



EXperiential TOurism for sustainable Rural 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



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

Individual Interviews National Report - Einurd

INTERVIEWS INFORMATION

Please add the main information about the interviews.

COUNTRY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Iceland

CITY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Reykjavík (online)

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS: 22

DATES OF THE INTERVIEWS: 20.5. – 28.5. 2024

VENUES OF THE INTERVIEWS: Online (questionnaires)

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS (per interview): 1 per interview

TARGET GROUP AND STAKEHOLDERS: Rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals

INTERVIEWS DESCRIPTION

Please provide a detailed description of the interviews.

- **Number of interview implementers and description of their background:**

The interviews were conducted via survey as required.

For the tourism entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs from my personal research network were being contacted. Most of these entrepreneurs have been involved in research networks themselves and have a connection to at least the local tourism support system and are generally open to research and academic discussions.

Regarding the tourism professionals, some of the entrepreneurs contacted shared the survey with their employees. Furthermore, the survey was distributed in selected Social Media forums that are specifically targeted at rural tourism workers.

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

22 interviewees with varying background

- **Duration of the interviews:**

Online Survey

- **Main structure and agenda of the interviews:**

See questionnaire

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

See description above

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

See description above

- **Any challenges faced during the interviews:**

The main challenge was to get responses. May is a very busy tourism month in Iceland, so the response rate was rather low, and we had to really push for answers.

- **Main conclusions of the interviews:**

See summary of the data below. The tourism professionals answered very wide-ranging, with some of them having clear ideas of what programs they would like to see, and others who could not imagine what kind of change (and if at all) they would need in their professional lives.

Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs

Out of 10 interviewees, 2 had started their business in 2000, 1 in 2006, 1 in 2011, 2 in 2016, 1 in 2017, 2 in 2020, and one only recently.

70% of the answers stated that their company was small (0-9 employees), 10% 10-25, and 20% of them stated their business was 25-249 employees.

In this category, some of the entrepreneurs chose several options.

3 out of 10 classified their business as ecotourism, 7 out of 10 as rural tourism, 1 out of 10 as sport and adventure tourism, and 5 out of 10 as cultural tourism.

The majority (8 out of 10) offers accommodation services, 1 out of 10 spa and wellness, 5 out of 10 are tour providers, and 1 out 10 classified their business as winery/brewery, 1 out 10 water-related activities, 2 out of 10 nature-based activities, and 1 out of 10 as farm holidays.

All the entrepreneurs stated that they used personal funding. Out of these 10 entrepreneurs 5 had a bank loan and only one made use of Icelandic grants.

60% stated that they had no knowledge about European or Icelandic grants, 20% where not sure, and 20% stated they had knowledge.

Regarding challenges during their business activities, 9 out of 10 stated that financial challenges and lack of financial support.

1 out of 10 stated a lack of knowledge and necessary skills.

And in each case 3 out of 10 stated a lack of necessary human resources, low demand, and lack of local involvement.

Furthermore, one out of 10 added Covid-19 as a challenge they faced.

Regarding sustainability, 1 out 10 stated they were not sustainable.

6 out of 10 see their contribution in sustainability in ensuring tourist-satisfaction.

4 out of 10 see their contribution in involving the (local) community, such as the preservation of culture.

5 out of 10 contribute to sustainability through green practises, 3 out of 10 provide training to improve skills. 5 encourage responsible tourism and 1 out of 10 did not understand the question.

70% have not yet participated in a VET program. 30% (3 out of 10) have participated in:

- Driving course (to transport tourists)
- Katla Geopark guiding course
- Women power course
- Workshops, such as Ratsjáin (Program for upskilling tourism entrepreneurs)
- Taking counselling offers into account

50% have never offered professional training to their employees, 40% have, and 10% were not sure.

40% are aware of VET programs in their area/country, other 40% are not, whereas 20% are not sure.

Regarding professional training the entrepreneurs would find useful:

- 1 out of 10 did not find it useful
 - Experimental Tourism (1 out of 10)
 - Sustainable Tourism (7 out of 10)
 - Rural Tourism (4 out of 10)
 - Farm Tourism (2 out 10)
 - Cultural Tourism (4 out 10)
 - Ecotourism (5 out 10)
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- Digital Marketing (5 out 10)
- Basic Skills in Video Marketing (1 out 10)
- EU funding and norms for SME's opening (5 out 10)

Regarding gaps in the rural tourism sector in Iceland 60% saw a shortage in infrastructure, 10% saw an insufficiency of support for digital transition, 10% saw an insufficiency of support for green transition, and 10% in inadequate promotion.

Recommendations to improve the rural tourism are:

- Reduce costs of tourism arrivals
- Improve roads and transportation
- Enhance public transportation
- Distribute funds better to cold areas and areas that can accommodate more tourists (better distribute tourists around Iceland)
- Invest funds to support other routes into Iceland, for example Norröna, airport at Egilsstaðir
- Taking better care of gravel roads in remote areas
- Infrastructure development, dialogue with companies and support for sustainable implementation
- housing for staff
- More coordinated waste sorting, better education and monitoring. Improved winter services on roads. Faster processing by RARIK when electricity needs to be restored.

Support the rural tourism entrepreneurs would like to see are:

- Education and cooperation of companies
- Strengthening of tourism Improved access to funding for rural areas that can accommodate more tourists and strengthen infrastructure for development.
- Networking abroad in cultural tourism
- More promotion of entrepreneurs and their projects nationwide
- One states: "I found it difficult to deal with closed doors at the municipality when I asked for a payment extension during covid. Increased support during covid would have been a great help."

Three entrepreneurs stated that they did not need any support.

Rural Tourism Professionals

In total 12 tourism professionals answered the survey.

7 of them stated they work in a sustainable tourism business, 2 in experimental, 1 in ecotourism, 2 in rural tourism, 3 in farm tourism, 2 in sport tourism, 3 in regenerative tourism and 3 in cultural tourism.

9 out of 12 worked in accommodation businesses, 2 in a spa, 3 at a farm, 1 in a winery/brewery, 3 in sports-related activities, 2 in businesses that offer tours to historical sites, 1 in a local museum, 1 in smart tourism, 1 in a restaurant.

The interviewees' professions are:

Museum Manager

Accountant

Consultant

Operational Manager

front desk manager

Head of Marketing

Guesthouse manager

Chef

Guide

general hotel worker

1 out of 12 has worked for 1 year in rural tourism, 1 for 1,5 years, 1 for 10 years, 1 for 12 years, 1 for 15 years, 3 people have worked in rural tourism for 4 years, 1 for 5 years, 2 for 6 years, and 1 for 7 years.

Challenges these tourism professionals face are the following:

- Insufficient training/education (7 out of 12)
- A lack of support for digital transition (2 out of 12)

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- Lack of infrastructure (e.g. poor access to work due to transportation deficiencies) (3 out of 12)
 - Financial strain on their workplace (museum) due to cuts in governmental funding sources
 - Lack of trust in digital, abysmal level of digitalization, super short term-thinking
 - Lack of staff housing
 - Lack of resources and time
 - Expenses of being far away (remote) and paying for everything extra

75% of the interviewees have never participated in a VET program, 25% have.

The interviewed tourism professionals would wish for more training in:

- Experimental tourism (3 out of 12)
- Sustainable tourism (6 out of 12)
- Rural tourism key concepts (4 out of 12)
- Farm tourism (1 out of 12)
- Sport and adventure tourism (1 out of 12)
- Cultural tourism (3 out of 12)
- Regenerative tourism (2 out of 12)
- Ecotourism practices (3 out of 12)
- Digital marketing (4 out of 12)
- Basic skills on video marketing (4 out of 12)
- EU funding and norms for SME funding and development (2 out of 12)

One of them stated: “All these terms are fancy jibber that will not fare well in the reality of things. Rural companies are too busy getting the money in for a few months to start playing with eco labels.”

Perceived gaps in the rural tourism sector in their opinion are:

- No gaps (1 out of 12)
- A lack of infrastructure (e.g. poor access to rural areas due to transportation deficiencies) (4 out of 12)
- Having problems with basic services (e.g. electricity, water, sewage, internet, telecommunications) (7 out of 12)
- Lack of training programs/education (6 out of 12)
- Lack of financial support (1)
- Insufficiency of support for digital transition (1)
- Insufficiency of support for green transition (1)
- Inadequate promotion (1)

Their recommendations to improve the sector in Iceland are:

- Government support for cultural programs, especially in seasonal exhibits, is really important, as it is not easy to maintain exhibits and buildings through ticket sales alone in tiny rural towns.
- Special cultural courses for all seasonal workers
- A true connection between DMO, government and stakeholders to create an environment that organizes data. Not just a far West.
- Public transportation is limited in Iceland outside the capital area and major population centers, so all our visitors and guests depend on private cars or organized private bus tours.
- The lack of available and affordable housing nearby means we need to build and provide accommodation for our employees.
- 1) financial aid by the government for sustainable approaches. 2) training of staff 3) Learning from companies that do well in that field (could be an online resource as well))
- We need training and investments
- Vegagerðin / the Road Authority needs to maintain the gravel roads near our place better and provide road service more than 2x per week in winter!
- Better road service and cheaper shipping costs
- Support to involve more locals in tourism in order to be able to avoid tourism companies to completely shut down for the winter.
- I think that a good idea to interest more guests could be to organize more workshops related to a given region like knitting, pottery, etc. but also yoga classes (classes which might take place in nature)

Support the tourism professionals would like to receive is:

- Training in promotion and advertising
- Digital education
- It would be nice to see hotels/companies support each other in becoming more sustainable, not only competing against each other.
- Financial and educational
- More financial support to counteract the expenses of living in a rural area
- Remote job opportunities for off-season.