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SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED PERSONNEL IN THE TOURISM SECTOR AND ISSUES OF IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY

Abdumalikova Mashxuraxon Rahmatali qizi
Alfraganus University, Faculty of Tourism,
Master's student, group TvM/M-26-1

Qodirova Xolida Salimovna
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Economics,
Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Tourism Management
Alfraganus University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
E-mail: xolidaqodirova335@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-8848-1403

Abstract
This paper examines the shortage of qualified personnel in Uzbekistan's tourism sector and its impact on service quality. Based on official statistics for 2021–2025 and the SERVQUAL model, it shows that foreign arrivals grew 6.2-fold to 11.68 million, while certified guides increased by only 9.4% in 2025. As four of five quality dimensions depend on staff, this gap lowers service quality. Measures on competency-based training, dual education, retention and quality monitoring are proposed.

Keywords: Tourism; human resources; qualified personnel; labour shortage; service quality; SERVQUAL; dual education; Uzbekistan.

Introduction
Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy of Uzbekistan. According to the National Statistics Committee, the country received 11.68 million foreign visitors in 2025, which is 46.8% more than in 2024, and the national target for 2026 exceeds 12 million arrivals (Figure 1). Such dynamics

make the sector an important source of export revenue, employment and regional development.

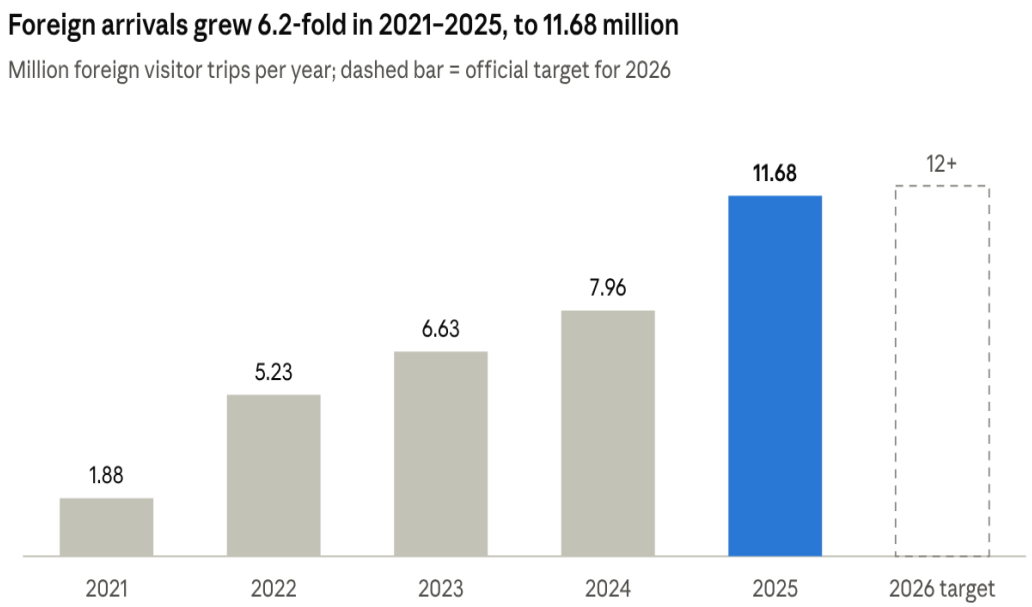
Rapid growth, however, places heavy demands on the people who deliver tourism services. Tourism is a labour-intensive industry in which the service is produced and consumed at the moment of contact between the employee and the guest. Consequently, the number and competence of staff largely determine the quality perceived by tourists. International research identifies human resource issues — the status of tourism work, skill gaps and workforce change — as one of the most persistent challenges of the global industry [1]. In Uzbekistan, scholars note that despite the large number of educational institutions training specialists, the tourism labour market still lacks qualified personnel [3].

The aim of this thesis is to assess the gap between the growth of tourism demand and the development of the tourism workforce in Uzbekistan, to show how this gap affects service quality, and to propose measures to close it. The study applies statistical, comparative and structural analysis of official data for 2021–2025, and uses the SERVQUAL service-quality model as the analytical framework [2].

Main Part

1. Growth and changing structure of tourism demand

Inbound demand has expanded far faster than any other indicator of the sector. Foreign visitor arrivals rose from 1.88 million in 2021 to 11.68 million in 2025, a 6.2-fold increase (Figure 1). After a post-pandemic rebound in 2022, growth slowed to 26.8% in 2023 and 20.1% in 2024, then accelerated again to 46.8% in 2025 on the back of visa-free regimes, investment and international promotion.



National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan · 2021–2025; 2026 target per the Tourism Committee

Figure 1. Dynamics of foreign visitor arrivals to Uzbekistan, 2021–2025, million trips

Source: compiled by the author based on data of the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (bne IntelliNews, 10 March 2026).

The structure of demand is changing as well. Visits to relatives still account for 67.3% of all trips, yet the fastest growth comes from more distant markets: arrivals from China, for example, more than tripled in January–August 2025, to 135,400. These visitors rely much more on organised services — guiding, interpretation, accommodation and catering — and expect staff who speak Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, Spanish and other languages.

2. Workforce-related capacity lags behind demand

The supply side of the industry has grown much more slowly than demand (Table 1).

Table 1. Growth of tourism demand and workforce-related capacity in Uzbekistan, 2024–2025

Indicator	2024[1]	2025[2]	Change, %
Foreign visitor arrivals, million trips	7.96	11.68	+46.8
Accommodation facilities, units	5,907	6,861	+16.2
Bed capacity, thousand	161.0	183.9	+14.2
Certified tour guides, persons	3,970	4,345	+9.4
Foreign arrivals per certified guide, trips	2,005	2,688	+34.1

Source: compiled and calculated by the author based on data of the National Statistics Committee and the Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Notes: [1] for accommodation, beds and guides — stock at the beginning of 2025 (beds; facilities and guides = end-November 2025 stock minus the 954 facilities commissioned and 375 guides trained during the year); [2] for accommodation, beds and guides — as of the end of November 2025.

The table reveals a widening gap. While arrivals increased by 46.8%, the number of certified guides grew by only 9.4%, so the load per guide rose by about one third, to roughly 2,700 foreign visitors. Even if only the 32.7% of arrivals not visiting relatives are counted, there are about 880 visitors per certified guide. Accommodation capacity expanded by 14–16%, and each new hotel, guesthouse or hostel needs trained receptionists, housekeepers, cooks and managers. The fast entry of international brands — from 40 hotels at the end of 2025 to 51 by August 2026 — further raises demand for staff trained to international standards.

3. Causes of the shortage

The shortage has both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. Mukumova reports that up to 75% of employees of tourism companies lack specialised tourism education, and that graduates often do not meet international professional requirements, so hotels and travel agencies have to retrain new hires [3]. Eshmurodov's survey of university teaching staff shows that the sector needs specialists who combine knowledge of the industry, customer service, marketing

and management, and that continuous updating of training is a condition of competitiveness [4]. These findings agree with international evidence that human resource problems remain at the forefront of tourism's challenges [1]. The main causes can be grouped as follows:

- **Mismatch between training and the labour market:** curricula remain weighted towards theory, practical placements are short, and many teachers lack recent industry experience.
- **Language and soft-skill gaps:** the fastest-growing source markets require languages and intercultural service skills that the current workforce rarely has.
- **Low attractiveness of jobs:** seasonality, modest wages and unclear career paths cause high turnover and an outflow of trained staff to other sectors.
- **Regional imbalance:** new capacity is opening across the regions, where the local pool of trained staff is smallest.
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4. Impact on service quality

The consequences for quality can be traced through the SERVQUAL model, which defines service quality as the gap between customer expectations and perceptions across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy [2]. Only tangibles depend mainly on physical assets; the other four are delivered by employees. A lack of staff lowers responsiveness (longer waiting times, slower problem solving) and reliability (errors in bookings and itineraries). Insufficient competence and language skills weaken assurance, while overload and turnover reduce empathy — the individual attention that shapes tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Investment in hotels and infrastructure therefore improves only one dimension of quality unless it is matched by investment in people.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis shows that the main constraint on further tourism growth in Uzbekistan is shifting from infrastructure to human capital. Foreign arrivals rose 6.2-fold in 2021–2025 and by 46.8% in 2025 alone, while certified guides

increased by 9.4% and accommodation capacity by 14–16%. Because four of the five SERVQUAL dimensions are delivered by employees, this gap directly threatens service quality and the country's image as a destination [2]. The problem is both quantitative and qualitative: a large share of employees lacks specialised training, and graduates do not always meet international standards [3, 4].

To close the gap, the following measures are recommended:

1. **Occupational standards.** Adopt national competency standards for key tourism and hospitality occupations (guide, receptionist, housekeeper, cook, food-and-beverage staff, tour manager), aligned with international frameworks and linked to curricula and certification.
2. **Dual education.** Shift a substantial share of study time to partner hotels and tour operators, with hotel associations and international brands acting as co-designers of programmes and as mentors.
3. **Multilingual guide pipeline.** Plan the number of certified guides in line with the growth of non-CIS arrivals, run intensive courses in Chinese, Arabic, Korean, Japanese and European languages, and create regional training hubs.
4. **Retention and attractiveness of jobs.** Introduce transparent career ladders, wage benchmarks and incentives for year-round employment, and reduce seasonality by developing MICE, gastronomic and domestic tourism.
5. **Regular quality monitoring.** Conduct SERVQUAL-based tourist surveys at major destinations, collect digital feedback through the national tourism platform, and link the results to hotel classification and the renewal of guide certificates.
6. **Upgrading teaching staff.** Organise industry internships and train-the-trainer programmes with international partners for university and college teachers [4].

Implementing these measures would allow Uzbekistan to convert the rapid quantitative growth of tourist flows into sustainable growth of service quality, revenues and destination competitiveness.



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