

Unlocking Tourism Growth in Uzbekistan: Managerial Perspectives on Human Resource Challenges

Abstract

This study aims to explore the current state of the tourism industry in Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on evaluating its human resource capacity. The AMO model of human resource management serves as the theoretical foundation for this study, which adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the tourism industry in Uzbekistan through the lens of employers' and managers' perceptions, with particular attention to the labour market's capacity and available opportunities. The sample size was 20 respondents composed of managers and investors from four segments of the tourism industry. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using semi-structured interview questions. The findings indicate that there are considerable gaps in knowledge, skills, number of workers and loyalty required by the industry. The study suggests that tourism training and education in Uzbekistan needs to be modified and adapted to the industry's needs through communication and collaboration among the stakeholders, and one way of achieving that objective is a bottom-up tourism master plan with wide stakeholder participation.

Keywords: AMO model, global south, HRM in tourism and hospitality, service industry, tourism and hospitality, Uzbekistan

1. Introduction

Uzbekistan's service industry is growing rapidly along with the country's influence and popularity in the Global South. Except for a sharp fluctuation in the COVID years of 2020 and 2021, Uzbek domestic and international tourism figures have been on a steady ascent since the country's opening to the world in 2017 (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan [NSC], 2024).

The rapid pace of construction and infrastructure investments has increased the quantity and quality of physical facilities. "By the end of 2023, Uzbekistan boasted a total of 5,526 such establishments, compared to just 767 in 2017, reflecting a significant expansion in tourism infrastructure" (Abdurashidova, 2024). The Uzbek government has high expectations and has set ambitious goals such as the creation of 3.5 million new jobs in the tourism sector. The government aims to increase the number of local tourists to over 12 million and the number of foreign tourists to 9 million by 2027 (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022).

The official figure for foreign visitors in 2023 is 6,623,600. However, in the following year, between January and July 2024, Uzbekistan recorded a total of 4,242,900 international tourist arrivals. This represents an increase of 562,500 visitors, or 15.3%, compared to the same period in the previous year (NSC, 2024).

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Like many other developing economies, Uzbekistan's service economy faces a complex challenge in the quality and quantity of human capital, particularly in the tourism industry (Kumar & Khan, 2021). Public perception of tourism jobs is largely negative, and the educated workforce finds tourism job opportunities unattractive. As a result, unskilled candidates apply for low-paid roles, triggering a vicious cycle; employers invest time and money in training, employees leave for slightly better-paying positions, and high turnover, high hiring costs, low loyalty and low trust dominate the scene.

In this study, we have adopted the AMO Model of Human Resource Management as our theoretical framework. This model has significantly shaped our understanding and guided our research and interview questions. The AMO framework postulates that a combination of an employee's Ability (A), Motivation (M), and Opportunities (O) can predict individual or aggregated performance (in further text, AMO).

This study investigates employers' perceptions of the tourism workforce in Uzbekistan, with particular attention to employees' abilities, motivation, and the opportunities available to them, and examines how these perceptions relate to current skills expectations in the sector. Based on qualitative evidence from investors and managers, the study assesses the existing capacity of tourism education and training, identifies challenges related to workforce performance and development, and highlights managerial concerns within the industry. The findings offer context-specific empirical evidence that contributes to a better understanding of workforce–education alignment and human resource challenges in an emerging tourism destination.

2. Background

To effectively understand the workforce capacity in Uzbekistan and the factors that enhance the quality of professionals in the tourism industry, it is crucial to first explore the relationship between education and workforce quality. By establishing this connection, we can then focus on examining how these dynamics play out specifically within Uzbekistan's tourism sector.

2.1. The gap between tourism education and industry

Tourism education, which was initially in the form of vocational education, has later evolved into a more academic type of instruction (Airey & Tribe, 2005; Nailon, 1982). However, it has been consistently criticised for not preparing students for the tourism industry and for not meeting the sector's needs (Ladkin, 2005). Interestingly, the tourism sector does not appreciate tourism education and does not perceive a tourism degree as sufficient to be considered employable in the tourism industry (Cooper, 2002). Although the tourism industry has been growing fast, especially in the last forty years, due to uncertainties regarding the content and nature of tourism education, tourism graduates are not all considered employable by the industry (Airey, 2005).

There appears to be a significant gap between what is offered in management-level tourism education and the needs of the tourism industry. For instance, the industry has accused higher education in the UK of offering only generic knowledge, supplemented by some material from business studies and economics. Industry professionals state that what they require is people with personal skills such as adaptability, communication, leadership, and even numeracy (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [CEDEFOP], 1991). Another serious problem is the high dropout rate in tourism education. According to Barron and Maxwell (1993), most students who drop out either choose a completely new career path and view tourism very negatively, or realize they were deceived by the illusory, glamorous hotel images in the media.

It has been pointed out by Baum (1994) that conventional human resource management within the tourism and hospitality sphere is mostly dependent on short-term goals or actions taken based on contingency. This point is very much related to tourism and hospitality management, educational planning, curriculum design, and national strategy building and policy making. For this reason, being able to understand the problems experienced in the tourism sector in Uzbekistan and coming up with a sound road map for tourism and hospitality education seems to be vital. Thus, we believe that the current study will be meaningful to find out about the problems encountered in Uzbekistan.

Several studies conducted in developing service economies attempt to display the gap between the existing skills of the workforce and the requirements of the market. A research conducted by the Asian Development Bank in Uzbekistan's neighboring countries Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan revealed the facts that; "Educational attainment does not play a decisive role in the employment policy, cooperation with education institutions is little or nonexistent, and the hire on the basis of skills, with the result that new staff mostly start their careers in tourism at low levels" (Asian Development Bank, 2019). A similar research paper mentioned a considerable gap between the skilled labor supply and the industry demand in Thailand. The paper also mentioned the outdated tourism curricula and over-theoretical education (Batra, 2016). Recently, in 2023, Hyasat et al. in Jordan identified multiple gaps between the desired skills of the tourism industry and the available skills of the workforce.

2.2. Tourism and hospitality education in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan implemented a state vocational education system in 1998 with 15 technical schools. The number of schools has grown to over 1,000 schools and 1 million students in the early 2000s, when 8 of them were specialized in the service industry (Zhitnikova et al., 2008).

There are 4 public and 23 private 4-year tourism degree programs in addition to 8 vocational schools in Uzbekistan that represent 47,700 student capacity and 4,600 graduates annually (NSC, 2024). The discrepancy between the capacity and the number of graduates may be an indication of overcapacity and underusage. The state statistics agency of Uzbekistan does not provide a clear breakdown and analysis of the education sector's data. Most private higher education programs are franchises of Western institutions that tend to offer more theoretical education in hospitality management. The state vocational schools, on the other hand, tend to offer a more hands-on style and more vigorous internship and apprenticeship programs. As a result, the graduates of these schools are found to be more trainable and employable by businesses. That outcome is supported by similar research findings in other developing economies. Similar gap research conducted in Kenya reveals some relevant numbers: "For instance, a technical and vocational training graduate was rated higher than university graduates in technical skills (64%), supervisory skills (51%), management and leadership skills (36%) (Francis et al., 2020)."

Most of the graduates of higher education programs seek employment opportunities in other industries or countries, as opposed to most vocational school graduates seeking employment in the Uzbek service industry. The industry requirement of starting from a low-pay, low-esteem position may influence that behaviour. International hotel chains or incorporated tourism entities have developed contemporary HR practices and training programs. However, all around the world, most of the tourism businesses are small and mid-sized establishments, and they usually do not employ human resources practices and staff training programs (Mustapić, 2017). The situation in Uzbekistan complies with that conclusion.

Previous studies and available data indicate certain issues in the tourism sector that are related to the ability of employees, their motivation levels and the opportunities that are available to them. For this reason, we thought it would be meaningful to analyse the Uzbek tourism sphere by basing our research on the AMO model, which is explained in the next section.

3. Theoretical framework

Human resources undoubtedly play a crucial role in the tourism industry. The quality of service, customer satisfaction, and overall performance of the industry heavily depend on the skills, motivation, and opportunities provided to the workforce. By understanding and addressing the perspectives of employers regarding the abilities, motivations, and opportunities of the employees, we can pinpoint the problems encountered in the industry and spot industry needs to ultimately enhance the tourism sector's success.

For this study, we used the AMO model as our theoretical basis, which has been explained below:

3.1. AMO model of human resource management

The AMO framework posits that a combination of an employee's Ability (A), Motivation (M), and Opportunities (O) can provide a predictive measure of individual or aggregated performance (Paauwe, 2009). This model is particularly significant for the tourism industry, where the alignment of employees' skills and motivations with opportunities can greatly impact service quality and overall industry performance.

Ability refers to both physiological and cognitive capabilities which enable an individual to carry out a task effectively (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). Elbaz, Agag, and Alkathiri (2018) state that abilities are some competencies that an employee has, which include talent, knowledge, skills, proficiency and experience, and these are necessary to accomplish certain tasks. These encapsulate both natural aptitudes and capabilities acquired thanks to education and training (McShane and Travaglione, 2007). In order to tackle the skills gap among employees, it is vital to develop employees' skills in the workplace (Payne, 2012) and enhance the abilities of employees, resulting in improved task performance (De Silva et al., 2023). Moreover, it is argued that employees outdo their tasks, adopt creative ideas and perform much better at work when they become more competent (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2018). Consequently, training that boosts abilities and knowledge through learning has been recognized as a key factor in driving individual project innovation performance (Ferraris et al., 2018), and this also enhances employees' performance overall (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2018). Thus, enhancing employee skills and competencies through targeted upskilling or training programs that align with their roles is likely to boost organisational effectiveness and performance (Potnuru & Sahoo, 2016).

Secondly, motivation is regarded as a force that stimulates and sustains behaviour (Van Iddekinge et al., 2017) or the willingness of employees to undertake a task (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023). Researchers suggest that skilled employees' performance depends on how motivated they are (Delaney & Huselid, 1996). Certain human resource practices are closely tied to enhancing employee motivation. These include performance evaluations based on behaviour, competitive salaries, recognition programs, direct incentives and rewards, and enriching job roles (Marin-Garcia & Tomas, 2016). Empirical evidence from Subramony's (2009) meta-analysis demonstrates a positive correlation between motivation-enhancing HRM practices and favourable employee behaviours, especially within large organisations.

Finally, opportunity is defined by Blumberg and Pringle (1982) as forces that affect a person's task performance. Practices that enhance opportunities can be divided into four main categories: practices that boost employee engagement, those that facilitate knowledge sharing, practices related to job design, and those that promote autonomy. Employee engagement practices include initiatives like quality circles, self-directed work teams, problem-solving groups, teamwork, and methods that reinforce hierarchical structures and participation in decision-making. Knowledge-sharing practices aim to ensure employees have access to vital information regarding organisational performance, financial status, operations, and strategic matters (Demortier et al., 2014).

Overall, researchers contend that the AMO model offers a structure for assessing the elements that affect workplace behaviour and their subsequent effect on employee productivity and performance (Bhatti et al., 2021). Implementing AMO and HR practices in the workplace is frequently associated with increased

employee engagement. This heightened engagement provides employees with the motivation to continue their work diligently and identify opportunities for adding value (Boxall, 2003).

In this qualitative study, we explore the Uzbek tourism industry from the employers' perspective by assessing the quality and quantity of its human resource workforce. Using the AMO model as our theoretical framework, we propose that employee success is driven by their abilities, opportunities, and motivation. Therefore, our research and interview questions are crafted in alignment with this model to ensure a thorough analysis.

4. Data and methodology

4.1. Research design

We adopted a phenomenological approach in the frame of qualitative research (Denzin, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 2014) to bring out the perceptions of managers employed in the tourism and hospitality industry. In addition to qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews, we also utilised quantitative data such as current year statistics and secondary sources, which were scarcely available. To answer our research questions, we prepared semi-structured interview questions.

4.2. Participants of the study

We identified the participants of the study based on a purposeful sampling principle and approached the managers and owners of some leading organisations that have certain experience and reputation in the country, as their experience and insights would provide the necessary data we were aiming for. These respondents were managers from four different tourism segments, namely Food and Beverage, Logistics and Guideship, Hospitality and Consulting for Hospitality.

Table 1
The codes and demographic information of the participants (n=20)

Participant codes	Gender	Age	Field	Position
Hospitality				
Participant (P1)	M	45	Hotel	Manager
Participant (P2)	F	45	Hotel	Owner
Participant (P3)	M	40	Resort	CEO
Participant (P4)	F	40	Hospitality	HR manager
Participant (P5)	M	42	Hospitality	Manager
Participant (P6)	M	39	Hospitality	Manager
Participant (P7)	M	42	Hospitality	Owner
Food and beverage				
Participant (P8)	M	36	E-commerce	HR director
Participant (P9)	M	28	Restaurant	Manager
Participant (P10)	M	35	Restaurant	Manager
Participant (P11)	M	30	Restaurant	Manager
Participant (P12)	F	21	Restaurant	Manager
Participant (P13)	M	32	Restaurant	Manager
Participant (P14)	M	38	Restaurant	Manager
Logistics/Guideship				
Participant (P15)	F	33	Travel agency	Travel agent
Participant (P16)	F	36	Travel agency	Owner
Participant (P17)	M	50	Travel agency	Founder & director
Participant (P18)	M	43	Travel agent	Travel agent
Consulting				
Participant (P19)	M	35	Consulting for hospitality	Co-founder
Participant (P20)	F	43	Consulting for hospitality	Founder/manager

4.3. Data collection instrument

Based on relevant literature and the aim of the study, we prepared a semi-structured interview form. The survey was composed of five sections and all together 14 questions. After the instrument was designed, the expert opinion of a professor who specialised in qualitative research was sought, and the necessary modifications were made considering the feedback. A modified version of the questionnaire was piloted with two managers working in the tourism sector who were not among the participants in the study. Having modified the questionnaire one more time, it was used during the actual interviews.

The questions in the instrument aimed to find out about the problems participants come across in the industry, the quality and quantity of human capital, their evaluation of tourism education in Uzbekistan, employability of graduates, turnover rate in the industry and training programs and career opportunities for tourism sector employees. The questions asked are as follows (Q1-Q7):

- Q1. a. What can you tell us about the tourism industry of Uzbekistan?
b. What problems do you see in the tourism industry?
- Q2 a. Please tell us about the quality and quantity of Human Capital in the tourism industry.
b. Do you provide extra training to the people you hire?
- Q3 a. What's your evaluation of tourism education in Uzbekistan?
b. Does it meet the needs of the sector? Why? Why Not?)
c. How do you evaluate the employability of tourism school graduates both locally and internationally?
- Q4 a. Can you tell us about the turnover rate in your company and in the industry overall?
b. How do you prioritise the reasons for the turnover?
- Q5 a. Do you provide career planning and career opportunities in your organisation?
b. What training programs do you have for your staff?
- Q6. When you consider your organisation and tourism sector in Uzbekistan overall, what gaps are there in your opinion, between the expectation and current performance? (i.e. education, loyalty, efficiency, effectiveness)
- Q7. What would be your closing remarks? Do you have any suggestions?

4.4. Data collection procedure

Ethical permission to conduct the research was received from the university. Participants were approached individually, and appointments were arranged. Depending on their suitability, some interviews were conducted face to face, and some were conducted via Zoom video stream online in May and June 2024, over two months. (face to face - 6 respondents, online - 14 respondents)

Participants (n=20) were informed of the study's aim, and their consent was obtained for the interview and for recording. They were assured that they could withdraw from the interview at any time without giving an excuse. The interviews lasted about 30-40 minutes. The researchers transcribed the interview recordings after each interview.

4.5. Data analysis

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using inductive content analysis, involving systematic analysis and synthesis of interview data to generate themes, which were subsequently interpreted deductively through the AMO framework rather than through a phenomenological lens.

To analyse the qualitative data, audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed Marshall and Rossman's (2014) four stages of content analysis: organising the data, generating categories, themes, and patterns, testing emergent hypotheses, and exploring alternative explanations. Given the relatively small number of interviewees, coding was conducted manually without qualitative data analysis software. Each researcher independently coded the transcripts by hand, allowing close, nuanced engagement with the data.

The coding process was inductive, meaning that codes and themes were not predefined but emerged organically from the data itself. After individual coding, the research team engaged in collaborative discussions to compare interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and reach consensus on the final coding framework. This iterative and dialogic approach helped ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis. To further support trustworthiness, each researcher reviewed both the findings and the analytical process independently.

Interview transcripts were coded manually using an inductive content analysis approach, with themes emerging from the data through independent coding by multiple researchers, followed by collaborative comparison and consensus-building to ensure analytical consistency and trustworthiness.

To maintain participant anonymity, each interviewee was assigned a code (e.g., P1, P2, P3), as presented in Table 1.

5. Findings

In relation to our research questions, the data revealed six key categories: challenges in the tourism sector, the quality and quantity of human capital, the evaluation of tourism and hospitality education (in relation to the industry), turnover rate, career opportunities, and training. First, the evaluation of the participants regarding the tourism sector in Uzbekistan in general will be shared. Later, these findings will be explained using the AMO theoretical framework. The first aspect of the model, *Ability*, encompasses employees' capabilities and skills, which are influenced by the education and training they receive. The second aspect, *Motivation*, pertains to employees' willingness and enthusiasm to continue working within their organization or the tourism sector. Findings related to the turnover rate will be discussed under this heading, as there is a connection between employees' motivation and the turnover rate in an organisation. Lastly, the third dimension of the AMO model, *Opportunity*, will address employees' career opportunities and the potential benefits that training may offer in their career development.

The AMO framework is used as an organizing lens to interpret employers' perceptions of workforce challenges in Uzbekistan's tourism industry. In this study, ability refers to employees' skills and competencies shaped by education and training; motivation reflects employees' willingness to remain in the sector, as evidenced by turnover and retention issues; and opportunity concerns access to career development, training, and advancement. The framework is applied pragmatically to structure the qualitative findings rather than to advance or extend AMO theory.

5.1. Is Uzbekistan ready for the increasing demand?

When the data is analysed, it has been found that all the participants believe that the tourism industry in Uzbekistan is not yet ready for the influx of tourists. The representatives of the sector all agree that Uzbekistan has a lot of potential and that the number of tourists coming to Uzbekistan is increasing every day. However, despite the increasing demand, it seems that the industry is currently facing problems.

All participants noted that the number of tourists visiting Uzbekistan is rising. However, they believe tourism capacity is inadequate to meet demand, as there is a need for more hotels and restaurants. In terms of logistics, the issues include difficulty in securing train tickets and roads that are not in very good condition, making travel to regions difficult and uncomfortable for tourists. Participants from the hospitality sector also cited a lack of trained staff and high operating costs. It seems that both the food and beverage and hospitality

sectors need more government planning and organisational support. They believe there is a need for more subsidies, and that bank loan interest rates are very high, making it hard for them to invest and keep up with the influx of tourists without sufficient government support. In addition to concerns about the capacity of hotels, restaurants, and transport infrastructure, airport capacity was also identified as a significant issue by interviewees. This observation was consistently echoed by professionals from both the hospitality consulting and logistics sectors, particularly in reference to cities other than Tashkent.

In addition, it was stated by some of the interviewees that most tourism activity is for cultural-historical tourism. Yet, Uzbekistan has room for development in other tourism categories. For example, P15, who is a travel agent, states the following:

People coming to Uzbekistan are not aware of Khiva, they do not know Aral Lake, and they do not know how beautiful it is. People are limited to Samarkand and Bukhara. There should be more campaigns to show people how beautiful Uzbekistan is.

Regarding the quality of the tourism industry, participants from hospitality, food and beverage, and tourism consulting highlighted that standardisation is a serious issue in Uzbekistan. There is no regulatory body to set standards and certify individuals or organisations. This seems to be one of the reasons for the lack of a common understanding of quality and for the quality in most hotels and restaurants, especially in regions outside Tashkent, not yet being satisfactory.

Several interviewees raised registration requirements as a concern for international tourists travelling within Uzbekistan. One participant (P4) commented:

A tourist needs to register each time he changes his location within the country. Each time, there is a fee to pay, and for tourists this level of control is very hard to understand. They do not understand it, especially when there is already a visa in place.

While the registration process itself is typically handled by hotel receptions and does not require direct interaction with government offices, the recurring fees associated with each change of accommodation were perceived by some visitors as burdensome. Another interviewee, P6, stated that although the system is designed to ensure regulatory compliance and public safety, the cumulative cost of registration, alongside accommodation prices for foreign guests, contributes to an increased overall cost of travel and a sense of administrative complexity for tourists unfamiliar with such procedures.

5.2. Ability of employees in the tourism industry in Uzbekistan

When the findings of the study were analysed across all tourism segments, the major problem seemed to be the quality of human capital. All the participants stated that it is very hard to find trained staff to work in the industry. Although most companies are aware of the problem and are doing their best to train them either through some online training programs or on the job, face to face, they state that it is a serious problem because they cannot even keep the ones that they have trained for a long time. Across all segments, companies seem to battle with each other to hire trained personnel. In the hospitality sector, unfortunately, trained staff do not even seem to continue to work in the sector for long; they even change countries, according to P1, who is a hotel manager. He reports: *“The lack of well-trained hotel personnel is our biggest problem. We do not have human resources, and most importantly, we do not have trained employees. The government of Uzbekistan has to take some serious measures for this problem”*.

He adds that the people who come to work in their hotels usually come from regions of Uzbekistan outside Tashkent because they need the money. Most of them are hoping to leave the country, and they do so when they have the chance. He believes that they do not lose trained staff to other hotels; the people leave the country altogether in most cases.

When the participants were asked to evaluate tourism education, it was found out that all of them strongly believe that there is a huge gap between what is required in the tourism industry and what is done in schools. Unfortunately, participants state that tourism education is too theoretical, and graduates are not equipped with the practical skills required for the job. P3, who is the CEO of a hotel in Uzbekistan, says: *'We train them on the job when they are in contact with the clients. This is what they need. We do not need the theory.'*

In addition, it has been found that hotels and restaurants work with students coming from tourism colleges and tourism and hospitality departments of universities as part of apprenticeship programs. However, these graduates do not want to work in the sector after school. Their perception of the sector is negative, either due to limited career opportunities or the jobs they must do in the sector seem trivial to them. While talking about the issue, P4, the HR manager of a hotel, stated that students from tourism and hospitality programs come to the hotel as part of the internship program. They are asked to work in restaurants or other departments. However, most of the students think that setting tables or cleaning rooms is not the job they should do as university students. She added:

I heard them say, 'I am not paying the university all this money to set tables. So, all of them are hoping to become managers right after they graduate, but it is impossible. They need to learn the job in every detail. Unfortunately, most of them do different jobs after graduation, and they do not work in the tourism industry. They think these are mundane jobs.'

P3. The CEO of a hotel uttered some similar words:

I will tell you this, we have to hunt a good professional who knows the job, who knows what is needed for a hotel and knows how to do it right. There are not many of them. Those who are there are already working today, and the guys who want to get a job have the desire, but unfortunately, don't want to work. They don't want to start from the beginning; they want to start from the end of the path

5.3. Motivation of employees in the tourism industry in Uzbekistan

Analysis of the data reveals that a significant factor behind the high turnover rate in Uzbekistan's tourism sector is a widespread lack of employee motivation. Despite efforts by many companies to address this issue, such as offering online and on-the-job training opportunities, employers report that retaining trained staff remains a serious challenge. Even after investing in employee development, organisations struggle to retain personnel for extended periods, as many leave shortly after being trained.

This issue is particularly pronounced in the hospitality sector, where competition among companies for skilled workers is intense. According to P1, a hotel manager, trained employees often exit the industry altogether, sometimes even migrating abroad in search of better opportunities. He explains:

"The lack of well-trained hotel personnel is our biggest problem. We do not have human resources, and most importantly, we do not have trained employees. The government of Uzbekistan has to take serious measures to address this problem."

He further notes that many hotel workers come from regions outside Tashkent, primarily driven by financial need, and often leave the country when the opportunity arises. In his view, the problem is not just competition between hotels but a broader issue of workforce migration.

Similar challenges are reported across the logistics and food and beverage sectors. P14, the founder and CEO of a prominent café and restaurant chain, describes ongoing difficulties in retaining staff. Despite offering both online and face-to-face training, employees frequently leave for slightly higher salaries elsewhere. He emphasises the unsustainability of this pattern, stating: "It is not sustainable. You cannot constantly increase the salaries, so we provide opportunities for career development as well."

Nonetheless, the problem persists. His company experiences a monthly turnover rate of 7%, which he notes is lower than the industry average.

Across all segments of the tourism industry, high turnover is a consistent concern. Employees often leave either in pursuit of higher wages or due to a perceived lack of career advancement opportunities. P4, an HR manager at a five-star hotel, reports that turnover is especially high in departments such as housekeeping, food service, and reception, while administrative roles are more stable. She attributes this to both the demanding workload and dissatisfaction with low pay.

Overall, the findings suggest that low motivation—driven by limited financial incentives, lack of career progression, and broader economic aspirations—is a central factor behind the sector's retention challenges.

5.4. Opportunities for employees in the tourism industry in Uzbekistan

The participants in the study predominantly reported a lack of opportunities for employees to develop their skills, secure promotions, or receive satisfactory pay increases. This issue is particularly pronounced in smaller hotels and restaurants, where employees often leave for slightly better offers from newly established establishments.

A significant concern is that many of these employees are students, especially in the hotel industry, who work until they graduate and then pursue careers in their field of study. This transient nature of student employment contributes to high turnover rates in smaller establishments, as they are more likely to leave once they obtain their diplomas.

Conversely, five-star chain hotels offer substantial development opportunities that smaller hotels cannot match. These larger establishments invest in their employees by providing training programmes in other countries, such as Dubai and Turkey. This international exposure not only enhances employees' skills but also serves as a significant motivational factor, encouraging them to remain with the organisation. One of the hotel managers of a five-star chain hotel (P6) stated:

They seem very happy with the opportunities we provide for their professional and personal development. They receive training in different countries and see the world. They come back very happy, and this has a very positive impact on their performance. We have employees who have worked with us for many years. Of course, we also have employees who leave us despite all the opportunities we provide, but they are the students who graduate. We cannot pay as much as some other sectors, and a student who becomes a doctor after graduation wants to work in their own field. That's understandable.

Unfortunately, such opportunities are scarce in smaller hotels. The lack of investment in employee development in these establishments leads to a cycle of high turnover and limited career growth. Employees in smaller hotels and restaurants often feel undervalued and are quick to leave for better opportunities, perpetuating the challenges these businesses face in retaining skilled staff.

Opportunities for career advancement are notably scarce in the logistics sector, as well as in restaurants and cafes. Employees in these industries often face low salaries, which contribute to low motivation and job dissatisfaction. Most training is on-the-job, which, while practical, does not offer the comprehensive development programmes available in larger, more established organisations. This limited scope for professional growth and skill enhancement leads to high turnover, as employees frequently leave for slightly better offers elsewhere. The absence of structured training programmes and clear career progression paths further exacerbates the challenges faced by workers in these sectors, making it difficult for them to envision a long-term future within their current roles. Consequently, these industries struggle to retain talent, perpetuating a cycle of instability and underdevelopment.

Table 2 below shows the summary of the findings discussed above.

Table 2.
Summary of interview findings

Theme	T1 Logistics/ guideship	T2 Food and beverage	T3 Hospitality	T4 Consulting (for hospitality)
General evaluation of the tourism sector and problems	- problems with finding tickets - poor road conditions	- hard to cater for high influx of people - not enough government incentives - lack of card-free payment solutions such as Google Pay and Apple Pay - assortment and competition are low	- low capacity - low capacity - hard to keep up with increase in tourist numbers - high expenses/costs - high taxes burden and high interest rate for bank loans (23-25%) - low competition and bad service - registration is a problem - language barrier	- only the cultural-historical tourism category is being developed, there is a need to develop other categories as well. -the capacity of the airports is limited. - logistics between regions: road communication is very poor. - the service in hotels is poor. - there is no state or independent body that would certify people in the hospitality - hospitality suffers in the off-season (high costs)
Quality and quantity of human capital	- English speaking employees needed	- hard to find trained staff - poor knowledge of staff on the industry - Lack of good examples of good service for staff	- hard to find trained staff, companies battle for hiring good staff - no actual interest on the industry	- lack of interest in working in tourism in Uzbekistan among specialists and graduates, as it is not considered attractive, and they mostly leave the country to work abroad - number of hotels has increased by 300%, but its human capital has remained unchanged
Evaluation of tourism education	- education too theoretical - practise is missing	- tourism and hospitality graduates do not come to work in the sector - education too theoretical - most graduates lack practice - sometimes poor theoretical knowledge	- tourism and hospitality graduates do not come to work in the sector - hospitality is not attractive fore graduates, they do not want to learn - university graduates perception of the job is negative - education too theoretical - only 3-5% of staff has tourism educational background	
Turnover rate	- high turnover rate	- high - especially waiters leave for higher salary - in departments where they work with clients the turnover is high, in other departments it is quite stable - 30% for industry, 7%/month for participant's business	- not high at management level - high in housekeeping, restaurants, reception - 8%/month in seasonal time, 2% /month (usually 5 month) - employees are unable to cope with the work, so they are leaving - some do not go to other hotels after leaving, they go abroad	- high turnover, especially constant high turnover in local 3–4-star hotel comparing to internationally well-known brands
Career opportunities	- not enough opportunities	- opportunity to become a manager for a very small number - many top managers grow within the company; there is an opportunity to reach top management	- not much room to be promoted - managers do not leave - opportunities to grow to the top-management	
Training	- training in the first three months (trial period)	- on the job training - using an education program online (on their own platform)	- on the job training - train online according to the business needs on their own platform - training is wasted as they leave the industry	- own training is developed in their own platforms & on the job training

Overall, participants across all four tourism segments (T1-T4) consistently emphasised structural problems in the tourism sector, including infrastructure limitations, regulatory barriers, and capacity constraints, which undermine service quality and sectoral growth. In addition, persistent human-capital challenges—such as insufficient practical education, difficulty recruiting trained staff, high turnover rates, and limited career advancement opportunities—were identified as key obstacles to the sustainable development of the tourism and hospitality industry.

6. Discussion

The tourism industry in Uzbekistan is growing, yet it faces several challenges. This study aimed to analyse the current situation, with a particular focus on the workforce. We employed the AMO Model of Human Resource Management as our theoretical framework, which significantly shaped our understanding and guided our research and interview questions. According to the AMO framework, an employee's Ability (A), Motivation (M), and Opportunities (O) collectively predict their performance. Our research sought to explore employers' perceptions of the workforce across these three dimensions and how these perceptions align with their expectations of skills within the Uzbekistan tourism industry. We designed our questions to investigate the current experiences and future expectations of investors and managers, offering valuable insights into the industry's human resource dynamics.

The findings related to Ability indicate that employers perceive tourism education in Uzbekistan as overly theoretical and insufficiently aligned with practical industry needs, a challenge widely discussed in the literature, where weak collaboration between education providers and industry is seen as a major barrier to workforce readiness (Dredge et al., 2012). In terms of Motivation, the high turnover rates and limited commitment to tourism employment reported by participants reflect existing research showing that low wages, demanding working conditions, and the low occupational status of tourism jobs negatively affect employee motivation and retention (Baum et al., 2016). Regarding Opportunity, the absence of structured career paths and limited access to systematic training opportunities supports earlier studies, which argue that restricted opportunities for professional development and advancement undermine long-term employee engagement and performance in the hospitality and tourism sector (Kusluvan et al., 2010).

To address these challenges, several solutions may be proposed. Collaboration between educators and industry players on curriculum development, internships, and apprenticeship programs can help meet the evolving market expectations. Additionally, offering flexible and modular education for working individuals, combined with effective career planning and better income opportunities, can enhance workforce development. However, without identifying the most suitable tourism categories for Uzbekistan and planning accordingly, quick-fix solutions may lead to trial and error.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights that managers and investors in Uzbekistan's tourism industry share common concerns regarding infrastructure constraints, insufficient human capital, and the absence of strategic planning. The findings indicate a persistent shortage of skilled labour, inadequacies in current education and training systems, and a generally negative perception of tourism employment, which together contribute to high turnover and low service quality. These challenges suggest that workforce-related issues remain a critical barrier to the sustainable development of the sector.

From a practical perspective, the results underline the need for a coordinated, long-term national approach to tourism development, particularly in aligning human resource strategies with sectoral needs. Strengthening collaboration between educational institutions and industry actors and improving the attractiveness of tourism careers are essential steps toward enhancing employee performance and retention.

This study is limited by its qualitative design and sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand on these insights by incorporating larger samples, comparative studies across regions, or longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impact of human resource reforms on tourism performance in Uzbekistan.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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