

The Tourism Graduate Performance on Employer Satisfaction through Soft Skill and Career Choice as Mediation: A Case Study of Tourism Industry in Dili Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT

This study explores employer satisfaction with tourism graduates' performance and examines the interplay between graduate performance, soft skills, career choice, and employer satisfaction. A quantitative descriptive method was applied, using survey questionnaires to gather data from 30 employers (directors, department heads, HR representatives) in Dili, Timor-Leste. Data analysis conducted using SMART PLS 4.0. Hypothesis testing demonstrated that graduate performance does not directly affect employer satisfaction (H1) but strongly impacts soft skills development (H2). In turn, there is a substantial correlation between soft skills and employer satisfaction (H3). While career choice does not mediate the association between graduate performance and employer happiness (H4), soft skills do, serving as a vital bridge between performance and satisfaction (H5). These results provided educators, legislators, and industry stakeholders practical advice on how to modify training programs and curriculum to satisfy the ever-changing demands of the travel and tourism industry. Employers and the larger tourist sector will ultimately gain from graduates' increased ability to adapt to workplace needs through the development of soft skills like creativity and leadership.

Key words: Graduate Performance, Soft Skill, Career Choice Employer Satisfaction

1. Introduction

One of the biggest employment industries in the world, tourism employs a sizable percentage of the labor force. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2023), over 230 million people, or approximately 7.2% of the global workforce, are in tourism. This highlights the need for graduates to possess extraordinary skills and expertise in order to succeed in their career. Employers, on the other hand, maintain that workers meet their high expectations and perform effectively. In spite of having gained adequate information and abilities during their higher education, many tourism graduates often fail to meet these expectations when they start their jobs.

Several studies have noted that training programs fall short of business demands and workforce development strategies are frequently unconnected, resulting in key skill gaps impeding industry growth (Ullah et al., 2025; Gouda, 2025; Zins, 2025). These studies also show that a lot of private schools place more emphasis on theoretical education than on practical abilities, and that managers in the hospitality industry underline the need for competence in language, communication, and practical experience as essential job skills. In addition to these challenges, other scholars have drawn attention to broader concerns. Inadequate problem-solving abilities, limited independence, and weak communication skills among graduates have been linked to poor vocational training and low teacher quality (Kekelidze and Kvachantiradze, 2023).

Collectively, these deficiencies are seen as contributing factors to reduced service quality and lower customer satisfaction. While these concerns are widespread, not all

graduates perform poorly. Some institutions have received favorable feedback from employers. For example, Maglalang et al. (2026) observed that employers generally rated MINSU's Tourism and Hospitality Management graduates highly, praising their professionalism, practical skills, and early industry exposure. Similarly, Duplon (2025) reported strong graduate performance in teamwork, research, cultural awareness, sustainable practices, and stress management. These constructing findings draw attention to the differences in performance amongst institutions, pointing to a mismatch between industrial demands and educational preparation rather than a general failing. Given this misalignment, it is imperative that educational programs be brought into compliance with industry-specific standards. In this context, two important aspects influencing graduate performance and employer satisfaction are soft skills and career choice. According to research, technical skills seem to have less of an impact on career adaptability and perceived employability than soft skills (Tavitiyaman et al., 2025; Abulikemu, 2024). Key soft skills such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and problem solving are essential not only for meeting employer expectations but also for long-term career development and success (Tes and Khen, 2025; Santos et al., 2025). Emotional intelligence and leadership, particularly in multicultural and service-driven environments, further enhance workplace effectiveness. Equally important is the role of career choice in determining graduates' job satisfaction and performance. When graduates pursue careers aligned with their interests and strengths, they are more likely to succeed and experience greater fulfillment. Although prior studies have emphasized the importance of soft skills and

career choice in enhancing job performance, there is limited research on their mediating role in the relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction, particularly in emerging destinations like Dili and Timor-Leste. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how soft skills and career choice mediate this relationship within the tourism sector in Dili, Timor-Leste. Dili, as the capital city, Dili is a crucial study location because of its concentration of tourism-related enterprises, important government institutions, and pivotal role in the growth of the country's tourism industry.

This study expected that several stakeholders will gain from the study's conclusions. The findings could be used by higher education institutions to integrate both technical and soft skills into their curricula. Graduates will learn how important it is to match their career choices to their skills, interests, and labor market demands. In the meantime, generating focused training programs and long-term professional development plans to promote workforce preparedness may be beneficial for employers and policymakers. Consequently, the objectives of this research are to: Determine whether graduate performance has a significant impact on soft skill development and employer satisfaction; assess the effect of soft skills on employer satisfaction; and investigate whether career choice and soft skills mediate the relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Hypotheses

2.1 Conceptual Approach

2.1.1 Graduate Performance

The tourism sector highlights employee performance as a critical component of success in current talks. A more impressive capacity to use the knowledge and abilities required for job responsibilities efficiently reflected in increased employee productivity. Performance is the extent to which a person completes a task or activity, according to the Cambridge Dictionary. A graduate's performance often assessed based on how well they exhibit job-relevant skills in practical situations. A diverse skill set that meets employer requirements is necessary for high-level performance in the tourist sector. According to Zins (2025), improving graduate employability requires a variety of crucial qualities, including language proficiency, effective communication, and practical experience. Furthermore, new research indicates that soft skills like teamwork, flexibility, and emotional intelligence have a greater impact on employment outcomes than technical skills, even though technical skills are still crucial (Das, 2025; Sibulan et al., 2025). Since the tourism business and the service sector are closely related, providing outstanding customer service is essential to giving visitors the best possible experiences. This emphasizes how important it is that graduates in the tourist industry have the necessary education, training, and expertise. This underscores the necessity for tourism graduates to possess adequate knowledge, experience, and skills. The employability preferences for graduates in the tourism industry vary, necessitating a range of competencies. Wakelin et al. (2019) developed a tourism employability model to identify the

requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies, categorizing them into professional skills, personality traits, knowledge skills, and operational skills. In line with the ideas of Human Capital Theory, which sees skill development as a crucial investment in both individual and organizational productivity, this change reflects a wider understanding that employability depends not only on academic credentials but also on applied behavioral and social skills.

2.1.2. Soft Skills

Soft skills have become a significant focus in various academic and professional fields. According to the According to the Boudreau, et al, (2022), soft skills are "*personal traits that enhance an individual's interaction, communication skills, and job performance*," referring to personality traits that influence how an individual interacts with others. Employers are increasingly recognizing soft skills as being equally important as technical expertise in shaping overall team effectiveness and cohesion, Khalifa (2024). The essential soft skills in the tourism sector include motivation, time management, ethical behavior at work, verbal communication, responsibility, attention to detail, and customer service/awareness (Wakelin et al., 2019). Zekry et al. (2023) highlight that these skills are valued differently by employers in the tourism industry. For example, hotel managers prioritize soft skills when hiring staff, particularly those in managerial positions. The labor market recognizes these skills for their role in providing flexibility and adaptability traits essential for the future workforce (Poláková et al., 2023). Despite their growing importance, soft skills have not received sufficient attention in education and training.

2.1.3. Career Choice

Working in the tourism industry presents an excellent opportunity for tourism graduates. Factors that influence career choice in the tourism business, including a pleasing working environment, a safe job, excellent promotion prospects and attractive starting salary, self-image, career development, job choices, tradition, and cultural value, support from parents, career opportunities, belief in self-capacity, intellect (Hoque & Ashif, 2020; Vu, 2020; Jalim et al., 2021; Qiu et al, 2017). However, the perception of working in the tourism industry may present significant challenges for tourism graduates. Students had an unfavorable opinion of careers in the hotel and tourism sector (Amissah et al., 2019). Furthermore, it has been discovered that students' career self-efficacy levels are significantly impacted by one of the aspects of parental career behaviors, a lack of participation (Kanten et al., 2021). The study of Lee & Yu in 2023 confirms the negative perceptions of the hospitality industry. Additionally, it showed that Generation Z's intents to choose hospitality through family expectations were negatively correlated with their social class background. When a manager role was offered, the adverse effect was lessened (Lee & Yu, 2023).

In this case, job happiness and staff servicing efficacy were favorably predicted by supervisor support. Additionally, the relationship between supervisor support and job happiness was partially mediated by servicing efficacy, and those who

reported higher levels of servicing efficacy were also more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction. (Öksüz and others, 2023). Consequently, Chen and colleagues (2021) recommend that stakeholders endeavor to enhance students' career planning, confidence, and work attitude. Future career intention and career flexibility are both positively impacted by career optimism, on the other hand, it has been discovered that career flexibility undermines future professional goals. Additionally, the association between professional flexibility and future career intention is mediated by career optimism. Wang et al., 2024.

2.1.4 Employer Satisfaction

The satisfaction of employers becomes a determinant for graduates to be recruited from the industry. Employer satisfaction in the tourist industry significantly influenced by graduates' capacity to carry out their responsibilities efficiently. According to a study by Sibulan & Associates (2025), employers reported high levels of satisfaction with BSHM graduates, particularly in soft skills such as communication, teamwork, empathy, and flexibility. These skills play a major role in graduates' capacity to provide excellent customer service and foster satisfying client experiences, which raises employer satisfaction. This association is further supported by empirical research. Employer satisfaction was most strongly correlated with personality qualities, followed by kinesics and emotional intelligence, both of which were shown to be significant (Chatterji et al., 2023). In a similar vein, Punsalan et al. (2024) discovered that college-level competencies like critical thinking, communication, leadership, and information technology were extremely valued in the workplace. Furthermore, according to Duplon (2025), employers valued graduates' time management skills, ingenuity, and capacity to handle change, stress, and conflict in the job. Overall, these results indicate that graduates' ability in applying soft skills and technical competence has a significant impact on employer satisfaction.

2.2 Theoretical Justification and Hypotheses Development

2.2.1. Graduate Performance and Employer Satisfaction

Every task or duty a graduate employee performs impacts their employer's satisfaction level. A study conducted by Gomes et al. (2023) highlights that Employers rated graduates' performance in timeliness, professional competence, leadership, and communication as follows: 75.00% to 79.17% awarded it a "Very Good" rating, indicating that leadership and communication ethics still need to be strengthened. Therefore, employers' feedback will contribute to providing inputs to higher education. In a similar vein, Dzia et al. (2024) highlighted the increased demand for creativity and innovation in response to changing industry issues, underscoring the significance of critical and creative thinking. Reflecting this change, Wong et al. (2025) said that tourism grads need to have a wider range of skills, such as digital literacy, adaptability, health and safety knowledge, customer service, experience

management, business sense, and mental resilience. These emerging demands indicate that employer satisfaction is increasingly tied not only to technical ability but also to a graduate's capacity to adapt, think strategically, and meet the complex realities of the tourism sector.

H1: Graduate Performance positively and significantly influences employer satisfaction.

2.2.2. Graduate Performance and Soft Skills

Soft skills play a crucial role in shaping employer satisfaction. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of soft skills in meeting the demands of various industries. For instance, Chatterji, et al. (2023), in their study "*Assessing the Influence of Graduate Characteristics on Employer Satisfaction*," found that personality traits had the strongest correlation with employer satisfaction, followed by kinesics and emotional intelligence all of which were statistically significant contributors. Similarly, In the tourism sector in particular, soft skills are especially critical due to the industry's reliance on direct human interaction. Hussain and Associates (2024) emphasized that strong interpersonal competencies enhance the customer experience, which is essential in service-oriented industries where customer satisfaction directly impacts business success. Further supporting this view, Jantarachot and Lalaeng (2023) found that graduates' job performance is positively influenced by emotional intelligence components such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, social skills, and the ability to recognize emotions in others. These findings suggest that soft skills not only enhance individual performance but are also in high demand in the tourism industry. Moreover, Bedoya et al. (2024) reported that students identify teamwork and leadership as the most essential soft skills for employability. To address this demand, Bisschoff and Massyn (2024) proposed the development of employability capital through work-integrated learning programs, combined with interventions targeting emotional and social intelligence, as an effective approach to enhancing soft skills competency and improving graduate outcomes. Soft skills are not only personality traits but are fundamental drivers of graduate performance. These competencies are essential for enhancing employability and enabling graduates to adapt to workplace demands, particularly within the tourism sector. Graduates who develop strong soft skills are more likely to demonstrate higher job productivity and deliver quality service.

H2: Graduate Performance positively and significantly influences Soft Skill.

2.2.3. Soft Skill and Employer Satisfaction

Soft skills are essential in the tourism sector, which is closely associated with the service industry, where employees must demonstrate excellent performance in their roles. In addition to hard skills, soft skills significantly contribute to employees' job performance. Employers seek not only technical expertise but also place considerable prioritizes soft talents as a key factor influencing organizational success. Previous studies

have highlighted the importance of soft skills in the tourism sector. For instance, Hussain, Soni, and Shah (2024, p. 132) assert that interpersonal and soft skills are crucial in the retail sector, as they enhance customer experiences and foster consumer loyalty. Similarly, Ayodele et al. (2020) emphasize that employers have high expectations for soft skills such as accountability, administration, listening, communication, business negotiation, and professional ethics. However, graduates' soft skills do not always meet employer expectations. A study by Tsirkas, Chytiri, and Bouranta (2020) revealed a discrepancy between employees' self-assessment of their soft skills and employers' perceptions. While employees tend to rate their soft skills highly, employers often believe that graduates lack essential competencies. This gap in soft skills remains a concern among employers. One of the primary challenges in higher education, as emphasized by Al Balushi et al. (2024), is the presence of inadequate resources, insufficient training, and a misalignment between educational curricula and labor market demands. Furthermore, a study conducted in Turkey by Hevedanli (2025) indicated that research on soft skills remains limited, and the concept has yet to be fully conceptualized within the country. Multidisciplinary research on the definition, importance, and development of soft skills is recommended by a thorough evaluation. In line with these conclusions, Bisschoff and Massyn (2025) suggest that employability capital must be incorporated into work-integrated learning programs in addition to emotional and social intelligence interventions in order to improve soft skills competency and graduate employability.

H3: Soft Skills positively and significantly influence Employer Satisfaction.

2.2.4. Graduate Performance, Soft Skill and Employer Satisfaction

Soft skills are seen to be crucial characteristics that can have a big influence on graduates' performance and raise employer satisfaction. Soft skills are a range of behavioral, interpersonal, and communicative traits that help people collaborate well with others and adjust to different work settings. Soft skills are *"personal traits that enhance an individual's interaction, communication skills, and job performance,"* according to Boudreau et al. (2022), highlighting their significance in determining how people relate to one another. Soft skills are becoming more and more recognized by employers as being just as crucial as technical knowledge in determining the overall efficacy and cohesiveness of a team. Khalifa (2024). According to Zekry et al. (2023), companies place varying values on soft skills based on job roles. For example, hotel managers often prioritize these skills when recruiting for managerial positions. Moreover, Poláková et al. (2023) note that the labor market increasingly recognizes soft skills for their contribution to adaptability and flexibility traits deemed essential for the future workforce. Nevertheless, despite their growing importance, soft skills remain underemphasized in formal education and training. Kiryakova et al. (2019) point out that while hard skills are commonly taught in academic institutions, soft skills categorized as core, specific, and

managerial are frequently overlooked by educators. Consequently, in the tourism sector, these skills are particularly crucial, as they enhance graduate performance and enable individuals to meet workplace demands effectively.

H4: Soft Skill mediates the relationship between Graduate Performance and Employer Satisfaction.

2.2.5. Graduate Performance, Career Choice, and Employer Satisfaction

Employee success in the tourist and hospitality industry is influenced by a number of elements, according to earlier research. For instance, Liu et al. (2023) found that career choices are shaped by personal traits, generational differences, and industry conditions factors that ultimately influence professional direction and workplace alignment. Consequently, a well-chosen career path can greatly improve a graduate's employment success. In addition, using emotional commitment as a mediator and resilience as a moderator, Aggarwal et al. (2024) verified a positive correlation between psychological empowerment and job satisfaction. Specifically, the study's findings, employees with exceptional resilience will believe that psychological empowerment has a greater impact on job satisfaction. Similarly, Sharma and his associates' 2024 study, *"Evaluating subjective career success: the role of career commitment, career resilience, and self-efficacy: evidence from the hospitality industry,"* indicated that a strong, positive association between Career Commitment (CC) and SCS was validated by the regression analysis. Moreover, it emphasized a noteworthy indirect effect that involves serial mediation through self-efficacy and Career Resilience, illustrating the relationship between Career Commitment and SCS. Based on the description above, previous empirical studies focus more on career success, psychological flexibility, self-efficacy, Job satisfaction, employee satisfaction, career commitment, career awareness, and career resilience. In contrast, this study focuses on how the career choice variable significantly influenced employee job performance and employer satisfaction. It believes that employer satisfaction influences employees' productivity when performing their duties. In the same way, we believe that when employees choose a specific area for their career commitment, it will influence their work performance.

H5: Career Choice mediates the relationship between graduate performance and Employer Satisfaction.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study used a quantitative approach to establish empirical relationships (Stockemer, 2018). Specifically, it examines the influence of graduate performance on employer satisfaction, with soft skills and career choice acting as mediating factors. The study determines whether graduates' soft skills and career choices significantly shape employer satisfaction. To test these relationships, hypotheses were formulated and empirically examined. According to Stockemer and Bordeleau (2023), hypotheses must be empirically testable

at any level of analysis. Data collection was conducted using structured survey questionnaires administered to employers, including directors, department heads, and supervisors from tourism industry offices in Dili Municipality, where most of these establishments are located. The questionnaire consisted primarily of closed-ended items that required participants to select from predefined responses using a Likert scale with five response options: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree (Likert, 1932). The questionnaire items were adapted from previous research frameworks. Soft skills were measured using the framework of Pranić and Pivčević (2021), while career choice was assessed based on studies by El Dief (2019), Hoque and Ashif (2020), Vu (2020), Jalim et al. (2021), and Qiu et al. (2017). Productivity was examined using the work of Perangin et al. (2022). Since this study relies on closed-ended questionnaires as the primary data collection instrument, it recognizes the limitation that such instruments may restrict the depth of responses. However, they ensure standardization, allowing for efficient statistical analysis while minimizing respondent burden.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population under study comprises employers or proprietors within the tourism industry located in Dili, Timor-Leste, including the Lodging sector, transport sector, Travel organizers sector, Attraction sector, destination organization sector, restaurant and food service, Meeting & Events, Tourism education sector, and tourist information center (Mirzoeva, 2020; Pressbooks, n.d). A purposive sampling method was employed. This method involves selecting samples based on specific criteria and targeting respondents who are knowledgeable about the performance of tourism graduate employees. It also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher selects units for a sample based on their judgment about the most useful or representative of the population being studied (Teddle & Yu, 2007). Thirty respondents and representatives were recruited from the tourism sector in Dili Timor-Leste.

3.3 Variable Measurement

The concepts utilized to measure indicators-related variables in this study are based on the theories. In this study, graduate performance is positioned as the independent variable. The graduated performance includes knowledge and operational skill (Mwita et al. (2024); Wakelin (2019); Kala & Bagri, 2014, Abas et al, (2013). Career choice and soft skills are explored as mediators that influence graduate performance and employer satisfaction. Career choices include working conditions, environment, and promotion opportunities (El Dief, 2019; Hoque & Ashif, 2020; Vu, 2020; Jalim et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2017). In addition, soft skills measure thorough indicators, which include Leadership and creativity (Pranic & Pivcevic, 2021; Ngandu, 2016; Palumbo, 2013; Kiryakova et al., 2019; Kimeto L, 2020; Tudi, R, A, 2017). Employer satisfaction is the dependent variable, reflecting how graduate performance meets workplace expectations. This includes an indicator of

productivity, commitment, and Loyalty, Perangin et al. (2022); Setyaningrum & Ekhsan, (2021); Soong,(2025). By investigating these relationships, this research aims to provide insights into the factors that enhance graduate performance and address gaps between higher education outcomes and industry demands.

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

This study uses interviews and questionnaires as part of a thorough data collection strategy. The process consists of several steps: First, the researcher observed the tourism industry to determine whether they employ graduates from higher education institutions specializing in tourism. Second, preliminary interviews will be conducted with the Human Resources departments to gather information regarding the number of tourism graduates working in their industry. Third, questionnaires administered to employers in the tourism industry to solicit their feedback on the performance of the graduates employed in their organizations. The close-ended questionnaires consist mainly or solely of closed-response items, where participants choose from predefined responses using the Likert scale.

Each questionnaire item included five possible answers: strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree. These responses were used to gauge each respondent's behavior (Likert, 1932). It assesses the views, beliefs, and perceptions of a person or group about social issues. The score responses include intense satisfaction (SS) being assigned a value of 5, satisfaction (S) a value of 4, neutral (N) a value of 3, dissatisfaction (D) a value of 2, and strong dissatisfaction (SD) a value of 1. (Babbie, E., 2016).

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

This study examines the relationship between tourism graduates' performance and employer satisfaction, focusing on the mediating effects of soft skills and career choice in both public and private sectors of the tourism industry in Dili, Timor-Leste. This research employs Smart PLS 4.0, a software tool designed for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is a robust statistical technique used to analyze structural relationships between latent variables. Using SmartPLS 4 software, this study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the structural correlations between variables (Hair et al., 2022). The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is used to evaluate model fit; values less than 0.08 suggest a good fit (Henseler et al., 2016). Explanatory and predictive power are assessed using reported R² and Q² values (Hair et al., 2022). Using 5,000 resamples and bootstrapping, hypotheses are evaluated; significance is determined by looking for t-values > 1.96 at the 5% significance level. Additionally, 95% confidence intervals guarantee the stability of the estimate (Hair et al., 2022). This software is utilized to assess reliability, validity, and hypothesis testing. It is particularly suitable for analyzing small sample sizes, handling formative and reflective indicators, conducting multivariable analysis, addressing data normality requirements, and detecting collinearity issues (Hair et al., 2014;

Saldanha et al., 2019). Reliability is measured using Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) (Forero, 2024; Cepeda et al, 2024). While convergent validity is assessed through outer loadings (OL) and average variance extracted (AVE) (Haji et al, 2024; Cheung et al, 2024). Discriminant validity is evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Cheung et al, 2024; Vishnoi et al, 2024) and the heterograft ratio (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2016; Ghozali, 2015). Hypothesis testing analyzes direct and indirect effects through path coefficients, T-values, P-values, and bootstrapping methods (Hair et al., 2014; Saldanha et al., 2019).

4. Result

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The respondents of this study are employers from the tourism industry in Dili, representing various sectors such as accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, government, tourist information centers, destination management organizations, travel agencies, the education sector, and other related industries. The characteristics of the respondents include gender, job position, duration of employment, and the type of industry they represent. A summary of the descriptive analysis is provided below;

4.1.1 Gender

The demographic characteristics of respondents are based on gender. The results indicate that most 30 respondents were male, comprising 18 individuals (60%), while females accounted for 12 individuals (40%). Although the sample distribution includes both genders, there is a noticeable predominance of males.

4.1.2 Work Position

Job positions of employers in the tourism sector reflect a diverse range of leadership and managerial roles. The most frequent positions include "Head of Department" and "Manager," with three individuals in each role, indicating a significant presence of department heads and managers within the sector. Other notable positions include "Head of Administration," "Head of Marketing," and "Pro-Rector," each represented by one individual, suggesting that these positions are more specialized or held by fewer individuals. Several top executive roles are also represented, including "CEO ATR-TL," "General Manager," and "Director," each held by one individual, highlighting the presence of senior leadership positions within the industry. Additionally, roles such as "Lecturer," "Human Resource Manager," "Event Organizer," and "Ticketing" further illustrate the breadth of positions within the sector, although these are less common. Overall, the data demonstrates a wide range of job positions held by employers in the tourism sector, with a concentration in managerial and department head roles and a more miniature representation in more senior or specialized positions.

4.1.3 Types of Tourism Sector

The distribution of employers according to the industry in which they are employed. The study indicates that, among the 30 respondents, the majority are used in the government sector, specifically within tourism and environmental agencies, accounting for six respondents (20%). Following this, five respondents (16.7%) are employed in the education sector, primarily within tourism faculties. Additionally, four respondents (13.3%) work in cafés and restaurants, while three respondents (10%) are employed by tour operators and another three respondents (10%) by travel agencies. In contrast, the hotel industry and tourist information centers have lower representation, with two respondents (6.7%) each. The most miniature representation was observed in sectors such as the airline industry, event organizing, immigration, telecommunications, and tourism associations, each employing one respondent (3.3%). These findings suggest that employers distributed across various industry sectors, the government sector, education, and restaurants were dominant in this study.

4.1.4 Years of Experience

The duration of years employer engaging in the tourism industry. The results indicate that the largest group, comprising 11 respondents (37%), has up to 5 years of experience in the sector. This is followed by nine respondents (30%) with 6 to 10 years of experience. Additionally, four respondents (13%) have 11 to 15 years of experience, while another four respondents (13%) have 16 to 20 years of experience. A smaller proportion have 21 to 25 years and 26 to 30 years of experience in the tourism sector, with only one respondent each (3%). According to this finding, 37% of employers have worked in the tourist industry for one to five years, with those with six to ten years of experience coming in second. This implies that the employers have adequate industry experience, which is crucial for offering perceptive criticism on how well tourism graduates perform at work. A leader who places a high priority on learning, sharing, and implementing information can significantly improve staff performance in a project-based setting, Jia et al. (2024).

4.2 Distribution Frequency of Variables

This study explore three key variables: graduate performance, career choice, and employer satisfaction. This study looks at three important factors: employer satisfaction, career choice, and graduate performance. A total of thirty respondents who were employers in different sectors of the tourism business provided the data. Each variable was analyzed using mean values and frequency distributions, and the following are the details findings

4.2.1 Graduate Performance

Employers' feedback on the performance of tourism graduates is assessed through two primary indicators: Knowledge skills (KS) and operational skills (OS). Regarding knowledge and skills, a significant proportion of employers, 60% (18 respondents), agreed that graduates effectively deliver client presentations across various formats, including face-to-face interactions, telephone communication, and written correspondence. Furthermore, 23% (7 respondents) strongly

agreed with this statement, demonstrating high satisfaction with graduates' business communication competencies. A smaller proportion (13%, four respondents) expressed neutrality, while only 3% (1 respondent) disagreed. These findings underscore a predominantly positive perception of graduates' communication skills within the workplace. Additionally, 57% of respondents acknowledged graduates' ability to communicate effectively in multiple languages, mainly English, highlighting the importance of multilingual skills in the tourism industry. Similarly, 53% (16 respondents) agreed that graduates strongly understand customer preferences and behavior in the tourism sector. This reflects their capability to meet industry-specific demands. Regarding graduates' understanding of destinations and attractions within Timor-Leste, including cultural, historical, and environmental aspects, 47% of employers agreed, and 30% (9 respondents) strongly agreed, showcasing an appreciation for graduates' comprehensive regional knowledge. However, 20% (6 respondents) maintained a neutral stance, indicating variability in employer perceptions. When evaluating graduates' Operational Skills, 60% of employers (18 respondents) agreed that graduates possess practical negotiation skills, enabling them to meet client needs and expectations.

Additionally, 30% (9 respondents) strongly agreed with this assessment, while only 3% (1) expressed neutrality, further reinforcing the positive evaluation of graduates' negotiation abilities. Similarly, 57% (17 respondents) of employers agreed that graduates are proficient in managing financial transactions, such as processing payments and invoices, while 23% (6 respondents) strongly agreed. A smaller proportion, 20% (6 respondents), remained neutral. These results highlight graduates' competence in essential operational tasks. Regarding technological proficiency, half of the employers (50%, 15 respondents) agreed, and 30% (9 respondents) strongly agreed that graduates effectively use digital tools and platforms relevant to the tourism industry. This indicates that employers value graduates' digital literacy as a key competency, given the increasing digitization of the tourism sector. Graduates' awareness of the importance of digital tools suggests their preparedness to contribute meaningfully to the industry's evolving demands. For instance, from the viewpoint of hotel executives, the assessment framework is used to gauge the employability of the workers at a high-end hotel. The workforce's aptitude for embracing cutting-edge technologies, especially their knowledge of artificial intelligence, is considered, Fang and Liou, (2024). However, the analysis reveals a potential gap in graduates' prior work experience. Only 37% of employers (11 respondents) strongly agreed that graduates possess sufficient work experience to enhance their job performance. This finding suggests that while graduates demonstrate considerable technical and operational competencies, limited prior experience may influence their effectiveness in professional settings.

4.2.2 Career Choice

The frequency and mean scores for the variable Career Choice were evaluated through two indicators: Working Conditions and Promotion Opportunities. Of the 30 employers surveyed, 29 provided valid responses. The findings indicate

that respondents generally view Working Conditions positively. A majority (53%) agreed that the tourism industry is a safe job, with an additional 20% strongly agreeing. Nearly half, 47% of the employers indicated that they chose to work in the tourism sector due to the pleasant working environment. However, only 40% agreed that the tourism industry allows for managing family responsibilities efficiently, with 20% disagreeing.

Furthermore, only 33% agreed that ease of finding jobs in the sector was a motivating factor, reflecting a lower level of agreement on this aspect. In terms of Promotion Opportunities, the results highlight several positive perceptions. A significant proportion, 60%, agreed that the tourism industry provides opportunities for additional training. Similarly, 47% agreed that the sector offers opportunities for travel abroad and career advancement. However, opinions on salary competitiveness mixed: 43% agreed that the tourism industry provides competitive compensation, 10% disagreed, and 27% were neutral, indicating divided perceptions. This finding suggests that employers generally view job safety, a pleasant work environment, and opportunities for training and career progression as positive aspects of working in the tourism sector. However, limited appeal in job accessibility and mixed views on salary competition highlight areas for potential improvement to enhance career satisfaction and attractiveness in the industry.

4.2.3 Employer Satisfaction

The employer satisfaction regarding the productivity of graduates employed in the tourism industry. A majority, 57% of employers (17 respondents), agreed that "graduates always complete their duties as specified in their job descriptions (PR1)." Similarly, 50% of employers agreed that "graduates meet all the formal performance requirements of their jobs (PR4)," with an additional 23% (7 respondents) strongly agreeing. Neutral responses accounted for 17%, indicating some uncertainty about graduate productivity. However, the notable proportion of neutral responses necessitates further investigation to uncover underlying factors, such as differences in job roles or varying expectations. These findings suggest that most employers perceive graduates' productivity as a positive factor in organizational performance. For example, Putra and colleagues, (2024:224p) highlighted that employee productivity is the ability of workers to complete tasks assigned by the organization efficiently and effectively to achieve its goals. Employee productivity is the ability of workers to complete tasks assigned by the organization efficiently and effectively to achieve its goals (Putra and colleagues, 2024:224p).

Regarding commitment and loyalty, 57% of employers expressed satisfaction with graduates' compliance with internal organizational policies (CL3), though 20% were neutral, reflecting uncertainty about their organizational commitment. For graduates' dedication to growth, 50% of employers agreed that graduates demonstrate commitment to growing with the company (CL1), while 20% strongly agreed. Similarly, 50% agreed that "graduates support the company's vision and mission and actively contribute to its success (CL4)," with 33% strongly agreeing. However, satisfaction with graduates' loyalty and dedication (CL2) was lower, with only 43% of employers (13 respondents) expressing satisfaction and 33% remaining neutral. This lower satisfaction level indicates potential gaps in

graduates' organizational loyalty that may require targeted interventions, such as fostering a stronger sense of belonging or aligning individual goals with organizational objectives. Overall, the findings suggest that graduates generally demonstrate positive productivity and commitment in the workplace, contributing to organizational performance. However, the mixed responses regarding loyalty highlight areas for improvement, particularly in building a stronger connection between graduates and their organizations. Addressing these gaps could enhance employer satisfaction and graduate retention rates in the tourism sector.

4.3 Reliability and Validity

The Question item is considered valid if it has a loading factor > 0.6 and invalid if it has a loading factor < 0.6 (Chin, 1998). Invalid questions must be excluded from the construct model for further analysis. To show that the instrument measures constructs accurately, consistently, and precisely, reliability testing is carried out. The Smart PLS v. four software was used to conduct the dependability test in this investigation. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability assessed the construct reliability. The commonly used rule of thumb for evaluating construct reliability is that the values must exceed 0.7, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) must be greater than 0.50. (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

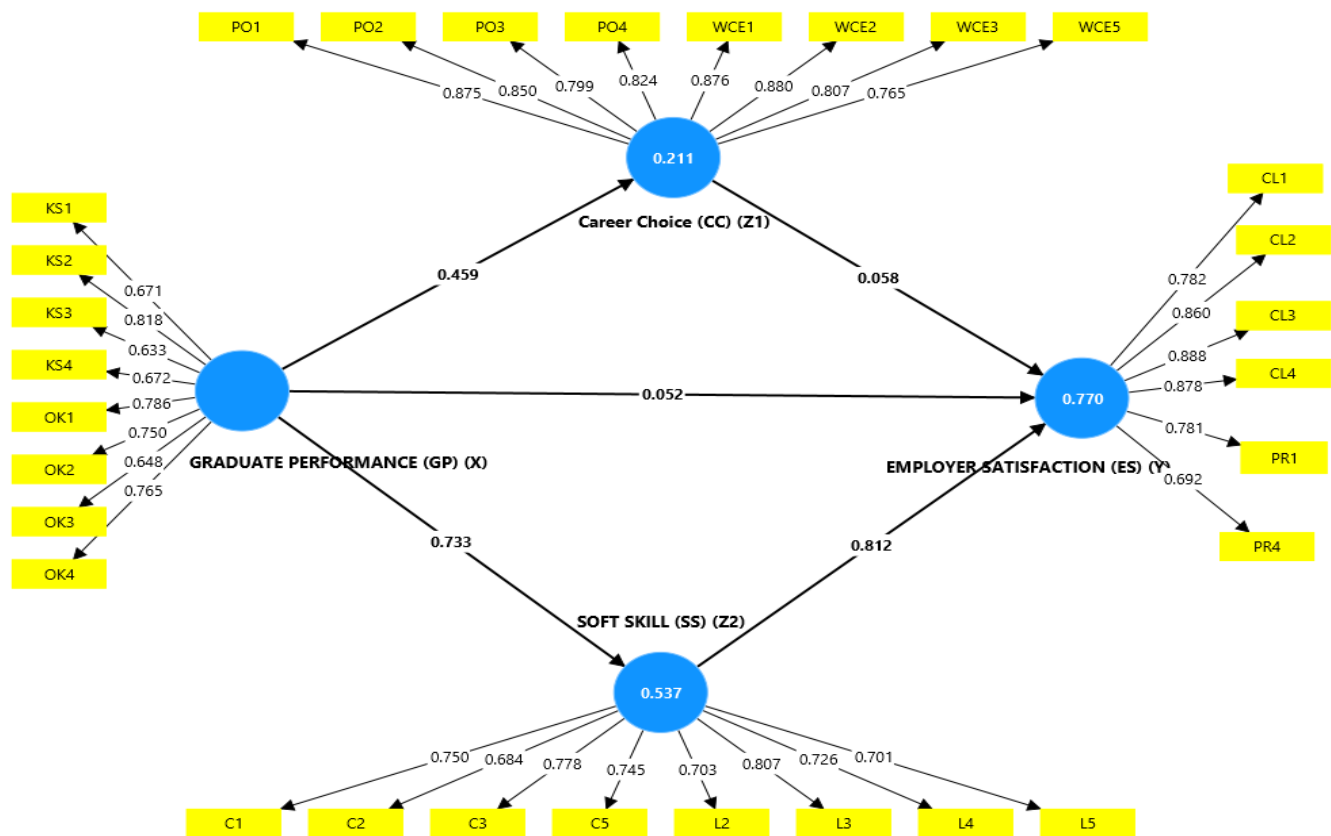


Figure 1. Outer Loading (OL) for Convergent Validity

Discriminant validity relates to the principle that measures of different constructs should not have high correlations. The method for testing discriminant validity with reflective indicators is by examining the cross-loading values for each variable, which must be > 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table I. Fornell Larcker Criterion for Discriminant Validity

Variable	CC (Z1)	ES	GP	SS
CC (Z1)	0,835			
ES (Y)	0,429	0,816		
GP (X)	0,459	0,673	0,721	
SS (Z2)	0,427	0,875	0,733	0,738

Table II. Values of CA and CR for Reliability Test, and AVE for Convergent Validity Test

Items	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
GP (X)	0,867	0,882	0,520
CC (Z1)	0,938	0,945	0,698
SS (Z2)	0,881	0,891	0,544
ES (Y)	0,898	0,900	0,667

4.4 Results of Hypothesis Testing and Discussion

4.4.1 Graduate Performance and Employer Satisfaction

The hypothesis test results examining the relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction indicate no significant association, as shown in Table III ($p < 0.05$). This finding does not support the proposed hypothesis in this study. In other words, the performance of graduate employees does not significantly affect employer satisfaction.

Table III. T and P Values for Hypothesis Test (Direct Effect)

Variable	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Observation
Graduate Performance (GP) (X) - > Employer Satisfaction (ES) (Y)	0,052	0,052	0,168	0,307	0,759	Not Significant
Graduate Performance (GP) (X) - > Soft Skill (SS) (Z2)	0,733	0,760	0,071	10,263	0,000	Significant
Soft Skill (SS) (Z2) -> Employer Satisfaction (ES) (Y)	0,812	0,813	0,123	6,600	0,000	Significant

This suggests that employer satisfaction may not solely depend on the graduates' knowledge and skills but could also be influenced by other factors, such as specific company requirements or prevailing market conditions. This highlights a misalignment between the skills graduates acquire and the needs of the industry; these findings align with Al, (2024) study; mismatches frequently result from a discrepancy between the abilities employers value and the skills taught in school and training. Recent changes in technology and industry dynamics worsen these challenges. On the other hand, according to Pujol 2023, graduates are not receiving instruction in the specific information that would seem to be helpful for a smooth transition into the workforce after graduation (gap A); more significantly, graduates appear to lack confidence in their skills and expertise (gap B) and self-worth. Similar to this, a study by Cortadas (2024) identifies a more substantial mismatch between the type of employment, training, and its evolution over time, indicating the need to modify labor supply and demand.

The result indicating no significant relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction highlights the complexity of factors influencing workplace outcomes. This finding suggests that the knowledge and skills of graduates do not solely determine employer satisfaction but are also influenced by a range of other factors within the workplace. While the skills and knowledge acquired by graduates are critical to their performance, this study emphasizes the need to consider additional factors that contribute to overall graduate success, such as soft skills, interpersonal skills, leadership

abilities, and other personal attributes. These results underscore the importance of aligning educational curricula with industry needs. To improve graduate performance and enhance employer satisfaction, educational institutions must prioritize understanding the evolving demands of the labor market and adapt programs accordingly. Developing general skills like leadership, teamwork, and communication is vital for graduates to succeed and satisfy employer expectations, even while technical knowledge and abilities are still critical for improving graduate performance. This study emphasizes the necessity of a thorough graduate preparation program that incorporates both hard and soft skills to guarantee that graduates are prepared to handle the challenges of contemporary work environments.

4.4.2 Graduate Performance and Soft Skills

The findings of the hypothesis test showed a statistically significant correlation between soft skills and graduation performance, as shown in Table III, where the T-value is significant at $P < 0.005$. These findings support Hypothesis 4, as proposed in this study. This implies that graduates demonstrate strong job performance in the workplace, significantly influenced by their soft skills. The evidence suggests that soft skills play a pivotal role in contributing to the overall job performance of graduates. These findings align with previous studies, which have similarly emphasized the critical importance of soft skills in enhancing workplace effectiveness. Asefer & Abidin (2021: 50p) state that developing soft skills will assist an employee in standing out in today's more

competitive workplace while enhancing relationships, productivity, and employability growth. For instance, Jantarachot and Lalaeng (2023) examine the multiple regression analysis of soft skills, such as self-awareness, emotion management, self-regulation, identifying emotions in others, and social skills, revealing a statistically significant favorable effect on graduates' work performance. Even higher pay is not correlated with soft skill requirements tied to personal attributes, including professional ethics, dedication to work, stress tolerance, and self-learning ability (Chiu et al., 2024). A deeper understanding of the importance of graduates' soft skills is becoming more and more necessary as a result of the growing demands from employers (Asefer & Abidin, 2021).

This result underscores the significance of soft skills among graduates, aligning with previous studies' findings that emphasize their importance. However, the specific soft skills needed can differ across industries. Rienda et al. 2024, in their conclusions, demonstrate differences among nations regarding the present soft skill levels of workers, the future soft skill levels that they will require, and the gaps that those in charge of educating the sector's future workforce should concentrate on for the 2030 horizon. Holidi & Seman's study "A Study of Employability Skills: From the Employers and Youth Perspectives" findings showed substantial variations in the perceived levels of employers and youth for most of the employability skills examined except for Basic Skills. Soft skills are a critical concern for employers, as emphasized by Shabir and Sharma (2019); recent Saudi Arabian graduates lack the fundamental "soft skills" needed to succeed in the workforce, according to many companies today, although technical talents are frequently sector-specific, employers emphasize soft skills like professional communication, critical thinking, and cross-sector collaboration. Therefore, this study suggests a comprehensive exploration of the specific soft skills required in each tourism industry sector. This process should involve employers in articulating their preferences, which can be integrated into the academic curriculum to enhance the learning experience during the educational period.

4.4.3 Soft Skill and Employer Satisfaction

The hypothesis test results indicate a significant relationship between soft skills and employer satisfaction. As presented in Table III, the statistical analysis revealed a p-value of 0.000, less than the threshold of 0.05, confirming a strong association. This suggests employers are more satisfied when employees demonstrate strong, soft skills; it is believed to influence workplace performance, teamwork, and productivity directly. These findings align with a previous study by Pons and associates (2024); the study provides educators and industry professionals with essential insights to better grow and utilize soft skills to develop employee sustainability practices and boost employee development as firms engage more in training. In addition, employer satisfaction with soft skills, as emphasized by Hoh et al. (2020), stated that employers were primarily satisfied with the following job competencies: communication skills, problem-solving abilities, commitment, self-confidence, managerial skills, time management, creativity

and innovation, knowledge of specific computer applications, punctuality, and specific technical knowledge. There is a noticeable need for soft skills, including critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and flexible creativity in technologically driven fields (Poláková, et al., 2023).

This result underscores the critical importance of soft skills, particularly regarding workplace performance as perceived by employers. Employers believe graduates with strong soft skills significantly enhance their ability to perform effectively in professional settings. Soft skills encompass interpersonal competencies and emotional intelligence, enable individuals to adapt to new environments, manage emotions under pressure, and interact effectively with colleagues and clients. According to Bischoff and Massyn (2024), within work-integrated learning programs, employability capital can be produced with emotional and social intelligence interventions to enhance soft skills proficiency and graduate employability. The tourism sector is expected to maintain high levels of interpersonal competence to meet client expectations and deliver superior customer service. Consequently, exhibiting strong, soft skills is desirable and essential for achieving optimal performance in service-oriented roles. Hussain et al. (2024:122p) state that soft skills are crucial for fostering connections, cooperating with others, and managing workplace demands. In contrast, hard skills are required to do particular tasks. This aligns with the industry's demand for graduate employees who can uphold service quality and ensure client satisfaction across various job responsibilities.

4.5 The Mediation Effect

4.5.1 Graduate Performance (GP) (X) -> Career Choice (CC) (Z1) -> Employer Satisfaction (ES) (Y)

This analysis examines whether career choice mediates the relationship between graduate performance (GP) and employer satisfaction (EP) in the tourism sector. Career choice does not significantly influence this association, according to the results of the hypothesis test. A T-statistic of 0.404 and a p-value of 0.686, which are more significant than the significance level of 0.05, were obtained from the analysis. This implies that the relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction is not much impacted by career choice. Employer satisfaction and graduate performance are not significantly impacted by choosing a profession in the tourism industry, suggesting that other factors may be more important in determining these results. Previous research by Zainudin et al. (2020) highlights that career education, financial hardship, family support, gender, culture, and life events play significant roles in career decisions. Individuals may choose occupations based on their personal interests, yet the job may not live up to their expectations. Swanson & Schneider (2013) point out that when a person's skills align with workplace requirements, job performance improves. However, a career decision by itself might not have a big impact on job performance or employer satisfaction if the workplace does not live up to graduates' expectations. According to Zopiatis and Theocharous (2015), precise job-person fit, reflective career awareness, and realistic

occupational views all have a favorable impact on career satisfaction and boost plans to stay and grow within the company. Factors beyond career alignment and graduate performance alone influence employer satisfaction. Determining and comprehending these elements may offer a more thorough explanation of the elements that influence

employer satisfaction by shedding light on the interactions between graduate characteristics and workplace outcomes.

Table IV. Mediation Effects (Specific Indirect Effects)

Variable	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Observation
Graduate Performance (GP) (X) -> Career Choice (CC) (Z1) -> Employer Satisfaction (ES) (Y)	0,027	0,030	0,066	0,404	0,686	Not Significant
Graduate Performance (GP) (X) -> Soft Skill (SS) (Z2) -> Employer Satisfaction (ES) (Y)	0,595	0,618	0,116	5,117	0,000	Significant

4.5.2 Graduate Performance (GP) (X) -> Soft Skill (SS) (Z2) -> Employer Satisfaction (ES) (Y).

The analysis of the indirect hypothesis test examining the relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction, mediated by soft skills, is presented in Table IV. The statistical findings show a P-value of 0.000, which is below the significance level of 0.05, and a T-value of 5.117, which is higher than the crucial threshold of 1.9. The findings indicate statistically significant connection between graduate performance and employer satisfaction through the soft skills mediation. Therefore this result strongly support hypothesis IV propose in this study. These results highlight how crucial soft skills are to improving the overall effect of graduate performance on employer satisfaction. Strong soft skills graduates are more likely to be adaptable, speak more clearly, and handle problems more skillfully all of which are essential for meeting employer standards, especially in the service-oriented travel sector. This finding is consistent with earlier empirical research showing that soft skills are just as important as hard skills in the tourism sector. Wongsuwatt et al.'s 2024 study found that soft skills had a positive direct impact on workers' job performance as well as an indirect one, based on this, it can be concluded that employee engagement was a complement to the positive impact that soft skills had on workers' job performance in the tourism and hospitality industries. These abilities are highly valued in all facets of life, not only at work, and frequently result from your innate strengths, character attributes, and emotional intelligence, (Khiem, 2024). Moreover, Colaco, (2024) study on *"The Impact of Soft Skills Training on Guest Satisfaction in the Hospitality Industry"* highlights that It is impossible to overstate the value of soft skills in this job; they not only assist personnel maintain a cheerful attitude but also enable them to appropriately greet customers and comprehend their requirements and issues. Strampe & Rambe, (2024), suggest that soft skills exert a

positive, and significant, effect on the entrepreneurial readiness behavior of students.

Soft skills increasingly recognized as a critical factor influencing job performance in the tourism sector. However, employers in industry exhibit varying perspectives regarding the specific requirements for these skills. As highlighted by Zekry et al. (2023), In terms of special and managerial soft skills scores, soft skills are different from the viewpoints of managers of hotels and travel agencies; therefore, hotels consider these abilities when hiring and selecting new employees. Another empirical study by Tanković, Kapeš & Kraljić, (2021) Results showed that with the exception of the questions demonstrating respect, integrity, and responsibility, all of the soft skills factor's items showed statistically significant differences between the sample of tourists and the sample of aspiring tourism professionals. Furthermore, Podolchak and friends (2024), indicated that traditional methods of succeeding in work, particularly in management, are no longer effective in the modern world; the findings of the literature analysis indicate that soft skills, rather than hard abilities, are what determine success. However, according to Ware & Dhawale, (2024) in their articles emphasize that whereas hard skills are easily taught, soft skills are those that call for a person's commitment to learning. This evidence supports the notion that educational institutions should prioritize the integration of soft skills training in their programs to improve graduate employability and satisfaction outcomes.

5. Discussion

This study examines the relationship between employer satisfaction (ES) and graduate performance (GP), concentrating on the mediating roles of soft skills (SS) and career choice (CC). To analyze these dynamics, five hypotheses formulated to examine the relationships among GP, CC, SS, and ES.

Discriminant validity assessed, and the hypotheses tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in SMART PLS, allowing for an evaluation of both direct and indirect relationships. The analysis of the first hypothesis (H1) revealed no significant direct relationship between Graduate Performance and Employer Satisfaction. The statistical results, with a T-value of 0.592 (T-value < 1.96) and a P-value of 0.554 (P-value > 0.05), indicate that Graduate Performance alone does not directly influence Employer Satisfaction. This finding supports H1, underscoring that Graduate Performance, when defined in terms of technical skills and knowledge, is insufficient on its own to meaningfully influence employer satisfaction. Employers may consider additional factors, such as interpersonal and professional behaviors, beyond technical and academic competencies when evaluating their satisfaction with employees. In contrast, the analysis of the second hypothesis (H2) demonstrated a significant positive relationship between Graduate Performance and Soft Skill. The statistical evidence, with a T-value of 10.263 (T Value > 1.96) and a P-value of 0.00 (P Value < 0.05), confirms that Graduate Performance substantially influences the development of soft skills. These findings suggest that the competencies graduates acquire through education and training significantly contribute to the cultivation of essential soft skills, which are critical for fostering positive perceptions among employers. According to Jantarachot & Lalaeng's 2023 analysis, graduates' work performance positively influenced statistically significantly by soft skills such as self-awareness, emotion management, self-regulation, social skills, and the ability to recognize emotions in others. Even the findings of Suyansah et al.'s 2023 study, which examines the connections and distinctions between academic factors and soft skills in relation to graduate employability, indicate that there are no connections between academic factors, program of study, or qualification. Moreover, this emphasize by Sandra et al. (2023), lectures or post-internship talks should used to give students educational materials on interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities.

The results of this study provide compelling evidence in favor of the third hypothesis (H3), which holds that employer satisfaction and soft skill performance are significantly correlated. The statistical results presented in Table 17—T-value of 6.600 (T-value > 1.91) and P-value of 0.000 (P-value < 0.05)—validate this relationship. Graduates demonstrating high soft skill performance, particularly in creativity and leadership, tend to achieve higher levels of employer satisfaction. This indicates that employers increasingly recognize the critical role of soft skills in enhancing workplace dynamics and overall productivity. This is in line with research that highlights the increasing significance of interpersonal skills including communication, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and critical and creative thinking in dealing with new problems. Hoh and Shi (2020) and Dzia (2024). The dynamic nature of the tourism sector need workers who can quickly adjust to changes. This flexibility goes beyond technical expertise and necessitates strong interpersonal qualities including cooperation, emotional control, and pressure tolerance. Front desk staff, for example, frequently deal with a wide range of clients from different ethnic backgrounds. Such exchanges require imagination and the

capacity to provide creative answers to problems faced by clients. González and Almeida (2021) underscore the value of frontline employees' creativity, work experience, and sense that their efforts will be appreciated, especially in leisure hotels. All of these observations highlight the importance of soft skills for both individual performance and fulfilling the intricate requirements of the travel and tourism industry, which in turn increases employer satisfaction.

Furthermore, the fourth hypothesis (H4) investigated whether the association between employer satisfaction and graduate performance is mediated by career choice. When profession choice acted as a mediator, the statistical findings showed no discernible relationship between these variables. H4 was rejected due to the T-value of 0.404 and P-Value 0.686 (P Value > 0.05). These results suggest that employers' job satisfaction and graduates' job performance not substantially impacted by profession choice. This result suggests that differences in employer satisfaction and graduate performance cannot explained only by profession choice.

Variations in employer satisfaction may not sufficiently explained by elements like working conditions and possibilities for advancement in the context of Dili's tourism industry. Even while earlier research has highlighted the beneficial effects of motivation and career alignment on job performance (Varghese, 2025; Jo, Park, & Song, 2023), the current findings point to a possible discrepancy between graduate goals and organizational realities. While Wang et al. (2023) stress flexibility and optimism as factors that contribute to career success, research by Alagarsamy et al. (2023) and Jufrizen et al. (2023) underlines the significance of psychological empowerment and person-organization fit. These results highlight the necessity to examine into other variables that influence the link between performance, employer satisfaction, and career choice. For instance, 70% of studies show that when an employee's personality and workplace environment mesh well, performance improves (Zainudin et al., 2020). This highlights the significance of vocational personality types.

These results have significant implications for the travel and tourism sector. Employers should prioritize hiring applicants whose education and experience match job specifications while creating welcoming work cultures that facilitate lifelong learning and take into account a range of personality types. To help students reach their full potential, educators and career counselors must direct them toward career pathways that align with their interests and capabilities. Furthermore, as Is et al. (2022) pointed out, programs that improve employee motivation and satisfaction—like training, education, and participatory decision-making are crucial for maximizing performance.

Importantly, this study confirms the significant mediating role of soft skills between graduate performance and employer satisfaction (H5), (T = 5.117; p < 0.001), reinforcing prior findings by Sharma (2024) and Abulikemu et al. (2024) on the need to integrate soft and technical competencies to enhance employability. These findings indicate that graduates with strong soft skills are better equipped to perform effectively in the workplace, leading to higher employer satisfaction. Soft

skills are increasingly recognized as essential for employability in the tourism industry. Empirical evidence further underscores the demand for a broad range of soft skills in the tourism industry. Soft Skills are constantly viewed by employers in the tourist sector as essential for meeting the ever-changing difficulties of the industry and improving organizational results. Therefore, educators urged to incorporate experiential and student-centered learning into academic programs in order to foster the development of soft skills. According to Rashmi and Singh (quoted in Upadhyay and Malik, 2024), fieldwork, industry visits, and post-internship reflections can promote professionalism, teamwork, creativity, and intercultural awareness. Decision-making and leadership are further encouraged in the classroom through the use of techniques including problem-based learning, tourist case studies, and presentations. Community service initiatives also help kids develop social responsibility, empathy, and independence, preparing them for lifelong learning (Kunwar, Shrestha & Adhikari, 2025). Lastly, to assist ongoing soft skill development and organizational success, employers are encouraged to offer regular training in communication, flexibility, and emotional intelligence.

6. Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction, with career choice and soft skills serving as mediating factors. The results of the hypothesis test showed no connection between employer satisfaction and graduate performance in Dili, Timor-Leste's tourism sector. Nonetheless, a significant correlation was observed between graduate performance and soft skill performance, suggesting that enhanced soft skills are associated with better graduate performance. Furthermore, it was discovered that employer satisfaction was strongly impacted by soft skill performance. Additionally, the study's indirect hypothesis test revealed that, through soft skills, graduate performance has a favorable impact on employer satisfaction. However, there was no evident correlation between employer satisfaction as measured by career choice and graduate performance.

The implication of this study offer valuable recommendations to various relevant institutions. Conducted in an emerging tourism destination, this research underscores the crucial role of soft skills particularly leadership and creativity—in enhancing the workplace performance of tourism graduates. These competencies are highly valued by employers and are essential for professional success. The findings suggest that policymakers and higher education institutions should prioritize integrating leadership and creativity development into academic curricula to better prepare students for the workforce. Bisschop & Massyn 2024, in order to improve soft skills competency and graduate employability, employability capital can be developed within the framework of work-integrated learning programs and combined with emotional and social intelligence interventions. Additionally, the study underscores the need for top

management in the tourism industry to implement targeted training programs that develop these essential skills among employees, thereby boosting overall industry performance and competitiveness. In addition, it is crucial for the government to recognize the vital role of soft skill development in the labor market and to incorporate targeted workforce development strategies that enhance the soft skills of tourism employees into the strategic planning for Timor Leste's tourism sector. This integration will ensure that the workforce is better equipped to meet industry demands, thereby improving overall sector competitiveness and sustainability. Asefer & Abidin (2021: 50p) highlighted that developing soft skills will assist an employee stand out in today's more competitive workplace while also enhancing relationships, productivity, and employability growth.

7. Limitations and Future Study

This study has several limitations: Firstly, this study's population is drawn from the tourism industry, which encompasses various sectors, each potentially requiring distinct soft skills. This study focuses on creativity and leadership as key soft skill indicators deemed significantly necessary by tourism employers in Dili, Timor-Leste. However, given the industry's diverse characteristics, the specific soft skills required may vary across different sectors. Therefore, future research should employ a mixed-methods approach to thoroughly explore the soft skills and employability requirements unique to each industry sector. Secondly, this study includes eight sectors of the tourism industry. However, there is no cruise ship sector in Dili, Timor Leste, the researcher could not obtain feedback from this sector, which limits the study's insights into the cruise ship industry. Third, this study solely reflects employer feedback on graduate performance, not integrating customer feedback. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, it is important to gather input from various stakeholders, including customers who interact directly with graduates in the workplace. Customer expectations regarding graduates' soft skills may differ from those of employers. Therefore, future research should include a comparative analysis of employer requirements and customer preferences concerning graduates' soft skills.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made for relevant institutions: Higher Education Institutions: It is recommended that soft skills be integrated into the curriculum or actively incorporated into the teaching and learning processes. This will help students develop essential soft skills, ensuring they are well-equipped to meet the demands of the industry. Further Research and Tracer Studies: Given the diverse range of employers across various sectors within the tourism industry, higher education institutions must conduct additional surveys or tracer studies. These studies aim to identify the specific soft skills required by each sector to align educational programs with industry needs better. The tourism sector should consider increasing employee training and capacity-building programs to enhance their soft skills,

particularly those critical for improved workplace performance. Career Counselling for Graduates: Although this study found no significant relationship between graduate performance and employer satisfaction through career choice mediations, it recommended implementing more comprehensive career counseling services for recent graduates. Such services should raise awareness about career opportunities within the tourism industry and equip graduates with the necessary information and guidance to make well-informed career decisions. By doing so, graduates can better align their career choices with their skills and the needs of the industry, potentially improving their performance and satisfaction levels in the long term.

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