

FROM TRAINING TO EMPLOYMENT: HOW VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SHAPES JOB SEARCH OUTCOMES FOR SPA TOURISM GRADUATES

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***Abstract:** The global rise of spa tourism has spurred a growing demand for a workforce that is not only skilled but also adaptable to evolving industry standards. In response, vocational education has been promoted as a key mechanism to bridge the gap between academic training and professional needs. Yet, questions persist regarding its actual impact on employability within this sector. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the extent to which vocational training influences employment prospects for graduates entering the spa tourism field. Employing a mixed-methods framework, the research draws on survey data from 250 recent graduates alongside insights from 40 semi-structured interviews. Particular attention is given to dimensions such as hands-on training, access to mentorship, competency development, and subsequent employment paths. Quantitative findings, derived through descriptive analysis, are complemented by qualitative themes emerging from interview narratives. Results highlight that structured internships, close mentorship, and industry-responsive curricula significantly enhance graduates' employment outcomes. However, notable regional variations emerged, often tied to differences in institutional quality and the maturity of local labor markets. Building on these findings, the study advocates for a series of targeted policy measures: deepening collaboration between industry and educational institutions, updating curriculum content to reflect market realities, and establishing regionally tailored support initiatives. These recommendations aim to assist educators, policymakers, and business leaders alike in cultivating a workforce that meets the dynamic demands of spa tourism.*

***Key words:** employability, skill acquisition, labor market integration, workforce readiness, industry collaboration, curriculum alignment.*

INTRODUCTION

The global expansion of wellness and spa tourism, driven by a heightened consumer focus on health, personal well-being, and immersive travel experiences, has brought profound changes to labor market dynamics within the hospitality sector [14]. No longer confined to traditional notions of service delivery, today's spa tourism industry demands a new generation of specialized, immediately deployable professionals, capable of offering personalized, high-value experiences that cater to increasingly sophisticated guest expectations [9,16]. As the sector continues to diversify and innovate, the pressure to align workforce competencies with industry requirements has intensified.

In this evolving landscape, vocational education institutions have assumed a pivotal role. Through the design and delivery of programs that blend strong theoretical foundations with substantial practical exposure, these institutions aim to bridge the gap between classroom learning and workplace realities [8,10]. In this context, it is considered that the emphasis on experiential learning, whether through internships, apprenticeships, or simulation-based training, seeks to equip graduates with the adaptability, technical expertise, and interpersonal skills essential for success in a highly competitive labor market [5].

In the meantime, despite the strategic intent behind vocational training models, discrepancies in graduate employment outcomes persist. While prior research has

consistently affirmed the general advantages of hands-on, industry-oriented education [3,11,12], a more granular understanding remains elusive. Specifically, there is a limited empirical insight into how certain programmatic elements, such as structured mentorship, formalized internship schemes, and active employer engagement, impact labor market transitions within the specific context of spa tourism [1]. These micro-level factors, though often overlooked, may prove decisive in determining the success or failure of vocational education systems in meeting sectoral workforce needs [13,15].

Addressing this gap, our study undertakes a systematic, mixed-methods investigation into the relationship between vocational training features and early employment outcomes among spa tourism graduates in Romania. By combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights, our research explores the mechanisms through which educational experiences influence job search effectiveness, employment relevance, and early career satisfaction. Furthermore, the study advances a set of evidence-based policy recommendations intended to optimize vocational education design, promote regional labor market integration, and foster sustainable sectoral development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To construct a detailed and nuanced understanding of graduate employment trajectories within the spa tourism sector, the research employed a mixed-methods research design, combining the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, methodological choice which has enabled a comprehensive exploration of both measurable employment trends and the subjective experiences that underpin graduates' transitions into the labor market.

The data collection phase was conducted exclusively within Romania, spanning the period from 15 January to 30 March 2025, and the target population consisted of individuals who had recently completed vocational education programs with a specialization in spa tourism. This focus ensured that the insights gathered reflected current industry conditions and educational practices.

The quantitative strand of the study centered around a structured survey administered to a purposive sample of 250 graduates, all of whom had finalized their vocational training between 2019 and 2023. The survey instrument was designed to capture a wide array of variables. Demographic attributes, including age, gender, geographic region, and type of educational institution attended, were collected to establish participant profiles. Also, educational experiences were probed, with specific attention paid to whether participants had completed internships, accessed mentorship opportunities, or benefited from career counseling services. Employment outcomes were also rigorously assessed, encompassing variables such as time taken to secure initial employment, the relevance of employment to their field of study, type of employment contract obtained, and overall levels of job satisfaction. Furthermore, graduates were invited to self-assess their preparedness in both technical and soft skills, and to articulate the barriers they encountered during their job search, alongside suggesting improvements for vocational training programs.

At the same time, the qualitative component was integrated to enrich and contextualize these quantitative findings. Thirty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected subsample of survey respondents. Sampling considerations emphasized diversity in terms of regional origin and institutional background, ensuring that the experiences from both urban and rural areas, as well as public and private institutions, were adequately represented. These interviews delved

deeper into graduates' perceptions of their training quality, the applicability of acquired skills, perceived gaps, and the complexities involved in transitioning to employment.

The quantitative data were processed analytically using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistics summarized central tendencies and distribution patterns across key variables. Throughout the research process, strict ethical standards were maintained, and all of our participants provided informed consent before involvement in the study. Measures were taken to ensure complete participant anonymization, and data handling adhered rigorously to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) frameworks applicable within the European Union, ensuring the privacy and protection of sensitive personal information.

For a better understanding of our methodological framework, data collection tools, and key analytic strategies are provided in Table 1, illustrating how each component contributed to the overarching goals of the research.

Table 1.

Overview of research design and methodological components

<i>Research component</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Methods and tools</i>	<i>Interconnection</i>	<i>Key contribution</i>
<i>Quantitative survey</i>	Gather structured data on demographics, education, employment outcomes	Structured questionnaire administered to 250 graduates	Forms statistical baseline for employment trends	Identifies general patterns and key correlations
<i>Semi-structured interviews</i>	Obtain in-depth, contextualized insights into graduate experiences	40 interviews with a regionally and institutionally diverse subsample	Complements survey findings; uncovers nuances	Reveals personal narratives, barriers, and opportunities
<i>Descriptive statistical analysis</i>	Summarize distribution and frequency of variables	SPSS Version 28	Enables clear profiling of the graduate cohort	Supports generalizations about training outcomes
<i>Ethical safeguards</i>	Ensure participant privacy and data protection	Informed consent, GDPR compliance, anonymization protocols	Maintains research integrity and credibility	Protects participant rights and builds trust

Source: own elaboration

RESEARCH RESULTS

Graduate profiles and training experiences

For the establishment of a foundation for analyzing employment outcomes, it is first necessary to examine the demographic and educational characteristics of the surveyed graduates, which is why in this subsection we are going to present a profile of the participants, highlighting key variables such as gender distribution, age group, institutional affiliation, and exposure to practical training, mentorship, and career counseling services.

Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the cohort's characteristics. For each categorical variable, the percentage share was calculated relative to the total number of survey respondents ($N=250N$). The following formula was applied:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Number of respondents in category}}{\text{Total number of respondents}} \times 100$$

This method ensures that the reported proportions accurately represent the structure of the surveyed population, while a detailed summary of these results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Descriptive characteristics of survey respondents (N = 250)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Male	48.8
	Female	51.2
<i>Age</i>	22–25	57.2
	26–29	31.6
	30+	11.2
<i>Institution type</i>	Public	64
	Private	36
<i>Practical training completed</i>	Yes	75.2
	No	24.8
<i>Mentorship access</i>	Yes	59.6
	No	40.4
<i>Career counseling access</i>	Yes	60
	No	40

Source: own elaboration based on the questionnaire results

The demographic profile of the surveyed graduates reveals a relatively balanced distribution between genders, with a slight predominance of female respondents, result that mirrors broader labor market trends within the wellness and hospitality industries, where female participation tends to be higher. In terms of age structure, the majority of participants fell within the 22 to 25-year-old bracket, a figure that underscores the early-career status of the cohort and highlights the sector's reliance on a youthful, entry-level workforce. Public vocational institutions emerged as the dominant training providers, accounting for 64% of the sample, suggesting that the public education system continues to play a central role in supplying labor to the spa tourism industry.

Turning to training experiences, a strong majority of respondents, approximately three-quarters, reported completing a practical internship or apprenticeship during their studies. These placements typically ranged from four to six months in duration, offering graduates valuable exposure to real-world operational settings. Nevertheless, the availability of mentorship opportunities proved considerably more uneven, because more than 40% of graduates indicated that they had not benefited from any structured mentoring relationship during their education, a gap that may have implications for their professional development and labor market confidence.

A similar pattern emerged concerning career counseling services. Although around 60% of respondents acknowledged access to such support, a substantial minority reported its absence, raising concerns about the consistency and reach of guidance programs across different institutions.

Taken together, we consider that the findings suggest that while technical training components, such as internships and skill-based coursework, are widely integrated into vocational curricula, institutional support structures related to mentorship and career advising remain inconsistently applied. Strengthening these areas could substantially enhance the transition from education to employment, offering graduates not only technical proficiency but also the professional networks, career planning tools, and personal guidance necessary for long-term success in an increasingly competitive sector.

Employment outcomes and skill application

Following the examination of graduate profiles, in this subsection we have explored the relationship between vocational training features and employment outcomes. Specifically, we analyzed how practical experiences, such as internships and mentorship access, shaped graduates' transition into the labor market.

To assess these patterns, employment indicators were summarized using descriptive statistics, and the percentage of graduates securing employment within three months of graduation and the relevance of their jobs to their field of training were calculated according to the following formula and the summarized outcomes are presented in Table 3:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Number of graduates achieving outcome}}{\text{Total number of respondents}} \times 100$$

where

N - represents the total number of respondents in each respective group (e.g., those who completed an internship vs. those who did not).

Table 3.

Employment outcomes based on training features

<i>Training feature</i>	<i>Time to first employment (<3 months) (%)</i>	<i>Employment relevance to training (%)</i>
<i>Internship completed</i>	70.4	75.8
<i>No internship</i>	36	50.6
<i>Mentorship access</i>	72.3	78
<i>No mentorship</i>	45.5	54.8

Source: own elaboration based on the questionnaire results

The results indicate that graduates who completed an internship were nearly twice as likely to find employment within three months compared to those without such experience. Similarly, the access to mentorship during vocational training corresponded to higher employment relevance and greater job satisfaction, reflecting the significant role of guidance and workplace integration during the educational process.

Regional disparities

Although the scope of this research remained confined to Romania, the findings reveal stark regional disparities in employment outcomes among spa tourism graduates. Those originating from larger urban centers, most notably Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Braşov, consistently reported more favorable trajectories in their transition from education to employment. In these cities, the presence of diversified economies, an extensive concentration of hospitality and wellness enterprises, and a rich fabric of professional networks collectively created an environment where vocational skills could be swiftly applied and meaningfully rewarded. Graduates from these areas not only secured employment more rapidly but also tended to find positions closely aligned with their specialized training.

By contrast, the participants hailing from more peripheral or economically lagging regions, such as Vaslui, Botoşani, and the southern parts of Oltenia, encountered markedly greater challenges. In these localities, the spa tourism sector remained relatively underdeveloped, often characterized by a limited number of employers, seasonal work patterns, and a scarcity of full-time positions related to vocational training. We also concluded that graduates from these regions frequently faced a difficult set of choices: accept employment beneath their qualification level, relocate to larger urban centers in pursuit of better prospects, or, in some instances, seek opportunities abroad.

These disparities underscore the persistent spatial inequalities embedded within Romania's labor market for spa tourism professionals and the geographic location remains a powerful determinant of career opportunity, affecting not only the immediacy of employment but also the quality and relevance of available roles. Without targeted policy interventions, we consider that the uneven distribution of economic opportunity threatens to undermine the role of vocational education as a pathway to social mobility for graduates

in less-developed regions, while addressing these imbalances will require a multi-level strategy. National efforts to stimulate regional economic development must be complemented by localized initiatives designed to expand spa and wellness tourism infrastructure beyond traditional urban strongholds. Investments in regional marketing, business incentives for spa enterprises, and the creation of training hubs tailored to regional needs could collectively foster a more equitable distribution of opportunities. Without such coordinated actions, the risk persists that vocational training, while expanding in quantity, may continue to deliver uneven benefits across the country. Table 4 below synthesizes the key regional contrasts and identifies critical barriers and opportunities for improving spatial equity in spa tourism graduate employment.

Table 4.

Regional disparities in spa tourism graduate employment outcomes

<i>Region type</i>	<i>Key characteristics</i>	<i>Employment opportunities</i>	<i>Main barriers</i>	<i>Potential strategies</i>
Major urban centers <i>Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara</i>	Diversified economies; developed spa tourism sector; strong professional networks	High job relevance; rapid employment; greater career mobility	Competition for premium positions; rising cost of living	Strengthen industry-education partnerships; expand internship pipelines
Peripheral regions <i>Vaslui, Botoșani, Southern Oltenia</i>	Weaker economic base; underdeveloped spa infrastructure; limited industry presence	Scarce relevant jobs; seasonal or unrelated employment	Need for migration; risk of professional underemployment or brain drain	Incentivize spa sector investment; establish regional training hubs; promote local entrepreneurship
Transitional Areas (e.g., Alba, Hunedoara)	Emerging spa tourism initiatives; moderate economic diversification	Moderate employment relevance; slower integration	Limited employer variety; uneven service quality	Support business clustering; regional marketing campaigns to attract investment

Source: own elaboration based on the questionnaire results

Development Policies

Building upon the findings of this study, we have proposed a series of integrated development policies to enhance the employability of spa tourism graduates and address regional disparities within Romania’s labor market. These recommendations are designed to strengthen the alignment between vocational education and sectoral needs, foster inclusive regional development, and better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of the industry.

Strengthening industry through academic collaboration

Forging closer and more structured partnerships between vocational education institutions and spa tourism businesses is an urgent priority, based on the fact that in a sector defined by rapid innovation and shifting consumer expectations, static curricula can quickly become obsolete [17]. In this situation, institutions must proactively involve industry stakeholders at every stage of curriculum development, internship design, and program evaluation. Collaborative advisory boards, joint training initiatives, and employer-led workshops could serve as practical mechanisms for embedding industry knowledge directly into educational offerings. Moreover, dynamic feedback loops should be institutionalized, allowing curricula to remain agile and responsive to emerging trends such as wellness technology integration, sustainability practices, and personalized service

delivery models. Strengthening these relationships not only ensures the relevance of training content but also builds trust and continuity between employers and future employees.

Making structured practical training mandatory

Bridging the persistent gap between theoretical instruction and workplace demands requires the systematic integration of structured [4], mandatory practical training into all vocational programs, while internships or apprenticeships must become non-negotiable graduation requirements, designed with clear learning objectives, quality standards, and formal evaluation procedures. Also, placements should last a minimum of four months to allow for meaningful immersion in operational environments, and institutions must actively monitor and assess the quality of these experiences through partnerships with host organizations. By embedding practical training as a core pillar of vocational education, we consider that graduates will emerge better prepared, not only technically but also in their understanding of real-world professional expectations, workplace culture, and customer relationship management.

Developing regional workforce hubs

Addressing regional disparities in employment outcomes necessitates the creation of targeted infrastructure capable of delivering high-quality training outside of traditional urban centers [2]. Policymakers should spearhead the development of regional centers of excellence for spa tourism education, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas such as Moldova, southern Oltenia, and northern Dobrogea. These hubs could offer specialized programs tailored to regional tourism assets, leverage local partnerships, and promote innovation in service delivery adapted to regional contexts. Beyond education, workforce hubs would act as catalysts for local economic revitalization, encouraging private sector investment and reducing internal migration pressures by anchoring talent within their home regions.

Expanding mentorship and career guidance services

The transition from education to employment is a complex process that extends beyond the acquisition of technical competencies, context in which the structured mentorship programs and comprehensive career guidance services must become foundational components of vocational education institutions [6]. Also, establishing formal mentor-mentee frameworks that pair students with industry professionals can greatly enhance workplace readiness, professional identity formation, and long-term career planning. Simultaneously, expanded career services should offer personalized counseling, skills audits, job search strategies, and support for graduate mobility. Institutions must recognize that facilitating labor market integration is not an ancillary service but a core responsibility, essential to fulfilling their educational mission.

Integrating digital skills and entrepreneurial training

The spa tourism sector, once grounded in traditional service models, is increasingly intersecting with digital innovation and entrepreneurial dynamism, and to remain competitive, vocational education programs must embed modules that foster entrepreneurial thinking and digital proficiency [7]. Curriculum reforms should include content on digital marketing strategies, e-commerce operations, social media brand management, and the development of wellness apps and online booking platforms. Beyond digital literacy, also entrepreneurial training should cultivate competencies in business

planning, financial management, and service innovation, empowering graduates to either invigorate existing enterprises or launch new ventures that expand and diversify the sector.

Promoting national mobility programs

Recognizing that disparities in local labor market conditions may persist even with regional development efforts, a comprehensive national mobility framework is required. In this situation, graduate mobility programs should provide logistical and financial support for those willing to relocate to regions where the spa tourism sector is more robust. These initiatives could include relocation grants, subsidized housing options, and centralized job-matching platforms to streamline the transition process. Encouraging mobility not only addresses labor market mismatches but also enhances the sector’s ability to meet fluctuating regional demand and fosters a more integrated national workforce.

To illustrate the interdependencies among the proposed development policies and highlight their potential contributions to workforce improvement in the spa tourism sector, Table 5 summarizes each policy initiative. The table outlines the primary objectives, how individual policies support and reinforce one another, the expected impacts on graduate employment and sector development, and key challenges that may arise during implementation.

Table 5.

Interconnection of development policies for enhancing spa tourism workforce outcomes

Policy initiative	Main objective	Interconnections	Expected impact	Potential challenges
<i>Strengthen industry–academic collaboration</i>	Align curricula with industry needs	Supports structured training, mentorship, and digital skills integration	Higher employability, curriculum relevance	Requires sustained commitment from private sector
<i>Mandatory structured practical training</i>	Provide meaningful, evaluated work experience	Depends on strong industry collaboration	Improved readiness; faster employment	Availability of quality internships in rural areas
<i>Develop regional workforce hubs</i>	Reduce regional disparities	Linked to mobility programs and local economic strategies	Boosts local employment; reduces migration	Funding and infrastructure challenges
<i>Expand Mentorship and Career Guidance</i>	Improve school-to-work transitions	Complements internships and workforce hub development	Better career matching, increased job satisfaction	Resource-intensive to scale nationally
<i>Integrate Digital and Entrepreneurial Training</i>	Prepare graduates for evolving market demands	Enhances entrepreneurship and national competitiveness	New business creation; modernization of sector	Resistance to curricular change; training costs
<i>Promote national mobility programs</i>	Facilitate graduate relocation to strong labor markets	Mitigates impact of regional disparities	Balanced workforce distribution; reduced unemployment	Ensuring equitable access and social integration

Source: own elaboration based on the questionnaire results

Collectively, the proposed policy directions offer a comprehensive framework for strengthening the capacity of Romania’s vocational education system to meet the evolving needs of the spa tourism industry. By simultaneously addressing curriculum relevance, practical skill acquisition, regional inequality, digital innovation, and mobility, these initiatives have the potential to transform graduate outcomes and foster more balanced economic development across the country. However, their success will depend on

coordinated efforts among educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and policymakers, as well as a sustained investment in both human and institutional resources.

CONCLUSIONS

The research highlights the pivotal role vocational education plays in shaping employment outcomes for graduates aspiring to enter Romania's dynamic spa tourism sector. When designed thoughtfully, with blending substantial practical experiences, structured mentorship opportunities, and sustained collaboration with industry stakeholders, vocational programs significantly enhance graduates' readiness to navigate the labor market. The empirical evidence gathered in this study strongly reinforces the principle that educational pathways must not only impart theoretical knowledge but also cultivate applied competencies aligned with the operational realities of an industry characterized by rapid expansion, evolving service models, and shifting consumer demands.

Even so, the analysis simultaneously reveals critical fractures within the current system. Access to the benefits of well-structured vocational education is far from evenly distributed. Significant disparities persist between graduates from urban hubs, where economic diversity and industry engagement are stronger, and those from peripheral or rural regions, where limited infrastructure, fewer business partnerships, and reduced exposure to professional networks hinder successful labor market transitions. Without deliberate and sustained intervention, we consider that these spatial and socio-economic inequalities risk deepening, undermining vocational education's potential to serve as a genuine engine for economic development, social mobility, and regional revitalization.

Addressing these structural imbalances requires a comprehensive, multi-level strategy that operates simultaneously at the institutional, regional, and national scales. Institutions must commit to continuous curriculum modernization, ensuring educational content remains agile, reflective of current industry practices, and responsive to technological advancements within the wellness and tourism sectors, while stronger and more formalized partnerships between vocational providers and spa tourism enterprises which are crucial to this endeavor, facilitating the integration of internships, mentorship programs, and real-world project-based learning opportunities that more effectively prepare students for the complexities of contemporary employment landscapes.

Equally important is the expansion and formalization of career guidance systems within vocational institutions, because empowering students with personalized pathways, mobility support, and entrepreneurial training can substantially improve not only immediate employment outcomes but also long-term career adaptability in a sector increasingly influenced by digital transformation and consumer-driven innovation.

Moreover, national policymakers must prioritize regional development strategies that include the creation of workforce hubs, targeted investment in underserved areas, and the promotion of mobility programs that facilitate graduate relocation to regions with more robust spa tourism ecosystems. Policies encouraging entrepreneurship, particularly in wellness micro-enterprises and digitally enabled services, should also be embedded within a broader framework aimed at diversifying local economies and mitigating brain drain from rural areas

Ultimately, the success of these interventions depends on coordinated action across multiple stakeholders: vocational education institutions, private sector actors, local governments, and national authorities. Only through an integrated, forward-looking policy approach can Romania fully leverage the potential of its spa tourism industry, transforming vocational education from a fragmented system into a dynamic, inclusive pathway toward

sustainable economic growth and social advancement. By doing so, vocational education will not merely prepare individuals for jobs, but will actively shape a more resilient, innovative, and regionally balanced future for Romania's service economy.

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