

## Staff qualification and the quality of tourism-related services in the Nitra region

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**Abstract.** The study attempts to justify the importance of the human potential quality, one of the key factors for the development of tourism industry. Moreover, the study attempts to establish a correlation between the human potential quality and the quality of tourism-related services. Next, the study emphasizes that not only geography-related factors, such as natural, historical and cultural sights, climatic and weather conditions getting the attention and interest by tourists, are vital for tourism industry. The human potential quality, including training, qualification and expertise, is important as well. Therefore, the study analyses the human potential quality in tourism industry, and assesses its impact on the service quality related to accommodation, catering, transport, organization and provision of sports, cultural and sightseeing events.

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### 1. Introduction and purpose of the study

Tourism, primarily in industrialized countries, has been one of the key manufacturing industries, no-

tably contributing to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), offering relatively attractive employment options and reaching a substantial proportion within the employment structure.

The main factors of production in tourism industry are primarily natural and geographic factors, historical and cultural sights, getting the attention and interest of tourists (Houška, 2007; Nejd, 2010). In this regard, the so called infrastructure, including transportation, accommodation, dining and/or sporting possibilities, is becoming decisive. No natural wonder or geographical attraction can attract tourists on a permanent basis. If, for instance, tourists are interested in seeing mountains, they are most probably to exert physical energy, and their remaining time is to be spent resting with the use of adequate services. Therefore, while visiting tourist attractions, not only satisfying basic human needs is necessary but also providing services related to resting.

While factors related to geography are, for the time being and to a certain degree, an objectively unchangeable variable not dependent on human activities (Štětina, 2002), the range and quality of services as well as infrastructure in tourism industry do depend on human behaviour, opinions, education, qualification or experience. Despite this, the main attention is paid to technical and organizational elements of infrastructure and quality of accommodation, dining facilities and transportation services (Burešová, 2007; Burešová, Zimáková, 2008; Houška, 2007; Štětina, 2002; Zurynek et al., 2008). In relation to them, organizational and managing aspects of tourism industry are analysed and researched (Beránek, Kotek, 2003; Indrová, 1996; Minář, Zelenka, 2007; Nejd, 2010; Sysel, 2008). The most careful attention is paid to various marketing aspects and strategies in tourism industry or its branches (Jakubíková, 2009; Királová, 2002; Minář, Zelenka, 2007; Palatková, 2006; SARIO). Analyses also focus on general issues in the development of tourism industry in terms of putting institutional components of the European Union into effect and in terms of integration and formation of the European market of the travel products (Borovský et al., 2008; Carreté et al., 2006; Novacká, 2010).

It is beyond doubt that the range of investments in tourism industry and tourism-related facilities affects the overall performance and effectiveness of the industry and contributes to the enhancement of infrastructure and quality of lodging, dining and other facilities (Borovský et al., 2008; Foret, Foret, 2001; Hriesková, 2011). Similarly, taxes on tourism-related services have an impact on its development

(Hnátek, 2009). However, quantitative and primarily qualitative aspects of staff working in tourism have not been perceived as a unique and significant factor which, in connection with the geographic one, form not only the essence of tourism industry but also noticeably contribute both to the GDP development in this specific industry and to employment. Likewise, natural, historic and cultural values as well as tourism-related services are not a mass product purchasable in a supermarket located in just any place in the world. Services intended for immediate consumption are not transferable in time or place. Their value does not cover primarily the material goods (for instance, groceries to prepare food) but the way they will be processed and offered by staff at the time of serving the meal prepared – their abilities, qualification, mood, and so on. Most tourism-related services are provided by people, and their main value is created by technical, social and psychological qualities, skills and expertise.

These skills and knowledge get expanded through cooperation with people inside and outside the organization, as well as through transfer of expertise and experience (relational capital) in order to build institutionalized knowledge of an organization, i.e. organizational capital. Therefore, we can conclude that the value is not formed by material goods and tourism-based facilities, but by the skills, knowledge and abilities of individual employees. Hence, it is critical to focus on the improvement of and care for single types of human capital represented by individuals in order to create and retain qualified, loyal and committed employees. Investing in human capital brings about improvement of performance, flexibility, and productivity, and enhances the ability to innovate, which naturally follows from continuous enhancement of qualification as well as skills and expertise of staff.

“Staff working in tourism industry” are defined as those who get in contact with customers on both regular and irregular basis, either in primary or secondary manner (Gučík et al., 2006). The relationship between entrepreneurs and staff (guides, staff working in lodging facilities, exchange offices and/or travel agencies, taxi drivers, bus drivers, airline employees, animators, etc.) involved in supplying tourism-related services and getting in personal contact with tourists is of primary importance.

Expertise, qualification and other soft skills, such as, for instance, language skills, sympathy, assertiveness, are essential for visitors to form their opinions experiences. Excellent assertive and emotional communication skills along with sound technical and foreign language skills affect in a positive way the guests' mood and their perception of a given geographic environment and its features. Therefore, it is essential to select and recruit competent and qualified staff.

The goal of this study is to analyse the quality of human potential and identify its impact on tourism development in the Nitra region, Slovakia. Since the value of geography-related factors is determined by nature or history, and little influenced by current activities by people, then human capital value is enhanced by current activities associated with qualification, expertise, experience, upbringing and so on. Geography-related factors alone are insufficient for the development of tourism. For instance, when we compare the geographic environment of Slovakia and Austria, we find that some naturally affluent Slovak locations are more attractive than the locations in Austria with almost identical historic and cultural values. It is a well known fact that tourism in Slovakia is lagging behind. The reasons include not only high quality amenities but, in particular, high quality staff and investments made to their development. Therefore, the study aims to perform a qualitative factor analysis of the staff working in tourism, and assess their impact on service quality and customer satisfaction.

We used several research methods, such as theoretical analysis and provision of justifications for the importance of human potential in the development of tourism industry; empirical research of qualitative characteristics of staff working in the tourism industry in Nitra region; quantitative and qualitative analyses of service quality and customer satisfaction and statistical methods.

The scientific originality of the paper lies in defining the importance of qualitative properties in service quality; identifying the impact of staff qualitative properties on customer satisfaction; and providing justification for the high priority given to staff qualitative properties in the development of tourism industry.

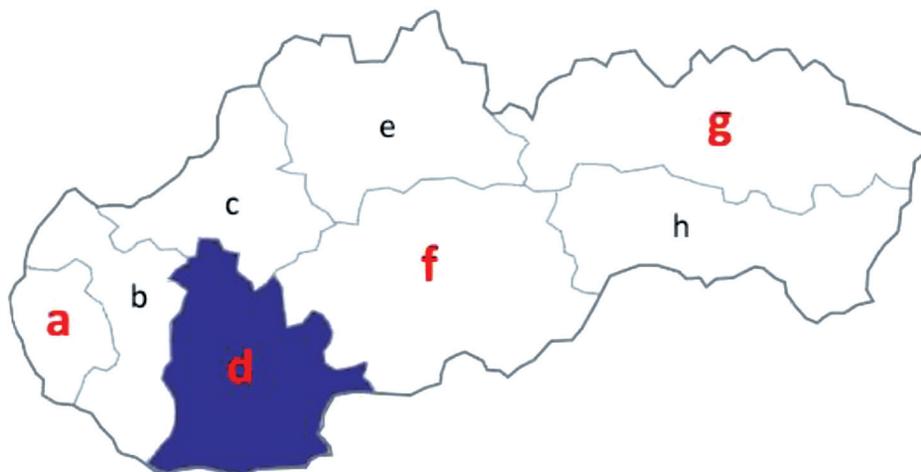
The practical significance of the paper lies in the fact that the results can be used for the creation and implementation of specific principles and measures

of the state policy in tourism industry; regularities and correlations between staff quality and service quality in tourism industry can be used by organization management to enhance strategies related to selection, recruitment, corporate training and development of staff working in tourism industry.

## 2. Results

Slovakia, a country rich in natural beauty, is known for interesting, yet distinct geographic locations featuring traditional crafts, indigenous products, unique culture, customs and traditions. Therefore, we can conclude that the development of tourism and related services in Slovakia could contribute to economic development and employment as is the case, for instance, in Austria. It is a well known fact that the amount of investments is a key factor for the development of tourism (Čuka, 2011). Scientific literature mostly underscores the investments into lodging, sporting, recreational or transport facilities related to tourism industry (Foret, Foret, 2001; Hnátek, 2009; Zurynek et al., 2008). Yet, it is clearly and fully known that quality amenities having staff without qualification or expertise are of no value for tourists. Tourism infrastructure value is primarily made up of staff – their special skills and knowledge, working attitude, values, willingness to help, etc.

Forming the quality of human potential starts with the system of vocational education. The documents of the Ministry of Education show that there are approximately 563 secondary state schools in the Slovak Republic. We have found that out of this number, there are 83 (14%) secondary vocational schools with specialisation in tourism and that most of them are located in the Nitra region. Full secondary education is provided by Grammar Schools (Gymnasiums) which prepare students for the university, and students can choose out of a variety of fields focused on tourism. We have found out that there are approximately 158 Grammar Schools (Gymnasiums). In Slovakia, there are four institutions of higher education offering study programs in tourism – University of Prešov, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica and University of Economics in Bratislava (compare Fig. 1).



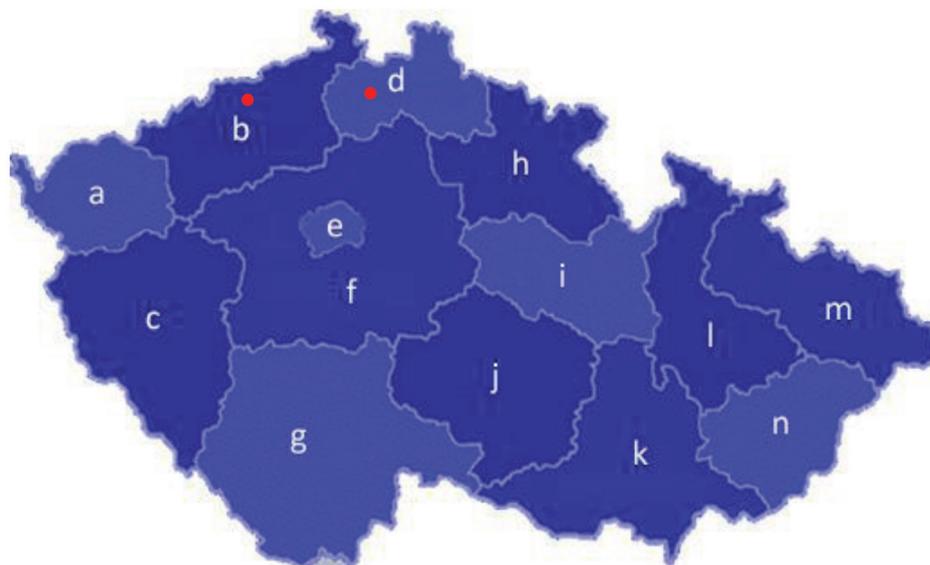
**Fig. 1.** Institutions of higher education offering study programs in tourism in Slovakia

Explanation: institutions of higher education offering study programs in tourism are marked red; a) Bratislava region, b) Trnava region, c) Trenčín region, d) Nitra region, e) Žilina region, f) Banská Bystrica region, g) Prešov region, h) Košice region

Source: Elaborated by authors based on the data from the Slovak Ministry of Education

Compared to the Czech Republic, there is a small number of institutions of higher education offering study programs in tourism in Slovakia, and the fact is clearly reflected in the quality of servic-

es provided. There are six institutions of higher education offering study programs in tourism in the city of Prague, and additional nine in other regions of the Czech Republic (compare Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Institutions of higher education offering study programs in tourism in the Czech Republic

Explanation: the number of institutions of higher education offering study programs in tourism are marked with red dots; a) Karlovy Vary Region, b) Ústí nad Labem Region, c) Plzeň Region, d) Liberec Region, e) the city of Prague – f) Central Bohemian Region, g) South Bohemian Region, h) Hradec Králové Region, i) Pardubice Region, j) Vysočina Region, k) South Moravian Region, l) Olomouc Region, m) Moravian-Silesian Region, n) Zlín Region

Source: Elaborated by authors

Additional data used in our study are the results of the research conducted in March 2009. The purpose of our research was to assess the qualification level of staff working in the dining and lodging facilities in the Nitra region. In addition, we aimed to assess customer satisfaction with the services provided. We developed two questionnaires – one to be filled by staff working in lodging and dining facilities located in the Nitra region, and the other to be filled by their customers.

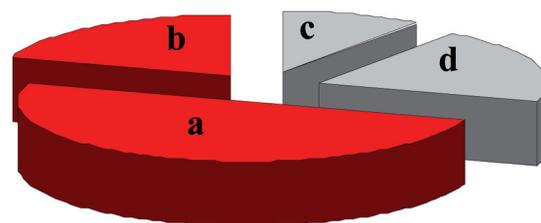
The first survey was conducted with staff working in dining and lodging facilities, including technical and managerial staff in the Nitra region. The sample size was more than 100 respondents. The first four questions were to obtain demographic characteristics, such as sex, age, job title and qualification. 45 males and 62 females participated in the survey. 16.7% of respondents were in the 18–34 age group, 36.6% were in the 35–44 age group, 6.7% of respondents were in the 45–54 age group and 16.7% were in the 55–62 age group.

13% of respondents held managerial positions, 7% of respondents had administrative posts, 10% had technical posts, 40% of respondents held positions related to lodging, and 30% of respondents held restaurant-related positions. Regarding qualification, 53% of respondents working in lodging and dining facilities had full secondary education, 17% had elementary education, 20% had higher secondary, and a mere 10% of subjects had a full univer-

sity qualification in the respective field. In Slovakia, there is a small number of colleges and universities offering study programs in tourism. Compared to the Czech Republic, there are almost one quarter fewer colleges and universities offering study programs in tourism in Slovakia. There is a lack of university educated staff in the Slovak hotel industry which has an adverse effect on the development of tourism in Slovakia.

The research results demonstrate that the staff working in lodging and dining facilities are under-qualified to perform their duties. Out of all respondents, 46.62% are under-qualified. It is apparent that a large number of hospitality facilities fail education and training to provide for their staff, and the remaining 43.33% are not willing to participate in further education and training. Since staff are not willing to improve their skills, major deficiencies in service quality occur. However, 66.6% of staff are satisfied with the quality of service they provide to their guests.

Guest satisfaction is crucial for the development of tourism industry. In our research, we also assessed guest satisfaction with the hotel accommodation and dining services in the Nitra region. More than 100 guests, 64 females and 48 males, filled out the guest satisfaction questionnaire. The age of survey respondents was 18–62 years. We found that almost 70% of respondents are not happy with or have objections to hotel accommodation (compare Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Guest satisfaction with accommodation

Explanation: accommodation-related services were of excellent quality: a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) strongly agree, d) agree

Source: Elaborated by authors

Nearly 77% of subjects are not satisfied with the quality of dining services. The research results indicate that more than 53% of the respondents would not stay in the same hotel again. Major deficiencies

include not very clean rooms, impolite staff unwilling to help, obsolete amenities, and language barrier. Except for obsolete amenities, all the remaining deficiencies are directly related to staff behaviour

and competences. It implies that majority of complaints address the quality of work performed by not only individuals but also teams, including managerial staff.

Regarding dining services, only 3.3% of respondents were satisfied with the service, which is an extremely low number. 20% agree they received quality service, 63% of respondents disagree, and 1.3% strongly disagree they received quality service. Major deficiencies listed by clients include unwilling to help staff, obsolete amenities, dirty dishes, food not warm enough and too long meal preparation.

Generally, more than half of surveyed guests gave a negative assessment of the quality of services provided. It is critical for the Slovak hospitality industry to be prepared for providing services to foreign customers in order to flourish. Hospitality staff should have a good command of foreign languages. Nearly 67% of respondents encountered language barriers. It follows that the staff are not prepared to provide services to foreign visitors to Slovakia in a suitable manner. Consequently, visitors to Slovakia do not have a high opinion about the services provided to them. Undoubtedly, poor quality of services hampers the development of tourism.

The results indicate that staff members behave in an inappropriate manner towards clients. It was found that 73% of respondents did not find the staff behaving in a courteous manner, and 75% of respondents did not find their complaints and requests resolved fast and flexibly enough.

According to a survey by the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO) there is a developed competitive environment made up largely of small economically weak enterprises providing primarily accommodation and catering services (SARIO, 2013). Larger companies that would start business in Slovakia and fulfil the role of a market leader in terms of the quality and innovation of services, or in improving the country's image abroad, disturb organizational, legislative, personal as well as psychological qualities of staff working in tourism industry. Even though the survey was performed in 2006, their findings still apply – as confirmed by the data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (Štatistický úrad SR, 2013). In addition, the tourism industry in Slovakia has been negatively affected by economic crisis.

In late September 2012, 321 accommodation facilities provided their services in the Nitra region. Compared to late September 2011, the number of accommodated guests decreased by 4.1%, the number of foreign guests decreased by 6.3%. The number of tourists accommodated in the region represented 5.9% of the total number of tourists coming to Slovakia. The average price for accommodation in the region was on average EUR 0.38 higher than the average price in Slovakia.

Low quality of tourism-related services can also be attributed to wages. In 2012, the average monthly wage in the sector of accommodation was EUR 577, and in the sector of dining and catering EUR 370, while in the sector of industry it was EUR 842, in the sector of gas and electricity it was EUR 1,302, in the sector of information and telecommunication technologies EUR 1,645. It follows that wages in tourism industry have considerably fallen behind the average wage of EUR 800 in Slovakia.

Therefore, it has to be underscored that not only findings of our survey but also data by the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO) and Statistical Office show that problems related to the development of tourism both in the Nitra region and the Slovak Republic are primarily associated with the human factor quality and service quality. Human factor is vital for ensuring service quality in all areas of tourism industry.

### 3. Conclusions

Service quality is the ability of service providers to produce the necessary output at a specified level for customers and according to their expectations. Tourism-related services are rated too low by respondents in the Nitra region, and it can be assumed that services of similar quality are provided in the remaining Slovak regions.

The survey findings imply that the key problem in the development of tourism both in the Nitra region and Slovakia is staff lacking proper or required qualification, and management not interested in developing their staff. An overwhelming majority of subjects point to the lack of career prospects, insufficient remuneration, no regular trainings or lack of high quality ingredients to prepare meals, etc.

It goes without saying that Slovak tourism industry needs qualified staff to thrive. The survey findings identified major deficiencies in dining and lodging-related service quality in the Nitra region.

We maintain that insufficient tourism-related service quality in the Nitra region can largely be attributed to the lack of universities providing study programs in tourism. The quality of tourism-related services provided in Slovakia does not reach the level of services demanded by visitors coming from Western European countries. Achieving the desired quality of service would attract more visitors to come to Slovakia, which in turn would contribute to the development of tourism. Staff qualification plays a crucial role in tourism industry in the Nitra region. The subjects for this investigation found major deficiencies in lodging and dining services in the Nitra region. Since guest satisfaction is of prime concern in tourism industry, continual enhancement of staff professionalism is a must.

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