



EXperiential **TO**urism for sustainable **R**ural development

WP2: Success stories and needs mapping for VET renewal in rural tourism

A2.1: EU collection of success stories and analysis of national trends



Analysis of the current national status of rural tourism and related VET offers

**Focus Group National Report
Center for Social Innovation**

FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION

Please add the main information about your focus group(s).

COUNTRY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Cyprus

CITY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Online

NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUPS: 6

DATES OF THE FOCUS GROUP(S): 29/04/24, 30/04/24, 28/05/24, 29/05/24, 30/5/24, 07/06/24.

VENUES OF THE FOCUS GROUP(S): Two interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. In two of the cases, the questionnaire was submitted online (Microsoft Forms), while in two other cases, a telephone interview was conducted.

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS (per focus group if more than one): One participant per focus interview. In total, 6 people participated.

TARGET GROUP AND STAKEHOLDERS: Study participants were VET teachers/trainers in the tourism sector. Specifically, a tertiary education teacher of hotel management, sustainable development, experiential tourism, and other subjects. They also train companies and entrepreneurs through seminars. The second participant was a former professor of sustainable development at the Cyprus University of Technology. The third participant teaches tourism and hospitality management, and the fourth hotel management, both at the tertiary level. The fifth participant is a teacher at Apeiteio High School's Hotel Management School, and the sixth is an adult trainer in hotel management.

FOCUS GROUP DESCRIPTION

Please provide a detailed description of the focus group(s).

- **Number of focus groups implementers and description of their background:**

The focus groups/interviews were conducted by Foteini Papadopoulou, a project manager at CSI, with a background in psychology.

- **Number and description of the participants' background:**

Study participants were 6 VET teachers/trainers in the tourism sector. Specifically, a tertiary education teacher of hotel management, sustainable development, experiential tourism, and other subjects. They also train companies and entrepreneurs through seminars. The second participant was a former professor of sustainable development at the Cyprus University of Technology. The third participant teaches tourism and hospitality management, and the fourth hotel management, both at the tertiary level. The fifth participant is a teacher at Apeiteio High School's Hotel Management School, and the sixth is an adult trainer in hotel management. **Appendix 1** shows the number of responses to the questionnaire.

- **Duration of the focus group(s):**

An average of 18.5 minutes was recorded for the two interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams. For the completion of the questionnaire using Microsoft Forms and the phone interviews the exact completion time cannot be calculated. This is because all the responses were transferred from the interviewer to Microsoft Forms, so they are stored together. As a result, the average completion time was affected.

- **Main structure and agenda of the focus group(s):**

Microsoft Teams was used for the first two **online interviews**. It was initially intended to have one focus group with six participants. Therefore, CSI sent an invitation through its professional channels, explaining the purpose, the process, and the time and date of the focus group. It also invited people to register for the event, through a link to the registration form. The post was originally published on the 25th of April 2024, and it was reposted on the 29th. This method didn't work probably because of Easter. It probably had to do with the schools and universities being closed during this time. As a result, only one participant expressed interest. In a second email, more information about the event was provided to this participant as well as a link to connect to the meeting. Then the interview was held, and the meeting was recorded. Following a brief introduction to the project and the focus group purpose, the participant responded to the questions. Similarly, the second interview followed the same format. A second participant expressed interest the following day, and the same process was repeated.

For the rest of the participants, a different approach was used. The focus group questions were translated into Greek and converted into digital form in Microsoft Forms. A disclaimer regarding personal data use was also included in the online questionnaire. **Appendix 2** includes the Greek questionnaire link. Then, research was carried out in the professional CSI's network as well as on the internet to find people who fit within the target group of the study. Then, a telephone call or email was used to contact people. Two different methods were utilised: Those contacted by phone were asked if they had time to answer the questionnaire. This was after the interviewer introduced herself, the project, and the study. Positive responses were followed up with a **phone interview**. The interviewer was asked the questions over the phone and recorded the responses using the link to the online questionnaire. The participants were also informed by phone about the privacy issues related to their data. In case of a negative response due to a lack of time, an email was sent with a link to the online questionnaire. People who were contacted by email received written information about the project and the research (aims, duration, data privacy

issues), and the link to the questionnaire directly in their emails. After that, they responded to the **online questionnaire** at their own pace.

A detailed description of the research method is as follows:

1. [Microsoft Teams Online Interviews: 2](#)
2. [Online Interviews: 2](#)
3. [Phone Interviews: 2](#)

- **Description of any group and/or interactive activities:**

None.

- **Level of engagement of the participants:**

There was a high level of openness and willingness by participants to participate in interviews and to contribute their knowledge to the project.

- **Main comments and evaluation points from participants (the most important suggestions and recommendations, improvement points etc.):**

1. [Trends and opportunities:](#)

Cyprus' main trend and most popular rural tourism sectors are accommodation units, according to respondents. A participant commented that there are many small accommodations and small businesses that offer local products. These products include jams, cured meats, and other products related to Cypriot culture. Additionally, another participant agreed that accommodation facilities are the main trend and provide visitors with additional experiences. This includes visits to wineries, hiking in the mountains, showing visitors the area and what organic products they offer in their guesthouses. The person elaborated further that more and more accommodations are becoming closer to nature and farms to provide visitors with ecological products. According to the third participant, domestic tourism has special interests' tourism preference. The same person stated that wine tourism is Cyprus' most popular rural tourism industry. The next respondent said there are rising prices and an increase in interest in agrotourism in Cyprus, highlighting Troodos, Akamas, and Vavatsinia, among others. The fifth one mentioned that more accommodation and spaces, such as restaurants, are needed. They added that rural tourism has a positive future, so more development is needed. The last participant agreed that accommodation is the most famous rural tourism sector in Cyprus.

The question of whether more jobs can be created was discussed further by one participant, who stated that co-operatives like those found abroad, such as those in Spain and Portugal, could be developed, providing jobs on a larger scale and giving jobs to locals, as well as an increase in income for everyone. They explained that now everything is done individually, through individual initiatives or family businesses. According to another individual, we will have more employment opportunities if more places are created. In addition, employers prepare to pay more and provide more decent working conditions. Finally, two participants answered yes without further explanation.

2. VET offers/programs available:

In general, 3 people said that there are rural tourism-related VET programs in green practices in rural tourism, 2 in rural tourism management, 2 in sustainable practices in rural tourism, whereas marketing and communication, as well as ICT for rural tourism received 1 mention each. There were 4 participants who chose 'other', where one further explained that there is only a small part on agrotourism, sustainability, etc., in hotel management. They also have green professions at the college where they work, and they give 20 scholarships for green development. According to the second person, some companies offer sustainable tourism training programs, specifically on how to implement sustainable practices in their hotels, wineries, etc. The third participant chose the option 'other' to indicate that they don't know if there are such programs. Finally, the last participant mentioned that the Deputy Ministry of Tourism and some small organisations provide programs.

Regarding the existence of any specific programs supporting rural tourism professionals' professional development, one respondent said that there are general tourism programs, not programs for rural tourism in particular. According to one participant there aren't any, one said they don't know, and another didn't respond to the question. A fourth person mentioned a specific website that offers programs. As a final suggestion, the last participant suggested there should be programs for every aspect of tourism and farming. Programmes should be available for people involved in that field to learn and build their futures with the knowledge gained. For example, they further elaborated that many farmers say they will change their profession because they face difficulties.

Most of the respondents (5) agree that there are limited training opportunities in Cyprus for rural tourism. Moreover, 4 people believe that there is an insufficient focus on sustainable practices, as well as gaps in technology and digital skills. Two people think that the promotion of rural tourism-related VET programs is not supported. Four participants explained their responses in more detail. One explained that a tourism-focused country should start educating children from primary school on the whole range of tourism, sustainability, good practices, etc, not just the hotel business. A taxi driver, for instance, should know some practices to serve tourists since they are Cyprus' ambassadors abroad. As for the training opportunities, the same participant said there could be more without saying there aren't any. It would also be beneficial to place an increased emphasis on sustainable practices and improving technology knowledge. The promotion is necessary, particularly for a new topic where many people will gain new knowledge or improve their skills. In the view of the second participant, it is beneficial to inform people about the prospects of agrotourism and the opportunities provided by the state, etc., to start an accommodation facility, for example. The third participant stated that based on the definition of sustainable tourism because it concerns social, environmental and economic aspects of sustainability, there might be a lack of training in the environmental sector, for example, for protecting rural tourism to make it sustainable in the future, whereas for entrepreneurs, maybe there is a lack of management skills, or how to engage the community. Perhaps there is a lack of communication about what they can do in rural tourism; perhaps there is a lack of information about training opportunities. In addition, those living in the countryside may be older, so we need to reach out to them to transfer their technology knowledge. Lastly, the last participant suggested that more intensive efforts are needed and to a greater extent.

3. Engagement of the authorities/community:

Different authorities in Cyprus promote rural tourism with informational/educational campaigns, according to 4 respondents. There are also 3 people who believe that infrastructure is being developed, policies supporting rural tourism are being promoted, and informational resources are being created. By selecting the 'other' option, 4 participants provided additional information. More specifically, one said that the Cyprus authorities are making efforts to promote rural tourism. In detail, over the last few years, a Troodos commissioner has been appointed, and there are various organisations for local development such as the local Nicosia, Larnaca and so on, which support some projects. Additionally, they suggested we should develop more policies to protect tourism and local communities. The Deputy Ministry of Tourism could also improve its information campaigns in all regions, since information resources are left to individuals' personal initiative. According to the same person, infrastructure development is Cyprus' biggest problem. Cypriots use their cars, but foreign tourists have limited transportation options if they don't want to rent a car. According to the second response the Deputy Ministry of Tourism is promoting rural tourism and providing digital resources. Further, some tourism agencies should organise tours that take tourists to the countryside, farms and wineries and accommodate them. The third person stated that the Deputy Minister of Tourism is making efforts for promotion, but that entrepreneurs make most efforts for promotion, mostly online. Furthermore, infrastructure development is underway, but more needs to be done. Last respondent said there are few promotional initiatives, but they do exist.

4. Suggestions/Recommendations

Regarding the kind of support they think will benefit rural tourism VET providers, 5 respondents mentioned collaboration between industries, professional development opportunities, and technology integration. A total of 4 people believe that support in promoting VET programs will be beneficial. As for 'other' responses, one stated that more information on those already engaged in rural tourism would be beneficial, as well as information on its benefits for the village, the region, and the individual. Another reported that it would be helpful to receive training in specific areas or financial or professional incentives. Collaboration between stakeholders is also crucial to offering more and developing rural tourism. Technology can be used in rural tourism and smart solutions, while engaging the community. In addition, the same person pointed out that support for effective promotion is crucial since VET providers may not know how to do so. The third response agreed that incentives would certainly be beneficial; not always monetary, but groups should be created through which many initiatives can be generated. Further, training should begin with VET providers and trainers, and then the accommodation owners themselves, and then the staff following. Regarding technology integration, it is especially important now with artificial intelligence. Lastly, they believe agencies need to help with promotion. These agencies include hotel associations, or chambers of commerce or local agents when talking about small businesses in villages. The last person agreed that financial support followed by strategic support would be helpful.

Among the recommendations made by the participants to improve the VET offer for rural tourism in Cyprus was setting up a small pilot group. This would be charged with improving rural tourism, sustainability, etc., and could produce recommendations for short- or long-term implementation. The group could include representatives from higher education, entrepreneurs, and community authorities. A

second recommendation was to provide more incentives for strengthening education and understanding rural tourism needs through various infrastructures and funding. As an example, visiting various places where rural tourism is offered in Cyprus to see the specific needs, as well as more government support so that everyone has increased access to rural tourism. Another one was to provide more information about the benefits of rural tourism for the village, for the region, for themselves, and for those who are already involved in it. Furthermore, the relevant departments should assist by shortening procedures, reducing the number of forms, for example, and offering incentives. The government should provide exclusionary funds for rural tourism, specialised courses on rural tourism, and maybe some experts could return to their villages and perform some services. In agreement with another participant, another suggestion was to educate locals about tourism benefits. Another person suggested that more specialised education programs should be available at all levels. As a final note, no recommendations were provided by a respondent.

- **Any challenges faced during the focus group(s):**

To conduct one single focus group, it proved difficult to find participants. This was probably because of the Easter vacation when all schools and educational institutions were closed. To ensure the success of the research, phone interview and online interview methods were selected after the Easter break.

- **Main conclusions of the focus group(s):**

As a result of the focus groups/interviews, Cyprus' main trend and most popular rural tourism sector is accommodation. Additionally, some local traditional products and other experiences are also offered. Visiting wineries and hiking are examples of such activities. Regarding VET programs offered, some are available, but most are general tourism programs without a particular focus on rural tourism. Additionally, most believe that there are limited training opportunities for rural tourism in Cyprus, as well as gaps in technology and digital skills. One participant mentioned that although there are some training opportunities, more should be offered. As for promotion, it is believed that authorities such as the Deputy Ministry of Tourism promote rural tourism in Cyprus and conduct educational/informational campaigns. Some participants, however, believe promotional efforts should be increased along with infrastructure development so tourists have more transportation options. There are many recommendations the participants provide for the support they think will be beneficial to rural tourism VET providers. Most of them believe that collaboration between industries, professional development opportunities, and technology integration would be the most beneficial. Finally, some recommendations included providing incentives, setting up specific rural tourism teams, providing more information about rural tourism's benefits, shortening procedures, and providing exclusionary funding.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Screenshots showing the number of responses to questionnaire

EXTOR - Experiential tourism for sustainable rural development

6 Responses

52:06 Average time to complete

Active Status



Sync results to Excel for the web automatically and analyze with more detail and flexibility.



Open results in Excel

Preview



Appendix 2. Link to the Greek questionnaire.

<https://forms.office.com/e/WUiejcPKqz>



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