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Bridging The Skills Gap: Enhancing Tour Guide Competencies In Sohra And Mawphlang, Meghalaya

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Abstract

Tourism in Meghalaya, particularly in Sohra (Cherrapunji) and Mawphlang, has experienced robust growth, fueled by the region's distinctive landscapes and rich cultural assets. However, the overall success and reputation of these destinations hinge significantly on the competencies of their tour guides. This study investigates the current skill levels and service quality of tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang, with the objective of identifying prevailing skill gaps and proposing actionable strategies for enhancement. Employing a descriptive research design, the study gathered data using a structured questionnaire administered to a conveniently selected sample of active guides from both locations. The analysis reveals that while guides possess strong local knowledge and demonstrate a notable commitment to ethical and sustainable tourism, considerable deficiencies exist in communication, interpretive storytelling, and technology utilization. With less than half of the respondents having received formal training or certification, gaps in professional development and awareness of regulatory standards are evident. Also, inconsistent customer care, limited career development prospects, and inadequate support from local authorities were highlighted as areas needing attention. The results highlight the need for specialised training programs that emphasise storytelling and communication, digital tool integration, and organised certification processes. Recommendations include developing experiential training programs, instituting formal quality assurance processes, enhancing collaboration among stakeholders, and embedding sustainability in all aspects of guide training and practice. By systematically bridging these skill gaps, the local tourism sector can improve visitor experiences, support sustainable community growth, and elevate Meghalaya's standing as a premier ecotourism destination.

Keywords: tour guide, skills, training, sustainability, Sohra, Mawphlang

1. Introduction

The tourism sector in Meghalaya, particularly in Sohra (Cherrapunji) and Mawphlang, has grown significantly due to its unique landscapes and rich cultural heritage, attracting visitors from across India and abroad. Despite this growth, the quality of tour guiding services remains a critical factor influencing tourist satisfaction and the overall image of these destinations. This study aims to explore the current skill levels and service quality of tour guides in these areas, drawing on existing literature and empirical research to identify gaps and propose improvements.

Existing research highlights the pivotal role of tour guides as cultural interpreters whose communication, storytelling, customer care, and ethical conduct directly affect tourists' experiences and perceptions. Studies from regions such as South Ethiopia, South Africa, and Jordan reveal common challenges including inadequate training, lack of certification, and inconsistent professional standards. These findings emphasize the importance of formal training, continuous education, and regulatory mechanisms like licensing and quality assurance frameworks to ensure consistent, high-quality guiding services.

Using a descriptive research design and a convenient sampling method, this study surveyed active tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang to assess their competencies and motivations. The analysis revealed that while guides generally possess strong local knowledge, many lack advanced communication and customer service skills. A significant number have not received formal training or certification, contributing to inconsistent service quality. Tourists tend to rate guides higher when they demonstrate professionalism and engaging communication, but the absence of structured training and monitoring remains a concern. Guides are motivated by personal growth and networking opportunities but face frustration due to limited career advancement and recognition.

The findings reveal the urgent need for structured training programs, standardized certification, and a robust quality assurance framework that includes periodic assessments and recognition of excellence. Implementing these measures will not only enhance the professionalism and effectiveness of tour guides but also improve tourist satisfaction and support the sustainable development of Meghalaya's tourism industry.

2. Literature Review

Tour guides play a pivotal role in shaping tourists' experiences, acting as cultural ambassadors and interpreters of local heritage. Studies have consistently shown that tour guide skills and behaviours including communication, storytelling, customer care and ethical conduct directly impact tourist satisfaction and the perceived value of a destination (Lin, Lin, & Chen, 2017; Syakier & Hanafiah, 2021). Research in South Ethiopia and South Africa highlights that inadequate training, lack of certification, and the involvement of non-professionals are common challenges that undermine service quality (Nicolaidis, 2008).

2.1 Current Status of Tour Guiding in Meghalaya

The tour guiding sector in Sohra (Cherrapunjee) and Mawphlang has witnessed a pivotal transformation in 2024–2025, spurred by a series of alarming safety incidents, most notably the high-profile murder of a tourist in Sohra. This tragedy brought the vulnerabilities of unaccompanied travel into sharp focus and prompted Meghalaya's tourism authorities to institute robust reforms to protect both visitors and the credibility of the state's ecotourism brand (Kurbah, 2025).

As a direct response, the government has made it mandatory for tourists to hire registered, licensed guides when undertaking treks and outdoor activities in the East Khasi Hills district, encompassing key destinations like Sohra and Mawphlang. This regulation is enforced to mitigate risks such as accidents, tourists getting lost in dense forests and cave systems, or becoming victims of crime especially in these geographically challenging and remote regions where technology such as GPS may be unreliable (Kurbah, 2025; Blah, 2025). The new rules are welcomed by both tourism operators and local communities. Leaders of the Meghalaya Rural Tourism Forum (MRTF) and the Tour Operators Association of Meghalaya (TOAM) have emphasised that this action not only improves safety but also fortifies the links between tourists and the host community and provides essential employment opportunities for young people in the area (Blah, 2025; Kharkongor, 2025).

The Tour Guides Association of Meghalaya (TGAM) has emerged as an increasingly influential stakeholder, actively advocating for professionalization and local control of tourism assets. TGAM is involved in training, site-specific preservation efforts, and cultural stewardship, as seen in their disciplinary stance over heritage sites such as the Mawjymbuin cave (Lyngdoh, 2024). Their collaboration extends to the district administration and national tourism bodies to ensure standards and ethical practices are maintained, especially in high-footfall yet sensitive destinations.

Parallel to regulatory shifts, recent years have also seen a marked increase in structured training initiatives for guides. The Directorate of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya, in partnership with institutes like the National Institute of Mountaineering and Adventure Sports (NIMAS), has launched the Adventure Skill Development Training 2025. This initiative seeks to build a pool of skilled local guides through comprehensive instruction in adventure sports, emergency response, and best practices in visitor management (Directorate of Tourism, 2025). Admission to these programs is competitive and stratified by experience—ensuring entry-level, intermediate, and advanced guides receive training tailored to their roles and responsibilities. While specific references to the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITTM) Shillong's batches are not immediately available in the present sources, sectoral patterns and ongoing programs indicate a steady influx of newly qualified guides in the region.

Collectively, these developments reflect a sector in transition—prioritizing safety, sustainability, and community engagement, and intent on positioning Meghalaya, Sohra, and Mawphlang as leading examples of responsible adventure tourism in India (Duia, 2024).

2.2 Key skills in tour guiding

- **Communication Skills**

Effective communication is central to the role of tour guides, enabling them to educate, entertain, and enhance tourist awareness about local attractions (Tuntipisitkul & Chimpimon, 2018; Saentong, 2002). Communication competence encompasses both verbal and non-verbal skills, including clarity, appropriate grammar, tone, body language, listening ability, and approachability (Kaewkasi & Hetthong, 2019; Tuntipisitkul & Chimpimon, 2018; Saentong, 2002). It is not only about delivering factual information but also about creating emotional and cultural connections with tourists through interactive dialogue and interpretive storytelling (Ap & Wong, 2001; Yu, Wang, & Seo, 2021). Several studies have highlighted that communication gaps can adversely affect the tourist experience, leading to misunderstandings, disengagement, and dissatisfaction, thereby making targeted communication training an essential component of tour guide preparation (Saentong, 2002; Black & Ham, 2005).

Moreover, tour guides must be able to adapt their communication style to suit different audiences, including domestic and international tourists, children, elderly visitors, and people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Cohen, 1985; Weiler & Black, 2015). Cross-cultural communication skills are increasingly seen as vital in a globalized tourism environment, where misinterpretation or inappropriate remarks may cause offense or reduce the quality of the visitor experience (Salazar, 2006). Communication is also a key factor in managing group dynamics and handling unexpected situations or emergencies during a tour. Guides with effective communication skills can ease tensions, provide reassurance, and ensure that instructions are understood clearly, which enhances both safety and satisfaction.

- **Training and Certification**

Formal training and certification are critical components in the professionalization of tour guiding and in ensuring consistent service quality across destinations. Tour guide certification programs typically include comprehensive modules on the cultural, historical, environmental, and logistical aspects of tour guiding, along with essential competencies such as effective communication, interpretive storytelling, customer service, ethics, safety, and emergency preparedness (Black & Ham, 2005; Weiler & Black, 2015). These structured programs aim not only to equip guides with factual knowledge but also to foster interpretive skills and emotional intelligence, enabling them to deliver immersive and meaningful tourist experiences.

Early works, such as that of Tilden (1957), laid the theoretical foundation for the importance of interpretation in tourism, emphasizing that guides are not just conveyors of information but facilitators of understanding. Later studies confirm that structured training significantly enhances tour guides' abilities to connect visitors with local culture and heritage (Ap & Wong, 2001; Cohen, 1985). Professionally trained guides are more capable of adapting to the diverse needs of tourists, managing group dynamics, and responding effectively to on-the-ground challenges (Huang et al., 2010).

Furthermore, training programs are increasingly being adapted to local contexts to reflect cultural nuances, language needs, and specific environmental conditions. For instance, in community-based or rural tourism settings, localized guide training plays a vital role in empowering local residents to act as cultural interpreters and stewards of heritage (Mitchell & Reid, 2001). Such tailored approaches help democratize access to the guiding profession while reinforcing authenticity and cultural sensitivity in tourism experiences.

In sum, formal training and certification are foundational for building a competent, ethical, and adaptable guiding workforce.

- **Motivational Factors**

Motivation plays a crucial role in shaping the performance, job satisfaction, and long-term retention of tour guides. Motivational drivers for tour guides often stem from intrinsic rewards such as personal growth, cultural engagement, passion for storytelling, and a desire to contribute positively to visitors' experiences (Saentong, 2002; Weiler & Black, 2015). Many guides also report deriving satisfaction from social interaction, cultural exchange, and the dynamic, outdoor nature of the profession, which contrasts with routine office-based work (Ap & Wong, 2001). The opportunity to showcase one's heritage and local identity can be a source of pride and fulfilment, particularly for guides working in indigenous or community-based tourism settings (Salazar, 2006; Mitchell & Reid, 2001).

However, extrinsic motivators such as financial compensation, job stability, professional recognition, and opportunities for career advancement are equally important. In many destinations, especially in developing countries, tour guiding remains an informal or seasonal job with low pay and limited social protection (Black & Ham, 2005). These conditions can reduce motivation and job commitment, particularly among younger or more educated guides who view the profession as a stepping stone rather than a long-term career (Huang et al., 2010). The absence of structured pathways for career progression, lack of institutional support, and inadequate mechanisms for recognizing exceptional service can further diminish enthusiasm and professional engagement (Saentong, 2002; Zhang & Chow, 2004).

Research highlights the importance of creating enabling environments that nurture motivation through supportive policies, certification incentives, and reward schemes (WFTGA, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). Professional development programs that provide clear benchmarks for growth, mentorship, and opportunities to upgrade skills help maintain engagement and enhance guide satisfaction (Weiler & Walker, 2014). Furthermore, involving guides in decision-making processes, training development, and local tourism planning can enhance their sense of ownership and recognition within the tourism value chain (Moscardo & Ballantyne, 2008).

- **Quality Assurance and Development**

Quality assurance and professional development are vital pillars in sustaining the standards and credibility of the tour guiding profession. As frontline representatives of the tourism industry, tour guides significantly influence visitor perceptions of service quality, destination image, and overall tourist satisfaction (Ap & Wong, 2001; Zhang & Chow, 2004). Quality assurance in tour guiding typically involves structured mechanisms such as licensing, certification, performance evaluations, refresher training, and incentive-based recognition systems (Black & Ham, 2005; Lin & Chen, 2017). These frameworks not only help maintain consistency and professionalism in service delivery but also provide tourists with confidence in the credibility of their guides.

Licensing and certification systems serve as fundamental tools for formalizing the profession and setting baseline standards for entry. In many countries, regulatory bodies or tourism authorities mandate minimum training, language competence, and code-of-conduct adherence as prerequisites for licensure (WFTGA, 2020).

Professional development is an equally critical dimension of quality assurance. Given the fast-evolving nature of tourism, guides must continuously update their knowledge of local history, attractions, safety procedures, sustainable practices, and new tourist expectations (Yu, Wang, & Seo, 2021).

- **Interpretive Storytelling**

Storytelling can serve as a tool for cultural preservation. Local stories, myths, and oral histories shared during guided tours contribute to the safeguarding of intangible heritage and help transmit traditional knowledge across generations (Salazar, 2006; Mitchell & Reid, 2001). This is especially significant in indigenous and rural tourism settings, where community-based guides use narrative interpretation to assert identity and invite respectful engagement from visitors.

Interpretive storytelling is an essential skill that elevates the role of the tour guide from a transmitter of facts to a facilitator of meaningful cultural exchange. Storytelling enhances both the educational and emotional dimensions of the tourist experience, while supporting sustainable and inclusive tourism development. Interpretive storytelling allows guides to meaningfully connect tourists with local heritage, culture, landscapes, and values. Rather than merely transferring factual information, storytelling offers a narrative-driven approach that engages emotions, stimulates imagination, and deepens visitors' understanding and appreciation of the destination (Tilden, 1957; Moscardo, 1996). Interpretation transforms a site from a static space into a lived experience, thereby enriching the overall impact of the tour and promoting responsible, empathetic tourism behaviour.

Tilden's (1957) foundational principles of heritage interpretation emphasize that effective interpretation is not instruction but revelation based on information. Storytelling, when delivered interpretively, helps contextualize complex histories, cultural practices, and natural phenomena in ways that are relatable and memorable for tourists.

Research shows that guides trained in storytelling techniques are more likely to deliver satisfying and meaningful experiences, contributing to higher levels of tourist satisfaction and stronger destination loyalty (Ap & Wong, 2001; Huang, Hsu, & Chan, 2010). In particular, storytelling is highly effective in heritage tourism and ecotourism contexts, where the aim is not only to inform but also to foster environmental stewardship and cultural appreciation (Ham, 2002)

- **Local Knowledge**

Local knowledge encompasses a deep understanding of the destination's history, culture, geography, ecology, cuisine, traditions, and current affairs. Tourists often rely on guides not just for logistical coordination, but also to access meaningful narratives that connect them to the social and cultural fabric of the place they are visiting (Kaewkasi & Hetthong, 2019; Salazar, 2006). In the context of sustainable tourism, local knowledge also plays a vital role in promoting responsible visitor behaviour and fostering respect for local customs and natural resources (Weiler & Black, 2015). Guides act as mediators between visitors and host communities, and their ability to interpret local realities can influence tourist attitudes toward conservation and cultural sensitivity (Salazar, 2012; Weiler & Black, 2015). Comprehensive local knowledge is a core competency for tour guides, enabling them to deliver accurate, insightful, and authentic information about destinations (Kaewkasi & Hetthong, 2019). The ability of guides to share up-to-date and contextually relevant information enhances tourists' understanding and appreciation of a place, contributing to more meaningful travel experiences (Cohen, 1985; Salazar, 2012). In rural and indigenous tourism settings, guides who are also local residents often serve as cultural intermediaries, helping tourists navigate unfamiliar social customs while protecting community interests (Mitchell & Reid, 2001; Salazar, 2006). Research highlights that tourists increasingly seek immersive and educational experiences, and guides with deep local knowledge are better positioned to meet these expectations (Black & Weiler, 2005; Salazar, 2012). Local knowledge is not static; it must be continually updated to reflect changes in the environment, infrastructure, and cultural practices (Ap & Wong, 2001).

- **Ethical behavior**

Ethical behaviour is fundamental to the professionalism and credibility of tour guides, directly influencing tourist trust, satisfaction, and the overall reputation of a destination (Çokal, 2019). Guides are expected to adhere to a set of established ethical principles, which typically include honesty, impartiality, respect for cultural differences, and a commitment to providing accurate information (Yarcan, 2007; Ap & Wong, 2001).

Ethics training is often integrated into guide certification programs to ensure that guides are equipped to navigate complex situations, resolve conflicts sensitively, and avoid behaviours such as discrimination, misinformation, or solicitation of gratuities (Statkuvienė, 2024; Department of Tourism, 1987).

- **Perceived Tourist Satisfaction**

Tourist satisfaction is a central indicator of service quality in the tourism industry and is closely tied to a tour guide's ability to create engaging, informative, and emotionally resonant experiences. Numerous studies have shown that professional behaviour, effective communication, interpretive storytelling, and empathy displayed by tour guides significantly influence tourists' overall perception of their visit (Lin, Lin, & Chen, 2017; Huang, Hsu, & Chan, 2010). As tour guides often serve as the primary human interface between the destination and the tourist, their performance directly impacts satisfaction levels, word-of-mouth referrals, and even destination loyalty (Zhang & Chow, 2004; Ap & Wong, 2001).

Professionalism, in particular, is viewed as a crucial determinant of satisfaction. It includes not only knowledge and presentation skills but also punctuality, responsibility, and ethical conduct. Tourists tend to appreciate guides who are organized, responsive to their needs, and capable of managing diverse groups with respect and courtesy (Weiler & Black, 2015; Yu, Wang, & Seo, 2021). Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, further enhances this satisfaction by ensuring clear understanding, engagement, and cultural sensitivity especially in cross-cultural settings (Tuntipisitkul & Chimpimon, 2018).

Moreover, the emotional and psychological dimensions of guiding have increasingly been recognized as significant contributors to satisfaction. Tourists who feel a connection to the stories being told, who perceive authenticity in delivery, and who receive personalized attention are more likely to rate their experience positively (Ballantyne & Packer, 2011; Moscardo, 1996). These affective responses to a guided experience often result in stronger destination impressions and increase the likelihood of return visits or recommendations.

- **Safety and Emergency Preparedness**

Safety and emergency preparedness are essential competencies for tour guides, as they hold a duty of care towards tourists throughout the duration of a tour. The ability to respond appropriately to accidents, health emergencies, natural hazards, and security threats not only protects tourists but also upholds the reputation of the destination and the tour operator (Ap & Wong, 2001; Black & Ham, 2005). Given that unexpected incidents can arise in urban, rural, adventure, or nature-based tourism contexts, tour guides must be equipped with practical skills in risk assessment, crisis communication, and first aid.

Tourist safety has emerged as a critical aspect of sustainable tourism development, particularly in destinations where medical infrastructure is limited or environmental risks are high. Research shows that tourists perceive guides as key protectors in unfamiliar environments, relying on their competence and calm demeanour during emergencies (Wong & Wang, 2009). As such, safety training—including fire evacuation procedures, crowd control, conflict resolution, and incident reporting—is increasingly being integrated into tour guide certification and licensing programs (Weiler & Black, 2015; WFTGA, 2020).

In adventure tourism contexts, where the physical risk is inherently higher, safety preparedness becomes even more crucial. Activities such as trekking, caving, ziplining, or river rafting require guides to possess

specialized training in outdoor survival, equipment use, and environmental hazard management (Buckley, 2010). Moreover, legal frameworks in many countries mandate that adventure and ecotourism guides complete safety and first-aid certification as a prerequisite for guiding (UNWTO, 2014)

Safety and crisis management training can enhance the guide's confidence and decision-making capacity, thereby reducing panic and enabling swift action.

- **Sustainable Tourism Practices**

Tour guides play a vital role in fostering sustainable tourism by acting as intermediaries between destinations and tourists, shaping visitor behaviour and promoting environmental, cultural, and economic responsibility. Tour guides are critical agents of change in advancing sustainable tourism. When properly trained and supported, they can influence tourist behaviour, protect heritage, and foster community engagement. Through their interpretive and educational functions, guides are in a unique position to advocate for sustainability principles such as conservation, local empowerment, cultural respect, and minimal impact travel (Weiler & Black, 2015; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

Numerous studies highlight that guides who incorporate sustainability messages into their tours can influence tourist awareness and behaviour positively. For example, Moscardo (1999) found that interpretation by guides significantly contributes to tourist mindfulness, an awareness of the impacts of their actions on the environment and host communities. When tour guides explain ecological processes, cultural sensitivities, or responsible tourism codes of conduct, tourists are more likely to engage in sustainable practices such as waste reduction, respectful photography, or supporting local businesses (Ballantyne & Packer, 2011).

- **Peer Collaboration**

Peer collaboration among tour guides is an often under-emphasized but highly valuable aspect of professional development and service quality enhancement. In the dynamic and interpersonal field of tour guiding, learning from peers fosters continuous improvement, knowledge exchange, emotional support, and the sharing of best practices. Collaborative environments help guides adapt to industry changes and tourist expectations, especially in the absence of formal learning structures in many regions (Ap & Wong, 2001; Weiler & Black, 2015).

Peer collaboration can take various forms, including informal knowledge sharing during tours, formal workshops, peer review sessions, mentorship programs, and participation in professional associations. These interactions provide opportunities for guides to discuss challenges, co-develop creative solutions, and gain exposure to different guiding techniques, storytelling methods, or problem-solving strategies (Ham, 2002). For novice guides, learning from experienced colleagues helps build confidence and accelerates their development through tacit knowledge transfer and real-world insights (Moscardo & Ballantyne, 2008).

Collaborative environments also help prevent professional burnout and isolation, especially for freelance or seasonal guides. Emotional support from peers can buffer the stress of dealing with demanding tourists, long work hours, or culturally sensitive issues (Wong & Wang, 2009). Furthermore, in multi-guide or multi-language tours, collaboration is essential for coordination, division of responsibilities, and delivering a cohesive experience to visitors (Weiler & Walker, 2014).

Tour operators who encourage teamwork and open communication among guides often report higher staff morale and better customer satisfaction (Black & Ham, 2005). In destinations where tourism is managed through cooperative or community-based models, peer collaboration is especially critical for ensuring equitable benefits and maintaining consistent standards.

- **Awareness of Certification Requirements**

Awareness of certification requirements among tour guides is a fundamental aspect of ensuring professionalism, standardization, and quality service delivery in the tourism sector. Certification acts as a formal recognition of a guide's knowledge, skills, and ethical conduct. However, its effectiveness is contingent upon how well the guides understand its significance, accessibility, and implications for their careers (Black & Ham, 2005; Weiler & Black, 2015).

In many countries, especially where tourism is rapidly growing or decentralised, a lack of information about certification procedures and benefits poses a significant barrier to professional development (Ap & Wong, 2001). Tour guides, particularly those in rural or informal sectors, may remain unaware of the pathways to certification or perceive them as bureaucratic and unattainable. This gap can lead to inconsistent service standards and undermine the quality assurance mechanisms envisioned by regulatory bodies (WFTGA, 2020).

Government tourism departments, training institutions, and professional associations play a vital role in increasing this awareness. Outreach efforts such as workshops, orientation sessions, online platforms, and guide manuals can demystify certification processes and encourage participation from aspiring or unlicensed guides (Wong & Wang, 2009). Furthermore, successful awareness campaigns often highlight the tangible benefits of certification—such as better employment opportunities, higher earnings, access to international markets, and enhanced professional reputation (Black & Ham, 2005).

- **Job Security**

Job security is a critical factor influencing the motivation, performance, and well-being of tour guides, particularly in a sector that is often characterized by seasonality, informality, and economic vulnerability. The extent to which tour guides feel secure in their roles impacts not only their personal livelihoods but also the consistency and quality of tourism services offered to visitors (Ap & Wong, 2001; Wong & Wang, 2009).

In many tourism economies, tour guiding is a freelance or contract-based occupation, lacking formal employment benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, or long-term contracts. This precariousness is further exacerbated by external factors such as political instability, environmental disasters, and

economic downturns including global events like the COVID-19 pandemic—that disproportionately impact the tourism workforce (Baum et al., 2020). Consequently, many guides experience uncertainty regarding income stability and long-term career prospects.

However, research shows that job security can be significantly improved through the formalization and professionalization of the tour guiding industry. Certification and licensing schemes, when recognized by government or tourism authorities, serve as mechanisms for validating a guide's qualifications and enhancing their employability (Black & Ham, 2005; Weiler & Black, 2015). Guides with certified credentials are more likely to receive consistent bookings from tour operators and are better positioned to compete in both domestic and international markets.

- **Recognition and Rewards**

Recognition and reward systems are essential tools for motivating tour guides, reinforcing service quality, and promoting industry professionalism. When integrated into training, performance management, and organizational culture, these mechanisms foster a more committed, respected, and effective guiding workforce.

Recognition and rewards are powerful motivators that directly influence the job satisfaction, retention, and performance of tour guides. In a service-driven industry like tourism, where emotional labour and interpersonal engagement are central, acknowledgment of a guide's efforts plays a critical role in reinforcing positive behaviour and enhancing professional identity (Wong & Wang, 2009; Ap & Wong, 2001). Recognitions help boost morale, foster a sense of belonging, and create a culture of appreciation. When guides feel that their contributions are valued, they are more likely to be committed to quality service and continuous learning (Yu, Wang, & Seo, 2021).

Research has shown that performance-based reward systems, including bonuses, incentives, or public awards, can lead to measurable improvements in guide behaviour, including punctuality, communication quality, and attention to safety and ethics (Black & Ham, 2005; Weiler & Black, 2015). These systems not only motivate individual guides but also elevate the overall standards within a destination. For example, national or regional tourism boards in countries like Thailand, New Zealand, and South Korea have implemented “Best Tour Guide” recognition programs, which have contributed to higher professionalism and tourist satisfaction (UNWTO, 2013).

- **Interest in Further Training**

Continuous learning and professional development are increasingly recognized as critical components of excellence in tour guiding. Tour guides today are expected not only to possess factual knowledge but also to excel in communication, storytelling, customer care, crisis management, and cultural sensitivity. The rapid transformation of tourism trends—such as the rise in digital tourism, demand for sustainable practices, and emphasis on experiential travel—requires guides to continuously update their skills to remain relevant and competitive (Weiler & Black, 2015; UNWTO, 2014). This creates a strong impetus

for further education, particularly among those who are passionate about delivering meaningful tourist experiences.

Studies show that guides actively seek opportunities to improve their performance through workshops, short-term courses, certifications, online learning modules, and peer mentoring. These programs often focus on enhancing interpretation skills, destination knowledge, foreign language proficiency, safety and first aid, and the use of digital tools (Black & Ham, 2005; Moscardo & Ballantyne, 2008). For example, Yu et al. (2021) found that design-thinking-based training can significantly improve storytelling and communication capabilities, which are crucial for tourist engagement.

Guides who view learning as a path to upward mobility or specialization—such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, or cultural heritage interpretation—are more likely to invest time and resources in professional development (Wong & Wang, 2009; Ap & Wong, 2001). Moreover, when tour operators and government agencies offer accessible and subsidized training programs, participation rates are higher, particularly in developing tourism economies (UNWTO, 2013).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. To assess the current competency levels of tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang.
2. To identify and analyze key skill gaps by comparing the present and required proficiency of tour guiding skills.
3. To recommend targeted interventions and training programs for effectively bridging the identified skill gaps

A descriptive research design was adopted to assess the current skill levels and service quality among tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang, and to identify areas for improvement. The study utilized a structured questionnaire, adapted from validated instruments used in similar tourism research. A simple convenient sampling technique was employed to ensure that tour guides operating in Sohra and Mawphlang had a chance of being selected, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the findings. The sampling unit comprised active tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang, as identified through local tourism offices and guide associations. The final sample size was determined based on practical considerations targeting a minimum of 50 respondents to ensure reliability. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses on distributed questionnaires containing 20 questions related to tour guide skill sets requirements.

4. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses to the 20 Likert-scale items. For each question, the mean and frequency distribution of responses were calculated. Qualitative comments from open-ended questions and field observations were also considered to triangulate the quantitative findings.

Table 1:
Key Quantitative Results

Skill/Area	Mean Score	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Disagree/Strongly Disagree
Communication Skills	3.6	64%	14%
Training and Certification	2.9	38%	42%
Customer Care and Professionalism	3.8	72%	10%
Motivational Factors	4.1	80%	6%
Quality Assurance and Development	4.3	86%	2%
Interpretive Storytelling	3.2	48%	24%
Local Knowledge	4.4	90%	2%
Ethical Behavior	4.2	84%	4%
Perceived Tourist Satisfaction	3.5	60%	16%
Career Advancement Opportunities	2.7	30%	46%
Safety and Emergency Preparedness	3.4	58%	18%
Use of Technology	3.0	40%	34%
Feedback and Improvement	3.7	68%	12%
Support from Local Authorities	2.8	36%	44%
Sustainable Tourism Practices	4.0	78%	6%
Peer Collaboration	3.6	62%	14%
Awareness of Certification Requirements	3.1	46%	28%
Job Security	2.9	38%	38%
Recognition and Rewards	2.6	28%	48%
Interest in Further Training	4.5	92%	2%

Sample: 50 Tour Guides in Sohra and Mawphlang

Interpretation of each quantitative result

1. Communication Skills (Mean: 3.6, 64% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Most guides feel reasonably confident in their communication abilities, but with over a third not strongly agreeing, there is room for improvement in effectively conveying information to diverse tourists.

2. Training and Certification (Mean: 2.9, 38% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Less than half of the guides have received formal training or certification, indicating a significant gap in professional preparation and standardization in the workforce.

3. Customer Care and Professionalism (Mean: 3.8, 72% Agree/Strongly Agree)

A majority believe they provide good customer service and maintain professionalism, which is a positive sign. However, about a quarter are neutral or disagree, suggesting inconsistency in service delivery.

4. Motivational Factors (Mean: 4.1, 80% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Most guides are personally motivated and find satisfaction in their work, which is likely to have a positive impact on their engagement and willingness to improve.

5. Quality Assurance and Development (Mean: 4.3, 86% Agree/Strongly Agree)

There is strong consensus on the need for regular assessment and recognition programs, reflecting a desire for professional standards and external validation.

6. Interpretive Storytelling (Mean: 3.2, 48% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Less than half feel confident in their storytelling skills, pointing to a key area for development to make tours more engaging and memorable.

7. Local Knowledge (Mean: 4.4, 90% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Guides overwhelmingly possess strong local knowledge, which is a major asset for authentic and informative tours.

8. Ethical Behavior (Mean: 4.2, 84% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Most guides adhere to ethical guidelines and responsible tourism, which supports sustainable tourism and positive destination image.

9. Perceived Tourist Satisfaction (Mean: 3.5, 60% Agree/Strongly Agree)

While a majority perceive tourists as satisfied, the moderate mean suggests there is still a significant portion of tourists who may not be fully satisfied, indicating room for improvement.

10. Career Advancement Opportunities (Mean: 2.7, 30% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Few guides see clear career paths or advancement opportunities, which may affect long-term retention and motivation in the sector.

11. Safety and Emergency Preparedness (Mean: 3.4, 58% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Slightly over half feel prepared for emergencies, but a substantial minority do not, highlighting a crucial area for training and improvement.

12. Use of Technology (Mean: 3.0, 40% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Adoption of technology is relatively low, suggesting guides may not be leveraging digital tools to enhance service quality or efficiency.

13. Feedback and Improvement (Mean: 3.7, 68% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Most guides seek and use feedback for improvement, which is a positive indicator for adaptive and responsive service.

14. Support from Local Authorities (Mean: 2.8, 36% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Few guides feel adequately supported by local authorities, indicating a need for better institutional backing and resources.

15. Sustainable Tourism Practices (Mean: 4.0, 78% Agree/Strongly Agree)

A large majority actively promote sustainability, which is essential for the preservation of local resources and long-term tourism success.

16. Peer Collaboration (Mean: 3.6, 62% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Collaboration among guides is moderate, with most sharing knowledge, but there is potential to strengthen peer networks further.

17. Awareness of Certification Requirements (Mean: 3.1, 46% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Awareness of certification standards is mixed, showing a need for better communication and outreach regarding professional requirements.

18. Job Security (Mean: 2.9, 38% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Perceptions of job security are low, which may contribute to anxiety and turnover in the profession.

19. Recognition and Rewards (Mean: 2.6, 28% Agree/Strongly Agree)

Very few guides feel recognized or rewarded for their work, indicating a lack of formal appreciation that could demotivate high performers.

20. Interest in Further Training (Mean: 4.5, 92% Agree/Strongly Agree)

There is overwhelming interest in additional training, demonstrating strong willingness among guides to upskill and improve service quality.

Hence, the data reveals a workforce with strong local knowledge, ethics, and motivation, but limited by gaps in formal training, storytelling, technology use, career advancement, and institutional support. There is a clear appetite for further training and structured quality assurance, which, if addressed, could significantly elevate the standards and sustainability of tour guiding in Sohra and Mawphlang.

The table below shows the quantitative analysis tests (Correlation, T-Test, ANOVA, Regression), modelled after standard reporting conventions used in SPSS output:

TABLE 2:

Summary of Quantitative Analysis Tests for Tour Guide Skills and Service Quality (N = 50)

Test Type	Variable(s) / Groups Compared	Test Statistic (Value)	df	p-value	Effect Size / R ²	Key Result / Factor Structure
Correlation	Communication Skills & Tourist Satisfaction	Spearman's $\rho = .61$	48	$< .001$	—	Significant positive correlation
	Training & Certification & Customer Care	Spearman's $\rho = .54$	48	$< .01$	—	Significant positive correlation
T-Test	Customer Care: Certified vs. Not Certified	$t = 4.75$	48	$< .001$	$d = 1.29$	Certified guides scored higher (M = 4.12, SD = 0.58)
ANOVA	Communication Skills by Age Group	$F = 3.92$	2, 47	.027	$\eta^2 = .14$	Younger guides scored higher (M = 4.00)
Regression	Predictors: Communication, Customer Care, Training, Storytelling Outcome: Tourist Satisfaction	$F = 21.37$, $R^2 = .653$	4, 45	$< .001$	$\beta = .39$ (Customer Care), $\beta = .33$ (Comm.)	Customer Care & Communication significant predictors

Interpretation of Table 2

The table summarizes the results of multiple quantitative analyses conducted on the survey data from 50 tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang. The findings highlight several important patterns regarding skills, training, and service quality in the region's tour guiding sector.

Correlation Analysis

- There is a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between communication skills and perceived tourist satisfaction (Spearman's $\rho = .61$, $p < .001$). This means that guides who rate themselves higher in communication also tend to receive better feedback from tourists.
- A significant positive correlation is also observed between training & certification and customer care ($\rho = .54$, $p < .01$), indicating that formal training is associated with higher standards of professionalism and customer service.

T-Test

- The independent samples t-test comparing certified and non-certified guides on customer care shows a statistically significant difference ($t = 4.75$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.29$). Certified guides score much higher (M = 4.12, SD = 0.58), confirming that certification is linked to better customer care and professionalism.

ANOVA

- The one-way ANOVA examining communication skills across age groups is also significant ($F = 3.92$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .14$). Younger guides report higher communication skills (M = 4.00), suggesting that age or generational factors may influence communication effectiveness.

Regression Analysis

- Multiple regression analysis shows that customer care ($\beta = .39, p < .001$) and communication skills ($\beta = .33, p = .002$) are significant positive predictors of tourist satisfaction. The model explains 65.3% of the variance in tourist satisfaction ($R^2 = .653$), indicating that these interpersonal skills are crucial for enhancing the tourist experience. Training and storytelling, while positive, are not statistically significant predictors in this model.

Overall Interpretation of Quantitative Analysis Tests for Tour Guide Skills and Service Quality

The analyses consistently demonstrate that formal training and certification are associated with higher professionalism and customer care, and that interpersonal skills especially communication are central to tourist satisfaction. Younger guides may have an edge in communication, and the three-factor structure helps clarify where to focus training and support. These findings underscore the need for targeted skill development, ongoing certification, and institutional support to elevate the quality of tour guiding services in Sohra and Mawphlang.

5. Findings

• Skill Gaps:

While local knowledge and ethical behavior scored high, there were notable gaps in communication skills, interpretive storytelling, and technology use. Less than half of respondents felt confident in their storytelling abilities or use of digital tools, indicating a need for targeted upskilling. While most guides express confidence in their local knowledge and ethical behavior, fewer report strong communication or interpretive storytelling skills. This suggests a need for targeted communication and storytelling training.

• Training and Certification:

Only 38% reported having received formal training and certification, and just 46% were fully aware of certification requirements. There was strong consensus (86% agreement) on the need for regular assessments and a formal quality assurance framework. Less than half of respondents have received formal training or are fully aware of certification requirements, indicating a gap in professional development and regulatory awareness.

• Customer Care and Professionalism:

Most guides rated themselves positively on customer care and professionalism, but tourist satisfaction scores were only moderate, suggesting room for improvement in service delivery and guest engagement. A majority rate themselves positively, but a notable minority remain neutral or negative, showing inconsistency in service delivery.

• Motivation and Career Development:

Guides overwhelmingly cited personal growth and job satisfaction as motivators (80% agreement), but only 30% felt there were sufficient career advancement opportunities. Many expressed frustration over limited recognition and rewards for outstanding performance. Most guides find personal growth and satisfaction in their work, though many feel job security and recognition are lacking. There is overwhelming support for regular assessments, awards, and further training, highlighting a desire for structured quality improvement.

- **Support and Resources:**

Less than 40% felt they received adequate support from local authorities, and job security perceptions were mixed. Peer collaboration was moderate, but there was very high interest (92%) in further training and professional development. Adoption of technology is moderate to low, suggesting areas for policy and infrastructure improvement.

- **Sustainability and Responsible Tourism:**

Most guides (78%) reported actively promoting sustainable tourism practices, reflecting strong local commitment to preserving Sohra and Mawphlang's natural and cultural heritage. Most guides report promoting sustainable tourism, aligning with regional development priorities³

The analysis reveals a workforce with strong local knowledge and ethical standards but notable gaps in communication, storytelling, technology use, and formal training. There is a clear demand for structured training, certification, regular quality assessments, and more robust support and recognition from tourism authorities. Addressing these areas is essential for elevating service quality and ensuring the sustainable growth of tourism in Sohra and Mawphlang.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The research findings reveal a workforce of tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang with strong local knowledge and ethical commitment, particularly towards sustainable tourism practices. However, significant skill gaps exist, notably in communication, interpretive storytelling, and technology use, which are crucial for delivering engaging and informative visitor experiences. Fewer than half of the guides have received formal training or certification, coupled with limited awareness of certification standards, highlighting a major gap in professional development and regulatory knowledge.

Despite mostly positive self-assessments regarding customer care and professionalism, tourist satisfaction levels point to inconsistent service quality. Besides this, limited career advancement opportunities and insufficient formal recognition contribute to reduced motivation and job security perceptions among guides. Support from local authorities is perceived as inadequate, though peer collaboration and eagerness for further professional development remain high.

The data highlights that formal training, regular quality assessments, certification, and institutional support are key to raising service standards. Interpersonal skills, particularly communication and storytelling, strongly influence visitor satisfaction and thus should be core elements of capacity-building programs. Moreover, embedding sustainability into practice requires not only personal commitment by guides but also systemic backing from tourism management bodies through resources, training, and incentives.

Overall, the findings demonstrate an urgent need for a structured, continuous professional development framework that recognizes and supports tour guides as pivotal actors in maintaining tourism quality and sustainability in the region.

Recommendations

To address the critical skill gaps among tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang, it is recommended that specialized training programs be developed and implemented, with a strong focus on enhancing communication abilities, interpretive storytelling, and the use of digital tools such as mobile applications and online booking systems. These training courses should integrate experiential learning methods, including scenario-based exercises, role plays, and peer-led workshops, which have been widely recognized as effective in building practical guiding competencies. Such hands-on approaches will not only boost confidence but also make the learning process more relevant to the challenges faced by guides on the ground.

Establishing a formal certification and quality assurance framework is essential for professionalizing the sector. This should involve close collaboration with local tourism authorities to clearly define certification standards and set up an accessible, regular assessment pathway that enables guides to acquire and renew their qualifications. Awareness campaigns are crucial to ensure that guides fully understand certification processes, requirements, and their long-term benefits, which in turn will promote consistency and strengthen tourist confidence in locally guided experiences.

Improving customer care and professionalism among Sohra and Mawphlang guides requires the introduction of ongoing customer service training programs. These should be designed to promote consistency in service delivery and deepen guest engagement. Incorporating visitor feedback mechanisms—such as digital surveys or feedback forms—will provide actionable insights into guide performance, allowing for timely identification of weaknesses and targeted remedial training. Such continuous evaluation is fundamental to delivering high satisfaction rates among increasingly discerning tourists.

For guide motivation and career satisfaction, structured career development pathways with clear advancement opportunities linked to certifications and performance evaluations are needed. Introducing formal recognition programs such as awards and other performance-based incentives that will reward high standards, foster a sense of achievement, and motivate guides to continually improve their skills and service quality.

To ensure that guides are well-supported, it is important to enhance collaboration between local authorities, tourism boards, and guide associations. This collaborative approach will help provide essential resources, technical support, and the development of infrastructure such as improved internet access and marketing platforms which are vital for modern tour operations. Encouraging the formation and strengthening of cooperative models among guides will also foster peer support, ensure more equitable sharing of benefits, and help maintain consistent quality across the guiding community.

Embedding sustainability as a guiding principle in all training and practice is crucial for natural and cultural preservation in these high-value ecotourism locations. Guides should receive dedicated training on

sustainable tourism concepts and responsible traveller engagement, equipping them to champion conservation and heritage protection efforts

Finally, to stay competitive in a rapidly evolving tourism market, digital literacy workshops should be organized for tour guides in Sohra and Mawphlang. These sessions will empower guides to leverage technology for better visitor communication and marketing. Developing an online platform where guides can share best practices, access resources, and interact with peers will foster a culture of continuous learning and professional growth across the region. Such comprehensive support will ensure that the tour guiding community remains adaptable, skilled, and ready to deliver outstanding visitor experiences.

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