Mapping of Skills and Training Needs to Improve Accessibility in Tourism Services in Europe

Case Study 10. PEOPLECERT, Greece

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**Case Study
PeopleCERT/Accessibility Pass, Greece**

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Executive Summary

This case study concerns a private sector initiative led by PeopleCERT[1], a global organisation in the certification industry[2] which, in partnership with independent yet authorised trainers, provides a comprehensive training programme to professionals in the hospitality industry with respect to accessible service and customer care. The innovative character of the scheme lies in that the training offered can lead to certification upon successful completion of independent examinations (developed by PeopleCERT).   The training programme forms part of a wider global scheme employed, "Accessibility Pass", which classifies hotels' accessibility level based collectively on their infrastructure, services offered and personnel skills.

The training programme was developed by a dedicated scientific team and is also currently piloted in Greece. However, in the commercial phase all material will be distributed through PeopleCERT and its representatives internationally. Further to the global scope, the comprehensive framework in which the training programme is offered and the objectivity ensured in certifying professionals, among the outstanding features of the programme are the robust research and expertise on which the training material is based, the scope of access needs and service standards covered, as much as the differentiation of the content according to job profiles and descriptions.

Although the training's impact in practice is early to judge, there are reports of high success rates in the relevant examinations, as well as of increased interest on behalf of the enterprises involved in offering accessible services and customer care. That is of particular importance given the widespread lack of know-how in providing accessible customer care identified in the piloting stage. In that aspect, it is similarly argued that barriers to take up of training related to limited understanding of the importance of the matter and its potential for business growth, could be foremost dealt with through communication strategies in reaching out to the interested parties. Financial support is crucial in generating demand for such training programmes, particularly in times of economic recession, which in the context of Greece has meant restricted budgets and downward trends in inbound tourism.

Piloting the training programme in Greece, was in fact viewed by the interviewees as an opportunity to offer valid conclusions with regards to the pilots, primarily as regards the decisive role of tourism in the national economy. This case study offers the opportunity to review possible opportunities and threats in the national context with

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[1] Information and downloadable material regarding the scheme (such as sample exam papers) can be found at http://www.peoplecert.org and http://www.accessibilitypass.org. In this study publicised information is used with the permission of the owners.

[2] according to ISO: 17024

implications for the offer of accessible tourist services (and equally the demand for accessibility training), locally but also perhaps more broadly. These involve importantly consideration of the impact of economic recession on tourism, the legal context and funding opportunities for accessible tourism, as much as the extent to which these are exploited to their full potential, which are explored in the introductory chapter.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Prior to introducing the accessibility training scheme presented in this report, it could be helpful for readers to have a brief picture of the context in which it is being implemented. Further to the insights of the case study which shall inform final recommendations, it is understood that any evaluative approach to "what works" in developing accessibility training in the tourism sector, addressed and transferrable to training needs in different contexts in Europe, should also consider member states' particularities and trends, with respect to the strengths of the national tourist economy and local incentives in the form of legal and funding regulations.

Along these lines, Greece has traditionally held a high rank among the top twenty one world destinations according to annual UNTWO reports in the last decade (GNTO Hatzidakis, A. (2011)[3]. Nevertheless, the same study, which provides evidence on tourism in Greece since 1997, has pointed out that economic factors led to recession of inbound tourism in 2008, with some stability achieved after 2009 remarking in this way the "vulnerability of trends to external factors", (Hatzidakis 2011 p. 5)

Indicatively, the number of international arrivals had decreased by (-5.5%) by the end of 2009 in Europe, which was affected the most by the economic crisis in comparison with other world regions[4]. For Greece, there was a decline of inbound tourism, falling to the 17th rank as compared to the 16th (UNWTO 2009) and 15th place maintained up until 2008 at least since 2002[5]. More importantly, Greece has experienced a (-10,6%) decline in revenue since 2008, holding then the 12th place in international tourist revenue, ranking 21st in 2010 (UNWTO 2010). In the most recent years, arrivals have tended to increase with statistics in January-March 2013 showing a (4.6%) increase in comparison to the respective period in 2012[6]. Similarly, revenue indicators in the hospitality and catering industry noted a (5.3%) increase in the second quarter of 2013, with respect to the same period in 2012, which had dropped by (-20.6%) in comparison

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[3] Hatzidakis, A. (2011) Analysis of Greek Tourism Trends 2001-2010, GNTO Athens
http://www.gnto.gov.gr/sites/default/files/files_basic_pages/Analisi_touristikis_kinisis_2001-2010.pdf
[4] Hatzidakis, A. (2011, p. 5)
[5] National Statistical Service 2002
[6] Press Release 23rd July 2013: Arrivals of non-residents from abroad January- March 2013

with 2011[7]. It is finally important also to consider that the great majority of incoming tourists is from Europe (78.9%) with most tourists coming from member states such as Bulgaria (14.6%), Germany (12.5%), Cyprus (5.9%), UK (4.5%) and Italy (4.2%).

This briefly highlights the relevance of the national context of tourist provision to European travellers and makes a case for the potential of EU policy and co-ordination in supporting effectively the development of accessible tourism service provision so as to enhance competitiveness of European destinations. This case study clearly supports that accessible service provision is a significant part of updating the level and quality of mainstream services in pursuit of this goal.

The incentives for engaging with accessibility on behalf of the businesses can vary, owing to internal as much as external factors, but in any case these tend to harmonise with the social and legal context they are situated in. The availability of national legislation, in the case of Greece including the Building Code[8] (2012) and EU Regulations on Passenger Rights across the different modes of transport, as much as specialized technical standards in accessible tourism in Greece[9], provides grounds for raising demand both for accessibility training schemes and provision of such services to end-users. Specific regulations, as with the example of the hospitality sector where classification criteria relate to certain accessibility requirements[10], further enhance possibilities for the development of accessible tourism.

Further to the legal context, funding opportunities are a strong feature of development strategies. In the case of Greece, they have mainly focused on subsidizing domestic tourist demand. This could be an important driver for developing matching services, although among the recommendations offered in this report, is that subsidies directed to businesses could further facilitate this outcome. Indicatively, the National Tourist Organisation (GNTO) operates the programme "Tourism for all"[11] co-funding 38,700

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[7] National Statistical Service 2013 Press Release 6th September 2013 *2nd Quarter 2013 Revenue Indicator in Service Provision in the Hospitality and Catering Sector.*

[8] The *Building Code (2012)* Art.26(1) specifies that buildings accessed by the public, including accommodation and leisure, must ensure horizontal and vertical access according to the Design Guidelines for the Autonomous Movement and Living of People with Disabilities (Disability Office, Ministry of Environment 1986-1990)

[9] Ministry of Tourist Development (2003) "*Beaches for All"* ; The guidelines include detailed standards and specifications for access to the sea and tourist facilities and services.

[10] According to the Presidential Decree (43/2002) and later modifications, compliance with accessibility standards is obligatory for all types of hotels (including for instance standards for entrance, rooms, WC, alarms). There is also an obligation to provide accessible rooms at 5% of all rooms for hotels with more than 20 rooms, and at least 1 room for hotels with up to 20 rooms. Two or one star hotels with capacity of up to 20 rooms are excluded from the latter obligation.

[11] GNTO (2013) Approval of funding of "Tourism for All" 2013-2014 (Phase I)

individuals for 5 overnight stays at hotels which participate in the programme. Among eligible people are persons with 67% disability or over[12]. Similar programmes are run by the National Manpower Organisation (private sector employees/ unemployed) covering 110,000 beneficiaries[13], and by the Agricultural Social Security body[14] funding 120,000 beneficiaries (for 5 overnight stays) plus another 10,000 for three day excursions.

Although there are no clear facts and figures about the demand and use of tourist services by persons with disabilities or the elderly in the country[15], it is estimated that 50% of Greek people with disabilities or mobility problems due to ageing would travel more if accessibility was improved (JBR Hellas, 2006). It is commonly accepted that despite some great progress in restoring accessibility particularly in transport (such as national airports, the Athens metro or some passenger ships routes) as well as places of cultural interest[16], there are indications of limited implementation of accessibility legislation overall, as well as ineffective use of accessibility standards resulting in barriers in the travel experience of persons with disabilities. Related to this, there is very limited knowledge of accessible customer service as will be explored further in this case study.

The training scheme presented in the following pages has been developed and is being piloted by PeopleCERT in Greece. It is interesting to quote as a concluding point that the national context is considered to play a key role in producing valid results which can be transferrable to the wider network of PeopleCERT internationally.

> *ACCESSIBILITY PASS is still in 'beta' phase, currently carried out in Greece. The selection of Greece as a test market was not just an outcome of the fact that the initiative is of Greek origin; it was also based on the fact that the Greek tourism industry is strong per se and it's also a decisive one in the overall country's economy. Therefore we believe that piloting in Greece can lead to conclusions of a more 'global' validity.*
> *Mary Yannacopoulou,*
> *International Marketing*
> *Associate PeopleCERT*

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[12] The percentage refers to national regulations and classification systems of disability.

[13] http://www.koinonikostourismos.gr/pdfs/kointouroaed2013-2014.pdf

[14] http://www.koinonikostourismos.gr/pdfs/oga2013enarxihorigisis.pdf

[15] National statistics exist only by the Labour Survey 2002, showing that 18% of the Greek population has a health problem or disability, half of which are people over 65 (National Statistical Data, 2002).

[16] Detailed information about the implementation and effectiveness of legislation in the field of accessibility across different sectors can be read at ANED 2012 National Accessibility Report for Greece available at http://www.disability-europe.net

2.0   OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

ACCESSIBILITY PASS is a global scheme that aims to help people with accessibility needs find a hotel or conference center that can accommodate their specific needs, making their overall hospitality experience a simple and friendly one.

Based on universal criteria, ACCESSIBILITY PASS evaluates the accessibility features of Hotels and Conference Centers, including personnel's proven capability to cater for individuals with accessibility needs, including people with disabilities. It provides an objective classification and detailed information to enable everyone make an educated choice for their accessible holiday or business accommodation.

The training developed by PeopleCERT is provided to hotel personnel and forms an integral part of a wider certification scheme, named AccessibilityPASS that classifies hotels' accessibility level based on their infrastructure, services offered and personnel skills.

The scheme is currently at a piloting stage, designed to include a sufficient number of participants and the use of control groups (i.e. some accessible hotels/ some not) so as to draw statistically significant results. So far 130 individuals have already taken part in the training and certification schemes.

An outstanding feature of the case at hand is the objectivity ensured across the design and implementation process, from the development of standards and training material to auditing and certification processes.

The scheme is based on extensive research of international standards coupled with the scientific expertise of the working team, while certification of personnel skills is achieved through successful completion of independent examinations. Overall four levels of accessibility are distinguished upon completion of the certification process.

The concept of the complete ACCESSIBILITY PASS scheme rests with providing an equal level of service to persons with disabilities and elderly people as with anyone else. The global and objective scope of the classification process provides the opportunity to travelers to identify and compare appropriate hospitality infrastructure and services, backed with detailed information, easily and reliably.

Table 1: Accessibility pass levels

ACCESSIBILITY PASS Levels	Concepts
CtA Commitment to Accessibility	Accessible accommodation
A Core Accessibility	Accessible basic services
AA Superior Accessibility	Full accessibility excluding leisure & business areas
AAA Total Accessibility	Full accessibility

"Personnel in the hospitality industry have little to no knowledge about how they treat persons with disabilities, persons with physical restrictions and accessibility needs in general. They often have had little experience of providing services to such people and when they do, they often do it in an improper or inadequate manner. As such training is necessary to help develop such skills."

Mary Yannacopoulou, International Marketing Associate PeopleCERT

The scheme was developed to address a true market need in the evaluation of accessible services offered in the hospitality industry, particularly since available information has so far been based exclusively on self-evaluation (e.g. checklists), which in practice has led to partial and misguiding information for visitors. Further, there was the perceived need to improve hotel personnel skills and competences as disability customer service being offered is considered overall to be sub-optimal. Adding to this service gap, tourism education programmemes in the country do not currently include enough or any courses aiming to help tourism professionals develop appropriate skills.

3.0 CONTENT, TRAINING MATERIAL AND AVAILABILITY

ACCESSIBILITY PASS has developed a full pack of "official courseware", targeted to trainees and trainers, and also train-the-trainers material. The material has been developed by a team of experts in accessibility, who have based the ACCESSIBILITY PASS courseware on thorough research of current international scientific bibliography, and their knowledge and experience with regards to both accessibility matters and the hotel industry specifics. The training is delivered by independent trainers authorized by PeopleCERT on the grounds of previous training experience, good knowledge of accessibility matters and good command of both English and local language.

The training material includes ACCESSIBILITY PASS official presentations for students, trainers and train-the-trainers, official handbooks and brochures for students, and trainers guides, as well as online material with case studies, images and animations which form part of the ACCESSIBILITY PASS e-learning courses, offered as complementary and/or alternative method to classroom training.

Formal training courses have been designed for three hotel job clusters, defined according to the tasks related with each job position, and grouped under Hotel Management, Hotel Guest Services, and Hotel Housekeeping & Facilities Services (please see table with indicative occupations and respective competences below).

Training includes theory as well as occupational scenarios with case studies, images and animations. The training material is differentiated for the three different clusters principally in terms of the respective occupational scenarios developed. There are common grounds covered across the clusters, such as disability types and access needs, while hotel managers receive training on the sum of the training material, albeit more compact, plus knowledge on demographic, economic and legislative trends with regards to accessible tourism.

Overall, the training elaborates on the different types of disabilities and the functional limitations they induce, as much as disabled visitors' expectations for equal service and treatment. Trainees are expected to learn how to provide appropriate services related to their job tasks to persons with disabilities and Seniors. It is worth noting that the aspect of ageing was in fact developed in the process of the first pilots, as it became clear that a significant proportion of impairments are also frequently met in the elderly population.

Box 1: Types of disabilities covered in the Accessibility Pass training

Types of disability covered by the Accessibility PASS training:
- Mobility & wheelchair users   - Deaf or with partial hearing loss   - Blind and partially sighted   - Deaf & blind   - Diabetes   - Epilepsy   - Use of assistive technologies   - Serving customers with learning difficulties   - Catering for people who need special diets, people with allergies (cleaning)

Table 2: Knowledge and competences relating to occupations

PEOPLECERT ACCESSIBILITY Certifications for Professionals- Indicative Occupations	Knowledge and Competences
Hotel Management Hotel Managers Managers on Duty Boutique & Small Hotel Owners	**The HM certification ensures that a professional possesses the following knowledge and capabilities:** ✓ Key facts and statistics about the importance of people with disabilities for the travel & hospitality industry. ✓ The diversity of the special needs of various clients and how these can be catered for. ✓ Current legislation regarding accessibility in the tourism sector and how to check compliance. ✓ Ability to: • Create an equal customer experience for all, from planning, to transfer and for the overall duration of their stay. • Assist with the use of different types of technical aids and other assistive technology available and support them. • Cope with critical situations and emergencies arising in relation to various types of needs. • Maximize the quality of the services offered by catering for the needs of key groups of people with disabilities.

Hotel Guest Services Booking Personnel Receptionists Reservation Managers Food & Beverages Managers Concierge Services Personnel	**The HGS certification ensures that a professional can:** ✓ Create an equal customer experience for all, from planning to transfer and for the overall duration of their stay. ✓ Offer simple information about the hotel's accessibility for each particular type of need. ✓ Handle the check-in/check-out process for clients with disabilities. ✓ Ensure the hotel offers appropriate F&B services for all groups. ✓ Evaluate the accessibility level of the services the hotel is offering. ✓ Maximize the quality of the services offered by catering for the needs of key groups of people with disabilities

Hotel Housekeeping & Facilities Services	The HHFS certification ensures that a professional can:
Grooms Housekeepers Room Service Technical Support Valet Service Hotel Shuttle Bus Drivers	✓ Create an equal customer experience for all, from planning to transfer and for the overall duration of their stay. ✓ Assist clients with disabilities with their transport to and from the hotel. ✓ Make correct use of technical aids and other assistive technologies. ✓ Evaluate the accessibility level of the facilities and services offered, and provide recommendations for improvement. ✓ Mitigate unexpected situations and provide rescue services to all groups of clients, including clients with disabilities.

4.0 TARGET AUDIENCE, COMMUNICATIONS AND BARRIERS

ACCESSIBILITY PASS is appropriate for all types and sizes of hotels worldwide, a great number of these qualify as SMEs. At the same time the personnel training and certification scheme covers a wide range of key roles, making it suitable for the hospitality industry across the board.

The main barriers existing in the uptake of accessibility training programmes in the tourism industry, as identified by the interviewees were:

- Little attention drawn to the importance of the matter.
- Unwillingness of employers to invest their employees' time in training.
- No obvious connection between the value of providing accessible products/ services and profitability.

Furthermore, the financial crisis is holding back investments on the part of hotels, so it is expected to be a stopper to a reasonable extent. As a whole, there is de-prioritising of training in general, rather than accessibility training only, as a consequence of restricted budgets.

Some common characteristics found across hotels with lesser readiness to take part in the piloting scheme, as mentioned by the interviewees, were firstly concern about not fulfilling requirements of accessibility and being exposed, even though this is far from what the scheme is intended for. By contrast, as also demonstrated by one of the participant hotels which has completed the AccessibilityPASS scheme (please see section 5), the certification process is and should be seen as an opportunity for improvement, aided by specific standards and indications.

Moreover, limited thought and understanding of the significant potential of accessible tourism for development was commonly met, whilst staff had little to no knowledge of how to serve customers with disabilities. Nevertheless, once training is received, accessible service provision and customer care become widely accepted equally by bigger or smaller accommodation units, whilst staff particularly appreciate the practical tips and advice offered as part of the training, giving evidence of effectiveness and potential for positive impact.

> *The hoteliers' culture in Greece is diverse, so it provides grounds for conclusions regarding different aspects. From being concerned about offering accessible services, to seeing the financial opportunities once exposed to them, to aspiring to a 'politically correct' image projected and to rarely but actually expressing some phobia towards PwD, the reactions to the accessibility training concept vary considerably.*
>
> *Mary Yannacopouloy International Marketing Associate PeopleCERT*

5.0 EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

At the piloting stage of the scheme, indications of impact relate more to aspects of the training, while impact on actual service provision is perhaps early to judge, particularly as it may take some time after the training for hotel personnel to put their acquired knowledge into action, due to lesser frequency of disabled visitors.

As pointed out by the International Marketing Associate of PeopleCERT, the majority of the trainees who sat a pilot exam passed with high scores, which is considered as a key performance indicator on the quality and effectiveness of the training. Further, the trainers report that the content is much appreciated by Hotels, and overall they have increased interest in better understanding accessibility as a result of their participation in the scheme.

For monitoring impact, it was suggested that short questionnaires on accessible personnel services can be included in hotels' own guest assessment forms, while it is planned that complaints from clients with disabilities will be monitored by Accessibility Pass at the commercial stage.

Qualitative aspects such as the perceived relevance of the training offered and potential impact on the business prospects were moreover approached through an interview with the Chief Engineer and Quality Manager at Makedonia Palace, which successfully completed the AccessibilityPass certification scheme at its piloting stage.

Makedonia Palace is one of the most prestigious hotels in the country, offering a complete series of 5-star and VIP accommodation services. Makedonia Palace forms a landmark in the city of Thessaloniki hosting 283 rooms and suites, a series of fully equipped business meeting rooms and social events halls, restaurants, plus a number of facilities such as gift and jewellery shops, private parking, and fitness facilities.

Staff across the different departments of the hotel enterprise (from directors and managers to frontline and support staff) participated according to their role at each one of the three training schemes offered by PeopleCERT for professionals.

In discussing the reasons as to the decision to take part in the scheme, a heightened commitment to excellence became much prominent, in which disability customer service is perceived as a strong competitive advantage for businesses in the tourism industry. As pointed out by Theodoros Bastianos, Chief Engineer and Quality Manager at Makedonia Palace, responsible for the quality management and supervision of infrastructure and services, *"there is no room for mistakes in the tourism industry"* understanding that each customer simply must experience equal level and quality of service, as that feeds back eventually to the share of the market a business maintains. In that context, disability customer service is mainstreamed with an emphasis on comfort and barrier-free use of the hotel facilities and services.

As expressed by the interviewee, certification is perceived as a willing act of self-exposure and openness to external evaluation, which is measurable against objective international standards. It is a process required to prove level and quality of accessible services offered, and at the same time identify points of non-compliance so as to improve quality through relevant modifications. The AccessibilityPASS training offered

an immediate raise of standards in accessible customer service equally for people with little previous experience or advanced knowledge, which was stated as a distinguishing positive trait of the programme. In turn, the impact on the hotel's services is evidenced by positive feedback and repeated reservations by visitors.

As pointed out, identifying needs in service provision is a non-ending process, as service is continuously monitored and updated. There is a crucial driver of this constant quality management process which uses certification as a tool rather than as a given status seen as resulting in stagnation. Certification and training provide a set of objective indicators against which to measure and define capacity to respond to certain needs of the tourist demand. In this sense, it was also remarked that promoting accessible service provision cannot by nature rest on compulsory measures, as it rests with initiative and the human factor in how standards are used and implemented to good effect.

Box 2: Key elements that make the ACCESSIBILITY PASS training effective

Key elements that make the ACCESSIBILITY PASS training effective:
- Method of delivery
- Completeness of content and knowledge conveyed
- Occupational scenarios used
- Complementary nature of training materials

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

The current case study concerned a highly innovative accessibility training scheme for personnel in the hospitality industry, developed by PeopleCERT and currently piloted in Greece. The training forms part of a wider scheme of classification of hotel infrastructure and services, based on objective international standards and scientific expertise, while certification is achieved through independent examinations. Adding to its innovative character is a strong business case made for mainstreaming accessible customer service.

The scheme is also highly relevant to the training needs identified in the accommodation industry in a national context, particularly in the general lack of tourism education or training programmes addressing accessibility. Varied responses to training by businesses at this stage depict a range of increased readiness to limited knowledge of accessible service provision, whilst the scheme actively aims to address

barriers relating to limited perception of the benefits of offering equal level of services to all.

Furthermore, the global scale of the organization implementing the scheme defines its transferability, but apart from that the training also captures international standards which can be applied to different occupational scenarios. The effectiveness of the training programme is evidenced equally by the high success rates at examinations so far as by the competitive advantage, the positive feedback and repeat business for the participants.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The case study offers valuable insight into factors that shape suitable and effective accessibility training in the tourism sector, among which the design, content and scope of relevant programmes are significant in covering gaps and needs in service provision.

For the interviewees of PeopleCERT, a general framework where accessibility is pronounced, for instance through policies, accessible towns, or subsidies for infrastructure, is essential in order to get the attention of small and medium sized businesses that have not yet taken part in Access Training. In addition, there needs to be well-documented argumentation pertaining to the business opportunities arising by offering accessible services, while actual examples and case studies aid in demonstrating the business case for accessible tourism.

Where training schemes already exist, it is moreover suggested that demand for such programmes can be generated through communication of the benefits arising as well as through subsidies to support the programme into SMEs. Alternatively, the development of training will also be encouraged through financing localisation of existing programmes or entirely new developments.

The top priorities for an EU agenda supporting the development of accessible tourism as a whole are as reported communication, subsidy, and legislation, emphasizing that direct and face-to face communication making a case for the relevance of accessible service provision to the interests of stakeholders would be foremost effective in overcoming barriers in the uptake of accessible training, coupled with financial and legal incentives for investment.

8.0   ANNEX I

Table 3: Table setting out best practice criteria and justification

Criteria	Justification	On track/off track
Innovative	Relies on international standards and scientific expertise. Training forms part of wider scheme of certification of infrastructure and services. Certification achieved through independent examinations., which at piloting stage has increased success rates. Global scope. Strong business case for mainstreaming accessible customer service.	🟢
Relevant	Directly addresses needs for training in accommodation industry. Varied responses to training depict a range of increased readiness to limited knowledge and understanding of accessible service provision.	🟢
Transferable	Content is copy-righted, but highly transferrable within global scale of organisation. Captures international standards which can be applied to different occupational scenarios in the hospitality industry but also more broadly in tourism (e.g. catering)	🟢
Efficient & Effectiveness	Still in piloting stage, not commercialised yet.	🟡
Impact	High success rates at examinations after training. Impact evidenced by positive feedback and repeat business. Also adds to the prestige and high level of quality service offered by the hotel.	🟢
Sustainable	Sustainable through marketing after piloting stage.	🟡