills prioritized” also reinforces the idea that, in the absence of formal sustainability credentials, personal attitudes and emotional commitment are often used as proxies for employability. However, the recurring mention of “Sustainability not being a hiring criterion” and “Competition for sustainability talent” suggests that sustainability remains marginal in structured HR practices, underscoring the need for stronger adoption of green HRM frameworks (Tanova & Bayighomog, 2022).

These findings demonstrate the heterogeneity of sustainability implementation and workforce development practices across different hotel settings. They provide a valuable basis for deeper discussion on industry-wide gaps and shared challenges, particularly in relation to talent acquisition, sustainability training, and the alignment between corporate ambitions and human resource strategies.

The findings underscore a dual reality: while sustainability is gaining prominence in hotel strategies, there is a clear implementation gap in terms of workforce alignment. To close this gap, hotels may move beyond rhetorical commitments and invest in GHRM practices, realistic training pathways, and recruitment strategies that target the competencies needed for sustainable transformation. This research contributes by shedding light on the misalignment between the expectations of future professionals, current HR practices, and the operational realities of the sector, while offering recommendations for more coherent and impactful sustainability implementation.

CONCLUSION

The interviews with sustainability and HR representatives from leading hotel groups in Croatia and Spain offer a relevant contribution into how sustainability is integrated into operations, recruitment, and workforce development. A shared narrative emerged: sustainability is increasingly included in strategic management, with some groups aligning their vision with long-term goals like net-zero emissions (Ali et al., 2018; Bagheri et al., 2023).

Leadership plays a central role, with CSS committees and sustainability professionals guaranteeing that goals are implemented top-down, based on Floričić et al. (2024) on the importance of corporate commitment. Yet, a major gap lies in the availability of personnel with sustainability-specific skills (Akhtar et al., 2023). These competencies are rarely found in CVs; knowledge often stems from personal values rather than formal training. The sector still prioritizes soft skills such as adaptability and communication, consistent with Ek Styvén et al. (2022), indicating limited integration of green HRM practices.

Training and communication are essential enablers. Internal platforms and onboarding—even for seasonal staff—are used to build awareness, though newer companies report challenges in this regard. Certifications are generally valued for standardization, but some skepticism remains about their credibility and potential for greenwashing (Floričić, 2024).

Sustainability is not yet a decisive hiring criterion, but some companies with robust CSS agendas see it as increasingly important, aligning with Tanova & Bayighomog (2022). However, concerns were raised about graduates' expectations for quick advancement and their limited understanding of operational and infrastructural constraints.

Overall, sustainability is a declared priority, but inconsistently operationalized in HR practices. The industry calls for stronger alignment with academic training, development of hybrid profiles, and realistic expectations from future professionals.

This research contributes to bridging the gap between sustainability discourse and workforce transformation in hospitality, offering insights into how education and industry can better align to prepare professionals for a sustainable tourism future.

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