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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN TOURISM

Abstract: This study explores sustainability perceptions among future professionals, focusing on the role of work experience. Based on a sample of 241 students, the results reveal that those with prior work experience report significantly higher levels of perceived sustainability development and organizational responsibility. These findings suggest that practical exposure enhances sustainability understanding beyond formal education, indicating a potential gap between educational content and real-world practice. The study contributes by distinguishing between different dimensions of sustainability perceptions and by positioning these findings as a basis for future qualitative research. In particular, further studies are needed to explore how sustainability is understood and implemented by tourism professionals and whether a gap exists between the expectations of future professionals and actual industry practices.

Keywords: sustainability perceptions, tourism, students, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is undergoing in the last decades a deep sustainability transformation driven by environmental urgency, growing regulatory frameworks, and a shift in consumer consciousness and exigence. As a resource-intensive sector, hotels are increasingly pressured to align their operations with sustainable development goals while maintaining service excellence (Bagheri et al., 2023; Ek Styvén et al., 2022). Consequently, corporate sustainability strategies (CSS) have moved from the periphery to the core of hotel management. However, the successful implementation of these strategies depends on a workforce that possesses not only theoretical knowledge but also the practical competencies required to navigate the complexities of daily operations.

Despite the growing emphasis on sustainability within tourism and hospitality higher education, a persistent concern remains: which can be conceptualized as the "education-industry gap". Several studies suggest that while academic programs provide a solid conceptual foundation, they may fall short in preparing future professionals for the pragmatic and interdisciplinary challenges of the corporate world (Mínguez et al., 2021; Scott & Willison, 2021). This mismatch often results in a friction between students' idealized expectations and the operational realities of the sector (Hall, 2011).

In this context, understanding the perceptions of future professionals is crucial. Their vision of how sustainability is integrated into the industry and how roles are distributed within organizations will shape the future of the sector. Emerging research suggests that practical exposure through work experience may contribute to differences in these perceptions (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022; Bennett, et al., 2023). Work experience allows students to move beyond

classroom theory, fostering a more nuanced and realistic understanding of sustainable practices and organizational responsibilities (Garavan et al., 2023).

Building upon previous research that identified key sustainability competencies through industry leader interviews (Guerra-Lombardi et al., 2025), this study adopts a quantitative approach to analyze the perceptions of 241 future professionals. Specifically, the research focuses on how work experience influences these perceptions and what this reveals about the current state of tourism education. To address this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. Are there significant differences in sustainability perceptions between future professionals with and without work experience in the tourism sector?
- RQ2. How does work experience contribute to identifying a potential gap between sustainability education and practice in tourism?

By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to the literature on sustainable tourism management and human resources by identifying how practical engagement shapes the professional mindset of the next generation of hospitality leaders.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The foundation of Sustainability perceptions

The successful operationalization of corporate sustainability strategies (CSS) in the hospitality industry relies heavily on the competencies, perceptions, and readiness of its workforce. While theoretical models of sustainability are widely taught in academic settings, understanding how these concepts translate into real-world operations requires an industry-aligned perspective. The conceptual foundation and the constructs evaluated in this quantitative study are rooted in previous research that identifies a critical need to assess how future professionals understand sustainability implementation and organizational responsibilities. Building upon these industry-driven insights, this study examines two core dimensions: the systemic integration of sustainability in the sector and the distribution of organizational roles.

2.2. Perceived sustainability integration in the Hospitality industry

Current trends underscore sustainability not merely as an ethical obligation but as a fundamental strategic priority within the tourism and hospitality sector. The integration of sustainability into hotel operations encompasses a complex range of initiatives, from environmental resource management to corporate sustainable governance (CSG) (Guerra-Lombardi et al., 2024; Bagheri et al., 2023). However, the conceptualization of these practices goes beyond structural changes; it deeply relies on how professionals perceive the authenticity and effectiveness of these efforts.

As sustainable business practices gain strength, a critical challenge emerges regarding the distinction between genuine commitment and superficial marketing tactics, commonly referred to as greenwashing (Florićić et al., 2024). Consumers and emerging professionals alike are increasingly demanding transparency and the tangible application of government regulations to ensure compliance (Rana et al., 2023). Consequently, assessing how future professionals interpret the macro-level implementation of these strategies is essential. In this study, this dimension is conceptualized as Perceived Sustainability Integration (PSI). This construct captures the respondents' overall assessment of the extent to which sustainability is genuinely recognized as a systemic and operational phenomenon within the tourism industry, contrasting authentic corporate commitment with mere compliance or greenwashing.

2.3. Organizational Sustainability Role Perceptions

The effective execution of sustainable strategies is intrinsically linked to human resource management and the active participation of employees across all organizational levels. The literature extensively highlights the significance of green human resource management (GHRM) in driving organizational performance and ensuring that sustainability values are actually internalized in daily operations (Tanova & Bayighomog, 2022; Hong et al., 2024).

However, achieving sustainability goals is not only the responsibility of top management; it requires a collaborative framework. Abbas et al. (2023) emphasize the mechanisms through which employee behavior at the operational level contributes to environmental and social sustainability in hotels. Furthermore, future professionals and young entrepreneurs play a pivotal role as catalysts for innovation and environmental awareness (Salvatore et al., 2021). The synergy between different organizational levels, ranging from executive decision-makers to operational staff, greatly influences the success of green initiatives (Song et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2025). To measure this understanding, this study introduces the construct of Organizational Sustainability Role Perceptions (OSRP). This variable reflects the

respondents' comprehension of how responsibility for sustainability is distributed across the corporate hierarchy and the perceived need of cross-level collaboration to achieve environmental objectives.

2.4. The Education–Industry Gap and the Role of Work Experience

A central debate in contemporary tourism literature concerns the alignment between academic readiness and the actual practical competencies demanded by the industry. While educational institutions strive to prepare students with sustainability knowledge, a growing body of research questions whether theoretical programs adequately train graduates for the complex realities of hotel operations (Mínguez et al., 2021; Scott & Willison, 2021). Hall (2011) notes that emerging professionals often face friction upon entering the workforce, as there is frequently a gap between their idealized academic expectations and the pragmatic, efficiency-driven approaches adopted by local specialists.

Practical exposure and active engagement in the workforce are posited as crucial factors in bridging this gap. Experiential learning and direct involvement in organizational environments significantly enhance an individual's contemporary social skills and green competencies (Garavan et al., 2023; Ivasciuc & Ispas, 2023). It is hypothesized that students with prior work experience in the tourism sector possess a more nuanced, critical, and realistic understanding of both corporate sustainability implementation (PSI) and the practical distribution of organizational roles (OSRP). By analyzing the differences based on work experience, this study aims to clarify the nature of the education-industry gap, providing actionable insights into how practical exposure shapes the sustainability competencies of the future hospitality workforce.

3. METHODOLOGY

The first part is devoted to sample characteristics and research procedure, and the second part depicts the variables used in the research, explaining the procedure of measuring respondents' perceptions on analyzed constructs.

3.1. Sampling and Research Procedure

The sample consists of students enrolled at faculties of economics, business, and tourism. In cases where tourism was not explicitly included in the faculty title, the curriculum was carefully reviewed to ensure the presence of courses related to tourism and sustainability, confirming the relevance of respondents to the research context. The sample is predominantly composed of undergraduate students, with a smaller representation of master's and doctoral levels (Table 1). Geographically, the sample is regionally grounded but also internationally diverse. In addition to participants from Serbia and neighboring countries, respondents come from a wide range of European and non-European countries. Such diversification can be largely attributed to the presence of Erasmus and other international mobility programs, which contribute to a more heterogeneous student population and enrich the cross-cultural perspective of the study.

Table 1: Sample structure

	Number of respondents	%
Gender		
Male	65	27.0%
Female	173	71.8%
Other	3	1.2%
State		
Serbia	105	43.6%
Croatia	74	30.7%
Spain	28	11.6%
Other countries	34	14.1%
Level of study		
Bachelor	184	76.3%
Master	49	20.3%
PhD	8	3.3%

Source: Authors' research

A questionnaire survey was conducted to obtain the data required for this study, as part of a broader research project. The questionnaire consisted of several sections, including statements measured on a seven-point Likert scale, as well as questions capturing the demographic characteristics of respondents. Data were collected using a convenience sampling approach among students who had previously attended courses in tourism or related fields. In cases where tourism was not explicitly part of the program title, the curriculum was reviewed to ensure the inclusion of subjects related to tourism management and sustainability, as familiarity with the fundamentals of tourism management was considered a prerequisite for participation. The majority of respondents (over 80%) actively attended classes, indicating a satisfactory

level of engagement with the subject matter. Data collection was carried out during the winter semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study in advance.

3.3. Measures

To ensure the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the constructs were operationalized using multi-item scales. The items were developed based on a comprehensive review of existing literature. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). The adequacy of the data for factor analysis was confirmed by the results of the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), indicating satisfactory sampling adequacy and factorability (KMO = 0.789; Bartlett's test of sphericity = 663.652; df = 45; $p < 0.001$), as presented in Table 2. Perceived Sustainability Integration ($\alpha = 0.770$) and Organizational Sustainability Role Perceptions ($\alpha = 0.740$) constructs demonstrate acceptable internal consistency, indicating satisfactory reliability and consistent measurement of the underlying concepts.

- **Perceived Sustainability Integration (PSI)** - This construct was measured using five items designed to assess respondents' overarching perceptions of how sustainability is systemically prioritized, regulated, and authentically implemented in the tourism sector, contrasting genuine efforts with greenwashing. The theoretical foundation for these items draws upon recent literature on corporate sustainable governance and greenwashing in hospitality (Bagheri et al., 2023; Floričić et al., 2024; Guerra-Lombardi et al., 2024). Example items include: "Hotels in my country are genuinely committed to sustainability rather than engaging in greenwashing" and "Government regulations play an essential role in ensuring sustainability in tourism."
- **Organizational Sustainability Role Perceptions (OSRP)** - To evaluate how participants perceive the distribution of responsibility for sustainability across different organizational hierarchies, this construct was measured using five items. The formulation of these items was guided by literature emphasizing green human resource management (GHRM) and cross-level collaboration for sustainability goals (Song et al., 2021; Tanova & Bayighomog, 2022; Abbas et al., 2023). Example items include: "Future professionals in tourism will play a key role in driving sustainability efforts" and "Sustainability initiatives in a hotel are more effective when there is collaboration between different organizational levels (e.g., management, operations, and staff)."

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis, and Cronbach's Alpha

		Factor loadings	
Perceived Sustainability Integration (PSI)			
Cronbach's Alpha= 0.770			
1	Sustainability is a priority in the tourism industry in my country.	.819	
2	Hotels in my country are genuinely committed to sustainability rather than engaging in greenwashing.	.829	
3	Government regulations play an essential role in ensuring sustainability in tourism.	.517	
4	Sustainability is a key priority in the hotel industry around the world.	.623	
5	Hotels in my country are implementing specific sustainability practices and plans.	.728	
Organizational Sustainability Role Perceptions (OSRP)			
Cronbach's Alpha= 0.740			
6	Future professionals in tourism will play a key role in driving sustainability efforts.		.762
7	Employees in operational roles can have a significant impact on a hotel's sustainability goals.		.675
8	The ability to influence sustainability practices depends on the position held within a company.		.653
9	Top managers play the most critical role in ensuring the success of sustainability initiatives in a hotel.		.636
10	Sustainability initiatives in a hotel are more effective when there is collaboration between different organizational levels (e.g., management, operations, and staff).		.705

Source: Authors' research

4. Results and Discussion

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients among the research variables. The mean values indicate that respondents generally report moderately high perceptions of sustainability integration in the tourism sector (PSI: $M = 4.52$), while perceptions of organizational sustainability roles are even more pronounced (OSRP: $M = 5.49$). This suggests that, although sustainability is recognized as important, students particularly emphasize the role of individuals and organizational actors in driving sustainability efforts.

The correlation analysis reveals a positive and statistically significant relationship between PSI and OSRP ($r = .381$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher perceptions of sustainability integration are associated with stronger beliefs in the

importance of organizational roles and responsibilities for sustainability. This finding supports the notion that systemic sustainability practices and individual role perceptions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Regarding control variables, work experience in tourism shows a positive and significant correlation with both PSI ($r = .190$, $p < 0.01$) and OSRP ($r = .201$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that practical exposure to the industry contributes to more developed sustainability perceptions. In addition, level of studies is positively related to OSRP ($r = .174$, $p < 0.01$) and moderately associated with work experience ($r = .369$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that more advanced students and those with greater experience tend to demonstrate a higher awareness of sustainability roles within organizations.

Gender does not show significant relationships with the main constructs, implying that sustainability perceptions are relatively consistent across male and female respondents. However, a weak negative association between gender and level of studies ($r = -.154$, $p < 0.05$) suggests minor structural differences within the sample, which do not substantially affect the main findings.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. PSI	4.5228	.99659	1	.381**	.190**	-.038	.116
2. OSRP	5.4880	.88481	.381**	1	.201**	-.078	.174**
3. Work Experience			.190**	.201**	1	-.064	.369**
4. Gender			-.038	-.078	-.064	1	-.154*
5. Level of Studies			.116	.174**	.369**	-.154*	1

Notes: SD – standard deviation

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors' research

Given the observed associations, further analysis was conducted using an independent samples t-test to examine whether significant differences exist between students with and without work experience. The findings indicate statistically significant differences between the two groups for both examined constructs. Specifically, students with work experience report significantly higher levels of PSI compared to those without experience. This suggests that practical exposure to the tourism industry enhances students' understanding of how sustainability is implemented in real-world contexts. Similarly, significant differences are observed for organizational sustainability role perceptions OSRP, with students who have work experience demonstrating stronger beliefs in the importance of individual and collective roles in achieving sustainability within organizations.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test Comparing Students With and Without Work Experience

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	t	p
PSI	With work experience	99	4.7495	1.03701	2.997	.003
	Without work experience	142	4.3648	.93908	2.944	.004
OSRP	With work experience	99	5.7010	.82974	3.180	.002
	Without work experience	142	5.3394	.89442	3.223	.001

Source: Authors' research

The findings indicate that PSI is positively associated with OSRP. This suggests that students who perceive sustainability as more systematically embedded in the tourism sector are also more likely to recognize the importance of shared responsibility across different organizational levels. This result is consistent with previous research emphasizing that sustainability in hospitality is not limited to formal strategies or regulatory compliance, but also depends on authentic implementation, employee involvement, and cross-level organizational collaboration (Tanova & Bayighomog, 2022; Garavan et al., 2023; Ivasciuc & Ispas, 2023; Hong et al., 2024).

Furthermore, students with work experience in tourism reported significantly higher levels of both PSI and OSRP. This finding supports the argument that practical exposure to the tourism industry helps bridge the education–industry gap by enabling students to better understand how sustainability is operationalized in real organizational contexts. While classroom-based learning provides an important conceptual foundation, work experience appears to contribute to a more realistic and practice-oriented understanding of sustainability challenges and responsibilities in hospitality. These results are in line with studies emphasizing the importance of experiential learning, green competencies, and industry-based exposure in preparing future tourism professionals (Garavan et al., 2023; Ivasciuc & Ispas, 2023). Accordingly, the findings point to the need for a stronger integration of practical learning opportunities into sustainability education, including internships, fieldwork, industry-based projects, and closer cooperation with hotels and tourism organizations.

5. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to examine how students enrolled in tourism and related fields perceive sustainability integration in the tourism sector, as well as the role of different organizational actors in implementing sustainable practices. Particular attention was given to differences between students with and without work experience in tourism. The findings indicate that students generally recognize the importance of sustainability; however, those with work experience in tourism demonstrate higher levels of both perceived sustainability integration and organizational sustainability role perceptions. These results suggest that practical exposure represents an important factor contributing to a more developed, realistic, and nuanced understanding of sustainability in the tourism sector. Although this research does not directly measure the education–practice gap, it provides preliminary evidence of such a gap by showing that work experience is associated with more developed sustainability perceptions.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by extending the understanding of the relationship between education, work experience, and sustainability-related perceptions among future tourism professionals. Existing theoretical perspectives often emphasize the role of formal education in developing sustainability knowledge and attitudes. However, the findings of this study suggest that formal education, although essential, may not be sufficient to fully shape students' understanding of how sustainability is implemented in real organizational contexts.

The results contribute to the literature on the education–industry gap by showing that work experience may play an important role in bridging the distance between classroom-based knowledge and industry realities. Students with experience in tourism do not only demonstrate higher awareness of sustainability, but also show a more developed understanding of the fact that sustainability depends on coordinated action across different organizational levels, from top management to operational employees. In this respect, the study moves the theoretical discussion beyond the understanding of sustainability as a primarily educational or normative concept, and toward the view of sustainability as an experience-based and organizationally embedded phenomenon.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the operationalization of two related but distinct dimensions of students' sustainability perceptions: perceived sustainability integration and organizational sustainability role perceptions. The positive relationship between these constructs suggests that students who perceive sustainability as more strategically and systemically integrated in tourism are also more likely to recognize the importance of shared responsibility and cross-level collaboration within organizations. This finding may serve as a basis for developing future theoretical models that link sustainability education, experiential learning, and professional competence development in tourism.

5.2. Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are particularly relevant for higher education institutions, tourism study programs, and tourism and hospitality organizations. The findings show that students with work experience in tourism report more developed sustainability-related perceptions than students without such experience. Given that a considerable share of students may complete their studies without substantial practical exposure to the industry, these findings raise an important question: how can higher education compensate for the lack of direct work experience and support students in developing a more realistic understanding of sustainability during their studies?

From the perspective of higher education, the results indicate that special attention should be paid to the integration of sustainability topics with experiential and problem-based learning. Sustainability should not be treated only as theoretical content within course curricula, but as a practical and organizational issue that students need to understand through direct or simulated exposure to real industry challenges. Therefore, tourism programs could strengthen internships, fieldwork, industry-based projects, case study analysis, guest lectures by industry professionals, and research–practice projects focused on sustainable business practices.

For students without prior work experience, universities could implement structured learning activities that imitate or approximate industry experience. These may include simulations of managerial decision-making, analysis of real examples of sustainable and unsustainable practices in hotels, problem-solving tasks based on industry cases, mini-consulting projects with local tourism organizations, and practice-oriented assignments focused specifically on sustainability challenges. Such activities could effectively reduce the gap between students who have work experience and those who do not, by helping all students become more aware of how sustainability is implemented in practice.

The findings are also relevant for tourism and hospitality organizations. If work experience contributes to stronger sustainability awareness, organizations should recognize internships, traineeships, and student engagement programs as important mechanisms for developing future employees capable of supporting sustainable business transformation. Cooperation between universities and industry should therefore not be limited to recruitment or formal internship placement. Instead, it should be designed as a learning partnership aimed at developing sustainability-related competencies among future professionals.

From the perspective of curriculum development, the findings also suggest that not all forms of work experience should be treated as equally relevant. Experience in hotels, travel agencies, public tourism organizations, hospitality operations, or sustainability-related projects may shape students' perceptions in different ways. Therefore, study programs should move beyond the simple inclusion of practical experience and pay closer attention to its quality, duration, intensity, content, and relevance to sustainability. In this sense, practical learning should be intentionally designed, monitored, and connected to clearly defined sustainability learning outcomes.

5.3. Future Research Directions

This study provides a starting point for further research on the role of experiential learning in the development of sustainability competencies among tourism students. Although the findings indicate significant differences between students with and without work experience, the study does not explain which specific types of experience contribute most strongly to sustainability-related perceptions. Future research should therefore examine not only whether students have work experience, but also the quality, duration, relevance, intensity, and sustainability-related content of that experience.

Future studies could also investigate how different forms of experiential learning influence broader higher education outcomes, such as professional competence development, employability, work readiness, critical thinking, entrepreneurial orientation, and students' ability to address sustainability challenges in real business environments. A mixed-methods approach would be particularly useful, combining quantitative analysis with interviews involving students, teachers, and representatives of the tourism and hospitality industry. This would provide deeper insight into how students understand the relationship between formal education, practical experience, and sustainability.

Given that the sample included students from different countries, future research could also examine the role of national and institutional contexts in the development of sustainability competencies. It would be particularly valuable to analyze the extent to which different education systems, curricula, and university–industry cooperation models support student participation in practical activities that strengthen sustainability awareness. In this way, future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how contextual factors shape the relationship between education, work experience, and sustainability perceptions in tourism.

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