



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



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

Focus Group National Report – die Berater

FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION

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

COUNTRY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Austria

CITY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Vienna / online

NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUPS: 2 focus groups with 5 persons in total and 1 individual interview

DATES OF THE FOCUS GROUP(S): End of April 2024.

VENUES OF THE FOCUS GROUP(S): Video calls and in-person interviews

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS (per focus group if more than one): individual interview (1 person), focus group 1 (2 participants), focus group 2 (3 participants).

TARGET GROUP AND STAKEHOLDERS: VET providers and teachers

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 and the individual interview were implemented by one person from die Berater involved in the project. The implementer is the responsible project manager for the EXTOR project on behalf of die Berater and has knowledge of the EXTOR project, experience in the rural tourism sector, and in the implementation of ERASMUS+ projects.

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

The participants of the focus groups and the individual interview are trainers in VET institutions active in different regions of Austria: Lower Austria and Burgenland, Upper Austria, and Tirol. The majority of the participants are women (five persons) and one man.

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

The duration of each focus group or interview was approximately 1 hour.

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

The main structure and agenda for both the focus groups and the individual interview was the same. Firstly, the EXTOR project was introduced to the participants including aims and objectives. Secondly, the discussion was conducted according to the focus group questionnaire. Thirdly, the participants were informed about the next steps in the EXTOR project.

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

In the focus groups there was a group discussion according to the focus group questionnaire.

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

All participants showed a very good level of willingness to answer the questions and participate in the discussion. Some participants had a high interest in the following steps of the project and asked for updates on the EXTOR project.

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

Trends and opportunities:

The participants of the first focus group listed the following trends regarding rural tourism in Austria:

- Skiing, however less because of climate change
- Ecotourism and sustainability
- Adventure tourism with animals
- Slow tourism
- Wellness tourism
- Wwoofing (farm tourism combined with volunteering)

Wellness Tourism is the most important sector and hiking and cycling were mentioned also as important activities due to the mountains in Austria. Concerning the creation of more job opportunities the participants added that there is a great shortage of staff. However, job opportunities could be created in services related to tourism.

The participants of the second focus group mentioned numerous rural tourism initiatives on sustainability and cultural preservation, with projects ranging from traditional timber construction and adaptive reuse of historic buildings to digital innovations and climate adaptation efforts. Agritourism was identified as one of the most popular rural tourism sectors. Tourism providers in this sector are mainly located in East Tyrol and Salzkammergut. Agritourism creates more job opportunities in both tourism and agriculture.

The participant of the individual interview mentioned that trends have changed. They were different 10 years ago than they are now. The holiday behavior has basically changed. In the past, holidays were planned for the long term, but nowadays there are spontaneous holidays, e.g. in the Zillertal. Last-minute offers are very "in" at the moment. In the past, holidays with wellness or hiking were very popular. At the moment, everything should be included, e.g. services and activities, because demands have grown. There are approaches to sustainable tourism, but it is still catching on at the moment. The most popular tourism sector in Austria are holidays in nature, on the farm, mountains, meadows. Zillertal is a wonderful example – it has everything. This is very appreciated by German guests, which have also changed and developed.

VET offers/programs available:

The participants listed the following rural tourism-related VET programs in Austria: Marketing and Communication, sustainable practices in rural tourism, green practices in rural tourism, and in addition tourism schools and programs at FH Salzburg (University for Applied Sciences). Programs that support the professional development of rural tourism professionals are provided by tourism schools, VET providers (i.e. WIFI and BFI), and businesses in the form of internal projects. Tourism associations support such programs.

All participants identified the lack of support for promotion of rural tourism-related VET programs as a gap for VET training provision for rural tourism in Austria. 4 out of 6 participants also identified insufficient focus on sustainable practices as a gap. One participant added limited training opportunities and technology and digital skills gap.

Engagement of the authorities/community:

In regard to the efforts being made by different authorities in Austria to promote rural tourism, all participants identified informational/educational campaigns as an engagement of the authorities. 5 out of 6 participants also identified infrastructure development in this regard. 4 out of 6 participants added to the efforts promotion of policies that support rural tourism and creation of informational resources, and 3 participants infrastructure development. In addition, one participant mentioned problems with the traffic load (i.e. in the Zillertal) and difficulties to obtain funding.

Concerning the support for rural tourism VET providers, all participants mentioned professional development opportunities as beneficial. 4 out of 6 participants see collaboration between industries and 3 participants support in promoting VET programs also as beneficial. One participant added technology integration to this list.

Suggestions/Recommendations

The participants of the first focus group recommend vocational training on species-appropriate stock farming, promotion of educational projects outside the mainstream, integration of the connection between cities and the countryside in the design of educational programs, and to educate people in the countryside about integration. The participants of the second focus group added in this regard the promotion of rural tourism and the advantages of a possible apprenticeship or training, especially among the target group of young adults. The participant of the individual interview mentioned the final apprenticeship examination as an example for long-term and much more active promotion of vocational training programs so that they can continue to exist. The participant mentioned that there are problems with the implementation of projects and added that young people should also be persuaded to work in rural tourism, as the tourism industry has had a negative image over the last 5 years.

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

The main challenge was to find 6 participants for one focus group. This was solved by conducting two focus groups and one individual interview.

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

There were no common final conclusions for the two focus groups and the one individual interview. The findings of the focus groups and the individual interview were summarized in this report.