



## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING ON INTERCULTURALITY OF EMPLOYEES IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

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**Abstract:** The tourism sector, by its very nature, involves interactions between people from different cultures, and therefore employees are expected, in addition to knowing a foreign language, to have a certain level of cultural sensitivity. Intercultural training has numerous advantages, some of them are that it enables effective communication and interaction with guests from different cultures, affects the satisfaction and loyalty of service users, promotes cultural understanding and tolerance. Also, investing in intercultural training for tourism employees can lead to the long-term success of the tourism organization and create a positive impact on the wider community. There are numerous studies that show that employee training on intercultural issues is extremely important for front-line employees to provide high-quality service and guest satisfaction. The lack of this training represents a significant challenge for tourism employees. Therefore, the goal of this research is to analyze the importance of intercultural training of employees in tourism, as well as all the benefits it has for both employees and guests. The methodology includes a review of relevant literature with an analysis of available data. The results of the research show that training on interculturality has a positive impact on the quality of services, as well as those organizations that have included this training program achieve greater competitiveness compared to those that have not yet done so.

**Keywords:** *tourism sector, intercultural communication, training, cultural diversity, employees.*

### Introduction

Tourism is a global and socio-economic phenomenon, which has a significant contribution to the economic growth and development of the destination. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council 2019, tourism sector is considered an important industry accounting for 10.3% of global GDP and accounting for 3.9% of total employment. One of the key effects of tourism on the economy is the influence of realized tourist consumption stands out. The multiplicative effects of tourism on the economy are exclusively related to the effects that arise as a result of the consumption of foreign tourists. The development of international tourism contributes to the transfer of funds from one tax system to another, which has a positive economic effect on the destination visited by tourists (Vujadinović, 2022). It is an effective instrument for improving the economic situation, especially in developing countries, such as the Republic of Serbia. In addition to economic effects, tourism can also contribute to the social development of the destination. Increased tourism activity can contribute to the promotion of local culture, tradition and cultural heritage. The tourism and hotel industry development policy in the Republic of Serbia is based on the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025, the main goal of which is to improve the tourism sector in Serbia through various activities and measures. . The central focus of this strategy, among other things, is aimed at attracting more foreign tourists. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for tourism companies to recognize the importance of investing in the education of employees in terms of knowing the specifics of different cultures. This paper examines the importance of training and the relationship between the interculturality of employees and the quality of services. Although the issue of cultural diversity is not a new phenomenon, this topic is very little represented in domestic literature. By reviewing the relevant existing literature, it can be concluded that no specific study has been done in Serbia so far and that this is the first scientific paper that empirically examines the importance of training and the connection between training on the interculturality of employees and the quality of services. The initial hypothesis in this paper is: Training on the interculturality of employees in tourism has a positive effect on the quality of services, that is, employees who attended intercultural training are ready to provide a higher quality of service to guests. This empirical research was conducted during March 2023 in several multinational 4- and 5-star hotels operating in the territory of Belgrade on a sample of 78 front-line employees and 53 foreign tourists. A unique questionnaire was created for the purposes of this research. The collected data were processed using Microsoft Office and SPSS software packages.

### 1. Literature review

The tourism sector is connected to people and most depend on human resources. Only a highly-skilled workforce can ensure competitiveness and thus create jobs in tourism. In accordance with the new requirements, there is



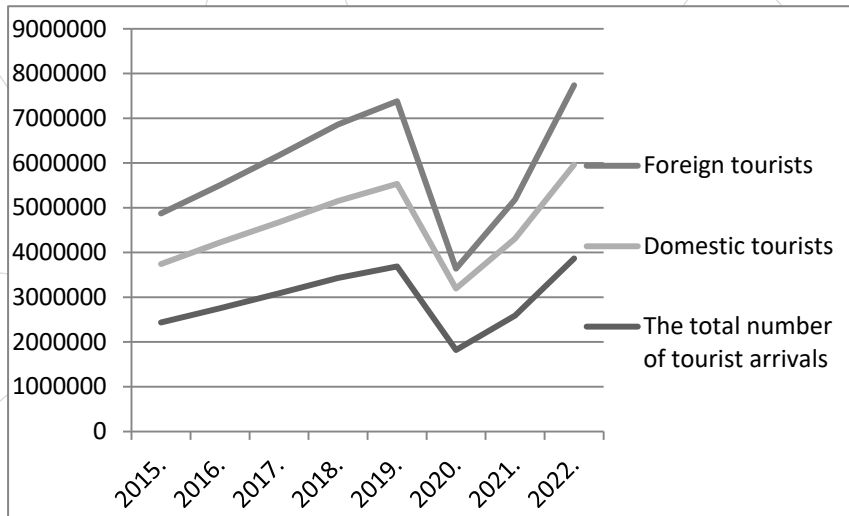
a need to improve the education system and involvement of intercultural learning because the new environment increasingly seeking employees who are multi-qualified, flexible, and educated (Milićević, et al., 2013). The need for employee education arose due to accelerated changes caused by technological development, globalization, and increased competition because formal education lags behind changes in the labor market. This is reflected in the function of education and training in the organization, as a supplement to formal education, and takes over the function of human resource development. Development implies much more than preparation for a specific job, primarily adaptation to changes in the labor market, as well as preparation for future working conditions (Bahtijarević-Šiber, 1999). Employee training implies a planned effort by the organization to improve the performance of employees at the workplace, changes in specific knowledge, abilities, skills, attitudes, or behavior of employees, and implies the temporal dimension of the present. (Goldstein, I.L., & Ford, K.J. 2002). Training is a planned activity of training employees for the successful performance of work or activities. It is mainly aimed at acquiring specific knowledge, skills, and techniques necessary to perform a specific job, as well as increasing its success. Human resources, as an organization's potential, represent its greatest creative and driving force. In addition to employees occupying a key place in the process of providing services, they are also important bearers of changes and new ideas, they create additional value, increase the company's business performance, and therefore are the drivers of the organization's future performance and gaining a competitive advantage. This is especially pronounced in the tourism and hotel sector, as a highly labor-intensive activity, the importance of which is reflected in the fact that employees are in direct contact with numerous tourists and that the quality of service largely depends on their actions.

Modern business conditions prevailing in the global market require employees, who are in direct contact with foreign tourists, to possess not only formal education, knowledge of one of the foreign languages, and readiness to provide high-quality services, but also a deep understanding of the culture and customs of the tourists' home country. This is essential in order to meet their needs adequately and deliver a higher quality of service. Therefore, today, in the modern business world, more and more companies are interested in intangible investments and investing in human capital as a way to gain a competitive advantage. Training and development can help a company's competitiveness because it can directly increase the value of the company through the contribution of intangible investments. Intangible assets have been shown to affect a company's competitive advantage because they are difficult to copy or imitate (Barney & Wright, 1998). The influence of culture is present at global, national, organizational, and individual levels (Milovanović, 2015). The modern way of doing business today implies an increase in multiculturalism both inside and outside the organizations themselves and interactions between employees in tourism, the local community, and tourists from different cultures are becoming more frequent. (Langović-Milićević, Cvetkovski, Langović, 2011; Milicevic, Cvetkovski, Langović, Pazun, Ocokoljic, 2013). The influence of culture on people's behavior can best be seen if you compare the culture of one country (for example, Serbia) with the culture of another country (for example, China) (Cvetkovski, Milićević, 2018). In the beginning, it can be seen that there are significant differences in attitudes, values, language, and manner of behavior, as well as in other aspects (Pavlović, 2016). The study of intercultural communication first began in the United States of America in the 1960s, and the concept was proposed to meet the needs of a multicultural society (Qiu, & Qi, 2020). Its main purpose is to understand the nature and process of intercultural communication and how to avoid and solve cultural barriers, and cultural conflicts and promote mutual communication. (Qiu, & Qi, 2020). For successful communication with members of other cultures, knowledge of the language alone is not enough, but a good knowledge of the specifics of other cultural characteristics and dimensions is also important (Milicevic, Cvetkovski, Langovic, Pazun, Ocokoljic, 2013). Among other things, managers and employees in tourism are expected to be well informed, to know the characteristics of another culture, to be tolerant and respect different cultural values, as well as to develop the ability to communicate. Knowledge of non-verbal communication in intercultural communication, as well as in business communication, is also extremely important for the success of business negotiations because research has shown significant differences in the behavior, i.e. non-verbal communication, of business people around the world (Bašić, 2014; Langović-Milićević, 2014; Pavlović, 2016), otherwise, misunderstanding may occur (for example, continuously looking into the eyes of the interlocutor during communication is considered uncultured in many parts of Asia and Africa, while the reverse is accidental in Western countries) (Lončar, 2015). Tourism companies must be aware that different cultures appreciate and value different values (Milićević-Langović, 2014). Companies that gravitate towards other regions, which have different cultural characteristics, must educate their employees and thus prepare them for the opportunities they will encounter in the encounter with another culture, otherwise, problems may arise, such as xenophobia, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, racism and the like (Prnjat, 2013).



## 2. Analysis of tourist traffic in the Republic of Serbia

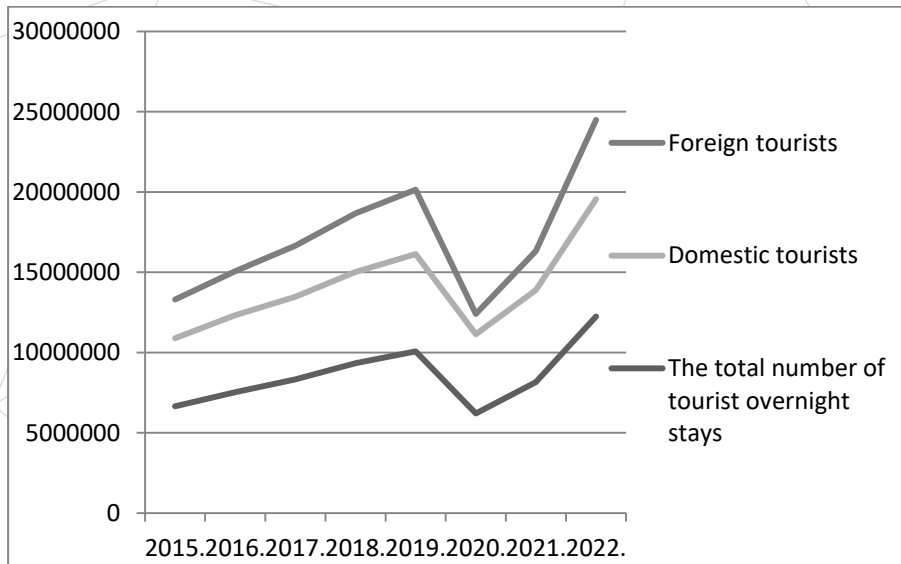
Graph1. The number of tourist arrivals in the Republic of Serbia from 2015 to 2022



Source: Author based on data from the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022.

Graph 1 shows that year after year, until 2019 and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Vujadinović, Vujadinović 2022), Serbia recorded an increase in the number of arrivals of domestic and foreign tourists. Also, in the observed period, the number of foreign tourist arrivals shows a growing tendency. The largest number of tourist arrivals was achieved in 2019 with a total of 1,846,551 tourist arrivals. According to trends, that number is expected to increase in 2023 (Vujadinović, 2022).

Graph2. The number of tourist overnight stays in the Republic of Serbia from 2015 to 2022



Source: Author based on data from the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022.

From Graph 2, it can be seen that Serbia records an increase in the number of overnight stays by tourists from year to year. Although the dominant participation of domestic tourists is noticeable, the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists shows a tendency to increase from year to year. The highest number of overnight stays was achieved in 2019 with a total of 9,387,488 tourist overnight stays. Traditionally, the largest number of arrivals and overnight stays in the Republic of Serbia are made by tourists from Bosnia and Herzegovina,



Montenegro, Slovenia, and North Macedonia, as well as from other important emission markets such as Russia, China, Italy, Greece, Great Britain, Turkey, Germany, and Austria (Ministry of Tourism and Youth of the Republic of Serbia).

### 3. Research Methods and Results

#### 3.1. General characteristics of the sample

This paper analyzes the importance of training on interculturality for employees in the tourism sector. Although the issue of cultural diversity is not a new phenomenon, this topic is very little represented in domestic literature. By reviewing the relevant existing literature, it can be concluded that no specific study has been done in Serbia so far and that this is the first scientific paper that empirically examines the importance of training and the connection between training on the interculturality of employees and the quality of services. For this study, data was collected in the Belgrade region, one of the most visited tourist destinations by foreign tourists with almost a million arrivals and 2,681.852 overnight stays in 2022 (<https://www.stat.gov.rs/>). In this research, front-line employees and foreign tourists from 4 and 5-star hotels operating in the city of Belgrade participated.

Socio-demographic characteristics of employees

Table1. Distribution of respondents with regard to gender

Gender	Frequency (f)
Male	37
Female	41
Total	78

Source: Author

From Table 1, it can be seen that the majority of respondents are female, 41 of them, while 37 are male.

Table2. Distribution of respondents by age

Age	Frequency (f)
Up to 27	19
28-38	33
39-49	17
49 and more	9
Total	78

Source: Author

Table 2 shows that the largest number of respondents are between the ages of 28 and 38, there are 33. Then, come respondents aged up to 27 years old 19 and between the ages of 39 and 49, them 17. In the case of respondents aged 49 and older, there are 9 respondents.

Table3. Distribution of respondents with regard to the level of professional education

The level of professional education	Frequency (f)
High school	19
College	27
Faculty	32
Total	78

Source: Author

According to the level of education, almost half of the surveyed employees have completed university, there are 32, 27 respondents have completed college, while 19 respondents have completed high school.



Table 4. Distribution of respondents according to years of service in the company

Years of service	Frequency (f)
Up to 3	12
3-6	18
6-10	25
10 and more	23
Total	78

Source: Author

When it comes to the length of work experience, the largest number of respondents were employees with a work experience of 6 to 10 years, there are 23, followed by employees with 10 or more years of work experience, 23, 18 respondents have work experience of 3 to 6 years, while 12 respondents have up to 3 years.

General characteristics of tourists

Table5. Distribution of respondents according to the countries they come from

Country	Frequency (f)
Turkey	3
Germany	4
Russia	15
China	17
West Balkan	14
Total	53

Source: Author

From Table 5, it can be seen that the largest number of respondents were tourists from China (17), followed by tourists from Russia (15), tourists from the Western Balkans, 14 of them, and the least number were from Germany (4) and Turkey (3).

Table6. Distribution of respondents according to the length of stay in the hotel

The length of stay in the hotel	Frequency (f)
Up to 2 nights stay	21
2-4 nights stay	18
4 and more	14
Total	53

Source: Author

The largest number of surveyed tourists stay in the hotel for up to 2 nights, there are 21. Then from 2 to 4 nights (18) and 14 respondents stay in the hotel for 4 nights or longer.

### 3.2. Analysis of the relationship between employees' training on interculturality and service quality

For the purposes of this research, in order to assess the degree of a linear relationship between the variables of employees' education on interculturality and service quality ratings, *the Pearson correlation coefficient* was used. In statistical research, *the Pearson correlation coefficient* ( $r$ ) is the most common way of measuring a linear dependence between two sets of data. It is the ratio between the covariance of two variables and the product of their standard deviations; thus, it essentially measures the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables, such that the result always has a value between  $-1$  and  $1$ . As with covariance itself, the measure can only reflect a linear correlation of variables (Lai & Balakrishnan, 2009). A value of  $0$  indicates that there is no association between the two variables. A value greater than  $0$  indicates a positive association; that is, as the value of one variable increases, so does the value of the other variable. A value less than  $0$  indicates a negative association; that is, as the value of one variable increases, the value of the other variable decreases.





The sample correlation coefficient  $r$ :

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2}} \quad (1)$$

Where is:

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n x_i}{n}; \bar{y} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n y_i}{n}$$

For the purposes of this research was used *the Pearson correlation coefficient*, in order to assess the degree of a linear relationship between the variables of employees' education on interculturality and service quality ratings.

Table7. *The Pearson correlation coefficient*

	Training employees on interculturality	The quality of services
Training employees on interculturality	1	
The quality of services	0,84077886	1

Source: Author

Table 7 shows the obtained value of *Pearson's correlation coefficient*  $r = 0.803$  indicating a high positive correlation between the education of employees on interculturality and service quality ratings. This high value of the correlation coefficient suggests that there is a strong relationship between the level of education of employees about interculturality and the perception of the quality of the services they provide to guests.

### Conclusion

The research results clearly indicate a significant relationship between the education of employees and the quality of services in tourism. By analyzing the collected data and applying appropriate statistical methods, it was determined that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between the education of front-line employees and the level of service quality. It is particularly important to emphasize that research indicates the key role of educating employees about interculturality in improving the quality of services in the tourism sector. Employees who have undergone intercultural training possess knowledge, skills and awareness of different cultures, which enables them to successfully communicate and understand the needs of guests from different cultural backgrounds. Implementing an intercultural education program for employees can bring numerous benefits, including increasing guest satisfaction, improving intercultural communication, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts, and creating a positive image of the destination. Therefore, tourism companies should recognize this type of training for their employees as an investment in the future, instead of an expense. Education about interculturality can be a key factor in creating a competitive advantage in the tourism market and ensuring high quality services, which will contribute to the success and sustainability of destinations in the long term.



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