READREADINESS LEVEL OF STUDENTS OF DIPLOMA IN TOURISM MANAGEMENT (DUP), HULU TERENGGANU POLYTECHNIC (PHT) IN MASTERING SOFT SKILLS IN THE HOSPITALITY FIELD: A SURVEY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the level of readiness of Diploma in Tourism Management students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic in mastering soft skills that are increasingly important in the hospitality industry. This quantitative survey study involved 166 respondents, selected randomly, and used a structured questionnaire with high reliability (α = 0.93). The study instrument measured four main dimensions of soft skills: communication, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork. The descriptive analysis showed that students' soft skills were at a high level. The Mann-Whitney U test found a significant difference in soft skills levels between students with soft skills course experience and those without, while the Kruskal-Wallis test showed no significant difference in achievement based on the Average Grade Point Average (GPA). Next, Spearman's correlation analysis showed that the relationship between soft skills and GPA was very weak and not significant. This finding confirms that academic achievement is not the main determinant of soft skills mastery; rather, these skills play a greater role in graduates' marketability. Therefore, the study recommends that polytechnics strengthen soft skills through curriculum integration, additional courses, industrial training, and co-curricular activities, so that graduates are better balanced between academic and industry needs.

Keywords: ***Soft Skills, Hospitality, GPA, Employability, Polytechnic Students***

1. Introduction

In an era of globalization and increasingly competitive job markets, graduates need to master both hard (technical) skills and soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and conflict management. The hospitality industry demands quality interactions between employees and customers, where customer satisfaction and the organization's image depend largely on graduates' ability to adapt to multicultural situations, manage conflict, and deliver services professionally.

The importance of soft skills has received attention from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, especially polytechnics, which play a role in producing a semi-professional workforce in various service sectors. Various previous research reports have shown that, even though graduates have sufficient academic knowledge, weaknesses in mastering soft skills remain a major factor in marketability. This underscores the need to assess students' readiness to master these skills, ensuring they are not only able to enter the job market but also to maintain their performance and careers in the long term.

Previous studies have focused heavily on soft skills development through targeted training or general skills assessments but have not evaluated students' overall readiness to meet the evolving, specific demands of the hospitality industry. This lack of targeted research has created a clear knowledge gap: there is currently no empirical study that comprehensively assesses the specific level of readiness among hospitality polytechnic students, especially from a soft skills perspective aligned with the industry's current requirements. Without addressing this precise gap, attempts to improve curricula and learning activities may be less effective.

In this regard, this study focuses on Diploma in Tourism Management (DUP) students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic (PHT), an educational sector that directly contributes to the workforce in the rapidly growing tourism and hospitality industry. This study aims to assess students' readiness to comprehensively master soft skills, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and provide a basis for suggestions to improve the curriculum and learning activities. By highlighting existing research gaps, this study is expected to contribute to the soft skills literature and to provide practical guidance to higher education institutions on increasing the marketability of their graduates.

2. Literature Review

Graduate employability is a major issue in higher education as it is closely related to the mastery of soft skills. Ghani et al. (2025) showed that hospitality graduates who master a balanced combination of soft and hard skills are more likely to obtain employment, maintain careers, and demonstrate high work performance. Employers emphasize graduates' ability to adapt, work in multicultural teams, and maintain strong customer relationships. Despite sufficient technical proficiency, a lack of soft skills is often a factor in unemployment, emphasizing the critical role of soft skills in facing the challenges of the dynamic world of work.

Given the importance of soft skills to marketability, higher education institutions are now emphasizing the development of these skills through innovative technology-based methods. Dalimunthe and Syahputra (2022) found that the use of interactive multimedia improved the soft skills of tourism polytechnic students. Through real-world simulations, students had the opportunity to make decisions in challenging situations, interact with various parties, and manage tasks in a virtual environment that resembled real industries. Elements such as flexibility, attention to detail, time management, and communication were reported to increase after the intervention. These findings indicate that digital methods not only develop soft skills relevant to the Industrial Revolution 4.0 but also enhance graduates' marketability.

This finding aligns with academic views that emphasize soft skills as the core of graduate employability. Zainal Shah et al. (2022) emphasized that communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork are key skills. Their study found that lecturers believed soft skills should be taught explicitly through dedicated courses or integrated into existing curricula, rather than relying solely on practical experience to achieve mastery. This finding underscores the role of higher education institutions in formally and systematically developing graduates' soft skills

Although soft skills development is widely accepted in academic circles as an important element for graduate employ24) found that although TVET students demonstrated strong mastery of soft skills, their readiness to face the digital transformation remained moderate ($r = 0.561$, $p = 0.000$). This indicates that mastery of soft skills alone is not enough; a more systematic development approach aligned with industry needs is needed to ensure graduates can adapt to the dynamics of future employment.

ability, students still face challenges in adapting to the requirements of Industrial Revolution 4.0. Hashim (20Although previous studies have emphasized the importance of soft skills in increasing graduates' marketability and their readiness to face the Industrial Revolution 4.0, there are constraints in ensuring that students are truly prepared to apply these skills. In this regard, this study was conducted to assess polytechnic students' readiness to master soft skills, with the aim of identifying strengths and areas for improvement. The findings are expected to provide initial insights to lecturers and higher education institutions in planning more accurate teaching and learning strategies to develop graduates who are competent and ready to face the challenges of the world of work.

3. Methodology

This study uses a quantitative design with a descriptive survey approach, which is considered most appropriate for assessing students' readiness to master soft skills based on questionnaire data. This approach allows for systematic data collection to produce a comprehensive picture of the level of mastery of soft skills among hospitality students. In addition, this method helps researchers identify patterns and tendencies in skill dimensions that require improvement to increase the efficiency and marketability of graduates in the context of polytechnic education.

The study population included all Diploma in Tourism Management (DUP) students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic (PHT). The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, which indicated a minimum of 132 respondents from a total of 210 students. This study enrolled 166 students, exceeding the minimum required number and thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings. Stratified random sampling was used to account for demographic factors, including gender, age, and Grade Point Average (GPA). The questionnaire was prepared in Google Form and distributed via WhatsApp to facilitate respondent access.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive analysis was performed to obtain mean values, standard deviations, and percentages to assess students' readiness. The mean score was categorized into three levels: low (1.00–2.33), medium (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00), according to the guidelines of Sidek (2005) (Table 1). Normality tests were conducted to assess the data distribution. If the data were not normal, nonparametric inference analyses, such as the Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test, and Spearman's rho test, were used to assess relationships and differences between variables. Selecting this method enabled valid analysis of relationships and differences even when the data did not meet normality requirements, thereby maintaining the accuracy of statistical inference.

Before the actual data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 30 students with a background comparable to that of the target population. The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the reliability and stability of the questionnaire instrument used. The analysis showed that the overall Cronbach's Alpha was 0.93, exceeding the minimum of 0.70 recommended by Nunnally (1978). This finding demonstrates that the developed instrument has high internal consistency, indicating reliability and suitability for use in actual data collection.

This study adhered to ethical research principles, including obtaining informed consent from respondents, maintaining confidentiality, and allowing respondents to withdraw from the study without penalty. Although this method enabled large-scale data collection, this study was limited to one polytechnic and one program, and thus, these limitations may affect the generalizability of the findings to a broader population.

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Table 1: Mean Interpretation

Mean Score	Mean Interpretation
3.67–5.00	High
2.34–3.66	Medium
1.00–2.33	Low

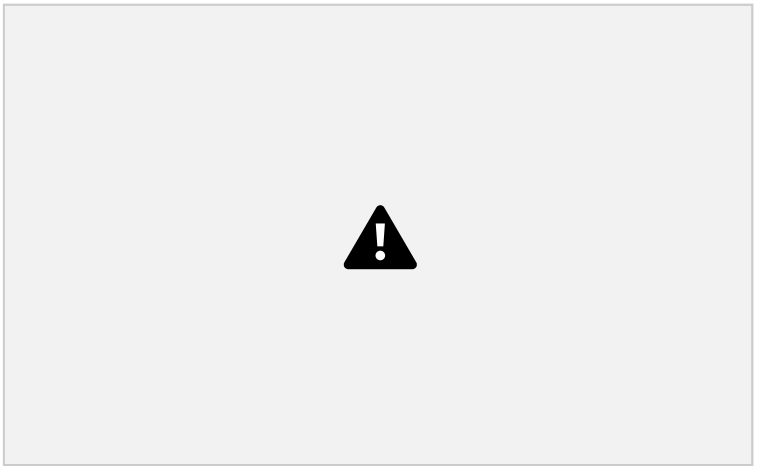
4. Discussion of Analysis and Findings

4.1 Demography of Respondent

4.1.1 Age

The study findings revealed that most respondents were students aged 18–20 years, accounting for 139 individuals (83.7%). Additionally, 15.7% (26 respondents) were between 21 and 23 years old, while only one respondent (0.6%) was aged 24 years or above. This age distribution indicates that most students in the Diploma in Tourism Management program at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic are in their late teens, which aligns with the typical age profile of diploma students. Thus, the study sample is relatively homogeneous in terms of age, potentially providing more consistent data for evaluating the level of readiness to master soft skills.

Figure 1: Age



4.1.2 Gender

The study found that most respondents were female, namely 108 people (65.1%). Meanwhile, 34.9% (58 respondents) were male. This distribution clearly shows the dominance of female students in the Diploma in Tourism Management program at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic. This phenomenon aligns with the national trend in hospitality and tourism, which is traditionally more popular with women than with men. A study by Shariffah Bahyah Syed Ahmad (2013) examined the level of soft skills among students in private higher education institutions, comparing by gender, area of residence, and type of school. The study's findings showed gender differences, providing strong justification for linking the dominance of female students to certain soft skills.

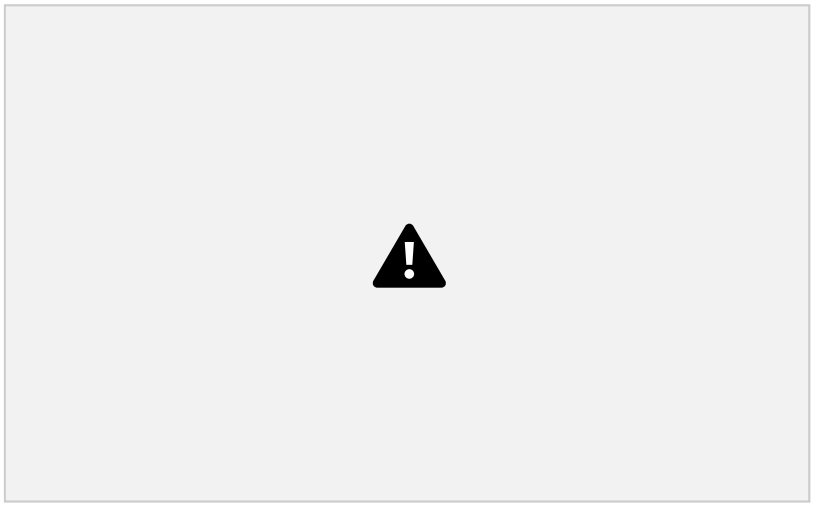
Figure 2: Gender

4.1.3 GPA

Of the 166 respondents, 71 (42.8%) had a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Next, 70 respondents (42.2%) had GPAs between 3.0 and 3.49. Meanwhile, 24 students (14.5%) recorded a GPA between 2.0 and 2.99. Only one respondent (0.6%) had a GPA of 1.99 or lower. Overall, this distribution shows that many students in the Diploma in Tourism Management program at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic have strong academic achievements, with more than 80% of

respondents earning a GPA of 3.0 or higher. This situation gives the impression that the study sample consists of high-performing students with the potential to achieve a more consistent level of soft skills mastery.

Figure 3: GPA



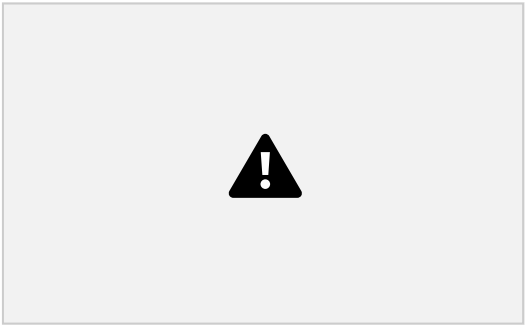
4.1.4 Working Experience in Hospitality Industry

Of the total 166 respondents, 62 (37.3%) reported having work experience, while the remaining 104 (62.7%) had never worked in the hospitality sector. This distribution shows that more than half of the students have not yet been directly exposed to industry experience. However, the

number of those with work experience is still significant, as almost four out of ten respondents have had the opportunity to be involved in the hospitality sector. This is important because work experience is believed to strengthen students' soft skills, especially in the aspects of communication with customers, time management, and teamwork. In other words, this study sample provides a balanced picture between students who already have a foundation of practical experience and students who still rely entirely on academic learning.

A study conducted in Poland by Bednarska and Olszewski (2016) highlighted that work experience has a significant influence on students' attitudes and perceptions towards a career in the hospitality sector. Students who have been directly involved in the industry tend to have more positive views, higher levels of confidence, and a stronger willingness to pursue a career after graduation. The experience not only helps them understand the realities and challenges of the hospitality industry but also strengthens soft skills such as conflict management, interpersonal communication, and practical problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, the study found that work experience provides additional motivation for students to maintain an interest in the hospitality sector, thus increasing their intention to pursue a long-term career in the industry.

Figure 4: Working Experience in Hospitality Industry



4.1.5 Attended a course or training in soft skills.

Of the 166 respondents, 51 (30.7%) reported having taken a course in the hospitality field, while 115 (69.3%) had not. Only a small proportion of students had additional exposure that could potentially enhance their industry knowledge and soft skills, such as work ethic, discipline, and professional communication skills. Most students relied on formal curricula, highlighting the need to expand access to additional courses or training to strengthen their readiness to face the challenges of the hospitality industry.

A study by Muzafar Mat Yusof and Nur Hidayah Mohiddin (2018) found that almost half of the respondents obtained career opportunities after industrial training, and more than 50% obtained work scopes that were in line with their field of study skills, indicating that additional exposure enhances students' ability to face industry challenges. A study by Azuwin and Azimah (2023) also showed that employer feedback recorded mean scores above 4.0 for all aspects of students' skills, indicating that industrial training plays a role in strengthening their skills in the hospitality sector.

Figure 5: Attended a course or training in soft skills.

4.2 Student Readiness Level in Mastering Soft Skills

Based on the findings of a study on 166 DUP students, their level of readiness in mastering soft skills in the hospitality field is high, with an overall average score of 4.12 out of 5. This shows that students generally feel confident and ready to apply soft skills in academic and career contexts. Among the items, students are most willing to learn new skills (S3, mean = 4.38) and receive criticism and feedback for improvement (S5, mean = 4.25), showing their openness to continuous learning and self-improvement. On the other hand, items related to communication skills (S1, mean = 3.77) and leadership (S11, mean = 3.93) recorded the lowest average, indicating that there are several aspects of soft skills that can still be strengthened through training or practical activities.

This finding is in line with the study by Sharifah Rahifa et al. (2023), which found that Diploma in Hotel Management students who underwent Work-Based Learning (WBL) training at Holiday Villa, Doha, showed significant improvements in interpersonal communication skills, self-confidence, and the ability to adapt to the real work culture. The study emphasized that direct industry experience allows students to practice soft skills in an authentic setting, thus strengthening communication and leadership skills, which are often weaknesses of students in the early stages of their studies. This also supports the findings of Quah and Kok (2024), which showed that the use of technology in internships increases hospitality students' openness to continuous learning and receiving feedback. All these studies collectively emphasize the need to integrate practice-based approaches and technology in the learning process to strengthen the mastery of soft skills of TVET students.

Standard deviation analysis showed that item S11 (leadership skills) recorded a value of 0.752, while S10 (conflict resolution) recorded a value of 0.706. This difference indicates that students' mastery levels of leadership skills are more varied than conflict resolution, indicating that students' experience, confidence, and level of readiness to exercise leadership vary among them. On the other hand, the slightly lower standard deviation value for conflict resolution indicates a higher level of consistency, that is, students relatively have a more uniform level of mastery in dealing with conflict situations. Overall, these findings indicate that although some aspects of soft skills, such as leadership, show significant variation, other aspects, such as conflict resolution, work ethic, and professional attitude, show a stable level of mastery among students. The findings of Abd Razak's (2019) study support the results of the current study, where the level of students' leadership and conflict resolution skills recorded a high standard deviation. This indicates that, like the current study, there is significant variation in students' mastery levels of certain soft skills, indicating that their experience and confidence vary.

Critically, these findings indicate that the DUP program was successful in building overall soft skills readiness, but there were certain aspects that needed additional attention, particularly communication and leadership skills. The program could be reinforced with practical activities, project-based learning, or simulation exercises to increase students' confidence in areas of weakness. Furthermore, because these data were obtained through self-report, there is the possibility of social bias, in which students rated themselves higher than they were. Overall, although students demonstrated high levels of readiness, more focused reinforcement strategies could help ensure more consistent and comprehensive mastery of soft skills.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Students' Level of Readiness to Master Soft Skills in the Hospitality Field

	Questions	Min	Standard deviation	Level
S1	I feel I have sufficient communication skills for the hospitality field.	3.77	.743	High

S2	**I am confident in being able to work effectively in a team in hospitality-related tasks.**	**4.16**	**.635**	**High**
S3	**I am willing to learn new skills related to soft skills in the hospitality field.**	**4.38**	**.568**	**High**
S4	**I believe my time management skills are sufficient to meet the requirements of the hospitality field.**	**4.15**	**.632**	**High**
S5	**I am willing to accept criticism and feedback to improve my soft skills.**	**4.25**	**.609**	**High**
S6	**I believe that the soft skills I possess will help me succeed in a hospitality career.**	**4.25**	**.657**	**High**
S7	**I have high motivation to learn the interpersonal skills needed in the hospitality field.**	**4.07**	**.683**	**High**
S8	**I feel I am well prepared to face challenges in the hospitality field which requires soft skills.**	**4.08**	**.691**	**High**
S9	**I am actively seeking opportunities to hone my soft skills in hospitality learning and training.**	**4.19**	**.634**	**High**
S10	**I am able to resolve conflicts between customers or colleagues effectively.**	**3.93**	**.706**	**High**
S11	**I have leadership skills that allow me to guide colleagues.**	**3.93**	**.752**	**High**
S12	**I have a high work ethic and am always punctual and responsible.**	**4.19**	**.671**	**High**
S13	**I am able to adapt to changes and challenges in the hospitality work environment.**	**4.13**	**.665**	**High**
S14	**I have good listening skills and understand customer needs.**	**4.13**	**.598**	**High**
S15	**I always demonstrate a professional attitude in appearance, speech and behaviour.**	**4.22**	**.599**	**High**

Overall Score	**4.12**	**.476**	**High**

4.3 Differences in Student Readiness Levels in Mastering Soft Skills Based on Demographics

Normality tests (Table 3) were conducted on the study data using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. The results of the analysis showed that the significant value for both tests was p = 0.000 (< 0.05). Therefore, the data in this study did not follow a normal distribution. Therefore, further analysis will be conducted using non-parametric tests that are more appropriate to the nature of the data.

Table 3: Student Soft Skills Normality Test Results

Normality Test	Statistic	df	Sig.
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	**.123**	**166**	**.000**
Shapiro-Wilk	**.952**	**166**	**.000**

4.3.1 Age

Based on Table 4, the level of students' readiness in mastering soft skills shows a minimum score of 2.47 and a maximum of 5.00. This illustrates the existence of variation among students, where a small proportion of students assessed their level of readiness as quite low, while there were also students who assessed themselves as being at the highest level. Although the overall average was high (mean = 4.13, SD = 0.477), this wide range of scores indicates that not all students have the same confidence in mastering soft skills. This situation may be influenced by individual factors such as educational background, work experience, or exposure to different co-curricular activities, which causes their level of readiness to be not completely uniform.

A study by Mohd Fadel et al. (2022) found that final year students of TVET programs at IPTA had soft skills at a moderately high level in facing IR4.0, with the mean and standard deviation showing variation in several soft skills constructs, such as leadership and communication. This indicates that although TVET students generally showed good preparedness, the level of confidence and mastery of certain skills still differed among them.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Soft Skills Readiness Level

N	Min	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
166	**4.13**	**.477**	**2.47**	**5.00**

Next, the Kruskal-Wallis analysis was used to see the differences in readiness levels by age. The results of the mean rank analysis (Table 5) showed that students aged 18–20 years recorded a mean rank of 82.72, students aged 21–23 years obtained 87.46, while students aged 24 years and above recorded 89.50. Although there were slight differences, this pattern illustrates that older students tend to have higher soft skills readiness.

A study by Aryani et al. (2021) examined groups of high school students, university students, and workers to examine the impact of soft skills on career engagement. Findings showed that soft skills had a stronger impact on students than on adult workers. This reflects that university students, who are generally older, tend to have more mature soft skills that are beneficial to their psychological and career objectives. This supports the current findings that students in the 21–23 and 24+ age groups showed higher Mean Ranks.

Table 5: Mean Rank of Soft Skills by Age Group

Age Group	N	*Mean Rank*
18–20	**139**	**82.72**
21–23	**26**	**87.46**
Above 24	**1**	**89.50**
Total	**166**	

However, as shown in Table 6, the Kruskal-Wallis test found that the H value was 0.232 with degrees of freedom (df) = 2 and a significance value (p) = 0.891. A p value exceeding 0.05 indicates that there is no significant difference between age groups in the level of students' readiness in mastering soft skills. This non-significant finding may be due to several factors. First, the age difference among polytechnic students is small (the majority are 18–20 years old) and the number of students in the older age group is exceedingly small, resulting in a reduced statistical power of the test. Second, the mastery of soft skills may be more influenced by learning experiences, practical exposure, and individual motivation than age alone.

A study by Huang et al. (2024) on Chinese school students aged 10 to 15 years found that there were differences in social and emotional skills between different age groups. However, the differences were not solely due to age but rather were influenced by the level of psychological development of the students. This supports the current finding that age differences in higher

education do not automatically guarantee significant differences in soft skills mastery. Overall, this analysis concluded that students' readiness to master soft skills was high regardless of age, and age did not make a significant difference in their soft skills achievement.

Table 6: Kruskal–Wallis Soft Skills Test Statistics by Age

Kruskal-Wallis H	Degree of Freedom (df)	Asymptotic Significance (Asymp. Sig.)
0.232	**2**	**0.891**

4.3.2 Gender

Based on descriptive analysis (Table 7), the level of soft skills of students showed a high mean value (M = 4.13, SP = 0.48) with a dominance of female students (gender mean = 1.65). The results of the initial comparison in the Ranks Table (Table 11) showed that male students recorded a higher Mean Rank (92.58) compared to female students (78.63), thus giving the impression that descriptively, male students assessed themselves as having a slightly better level of soft skills.

However, the Mann–Whitney inference test (Table 12) showed U = 2605.50, Z = -1.793, and p value = 0.073, above the 0.05 significance level, indicating that the difference between genders was not statistically significant.

This finding emphasizes that the differences seen at the descriptive level do not reflect the true differences in the student population. Reasons for this non-significant finding include:

1. The dominance of female students in the sample (108 out of 166), which may cause the overall average to be more representative of the female group and reduce the power of the statistical test.

2. The similar level of curriculum exposure and learning experiences between male and female students, making gender not a major determinant of soft skills mastery.

3. Individual variations in co-curricular experiences and motivation may play a greater role than gender, thus equating soft skills scores between groups.

This finding is in line with the study by Abdullah et al. (2022), which found that the level of written communication anxiety, as part of soft skills, was not influenced by gender among international postgraduate students in Malaysia. Thus, the current study shows that the factors of curriculum exposure, practical experience, and individual motivation play a greater role in shaping soft skills mastery than gender alone.

Overall, this analysis concludes that although there are descriptive differences between genders, the level of students' soft skills mastery was not significantly influenced by gender, indicating that soft skills readiness is consistent regardless of gender.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of Soft Skills and Student Gender

Descriptive Statistic

	N	Min	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Soft Skills	**166**	**4.1269**	**.47687**	**2.47**	**5.00**
Gender	**166**	**1.6506**	**.47822**	**1.00**	**2.00**

Table 8: Ranks of Soft Skills by Gender

Ranks

	Gender	N	Min Rank	Total Ranks
Soft Skills	**Male**	**58**	**92.58**	**5369.50**
	Female	**108**	**78.63**	**8491.50**
	Total	**166**		

Table 9: Mann–Whitney Test Statistics by Gender for Soft Skills Mastery Levels

Statistics Test

	Soft skills
Mann-Whitney U	**2605.500**
Wilcoxon W	**8491.500**
Z	**-1.793**
Asymptotic Significant Values (2-sided)	**.073**

[a]Variable Group: Gender

4.3.3 Work Experience in Hospitality industry

Based on descriptive statistics (Table 7), the student's soft skills level was at a high mean average of 4.13 (SP = 0.477), with a minimum score of 2.47 and a maximum of 5.00. This shows that most students have a proficient level of mastery of soft skills, although there is some variation. For the work experience variable, the mean value was 1.63 (SP = 0.485) on a scale of 1 = No experience, 2 = Experienced, indicating that more students have no work experience in hospitality than those with experience.

Table 8 shows that the mean rank of soft skills for students with work experience is higher (92.20, n = 62) than for those with no experience (78.31, n = 104). Descriptively, this indicates that practical experience in the industry can strengthen the mastery of soft skills, especially in the aspects of communication, problem-solving, and teamwork effectiveness. These findings are in line with a study by Halik Bassah & Mohd Noor (2023) which emphasizes that according to industry experts, TVET graduates in Malaysia need to master soft skills such as communication, interpersonal, leadership, and problem-solving, while work experience also plays a role in improving the mastery of these skills.

However, the results of the Mann–Whitney U test (Table 9) showed U = 2684.50, Z = -1.811, p = 0.070, indicating that the difference between the groups of students who had work experience and those who did not was statistically insignificant at the level of 0.05. Some reasons for these insignificant findings include:

1. Group size was unbalanced – inexperienced students (n = 104) outnumbered experienced (n = 62), causing the overall average to be more influenced by large groups and reducing the statistical power of the test.

2. Individual variation in soft skills mastery – inexperienced students may acquire skills through extracurricular activities, courses, or informal experiences, further narrowing the differences with the experienced group.

3. The influence of other factors – such as motivation, curriculum exposure, and existing interpersonal skills can play a more dominant role than mere work experience in determining the level of soft skills.

These findings are in line with Santos (2025), who shows that while practical experience is an advantage, graduates' soft skills are also influenced by other learning factors and the need for the integration of interpersonal skills in the curriculum. In other words, the development of soft skills depends not only on formal work experience, but also on informal learning experiences and relevant curriculum exposure.

Overall, although descriptive trends show that work-experienced students tend to have higher soft skills, this difference is not strong enough to be statistically significant. This emphasizes that the work experience factor is just one of the many factors that make up the mastery of soft skills among polytechnic students.

Table 10: Descriptive Statistics of Soft Skills According to Work Experience in Hospitality

Descriptive Statistics

	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Soft skills	**.47687**	**2.47**	**5.00**
Work	**.48520**	**1.00**	**2.00**

Table 11: Mean Rank Soft Skills According to Work Experience Status in Hospitality

Ranks

Table 12: Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Comparison of Soft Skills by Status of Work Experience in Hospitality

Statistic Test

	Soft Skills
Mann-Whitney U	**2684.500**
Wilcoxon W	**8144.500**
Z	**-1.811**
Asymptotic Significant Values (2-sided)	**.070**

[a] Variable Group: Work Experience

4.3.4 Have Attended a Soft Skills Course or Training.

Based on descriptive statistics (Table 16), the overall level of students' soft skills is at a high average (Mean = 4.13, SP = 0.48) with a range ranging from 2.47 to 5.00. This shows that most students have a good mastery of soft skills although there are slight variations. Meanwhile, for the soft skills course experience variable, the mean value was 1.69 (SP = 0.46) with a scale of 1 = No course and 2 = Never course. This average value shows that more students have never taken a soft skills course than ever have, yet the percentage of students who have course experience is also quite significant at around three out of ten people.

Table 17 shows the comparison of the average rank of soft skills between students who have taken the soft skills course and those who have not experienced it. A total of 51 students with course experience recorded a higher mean rank (96.37) compared to 115 students without course experience, which was 77.79. This difference shows a tendency that students who attend soft skills courses have a stronger level of soft skills. In terms of total ranks, the group with no course experience (8946.00) was larger due to the larger number of respondents, but the average ranking was clearly in favor of those with experience.

Overall, these findings suggest that soft skills courses serve as an important platform to strengthen students' skills, particularly in the areas of communication, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork. Formal training through courses provides a more systematic and focused learning space, in contrast to soft learning that occurs indirectly in academic or extracurricular activities. In other words, involvement in special soft skills courses can give students a competitive advantage in facing the challenges of the hospitality industry.

The Mann-Whitney U test (Table 18) is used to assess the difference in soft skills levels between students who have taken a soft skills course and those who have not taken a course. The values obtained were U = 2276.000, $Z = -2.311$, with $p = 0.021$ ($p < 0.05$). These results suggest there are statistically significant differences between the two groups. In other words, students who have attended soft skills courses have higher soft skills scores compared to their peers who have never taken part in the course. These findings confirm that soft skills courses have a positive and tangible impact on students' soft skills mastery**, in line with the role of formal training in building self-confidence, communication skills, teamwork, as well as critical thinking skills more effectively.**

The findings of this study are in line with the results of a study by Tan et al. (2021) which also found that the integration of soft skills in the curriculum has a positive impact on the development of interpersonal skills of diploma students. The study showed that the application of skills such as effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving can increase the employability level of graduates as well as strengthen students' self-confidence during industrial

training. Hence, these findings further strengthen the argument that the incorporation of soft skills elements in the teaching and learning process plays a significant role in producing students who are ready to face the challenges of the real world of work. In addition, Hussein's (2024) study showed that postgraduate students who have good soft skills are more likely to get jobs in the hospitality sector, while Colaco (2024) found that training in soft skills has a positive impact on customer service performance. Both studies support the findings of current studies that the experience of attending soft skills courses or training not only improves the skills of graduates but also contributes to the employability and overall performance of the organization, in line with the needs and expectations of the hospitality industry.

Table 16: Descriptive Statistics of Soft Skills According to Course Experience

Descriptive Statistics

				M	M
			Sta	i	a
			nda	r	x
			rd	i	i
			Dev	r	n
			iati	u	u
			on	r	n
Sof			.476	2	5
t			87	.	.
Ski				4	0
lls				7	0
Co			.462	1	2
urs			74	.	.
e				0	0
				0	0

Table 17: Mean Soft Skills by Course Experience Status in Hospitality

Ranks

Table 18: Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Comparison of Soft Skills by Course Experience Status in Hospitality

Statistic Test	Soft Skills
Mann-Whitney U	**2276.000**
Wilcoxon W	**8946.000**
Z	**-2.311**
Asymptotic Significant Values (2-sided)	**.021**

[a]**Variable Group: Course Experience**

4.4 The Relationship Between Students' Readiness to Master Soft Skills and Students' GPA Achievement

The Spearman's rho correlation test (Table 19) showed that the relationship between soft skills and a student's GPA was very weak with values of r = − 0.114, N = 166 and p = 0.144. Based on the interpretation of Chua (2014), the coefficient value in the range of ±0.01 to ±0.30 is categorized as a very weak relationship while a p-value above 0.05 indicates that the relationship is not statistically significant. This means that a student's level of mastery of soft skills does not have a consistent association with their academic achievement.

Analytically, these results show that both variables develop independently. An increase in GPA does not necessarily go hand in hand with an increase in soft skills and vice versa. While negative correlation values hint that students with high GPAs may have slightly lower levels of soft skills, the strength of the relationship is too small to be considered meaningful in practical terms. This signals that academic achievement is more influenced by cognitive factors such as theoretical mastery and ability to answer exams while soft skills are more honed through extracurricular experiences such as group assignments, extracurricular activities, and industry experience.

These findings are consistent with the literature that asserts that soft skills influence other factors more than academic achievement alone. Casali and Meneghetti (2023), for example, found that the effect of soft skills on academic achievement only occurs indirectly through mediators such as learning motivation and psychological stress. A study by Wan Muda et al. (2020) reported that although graduates demonstrate an elevated level of proficiency in soft skills, academic achievement does not necessarily reflect their actual employability or job performance, emphasizing that soft skills are more dominant in determining career success.

Overall, these results support the idea that soft skills are not the primary determinants of academic achievement measured through GPA but rather serve as a complement that reinforces students' capabilities in real-world contexts. As the relationship with GPA has been shown to be weak and insignificant, future studies are encouraged to assess the role of soft skills against other indicators such as professional communication ability, teamwork, leadership, and performance during industrial training. This approach will provide a more holistic picture of

the value of soft skills in forming graduates who are balanced in terms of academics and employability.

Table 19: Spearman Correlation between GPA and Soft Skills

Correlation				
			GPA	Soft Skills
Spearman's rho	GPA	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.114
		Sig. (2-hala)	.	.144
		N	166	166
	Soft Skills	Correlation Coefficient	-.114	1.000
		Sig. (2-way)	.144	.
		N	166	166

According to Chua (2014), the correlation strength is classified as follows:

Table 20: Classification of Correlation Forces (Chua, 2014)

Correlation Coefficient (r)	Strength / Interpretation
±0.91 to ±1.00	Very Strong / Very High
±0.71 to ±0.90	Strong/High
±0.51 to ±0.70	Moderate

±0.31 to ±0.50	**Weak/Low**
±0.01 to ±0.30	**Very Weak/Very Low**
0	**No Correlation**

5. Conclusion and Future Research

Overall, this study finds that DUP students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic prove a prominent level of readiness in soft skills mastery, particularly in the aspects of communication, teamwork, and leadership. However, an analysis of the relationship between soft skills and GPA shows a very weak and non-significant correlation. This suggests that academic achievement should not be used as the sole measure of a student's soft skill capabilities. Instead, soft skills have a greater impact on graduate employability and their performance within the actual hospitality industry.

To enhance the effectiveness of soft skills development, several recommendations are proposed. First, the integration of soft skill elements within the curriculum should be strengthened through experiential learning approaches such as industry simulations, case studies, and community projects. Second, polytechnics should provide more supplementary courses, workshops, and structured modules that emphasize soft skills in line with industry requirements. Third, strategic collaboration with industry partners should be expanded through industrial training programs, short-term internships, and mentorship programs to ensure students are exposed to real-world situations. Fourth, co-curricular activities and student leadership should be utilized as a medium for soft skills training outside the classroom.

These recommendations not only support efforts to increase graduate employability but also ensure that polytechnics produce a more holistic hospitality workforce, balanced between academic excellence and soft skills mastery. With consistent implementation, graduates have the potential to become human capital that meets national aspirations and the global needs of the hospitality industry.

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INESS LEVEL OF STUDENTS OF DIPLOMA IN TOURISM MANAGEMENT (DUP), HULU TERENGGANU POLYTECHNIC (PHT) IN MASTERING SOFT SKILLS IN THE HOSPITALITY FIELD: A SURVEY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the level of readiness of Diploma in Tourism Management students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic in mastering soft skills that are increasingly important in the hospitality industry. This quantitative survey study involved 166 respondents, selected randomly, and used a structured questionnaire with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$). The study instrument measured four main dimensions of soft skills: communication, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork. The descriptive analysis showed that students' soft skills were at a high level. The Mann-Whitney U test found a significant difference in soft skills levels between students with soft skills course experience and those without, while the Kruskal-Wallis test showed no significant difference in achievement based on the Average Grade Point Average (GPA). Next, Spearman's correlation analysis showed that the relationship between soft skills and GPA was very weak and not significant. This finding confirms that academic achievement is not the main determinant of soft skills mastery; rather, these skills play a greater role in graduates' marketability. Therefore, the study recommends that polytechnics strengthen soft skills through curriculum integration, additional courses, industrial training, and co-curricular activities, so that graduates are better balanced between academic and industry needs.

Keywords: *Soft Skills, Hospitality, GPA, Employability, Polytechnic Students*

1. Introduction

In an era of globalization and increasingly competitive job markets, graduates need to master both hard (technical) skills and soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and conflict management. The hospitality industry demands quality interactions between employees and customers, where customer satisfaction and the organization's image depend largely on graduates' ability to adapt to multicultural situations, manage conflict, and deliver services professionally.

The importance of soft skills has received attention from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, especially polytechnics, which play a role in producing a semi-professional workforce in various service sectors. Various previous research reports have shown that, even though graduates have sufficient academic knowledge, weaknesses in mastering soft skills remain a major factor in marketability. This underscores the need to assess students' readiness

to master these skills, ensuring they are not only able to enter the job market but also to maintain their performance and careers in the long term.

Previous studies have focused heavily on soft skills development through targeted training or general skills assessments but have not evaluated students' overall readiness to meet the evolving, specific demands of the hospitality industry. This lack of targeted research has created a clear knowledge gap: there is currently no empirical study that comprehensively assesses the specific level of readiness among hospitality polytechnic students, especially from a soft skills perspective aligned with the industry's current requirements. Without addressing this precise gap, attempts to improve curricula and learning activities may be less effective.

In this regard, this study focuses on Diploma in Tourism Management (DUP) students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic (PHT), an educational sector that directly contributes to the workforce in the rapidly growing tourism and hospitality industry. This study aims to assess students' readiness to comprehensively master soft skills, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and provide a basis for suggestions to improve the curriculum and learning activities. By highlighting existing research gaps, this study is expected to contribute to the soft skills literature and to provide practical guidance to higher education institutions on increasing the marketability of their graduates.

2. Literature Review

Graduate employability is a major issue in higher education as it is closely related to the mastery of soft skills. Ghani et al. (2025) showed that hospitality graduates who master a balanced combination of soft and hard skills are more likely to obtain employment, maintain careers, and demonstrate high work performance. Employers emphasize graduates' ability to adapt, work in multicultural teams, and maintain strong customer relationships. Despite sufficient technical proficiency, a lack of soft skills is often a factor in unemployment, emphasizing the critical role of soft skills in facing the challenges of the dynamic world of work.

Given the importance of soft skills to marketability, higher education institutions are now emphasizing the development of these skills through innovative technology-based methods. Dalimunthe and Syahputra (2022) found that the use of interactive multimedia improved the soft skills of tourism polytechnic students. Through real-world simulations, students had the opportunity to make decisions in challenging situations, interact with various parties, and manage tasks in a virtual environment that resembled real industries. Elements such as flexibility, attention to detail, time management, and communication were reported to increase after the intervention. These findings indicate that digital methods not only develop soft skills relevant to the Industrial Revolution 4.0 but also enhance graduates' marketability.

This finding aligns with academic views that emphasize soft skills as the core of graduate employability. Zainal Shah et al. (2022) emphasized that communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork are key skills. Their study found that lecturers believed soft

skills should be taught explicitly through dedicated courses or integrated into existing curricula, rather than relying solely on practical experience to achieve mastery. This finding underscores the role of higher education institutions in formally and systematically developing graduates' soft skills

Although soft skills development is widely accepted in academic circles as an important element for graduate employability, students still face challenges in adapting to the requirements of Industrial Revolution 4.0. Hashim (2024) found that although TVET students demonstrated strong mastery of soft skills, their readiness to face the digital transformation remained moderate ($r = 0.561$, $p = 0.000$). This indicates that mastery of soft skills alone is not enough; a more systematic development approach aligned with industry needs is needed to ensure graduates can adapt to the dynamics of future employment.

Although previous studies have emphasized the importance of soft skills in increasing graduates' marketability and their readiness to face the Industrial Revolution 4.0, there are constraints in ensuring that students are truly prepared to apply these skills. In this regard, this study was conducted to assess polytechnic students' readiness to master soft skills, with the aim of identifying strengths and areas for improvement. The findings are expected to provide initial insights to lecturers and higher education institutions in planning more accurate teaching and learning strategies to develop graduates who are competent and ready to face the challenges of the world of work.

3. Methodology

This study uses a quantitative design with a descriptive survey approach, which is considered most appropriate for assessing students' readiness to master soft skills based on questionnaire data. This approach allows for systematic data collection to produce a comprehensive picture of the level of mastery of soft skills among hospitality students. In addition, this method helps researchers identify patterns and tendencies in skill dimensions that require improvement to increase the efficiency and marketability of graduates in the context of polytechnic education.

The study population included all Diploma in Tourism Management (DUP) students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic (PHT). The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, which indicated a minimum of 132 respondents from a total of 210 students. This study enrolled 166 students, exceeding the minimum required number and thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings. Stratified random sampling was used to account for demographic factors, including gender, age, and Grade Point Average (GPA). The questionnaire was prepared in Google Form and distributed via WhatsApp to facilitate respondent access.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive analysis was performed to obtain mean values, standard deviations, and percentages to assess students' readiness. The mean score was categorized into three levels: low (1.00–2.33), medium (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00), according to the guidelines of Sidek (2005) (Table 1). Normality tests were conducted to assess the data distribution. If the data were not normal, nonparametric inference analyses, such as the Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test, and Spearman's rho test, were used to assess relationships and differences between variables. Selecting this method enabled valid analysis of relationships and differences even when the data did not meet normality requirements, thereby maintaining the accuracy of statistical inference.

Before the actual data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 30 students with a background comparable to that of the target population. The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the reliability and stability of the questionnaire instrument used. The analysis showed that the overall Cronbach's Alpha was 0.93, exceeding the minimum of 0.70 recommended by Nunnally (1978). This finding demonstrates that the developed instrument has high internal consistency, indicating reliability and suitability for use in actual data collection.

This study adhered to ethical research principles, including obtaining informed consent from respondents, maintaining confidentiality, and allowing respondents to withdraw from the study without penalty. Although this method enabled large-scale data collection, this study was limited to one polytechnic and one program, and thus, these limitations may affect the generalizability of the findings to a broader population.

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Table 1: Mean Interpretation

Mean Score	**Mean Interpretation**
3.67–5.00	High
2.34–3.66	Medium
1.00–2.33	Low

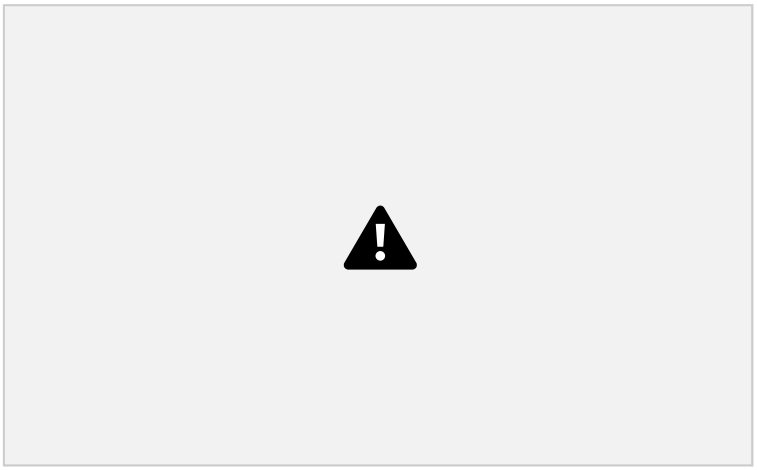
4. Discussion of Analysis and Findings

4.1 Demography of Respondent

4.1.1 Age

The study findings revealed that most respondents were students aged 18–20 years, accounting for 139 individuals (83.7%). Additionally, 15.7% (26 respondents) were between 21 and 23 years old, while only one respondent (0.6%) was aged 24 years or above. This age distribution indicates that most students in the Diploma in Tourism Management program at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic are in their late teens, which aligns with the typical age profile of diploma students. Thus, the study sample is relatively homogeneous in terms of age, potentially providing more consistent data for evaluating the level of readiness to master soft skills.

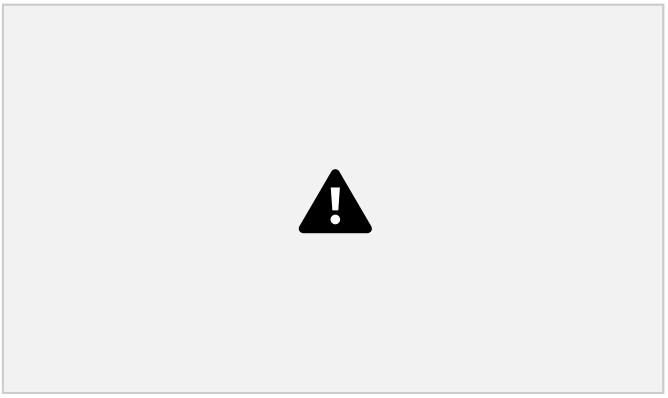
Figure 1: Age



4.1.2 Gender

The study found that most respondents were female, namely 108 people (65.1%). Meanwhile, 34.9% (58 respondents) were male. This distribution clearly shows the dominance of female students in the Diploma in Tourism Management program at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic. This phenomenon aligns with the national trend in hospitality and tourism, which is traditionally more popular with women than with men. A study by Shariffah Bahyah Syed Ahmad (2013) examined the level of soft skills among students in private higher education institutions, comparing by gender, area of residence, and type of school. The study's findings showed gender differences, providing strong justification for linking the dominance of female students to certain soft skills.

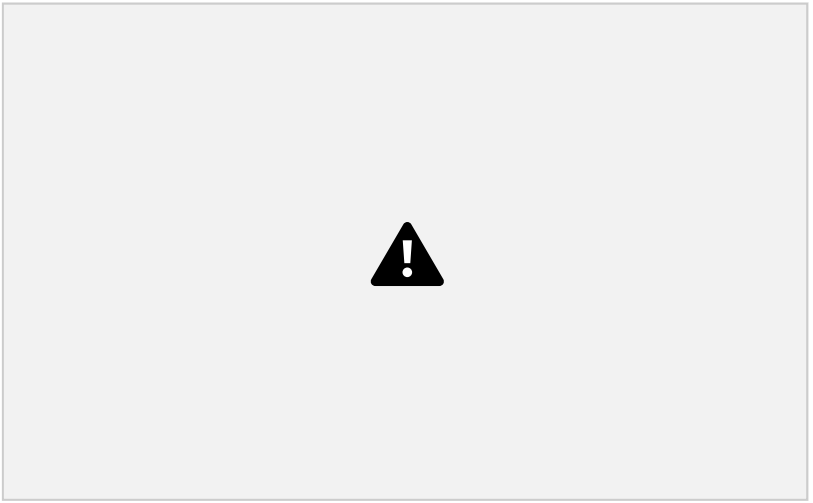
Figure 2: Gender



4.1.3 GPA

Of the 166 respondents, 71 (42.8%) had a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Next, 70 respondents (42.2%) had GPAs between 3.0 and 3.49. Meanwhile, 24 students (14.5%) recorded a GPA between 2.0 and 2.99. Only one respondent (0.6%) had a GPA of 1.99 or lower. Overall, this distribution shows that many students in the Diploma in Tourism Management program at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic have strong academic achievements, with more than 80% of respondents earning a GPA of 3.0 or higher. This situation gives the impression that the study sample consists of high-performing students with the potential to achieve a more consistent level of soft skills mastery.

Figure 3: GPA



4.1.4 Working Experience in Hospitality Industry

Of the total 166 respondents, 62 (37.3%) reported having work experience, while the remaining 104 (62.7%) had never worked in the hospitality sector. This distribution shows that more than half of the students have not yet been directly exposed to industry experience. However, the number of those with work experience is still significant, as almost four out of ten respondents have had the opportunity to be involved in the hospitality sector. This is important because work experience is believed to strengthen students' soft skills, especially in the aspects of communication with customers, time management, and teamwork. In other words, this study sample provides a balanced picture between students who already have a foundation of practical experience and students who still rely entirely on academic learning.

A study conducted in Poland by Bednarska and Olszewski (2016) highlighted that work experience has a significant influence on students' attitudes and perceptions towards a career in the hospitality sector. Students who have been directly involved in the industry tend to have more positive views, higher levels of confidence, and a stronger willingness to pursue a career after graduation. The experience not only helps them understand the realities and challenges of the hospitality industry but also strengthens soft skills such as conflict management, interpersonal communication, and practical problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, the study found that work experience provides additional motivation for students to maintain an interest in the hospitality sector, thus increasing their intention to pursue a long-term career in the industry.

Figure 4: Working Experience in Hospitality Industry

4.1.5 Attended a course or training in soft skills.

Of the 166 respondents, 51 (30.7%) reported having taken a course in the hospitality field, while 115 (69.3%) had not. Only a small proportion of students had additional exposure that could potentially enhance their industry knowledge and soft skills, such as work ethic, discipline, and professional communication skills. Most students relied on formal curricula, highlighting the need to expand access to additional courses or training to strengthen their readiness to face the challenges of the hospitality industry.

A study by Muzafar Mat Yusof and Nur Hidayah Mohiddin (2018) found that almost half of the respondents obtained career opportunities after industrial training, and more than 50% obtained work scopes that were in line with their field of study skills, indicating that additional exposure enhances students' ability to face industry challenges. A study by Azuwin and Azimah (2023) also showed that employer feedback recorded mean scores above 4.0 for all aspects of students' skills, indicating that industrial training plays a role in strengthening their skills in the hospitality sector.

Figure 5: Attended a course or training in soft skills.

4.2 Student Readiness Level in Mastering Soft Skills

Based on the findings of a study on 166 DUP students, their level of readiness in mastering soft skills in the hospitality field is high, with an overall average score of 4.12 out of 5. This shows that students generally feel confident and ready to apply soft skills in academic and career contexts. Among the items, students are most willing to learn new skills (S3, mean = 4.38) and receive criticism and feedback for improvement (S5, mean = 4.25), showing their openness to continuous learning and self-improvement. On the other hand, items related to communication skills (S1, mean = 3.77) and leadership (S11, mean = 3.93) recorded the lowest average, indicating that there are several aspects of soft skills that can still be strengthened through training or practical activities.

This finding is in line with the study by Sharifah Rahifa et al. (2023), which found that Diploma in Hotel Management students who underwent Work-Based Learning (WBL) training at Holiday Villa, Doha, showed significant improvements in interpersonal communication skills, self-confidence, and the ability to adapt to the real work culture. The study emphasized that direct industry experience allows students to practice soft skills in an authentic setting, thus strengthening communication and leadership skills, which are often weaknesses of students in the early stages of their studies. This also supports the findings of Quah and Kok (2024), which showed that the use of technology in internships increases hospitality students' openness to continuous learning and receiving feedback. All these

studies collectively emphasize the need to integrate practice-based approaches and technology in the learning process to strengthen the mastery of soft skills of TVET students.

Standard deviation analysis showed that item S11 (leadership skills) recorded a value of 0.752, while S10 (conflict resolution) recorded a value of 0.706. This difference indicates that students' mastery levels of leadership skills are more varied than conflict resolution, indicating that students' experience, confidence, and level of readiness to exercise leadership vary among them. On the other hand, the slightly lower standard deviation value for conflict resolution indicates a higher level of consistency, that is, students relatively have a more uniform level of mastery in dealing with conflict situations. Overall, these findings indicate that although some aspects of soft skills, such as leadership, show significant variation, other aspects, such as conflict resolution, work ethic, and professional attitude, show a stable level of mastery among students. The findings of Abd Razak's (2019) study support the results of the current study, where the level of students' leadership and conflict resolution skills recorded a high standard deviation. This indicates that, like the current study, there is significant variation in students' mastery levels of certain soft skills, indicating that their experience and confidence vary.

Critically, these findings indicate that the DUP program was successful in building overall soft skills readiness, but there were certain aspects that needed additional attention, particularly communication and leadership skills. The program could be reinforced with practical activities, project-based learning, or simulation exercises to increase students' confidence in areas of weakness. Furthermore, because these data were obtained through self-report, there is the possibility of social bias, in which students rated themselves higher than they were. Overall, although students demonstrated high levels of readiness, more focused reinforcement strategies could help ensure more consistent and comprehensive mastery of soft skills.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Students' Level of Readiness to Master Soft Skills in the Hospitality Field

	Questions	Min	Standard deviation	Level
S1	I feel I have sufficient communication skills for the hospitality field.	3.77	.743	High

S2	I am confident in being able to work effectively in a team in hospitality-related tasks.	4.16	.635	High
S3	I am willing to learn new skills related to soft skills in the hospitality field.	4.38	.568	High
S4	I believe my time management skills are sufficient to meet the requirements of the hospitality field.	4.15	.632	High
S5	I am willing to accept criticism and feedback to improve my soft skills.	4.25	.609	High
S6	I believe that the soft skills I possess will help me succeed in a hospitality career.	4.25	.657	High
S7	I have high motivation to learn the interpersonal skills needed in the hospitality field.	4.07	.683	High
S8	I feel I am well prepared to face challenges in the hospitality field which requires soft skills.	4.08	.691	High
S9	I am actively seeking opportunities to hone my soft skills in hospitality learning and training.	4.19	.634	High
S10	I am able to resolve conflicts between customers or colleagues effectively.	3.93	.706	High
S11	I have leadership skills that allow me to guide colleagues.	3.93	.752	High
S12	I have a high work ethic and am always punctual and responsible.	4.19	.671	High
S13	I am able to adapt to changes and challenges in the hospitality work environment.	4.13	.665	High
S14	I have good listening skills and understand customer needs.	4.13	.598	High

S15	I always demonstrate a professional attitude in appearance, speech and behaviour.	4.22	.599	High
	Overall Score	**4.12**	**.476**	**High**

4.3 Differences in Student Readiness Levels in Mastering Soft Skills Based on Demographics

Normality tests (Table 3) were conducted on the study data using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. The results of the analysis showed that the significant value for both tests was $p = 0.000$ (< 0.05). Therefore, the data in this study did not follow a normal distribution. Therefore, further analysis will be conducted using non-parametric tests that are more appropriate to the nature of the data.

Table 3: Student Soft Skills Normality Test Results

Normality Test	Statistic	df	Sig.
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	.123	166	.000
Shapiro-Wilk	.952	166	.000

4.3.1 Age

Based on Table 4, the level of students' readiness in mastering soft skills shows a minimum score of 2.47 and a maximum of 5.00. This illustrates the existence of variation among students, where a small proportion of students assessed their level of readiness as quite low, while there were also students who assessed themselves as being at the highest level. Although the overall average was high (mean = 4.13, SD = 0.477), this wide range of scores indicates that not all students have the same confidence in mastering soft skills. This situation may be influenced by individual factors such as educational background, work experience, or

exposure to different co-curricular activities, which causes their level of readiness to be not completely uniform.

A study by Mohd Fadel et al. (2022) found that final year students of TVET programs at IPTA had soft skills at a moderately high level in facing IR4.0, with the mean and standard deviation showing variation in several soft skills constructs, such as leadership and communication. This indicates that although TVET students generally showed good preparedness, the level of confidence and mastery of certain skills still differed among them.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Soft Skills Readiness Level

N	Min	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
166	4.13	.477	2.47	5.00

Next, the Kruskal-Wallis analysis was used to see the differences in readiness levels by age. The results of the mean rank analysis (Table 5) showed that students aged 18–20 years recorded a mean rank of 82.72, students aged 21–23 years obtained 87.46, while students aged 24 years and above recorded 89.50. Although there were slight differences, this pattern illustrates that older students tend to have higher soft skills readiness.

A study by Aryani et al. (2021) examined groups of high school students, university students, and workers to examine the impact of soft skills on career engagement. Findings showed that soft skills had a stronger impact on students than on adult workers. This reflects that university students, who are generally older, tend to have more mature soft skills that are beneficial to their psychological and career objectives. This supports the current findings that students in the 21–23 and 24+ age groups showed higher Mean Ranks.

Table 5: Mean Rank of Soft Skills by Age Group

Age Group	N	*Mean Rank*
18–20	139	82.72
21–23	26	87.46
Above 24	1	89.50
Total	166	

However, as shown in Table 6, the Kruskal-Wallis test found that the H value was 0.232 with degrees of freedom (df) = 2 and a significance value (p) = 0.891. A p value exceeding 0.05 indicates that there is no significant difference between age groups in the level of students' readiness in mastering soft skills. This non-significant finding may be due to several factors. First, the age difference among polytechnic students is small (the majority are 18–20 years old) and the number of students in the older age group is exceedingly small, resulting in a reduced statistical power of the test. Second, the mastery of soft skills may be more influenced by learning experiences, practical exposure, and individual motivation than age alone.

A study by Huang et al. (2024) on Chinese school students aged 10 to 15 years found that there were differences in social and emotional skills between different age groups. However, the differences were not solely due to age but rather were influenced by the level of psychological development of the students. This supports the current finding that age differences in higher education do not automatically guarantee significant differences in soft skills mastery. Overall, this analysis concluded that students' readiness to master soft skills was high regardless of age, and age did not make a significant difference in their soft skills achievement.

Table 6: Kruskal–Wallis Soft Skills Test Statistics by Age

Kruskal-Wallis H	Degree of Freedom (df)	Asymptotic Significance (Asymp. Sig.)
0.232	2	0.891

4.3.2 Gender

Based on descriptive analysis (Table 7), the level of soft skills of students showed a high mean value (M = 4.13, SP = 0.48) with a dominance of female students (gender mean = 1.65). The results of the initial comparison in the Ranks Table (Table 11) showed that male students recorded a higher Mean Rank (92.58) compared to female students (78.63), thus giving the impression that descriptively, male students assessed themselves as having a slightly better level of soft skills.

However, the Mann–Whitney inference test (Table 12) showed U = 2605.50, Z = -1.793, and p value = 0.073, above the 0.05 significance level, indicating that the difference between genders was not statistically significant.

This finding emphasizes that the differences seen at the descriptive level do not reflect the true differences in the student population. Reasons for this non-significant finding include:

1. The dominance of female students in the sample (108 out of 166), which may cause the overall average to be more representative of the female group and reduce the power of the statistical test.

2. The similar level of curriculum exposure and learning experiences between male and female students, making gender not a major determinant of soft skills mastery.

3. Individual variations in co-curricular experiences and motivation may play a greater role than gender, thus equating soft skills scores between groups.

This finding is in line with the study by Abdullah et al. (2022), which found that the level of written communication anxiety, as part of soft skills, was not influenced by gender among international postgraduate students in Malaysia. Thus, the current study shows that the factors of curriculum exposure, practical experience, and individual motivation play a greater role in shaping soft skills mastery than gender alone.

Overall, this analysis concludes that although there are descriptive differences between genders, the level of students' soft skills mastery was not significantly influenced by gender, indicating that soft skills readiness is consistent regardless of gender.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of Soft Skills and Student Gender

Descriptive Statistic

	N	Min	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Soft Skills	166	4.1269	.47687	2.47	5.00
Gender	166	1.6506	.47822	1.00	2.00

Table 8: Ranks of Soft Skills by Gender

Ranks

	Gender	N	Min Rank	Total Ranks
Soft Skills	Male	58	92.58	5369.50
	Female	108	78.63	8491.50
	Total	166		

Table 9: Mann–Whitney Test Statistics by Gender for Soft Skills Mastery Levels

Statistics Test

	Soft skills
Mann-Whitney U	2605.500
Wilcoxon W	8491.500
Z	-1.793
Asymptotic Significant Values (2-sided)	.073

[a]Variable Group: Gender

4.3.3 Work Experience in Hospitality industry

Based on descriptive statistics (Table 7), the student's soft skills level was at a high mean average of 4.13 (SP = 0.477), with a minimum score of 2.47 and a maximum of 5.00. This shows that most students have a proficient level of mastery of soft skills, although there is some variation. For the work experience variable, the mean value was 1.63 (SP = 0.485) on a scale of 1 = No experience, 2 = Experienced, indicating that more students have no work experience in hospitality than those with experience.

Table 8 shows that the mean rank of soft skills for students with work experience is higher (92.20, n = 62) than for those with no experience (78.31, n = 104). Descriptively, this indicates that practical experience in the industry can strengthen the mastery of soft skills, especially in the aspects of communication, problem-solving, and teamwork effectiveness. These findings are in line with a study by Halik Bassah & Mohd Noor (2023) which emphasizes that according to industry experts, TVET graduates in Malaysia need to master soft skills such as communication, interpersonal, leadership, and problem-solving, while work experience also plays a role in improving the mastery of these skills.

However, the results of the Mann–Whitney U test (Table 9) showed U = 2684.50, Z = -1.811, p = 0.070, indicating that the difference between the groups of students who had work experience and those who did not was statistically insignificant at the level of 0.05. Some reasons for these insignificant findings include:

1. Group size was unbalanced – inexperienced students (n = 104) outnumbered experienced (n = 62), causing the overall average to be more influenced by large groups and reducing the statistical power of the test.

2. Individual variation in soft skills mastery – inexperienced students may acquire skills through extracurricular activities, courses, or informal experiences, further narrowing the differences with the experienced group.

3. The influence of other factors – such as motivation, curriculum exposure, and existing interpersonal skills can play a more dominant role than mere work experience in determining the level of soft skills.

These findings are in line with Santos (2025), who shows that while practical experience is an advantage, graduates' soft skills are also influenced by other learning factors and the need for the integration of interpersonal skills in the curriculum. In other words, the development of soft skills depends not only on formal work experience, but also on informal learning experiences and relevant curriculum exposure.

Overall, although descriptive trends show that work-experienced students tend to have higher soft skills, this difference is not strong enough to be statistically significant. This emphasizes that the work experience factor is just one of the many factors that make up the mastery of soft skills among polytechnic students.

Table 10: Descriptive Statistics of Soft Skills According to Work Experience in Hospitality

Descriptive Statistics

	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Soft skills	.47687	2.47	5.00
Work	.48520	1.00	2.00

Table 11: Mean Rank Soft Skills According to Work Experience Status in Hospitality

Ranks

Table 12: Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Comparison of Soft Skills by Status of Work Experience in Hospitality

Statistic Test

	Soft Skills
Mann-Whitney U	2684.500
Wilcoxon W	8144.500
Z	-1.811
Asymptotic Significant Values (2-sided)	.070

[a] Variable Group: Work Experience

4.3.4 Have Attended a Soft Skills Course or Training.

Based on descriptive statistics (Table 16), the overall level of students' soft skills is at a high average (Mean = 4.13, SP = 0.48) with a range ranging from 2.47 to 5.00. This shows that most students have a good mastery of soft skills although there are slight variations. Meanwhile, for the soft skills course experience variable, the mean value was 1.69 (SP = 0.46) with a scale of 1 = No course and 2 = Never course. This average value shows that more students have never taken a soft skills course than ever have, yet the percentage of students who have course experience is also quite significant at around three out of ten people.

Table 17 shows the comparison of the average rank of soft skills between students who have taken the soft skills course and those who have not experienced it. A total of 51 students with course experience recorded a higher mean rank (96.37) compared to 115 students without course experience, which was 77.79. This difference shows a tendency that students who attend soft skills courses have a stronger level of soft skills. In terms of total ranks, the group with no course experience (8946.00) was larger due to the larger number of respondents, but the average ranking was clearly in favor of those with experience.

Overall, these findings suggest that soft skills courses serve as an important platform to strengthen students' skills, particularly in the areas of communication, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork. Formal training through courses provides a more systematic and focused learning space, in contrast to soft learning that occurs indirectly in academic or extracurricular activities. In other words, involvement in special soft skills courses can give students a competitive advantage in facing the challenges of the hospitality industry.

The Mann-Whitney U test (Table 18) is used to assess the difference in soft skills levels between students who have taken a soft skills course and those who have not taken a course. The values obtained were U = 2276.000**,** Z = -2.311, with $p = 0.021$ ($p < 0.05$). These results suggest there are statistically significant differences between the two groups. In other words, students who have attended soft skills courses have higher soft skills scores compared to their peers who have never taken part in the course. These findings confirm that soft skills courses have a positive and tangible impact on students' soft skills mastery**,** in line with the role of formal training in building self-confidence, communication skills, teamwork, as well as critical thinking skills more effectively.

The findings of this study are in line with the results of a study by Tan et al. (2021) which also found that the integration of soft skills in the curriculum has a positive impact on the development of interpersonal skills of diploma students. The study showed that the application of skills such as effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving can increase the employability level of graduates as well as strengthen students' self-confidence during industrial training. Hence, these findings further strengthen the argument that the incorporation of soft skills elements in the teaching and learning process plays a significant role in producing students who are ready to face the challenges of the real world of work. In addition, Hussein's (2024) study showed that postgraduate students who have good soft skills are more likely to get jobs in the hospitality sector, while Colaco (2024) found that training in soft skills has a positive impact on customer service performance. Both studies support the findings of current studies that the experience of attending soft skills courses or training not only improves the skills of graduates but also contributes to the employability and overall performance of the organization, in line with the needs and expectations of the hospitality industry.

Table 16: Descriptive Statistics of Soft Skills According to Course Experience

Descriptive Statistics

			Sta nda rd De viat ion	M i r i r u r	M a x i n u n
Sof t Ski lls			.47 687	2 . 4 7	5 . 0 0
Co urs e			.46 274	1 . 0 0	2 . 0 0

Table 17: Mean Soft Skills by Course Experience Status in Hospitality

Ranks

Table 18: Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Comparison of Soft Skills by Course Experience Status in Hospitality

Statistic Test

	Soft Skills
Mann-Whitney U	2276.000
Wilcoxon W	8946.000
Z	-2.311
Asymptotic Significant Values (2-sided)	.021

[a]Variable Group: Course Experience

4.4 The Relationship Between Students' Readiness to Master Soft Skills and Students' GPA Achievement

The Spearman's rho correlation test (Table 19) showed that the relationship between soft skills and a student's GPA was very weak with values of $r = -0.114$, $N = 166$ and $p = 0.144$. Based on the interpretation of Chua (2014), the coefficient value in the range of ±0.01 to ±0.30 is categorized as a very weak relationship while a p-value above 0.05 indicates that the relationship is not statistically significant. This means that a student's level of mastery of soft skills does not have a consistent association with their academic achievement.

Analytically, these results show that both variables develop independently. An increase in GPA does not necessarily go hand in hand with an increase in soft skills and vice versa. While negative correlation values hint that students with high GPAs may have slightly lower levels of soft skills, the strength of the relationship is too small to be considered meaningful in practical terms. This signals that academic achievement is more influenced by cognitive factors such as theoretical mastery and ability to answer exams while soft skills are more honed through extracurricular experiences such as group assignments, extracurricular activities, and industry experience.

These findings are consistent with the literature that asserts that soft skills influence other factors more than academic achievement alone. Casali and Meneghetti (2023), for example, found that the effect of soft skills on academic achievement only occurs indirectly through mediators such as learning motivation and psychological stress. A study by Wan Muda et al. (2020) reported that although graduates demonstrate an elevated level of proficiency in soft skills, academic achievement does not necessarily reflect their actual employability or job performance, emphasizing that soft skills are more dominant in determining career success.

Overall, these results support the idea that soft skills are not the primary determinants of academic achievement measured through GPA but rather serve as a complement that reinforces students' capabilities in real-world contexts. As the relationship with GPA has been

shown to be weak and insignificant, future studies are encouraged to assess the role of soft skills against other indicators such as professional communication ability, teamwork, leadership, and performance during industrial training. This approach will provide a more holistic picture of the value of soft skills in forming graduates who are balanced in terms of academics and employability.

Table 19: Spearman Correlation between GPA and Soft Skills

Correlation

			GPA	Soft Skills
Spearman's rho	GPA	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.114
		Sig. (2-hala)	.	.144
		N	166	166
	Soft Skills	Correlation Coefficient	-.114	1.000
		Sig. (2-way)	.144	.
		N	166	166

According to Chua (2014), the correlation strength is classified as follows:

Table 20: Classification of Correlation Forces (Chua, 2014)

Correlation Coefficient (r)	Strength / Interpretation

±0.91 to ±1.00	Very Strong / Very High
±0.71 to ±0.90	Strong/High
±0.51 to ±0.70	Moderate
±0.31 to ±0.50	Weak/Low
±0.01 to ±0.30	Very Weak/Very Low
0	No Correlation

5. Conclusion and Future Research

Overall, this study finds that DUP students at Hulu Terengganu Polytechnic prove a prominent level of readiness in soft skills mastery, particularly in the aspects of communication, teamwork, and leadership. However, an analysis of the relationship between soft skills and GPA shows a very weak and non-significant correlation. This suggests that academic achievement should not be used as the sole measure of a student's soft skill capabilities. Instead, soft skills have a greater impact on graduate employability and their performance within the actual hospitality industry.

To enhance the effectiveness of soft skills development, several recommendations are proposed. First, the integration of soft skill elements within the curriculum should be strengthened through experiential learning approaches such as industry simulations, case studies, and community projects. Second, polytechnics should provide more supplementary courses, workshops, and structured modules that emphasize soft skills in line with industry requirements. Third, strategic collaboration with industry partners should be expanded through industrial training programs, short-term internships, and mentorship programs to ensure students are exposed to real-world situations. Fourth, co-curricular activities and student leadership should be utilized as a medium for soft skills training outside the classroom.

These recommendations not only support efforts to increase graduate employability but also ensure that polytechnics produce a more holistic hospitality workforce, balanced between academic excellence and soft skills mastery. With consistent implementation, graduates have the potential to become human capital that meets national aspirations and the global needs of the hospitality industry.

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