



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

**INTERNATIONAL REPORT**

Prepared by Center for Social Innovation, July 2024



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

## Contents

Introduction	5
EXTOR Project	5
Work Package 2: Success Stories and Needs Mapping for VET Renewal in Rural Tourism	6
EU Collection of Success Stories and Analysis of National Trends	6
International Report	7
Desk Research	8
Main Information and Methodology	8
Results	9
Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Rural Tourism Professionals	12
Interviews Methodology	12
Participants	12
Tools	12
Procedure	13
Description of Interviews in Each Country	14
Common Results Across Countries: Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs	15
Common Results Across Countries: Rural Tourism Professionals	17
Complete Reports	19
Focus Groups with VET Providers/Teachers	21
Focus Groups Methodology	21
Participants	21
Tools	21
Procedure	22
Focus Group Description in Each Country	22
Results	24
1. Trends and opportunities	24
2. VET offers/programs available	25
3. Engagement of the authorities/community	26
4. Suggestions/Recommendations	27
Complete Reports	27
Conclusions	29

## Introduction

### EXTOR Project

The Experiential Tourism for Sustainable Rural Development (EXTOR) project aims to foster sustainable development and economic growth in rural areas by promoting experiential forms of tourism and adopting environmentally sustainable practices. It also focuses on enhancing the skills of rural entrepreneurs, creating new multi-actor communication, digital marketing and networking channels, and increasing the capacity of VET (Vocational Education and Training) providers and trainers to adapt their offerings to the evolving needs of the economy and society, thereby strengthening their resilience.

EXTOR's specific objectives include:

- **Encouraging the exchange of successful EU stories and the analysis of VET needs**, promoting environmentally sustainable solutions, and creating new networks and communication channels. These efforts aim to upskill the rural workforce through tailored training in sustainable tourism, empowering rural communities to contribute to local development.
- **Updating VET offerings in rural tourism by designing a common framework** aligned with the changing priorities of the economy and society. This includes enhancing the competencies of VET providers/trainers through a customised training program and toolkit and providing VET learners with opportunities to apply their new skills for better visibility of their products and services.
- **Facilitating access to VET by developing an innovative blended learning program** that accommodates different learning preferences and allows learners to complete training at their own pace. VET providers, guided by a tailored instructional kit, will be able to replicate and adapt the EXTOR training program to meet their learners' needs, supporting ongoing vocational training and improving access to quality jobs in rural areas.

Overall, the project will establish a **common framework for VET renewal**, inspired by successful EU examples and current trends in rural tourism. It will introduce an innovative training program tested with target groups, complemented by a **kit for VET providers**, and create new digital marketing, networking, and communication channels through a tailored e-platform, the EXTOR community, and multi-actor forums. This will contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas by upskilling rural entrepreneurs and fostering stronger EU-wide exchanges and awareness of sustainable rural tourism practices.

Partners in the EXTOR project are:

- |   |                |
|---|----------------|
| 1. Land Impresa sociale s.r.l.                                | <i>Italy</i>   |
| 2. Instituto Para El Fomento Del Desarrollo Y La Formacion SI | <i>Spain</i>   |
| 3. CSI Center For Social Innovation                           | <i>Cyprus</i>  |
| 4. Die Berater Unternehmens Beratungs Gesellschaft MBH        | <i>Austria</i> |
| 5. Olympiaki Epaideftiki Kai Symvouleftiki EPE                | <i>Greece</i>  |
| 6. Einurd   | <i>Iceland</i> |
| 7. ReadLab Brussels   | <i>Belgium</i> |

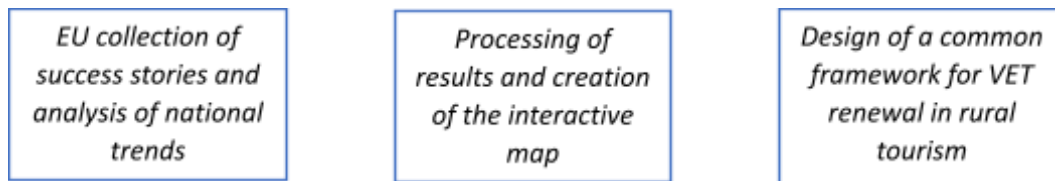
## Work Package 2: Success Stories and Needs Mapping for VET Renewal in Rural Tourism

This phase of the project aims to collect and share success stories in the field of experiential tourism in rural areas across the EU and to update the current VET offerings. This will enable rural entrepreneurs to keep pace with the evolving priorities of the economy and society. Also, it plays a key role in the project by promoting sustainable growth in rural areas and encouraging the dissemination of positive experiential tourism practices. This supports entrepreneurs in enhancing their services and competitiveness. Additionally, it aims to improve VET providers' skills and training programs to boost adaptability, resilience, and sustainability in rural tourism education and practice.

The specific objectives of this phase of the project are to:

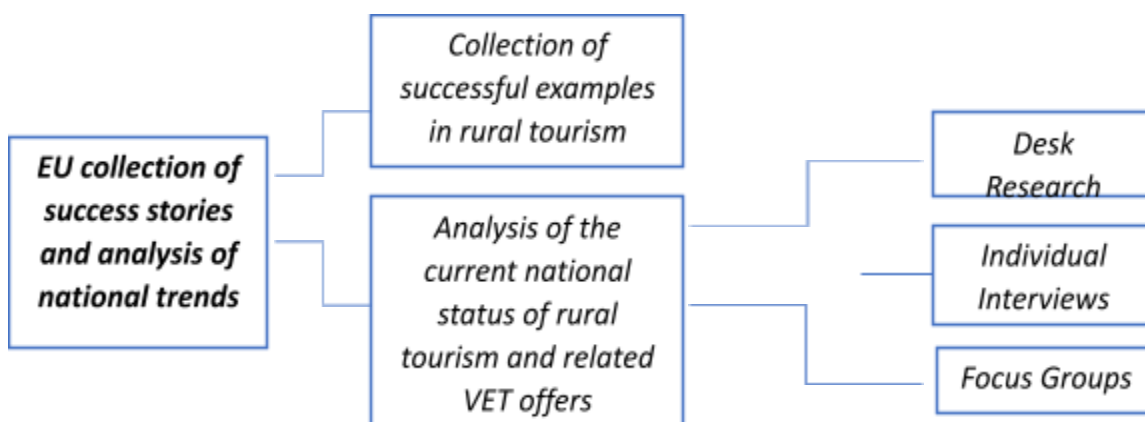
- **Promote the EU exchange of success stories** to encourage the development of experiential tourism in rural areas, by collecting first-hand testimonies from different EU countries and by strengthening their potential outreach through a tailor-made interactive map.
- **Define a common framework for the renewal of VET offer** in rural tourism, based on the results emerged from the direct involvement of the target groups. The framework intends to enable VET providers to adapt to the current economic and societal trends and benefit from the green and digital transitions.
- **Foster the upskilling of rural entrepreneurs**, by carefully analysing their needs and interests, thus transmitting them a feeling of personal value, and enhancing their motivation to participate in the project activities.

To achieve these objectives, EXTOR partners have implemented three key activities:



### EU Collection of Success Stories and Analysis of National Trends

EXTOR partners started by collecting EU success stories and analysing national trends. This activity can be divided into two sub-activities. The first is the collection of success stories, and the second is the analysis of national trends, which can be further divided into three sub-activities. The diagram below shows in detail all the activities and sub-activities.



The **collection of success stories** aimed to gather successful examples of rural tourism from each country to contribute to the EU exchange of good practices and inspire future actions. This process involved individual interviews with a minimum of three representatives from different sub-sectors of experiential tourism per country to ensure a diverse collection. A total of **19 success stories** were collected from all partner countries and are included in the EXTOR interactive map. Each story includes an overview of the initiative, challenges/strengths, funding channels, use of green practices, digitalisation level, key competencies and knowledge needed, and tips and hints.

The [EXTOR Interactive Map](#) can be found on the EXTOR platform and aims to facilitate the exchange of good practices among multiple stakeholders at the EU level. The map is geo-localised and displays all the collected success stories and VET training needs emerged from the analysis of national trends conducted in each partner country, presented in a digital and engaging format. Also, it highlights the diversity of rural tourism initiatives across the EU.

The **analysis of the current national status of rural tourism and related VET offers** was achieved through three sub-activities: *desk research*, *individual interviews with rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals*, and *focus groups with VET providers*. For the focus groups and individual interviews, there was direct involvement of the target groups. VET providers, rural tourism entrepreneurs, and professionals provided valuable insights regarding the current situations, their needs, existing gaps, and their suggestions for improving rural tourism.

### International Report

The aim of this international report is to compile the results from the analysis of the current national status of rural tourism and related VET offers. To achieve this, a summary of the desk research conducted in each country, international interview summaries with rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals, and the results from the focus groups will be presented, along with hyperlinks to the complete reports. Additionally, the methodology of each sub-activity will be explained. The international report will provide comprehensive conclusions, offering an understanding of the current situation in each country, the needs of those involved in rural tourism, and the related VET offers in each country. This will set a basis for the next activities of the project.

## Desk Research

### Main Information and Methodology

Desk research was conducted in all partner countries except Belgium, as previewed by the project. The aim of this activity was to collect information from each country on rural tourism trends, legislation applied, existing structures supporting and promoting rural tourism, funding opportunities, and related VET offers. To achieve this, the desk research consisted of seven key questions designed to gather the necessary information. The questions were as follows:

*1. Does your country have a high level of rural tourism? Is there a variety of rural sectors in your country?*

*2. What national and international legislation exists in your country regarding rural tourism?*

*3. Are there any vocational training programs for rural tourism in your country?*

*4. What is the responsible governing body/institution for supporting rural tourism entrepreneurs/professionals in your country?*

*5. What efforts have been made by different authorities in your country to promote rural tourism?*

*6. In your country are there any funding opportunities for entrepreneurs who wish to start a rural tourism business?*

*7. Do you have any best practices/successful examples regarding rural tourism in your country?*

The desk research questions were carefully selected to gather the information needed. For example, the **first question** aimed to understand the variety of rural tourism activities in each country, presenting the current situation. The **second question** covered the identification of the legislative frameworks regulating rural tourism at both national and international levels, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the legal context. The **third question** was designed to identify the related VET offers in each country specifically for rural tourism, which was a key objective of the research. This helped to determine the educational and training resources available to rural tourism professionals. The **fourth and fifth questions** aimed to identify the main governmental or institutional bodies responsible for supporting rural tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, as well as to gather information on the initiatives and strategies implemented by authorities to enhance rural tourism. The **sixth question** examined more in-depth the availability of financial support and funding opportunities for entrepreneurs wishing to start or expand a rural tourism business. This was crucial for identifying potential resources for aspiring and established entrepreneurs. Lastly, the **seventh question** aimed to highlight successful cases and best

practices in rural tourism that could inspire and guide others. These examples provide valuable insights into what can be achieved in the sector.

All partners conducted extensive research and completed their national reports on desk research between **April and June 2024**. The compiled information provided valuable insights into the current state of rural tourism, identified gaps and opportunities in VET offerings, and informed future strategies to support rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals.

## Results

This report summarises the findings from various countries on rural tourism trends, challenges, and opportunities. It highlights common themes such as the resilience of rural tourism, the growing interest in sustainable and slow tourism, and the importance of vocational training and funding support for rural tourism businesses.

Below is a summary of the main points for Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Austria, Greece, and Iceland:

- **Italy**

Rural tourism, especially agritourism, has remained resilient despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Italy's model of agricultural multifunctionality allowed agritourism to adapt quickly, with 24,515 agritourism recorded in 2021, predominantly in Tuscany and Sicily. Activities include tastings, cultural and recreational experiences, and educational farming. Trends show an increasing preference for slow tourism, off-peak travel, and nature-based activities. Educational farms and social agriculture are on the rise, reflecting a growing interest in organic farming and food transformation. Direct bookings are becoming more popular, emphasising the need for robust online booking systems. Italy's legislation supports rural tourism with over 100 laws covering agritourism and related sectors. Recent regulatory updates aim to address emerging trends. Funding opportunities include the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-27, which supports agritourism diversification. Training programs from institutions like the Scuola Universitaria Europea per il Turismo and projects like the Social Farming initiative offer vocational education in sustainable rural tourism. Examples of success include Agriturismo Bergi in Sicily, which combines organic farming with sustainable tourism.

To access the complete report, click on the hyperlink: [Desk Research - Italy National Report](#).

- **Spain**

Rural tourism in Spain continues to grow, driven by its diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage. Popular regions for rural tourism include Andalusia, Catalonia, Galicia, and Asturias, where activities like hiking, wine tours, and immersion in local traditions attract both domestic and international visitors. Spain offers a variety of rural tourism experiences, such as agricultural, ecotourism, and adventure tourism. Seasonality and economic conditions influence the sector, but government initiatives support its sustainable development. Spain's legal framework for rural tourism includes national and regional laws, as well as adherence to EU regulations on environmental protection. Quality certification standards help ensure the safety and sustainability of services. Vocational training is available through professional courses and government-sponsored programs. Funding for rural tourism comes from EU funds, regional grants, and private investments. Successful examples include the Camino de Santiago, La Rioja's wine tourism, and Sierra Nevada National Park, all of which integrate natural and cultural assets to enhance rural tourism offerings.

To access the complete report, click on the hyperlink: [Desk Research – Spain National Report](#).

- **Cyprus**

Cyprus, traditionally known for its beach tourism, is increasingly embracing rural tourism. In 2022, Cyprus attracted over 3 million tourists, and rural tourism is growing, with overnight stays in agrotourism accommodations rising. The Deputy Ministry of Tourism leads efforts to promote rural tourism through community projects and international marketing. Rural tourism activities include hiking, winery visits, and cultural workshops, supported by national legislation covering rural accommodations. Cyprus does not have dedicated vocational training programs for rural tourism but offers relevant educational courses in tourism and hospitality. Institutions like the Human Resource Development Authority and the Cyprus Sustainable Tourism Initiative provide training and seminars. The Deputy Ministry of Tourism also promotes rural tourism through strategic initiatives and digital platforms. Funding opportunities include grants for revitalising rural areas and supporting experiential workshops. Successful examples include Agros village and Pano Lefkara, which use cultural heritage and local craftsmanship to attract tourists.

To access the complete report, click on the hyperlink: [Desk Research – Cyprus National Report](#).

- **Austria**

Rural tourism plays a significant role in Austria, where 78% of the population lives in rural areas. Austria's rural tourism sector is diverse, offering farm stays, agritourism, and outdoor activities like hiking and skiing. Popular destinations include East Tyrol and Salzkammergut, known for their farm stays and scenic landscapes. Each Austrian federal state offers unique tourism experiences, often emphasising local culinary traditions and sustainable practices. Austria's legal framework for rural tourism includes national and provincial regulations on tourism and land use. The country's vocational training system provides a wide range of programs in hospitality, agriculture, and environmental management, delivered by institutions such as WIFI and BFI Vienna. Austria promotes rural tourism through the Rural Development Program and the LEADER initiative, which supports local innovation in rural areas. Funding comes from EU and national funds, including the CAP Strategy Plan for 2023-2027, which focuses on sustainability and biodiversity. Notable examples of success include Zell am See and Alpbachtal, which combine traditional hospitality with sustainable practices.

To access the complete report, click on the hyperlink: [Desk Research – Austria National Report](#).

- **Greece**

Greece is expanding its focus on rural tourism through its 2023 campaign, "A life-changing experience," which emphasises the authenticity of rural life beyond traditional beach tourism. The Greek National Tourism Organisation (GNTO) allocates a significant portion of its budget to promoting rural tourism experiences, including agritourism, cultural excursions, and gastronomy. However, service quality across regions varies, presenting challenges for the sector. Rural tourism in Greece is governed by national laws that address various forms of tourism, including agritourism, ecotourism, and geotourism. Private and membership-based initiatives provide vocational training, with some public programs available. Key institutions like the Ministry of Rural Development and Food support rural tourism through funding programs like the LEADER initiative, which focuses on linking primary agricultural activities with tourism. Successful rural tourism projects include agritourism farms like Klio's honey farm and networks such as Open Farm, promoting local agricultural products and rural experiences.



To access the complete report, click on the hyperlink: [Desk Research – Greece National Report](#).

- **Iceland**

Rural tourism is vital to Iceland's tourism sector, supported by small family-run businesses offering unique services like wellness spas and paragliding. Although dominated by large operators from Reykjavík, rural areas attract significant tourist attention, especially following the 2010 volcanic eruption. Regions like South Iceland, East Iceland, and the Westfjords each offer distinct attractions, such as geothermal areas and scenic fishing villages. Iceland's rural tourism is regulated by national and international laws focused on environmental protection and sustainable development. Vocational training for rural tourism is provided by regional marketing offices and the Icelandic Tourism Cluster, which emphasizes sustainable and digital tourism practices. Key institutions like the Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs and the Icelandic Tourist Board oversee rural tourism development, offering funding through the Regional Development Fund and grants for cultural and business projects. Notable successes include the Westfjords Region and the Arctic Coast Way, which have used their natural and cultural assets to grow rural tourism sustainably.

To access the complete report, click on the hyperlink: [Iceland – National Report](#)

# Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Rural Tourism Professionals

## Interviews Methodology

The individual interviews with rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals were conducted from **April to June 2024**, in all partner countries except Belgium. The aim was to collect information from the direct target group to help us analyse the educational gaps, needs, and interests of rural entrepreneurs and rural tourism professionals, along with practical suggestions and recommendations for improvement.

## Participants

The participants included a minimum of 10 entrepreneurs and 10 professionals in rural tourism in each country. Rural tourism entrepreneurs are defined as participants who own a business in rural areas across various sectors, including rural tourism, sustainable tourism, experiential tourism, ecotourism, agrotourism, farm tourism, sport and adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and regenerative tourism. Rural tourism professionals are participants employed in any position within these sectors. For instance, rural tourism entrepreneurs could be the owners of farms, wineries, small stores, accommodation facilities, or any other type of business within these categories. Rural tourism professionals could be employees working in such businesses in rural areas.

The criteria for participant selection were the availability and willingness of individuals who fit the defined target groups to take part in the research. Consequently, participants from both target groups may not represent the full range of tourism experiences in each category and area. Instead, they reflect the availability of individuals who had the time and interest to participate in the research and project. In some cases, researchers compiled a list of suitable candidates based on their professional networks and internet research, then contacted them and assessed their interest in participating. In other cases, the snowball sampling method was used, where initially interested participants recommended others who fit the target groups.

In total, **124 people** participated in the research across all involved countries. Among them were 60 rural tourism entrepreneurs and 64 tourism professionals. This diverse group provided a wide range of perspectives and insights, contributing significantly to the understanding of the current status of rural tourism.

## Tools

The tools used were two separate questionnaires: one for rural tourism entrepreneurs and one for rural tourism professionals. The questionnaires had some common questions but also some different ones, tailored to collect data based on the target group.

The *Individual Interviews with Rural Entrepreneurs Questionnaire* consisted of 15 questions, all aimed at gathering insights on their situation, needs, educational gaps/needs, and recommendations. The first four questions gathered information on the **profile of the business**, such as the launch year, size, sector, and type of business. The next two questions examined the **sources of funding** used to start the business and awareness of European or national funding opportunities, which were important to determine the entrepreneurs' familiarity with these opportunities. The seventh question identified the **challenges** faced by the entrepreneurs since starting their businesses. The eighth question addressed the **sustainability** of their businesses and the measures taken to ensure sustainability, highlighting this critical parameter. The

following four questions were related to **VET programs**. For example, they were asked whether they had ever participated in a VET program related to rural tourism or received any personal or professional development training. They were also asked if they had provided any training to their employees, if they were aware of VET programs or other professional training offered in their country related to rural tourism, and if they believed it would be useful to receive professional development training in some suggested topics. To examine the **gaps**, they believe exist in their countries regarding rural tourism, participants were asked if they recognized any gaps and, if so, which of the options provided they considered as gaps. The last two questions search for their **recommendations** for improving rural tourism in their country and any other kind of **support** they would like to receive as rural tourism entrepreneurs. These two final questions were open-ended, allowing participants to elaborate as much as they wished. All other questions were multiple-choice, with provided options, but they always included an "other" option for participants to express their opinions and ideas freely if they were not covered by the given options. The multiple-choice options were selected after extensive research.

To access the complete questionnaire, click on the hyperlink: [Individual Interviews with Rural Entrepreneurs Questionnaire](#)

The *Individual Interviews with Rural Professionals Questionnaire* included 10 questions. Similar to the rural entrepreneurs' questionnaire, it started with questions about their **profile**, such as the sector and type of business they work in, their profession, and the duration of their involvement in rural tourism. A question on the **challenges** they face in their role as rural tourism professionals followed. The next two questions examined whether they had ever participated in a **VET program** related to their profession or received any personal or professional development training. Additionally, they were asked if they thought it would be useful to receive professional development training and, if so, in which of the suggested topics. The eighth question focused on the **gaps** they believe exist in rural tourism in their country. Similar to the rural tourism entrepreneurs' questionnaire, the last two questions asked about their **recommendations** for improving rural tourism and the **support** they need.

To access the complete questionnaire, click on the hyperlink: [Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Professionals Questionnaire](#)

### Procedure

The interviews were conducted in various ways to ensure environmental protection and the effectiveness of the research. These methods included **in-person** interviews, online via **email** or **video calls**, and via **phone calls**, depending on the distance and convenience for participants.

A crucial issue to address was the protection of personal data. For in-person interviews, participants signed a consent form at the time of the interview. For other types of interviews, questionnaires were provided in an online format. Therefore, the online questionnaires included a disclaimer stating that by filling out the form, participants consented to our privacy policy in accordance with the GDPR. Similarly, for phone interviews, the researcher filled out the online questionnaire based on the participant's responses, with the last question confirming their consent to our privacy policy.

The professional channels of the partners were utilised to recruit participants. In some cases, personal research networks were used, or potential participants were contacted after research was conducted to identify suitable candidates. This approach ensured a diverse and representative sample, contributing to the comprehensive nature of the study.

The procedure followed was consistent across countries and for different types of interviews. The preparation phase included translating the questionnaires and consent forms into the respective languages. Additionally, the questionnaires were converted into online formats such as Google Forms or Microsoft Forms. The next step involved identifying participants through the previously mentioned methods, followed by contacting them via phone calls or emails. These initial contacts introduced the project's aims, objectives, and interview process, along with assurances of GDPR compliance and data privacy.

Depending on the type of interview, the following procedure varied. For phone interviews, the interviewer introduced the project and then asked the questions from the questionnaire, noting down the respondents' answers. In email interviews, the initial email included the introductory information and a link to the online questionnaire, allowing participants to complete it at their own pace. For face-to-face interviews, initial contact was made by phone to set an appointment, and the interview was conducted at the business location using printed questionnaires and consent forms. All interviews concluded with expressions of gratitude and a call to action for the next steps of the project.

### Description of Interviews in Each Country

The interviews for the EXTOR project were conducted across six countries—Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Austria, Greece, and Iceland—focusing on rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals. Each country followed specific procedures tailored to local contexts, though several common themes emerged, including participant engagement, interview challenges, and the type of feedback received.

- **Italy** conducted 21 interviews in Palermo and across Sicily, focusing on rural tourism. Participants included entrepreneurs from farms and agritourism businesses, as well as professionals like nature guides and tour operators. Interviews, conducted by phone, were handled by project managers familiar with the project's objectives. Participants were highly engaged, with most expressing interest in future project phases.
- In **Spain**, 20 interviews were conducted via phone and online between April and June 2024. Participants included entrepreneurs and rural tourism professionals, such as chambermaids and oenologists. The professionals voiced challenges related to digital skills, infrastructure, and professional development. Although logistical challenges arose, including technical issues and language barriers, participants found the survey comprehensive and aligned with their needs.
- **Cyprus** completed 21 interviews through a mix of online, phone, and in-person methods. Participants, ranging from winery owners to accommodation operators, were contacted via email and phone. The process involved informing participants about privacy measures and the project's objectives. While online participation started slow, phone and in-person methods helped increase response rates. Overall, participants were enthusiastic and willing to engage.
- In **Austria**, 17 interviews took place in several rural regions via video calls, phone, and in person. Participants included both rural tourism professionals and entrepreneurs in various sectors like wineries and farm tourism. Challenges mainly involved recruiting participants, especially rural entrepreneurs, though most who participated showed strong engagement.
- In **Greece**, 23 interviews were conducted using online questionnaires during scheduled phone calls. Participants included both entrepreneurs and professionals from diverse rural tourism sub-sectors. Though scheduling was a challenge, once interviews were set, the process went smoothly, with participants showing strong commitment despite occasional interruptions.

- **Iceland** conducted 22 online interviews in May 2024. Many participants were already connected to local tourism support systems. Challenges arose due to the busy tourism season in May, resulting in a low initial response rate. Persistent follow-up, however, helped ensure participation. Overall, the project garnered useful feedback and high interest across all countries, despite varying logistical challenges.

## Common Results Across Countries: Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs

Across Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Austria, Greece, and Iceland, rural tourism entrepreneurs share many challenges and opportunities as they navigate the evolving landscape of rural tourism. Key themes that emerge consistently include the significance of sustainability, funding challenges, professional development, community involvement, digital transformation, infrastructure limitations, and regulatory concerns. The following sections provide an overview of these common findings:

### 1. Entrepreneurial Motivation and Business Types

Rural tourism businesses in all countries surveyed exhibit a wide range of motivations and business models. In each country, entrepreneurs were driven by personal interests, family legacies, or a desire to enhance the local environment and culture. For example, in Italy, many entrepreneurs converted family farms into agritourism ventures, while in Cyprus, agrotourism dominated, with businesses often focusing on farm-based tourism and family-operated ventures.

Sectoral Involvement was diverse across the countries, although rural tourism and agritourism dominated. Cultural and experiential tourism was significant in Italy, Spain, Cyprus, and Austria, while eco-tourism was more prevalent in Iceland and Spain. The scale of businesses was predominantly micro-sized, with a few small businesses employing up to 49 people, as seen in Austria and Greece. Larger-scale businesses were rare, reflecting the rural and often family-operated nature of these ventures.

### 2. Funding Challenges

Entrepreneurs in all countries faced significant challenges related to *funding*. The majority of businesses relied on personal investment to start and sustain their ventures. Bank loans were a secondary source of funding, particularly in Iceland and Spain, though entrepreneurs often cited difficulties in accessing grants due to complex application processes.

European Union (EU) and national funding were accessed by a portion of entrepreneurs, especially in Italy, Spain, and Greece. However, the complex regulatory requirements and competition for these funds limited the number of businesses that successfully secured them. Awareness of funding opportunities was uneven, with Italy and Greece showing relatively high levels of awareness, while Iceland, Austria, and Cyprus revealed gaps in knowledge. A common concern was the lack of adequate financial support, especially for green or digital transitions. Entrepreneurs in Iceland and Austria reported limited government grants or EU funding, whereas Italian entrepreneurs benefited slightly more from Rural Development Programme (RDP) measures.

### 3. Sustainability and Green Practices

Sustainability was a prominent focus across the countries, but the level of engagement with sustainable and regenerative tourism varied. In Italy, for instance, there was significant emphasis on agricultural

biodiversity and environmental preservation, whereas Spain and Cyprus saw more focus on eco-tourism and community involvement. In Iceland and Austria, entrepreneurs implemented green practices like renewable energy and eco-friendly operations as part of their business models. Despite these efforts, many entrepreneurs noted gaps in support for green transitions, particularly in funding and infrastructural investment. Sustainable tourism training and professional development were desired by entrepreneurs in every country, reflecting a widespread interest in eco-conscious practices.

#### **4. Professional Development and Training Needs**

A significant challenge identified by entrepreneurs across all countries was the lack of access to specialised training and vocational education and training (VET) programs. Most respondents had a strong interest in training related to digital marketing, business management, and sustainable tourism practices, but awareness of available programs was low. For example, in Greece and Cyprus, less than half of the respondents knew about VET programs available to them, whereas Austrian and Icelandic entrepreneurs were slightly better informed, although they also reported gaps. Digital transformation training was a key priority for entrepreneurs, particularly in Spain, Cyprus, and Greece, where there was a strong demand for upskilling in e-commerce, social media marketing, and video creation. The lack of digital skills and resources was a common barrier to growth, limiting the entrepreneurs' ability to reach a broader, global audience.

#### **5. Community Involvement and Cultural Preservation**

Across all countries, community involvement played a vital role in the success of rural tourism businesses. Entrepreneurs in Spain, Italy, and Cyprus, in particular, emphasised the importance of working closely with local communities to offer authentic, culturally rich experiences to tourists. By engaging local producers, artisans, and farmers, businesses were able to create a more immersive tourist experience while helping to preserve local culture and traditions. In some countries, such as Italy and Cyprus, there was an active effort to involve local communities in sustainable practices, whether through educational workshops, agricultural tours, or support for local products. However, in regions like Iceland and Austria, entrepreneurs cited low community engagement as a barrier to growth, especially in more isolated areas.

#### **6. Infrastructure and Depopulation**

Inadequate infrastructure and rural depopulation were major obstacles for rural tourism across all countries. Entrepreneurs in Italy, Spain, and Greece highlighted issues with poor transportation links, lack of internet connectivity, and insufficient basic amenities like electricity and water. These challenges made it difficult to attract tourists, particularly in remote areas where these services are not well-developed. Depopulation was a specific concern in Austria, Cyprus, and Greece, where entrepreneurs struggled to find qualified personnel and maintain the human resources necessary for business operations. The outflow of younger generations from rural areas, combined with limited access to skilled workers, created significant operational challenges. Icelandic entrepreneurs echoed similar sentiments, calling for policies that would improve transportation infrastructure and support rural repopulation.

#### **7. Regulatory Environment**

The regulatory environment varied across countries but was often cited as a challenge, particularly in terms of bureaucratic hurdles. Entrepreneurs in Spain, Austria, and Greece described the regulatory framework as cumbersome, with complex requirements around environmental standards, tourism certification, and funding applications. In Spain, for instance, while regulations ensure high quality and sustainability, they were seen as a barrier to business operations. Similarly, in Italy and Cyprus, entrepreneurs called for a more supportive regulatory environment that would streamline bureaucratic processes, especially around funding applications, human resource management, and agricultural operations. Austrian entrepreneurs requested less bureaucracy concerning organic agriculture and human resources.

## 8. Market Trends and Changing Tourist Preferences

In nearly all countries, entrepreneurs observed a shift in tourist preferences toward more authentic and experiential forms of tourism. Travellers were increasingly seeking experiences that connected them with nature, local culture, and sustainable practices. This shift presented both opportunities and challenges, as businesses needed to continuously innovate and adapt their services to meet these changing preferences. In Italy and Spain, for example, experiential tourism was increasingly popular, with tourists showing interest in local food experiences, farm stays, and eco-friendly accommodations. Similarly, in Iceland, rural tourism entrepreneurs catered to growing demand for eco-conscious and adventure tourism, although low demand in certain rural areas remained a concern.

### Common Results Across Countries: Rural Tourism Professionals

Across all surveyed countries (Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Austria, Greece, and Iceland), rural tourism professionals report a variety of challenges that significantly impact their operations. These common issues include:

#### 1. Challenges Faced by Rural Tourism Professionals

- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** A recurrent problem is poor infrastructure, including roads, transportation networks, and basic services like electricity, water, and internet. In Italy, 63.6% of professionals cite inadequate infrastructure as a primary challenge, similar to Spain and Greece, where issues such as deficient basic services and poor transportation limit accessibility and quality of service. In Iceland, the problem is compounded by extreme weather conditions, leading to poor road maintenance, which impacts access to work. Austria also reports that inadequate infrastructure, noted by half of the respondents, constrains rural tourism development.

- **Financial Strain and Lack of Support:** Lack of financial backing is a significant concern for rural tourism professionals. In Cyprus, financial support is deemed inadequate by half of the respondents, while in Spain and Greece, rural tourism professionals call for increased resources and promotional policies. Financial constraints hinder the ability to invest in necessary services or marketing efforts, which would otherwise enhance visibility and attract tourists. Icelandic respondents add that high living costs and insufficient financial aid, especially for institutions like museums, create significant operational challenges.

- **Depopulation and Workforce Shortages:** Many rural areas are facing depopulation, which leads to a shortage of skilled workers, as seen in Spain and Greece. This demographic challenge leaves professionals struggling to maintain their services due to a lack of artisans, carpenters, and other essential workers, particularly in regions like Sicily, Italy. In Austria, professionals cite a lack of respect for tourism workers and low salaries as additional factors that discourage potential employees from joining the sector.

- **Digital Transition Barriers:** Across most countries, professionals express concern over their ability to adapt to the digital transition, which is seen as crucial for improving tourism operations and promotion. In Italy, 18.2% highlight the need for better support in digital adaptation, and similar concerns are raised in Spain, Austria, and Iceland. Cyprus also reports that while there is an interest in digital marketing and e-commerce training, there is limited support for such transitions.

## 2. Vocational Training and Educational Gaps

- **Lack of Training Programs:** Another significant challenge is the insufficient availability of vocational education and training (VET) programs tailored to rural tourism. In Spain, Austria, and Iceland, professionals note that they lack access to specialized training programs, particularly in areas like digital marketing, experiential tourism, and sustainable practices. In Italy, even though 90% of respondents have attended some form of vocational training, they express a desire for additional education in ecotourism practices, cultural tourism, and sustainable tourism. The demand for further training in areas such as video marketing, digital transitions, and EU funding norms is also a key theme in Cyprus and Greece.

- **Interest in Skill Development:** Despite the lack of educational programs, there is widespread interest in further skill development across all countries. Many professionals wish to acquire knowledge in areas like sustainable and regenerative tourism, digital marketing, and experiential tourism. In Austria, six respondents seek training in sustainable tourism practices, while in Iceland, 75% express interest in learning more about rural tourism and sustainable tourism concepts. Professionals in Greece, Cyprus, and Spain echo these sentiments, particularly in their desire for training in digital marketing, e-commerce, and ecotourism.

## 3. Sustainability and Experiential Tourism as Growing Trends

- **Shift Towards Sustainability:** A key finding across countries is the growing importance of sustainable and regenerative tourism. In Italy, two respondents are directly involved in sustainable and regenerative tourism, while in Iceland, seven out of 12 professionals work in sustainable tourism. In Spain and Greece, professionals also recognize sustainability as a significant trend, seeing it as an opportunity to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive tourism landscape. Cyprus, similarly, reflects a strong interest in ecotourism and sustainable practices, with professionals advocating for more thematic parks and year-round tourism promotion.

- **Experiential and Cultural Tourism:** The demand for authentic and immersive experiences is increasing, with rural tourism professionals in several countries focusing on experiential and cultural tourism. In Italy, 45.5% of respondents work in experiential tourism, while in Cyprus, five professionals are involved in experiential tourism. In Iceland, experiential tourism, cultural tourism, and farm tourism are gaining traction, as seen from the diverse business models that combine elements like accommodation, farming,



and cultural experiences. Austria also sees a growing demand for adventure and sports tourism, reflecting a broader trend toward offering more interactive and engaging tourist activities.

#### 4. Policy Recommendations for Sector Improvement

Across countries, rural tourism professionals offer a range of recommendations aimed at improving the sector, including:

- **Improving Infrastructure:** Professionals in all countries advocate for enhanced infrastructure as a priority for improving rural tourism. In Italy, professionals call for better transportation and communication networks, while in Iceland, improvements in road maintenance and public transport are seen as essential for accessing rural areas. Similarly, respondents in Spain and Greece stress the need for investments in basic services and transportation to improve the tourist experience.
- **Financial and Bureaucratic Support:** Many professionals call for greater financial support and streamlined bureaucratic processes to ease the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In Cyprus and Spain, professionals specifically request less bureaucratic red tape in accessing state support, while Icelandic respondents ask for financial assistance to help counteract the high cost of living and operational expenses in rural areas. Austrian professionals suggest increasing salaries to attract skilled workers and boosting financial support for small businesses.
- **Promotion and Marketing Efforts:** Better promotion of rural tourism is a recurring theme across countries. In Cyprus and Greece, professionals emphasize the need for stronger international marketing campaigns to raise awareness of rural tourism offerings. Icelandic respondents advocate for improved advertising and digital promotion strategies to reach a wider audience. In Austria and Italy, there are calls for increased visibility and participation in international fairs to better promote rural tourism businesses.
- **Training and Education Initiatives:** Many professionals suggest that more investment is needed in education and training programs tailored to the specific needs of rural tourism. This includes courses in digital marketing, sustainable tourism, and tourism experience management, as well as support for digital transitions. Austrian professionals propose expanding language courses and offering psychological counselling to tourism workers, while Icelandic professionals recommend introducing more diverse educational opportunities to fill existing knowledge gaps in the sector.

#### Complete Reports

To access the complete reports of Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Professionals, click on the hyperlinks:

Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Professionals: [Italy – National Report](#)

Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Professionals: [Spain – National Report](#)

Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Professionals: [Cyprus – National Report](#)

Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Professionals: [Austria – National Report](#)

Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Professionals: [Greece – National Report](#)

Individual Interviews with Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs & Professionals: [Iceland – National Report](#)



## Focus Groups with VET Providers/Teachers

### Focus Groups Methodology

Focus groups were conducted in each partner country, apart from Belgium, from **April to June 2024**.

A focus group is a research method involving a small group of people who answer specific questions and discuss a specific topic, concept, or product in a moderated setting. The purpose is to gather insights into participants' opinions, attitudes, and experiences.

### Participants

The participants were VET providers and teachers from the public and private sectors, offering training and education in rural entrepreneurship and tourism sectors.

Similar to the individual interviews, participant selection was based on the availability and willingness of individuals within the defined target group to take part in the research. As a result, VET respondents may not fully represent the variety of tourism-related training programs in the area. Instead, they reflect the availability of individuals who had the time and interest to participate in the research and project. In addition, like the interviews, researchers identify potential participants fitting the target group after conducting research through their professional networks and the internet. These individuals were then contacted to determine their interest in participating. Open calls for participation were also used.

The direct involvement of the participants in the VET sector provides a more detailed understanding of the training and education services available in each country. This first-hand knowledge was valuable in conducting a thorough analysis of the current state of VET in rural tourism and identifying specific areas for improvement. In total, **36 participants** were involved in the focus groups/interviews.

### Tools

The *Focus Group Questionnaire* was used to gather essential information from the participants. It consisted of eight questions, with four being multiple-choice and four open-ended. As with the individual interviews, the options provided for the multiple-choice questions were carefully selected based on prior research to ensure their relevance and comprehensiveness. Each multiple-choice question included an "Other" option, allowing participants to elaborate further or add additional insights.

The **first two questions** were open-ended and aimed to explore trends in rural tourism within each country, as well as identify the most popular rural tourism sectors. Participants were also asked whether there is potential for creating additional job opportunities in this sector.

The **third and fourth questions** focused specifically on vocational education and training related to rural tourism. The third question, a multiple-choice one, inquired about the availability of rural tourism-related VET programs in their country, offering several options that covered key topics in rural tourism. The fourth question, an open-ended one, sought information on any specific programs that support the professional development of rural tourism professionals.

The **fifth question** was multiple-choice and addressed the efforts made by various authorities in each country to promote rural tourism. The **sixth question**, also multiple-choice, aimed to identify gaps in VET training provision for rural tourism.

The final two questions were designed to gather information on the types of support that would benefit VET providers for rural tourism (multiple-choice question) and to ask for recommendations for enhancing the VET offerings in their country (open-ended question).

To access the full questionnaire, click on the hyperlink: [Focus Group Questionnaire](#)

## Procedure

Similar to the individual interviews, the focus groups could be conducted in various ways. It could be in-person with all participants together in one focus group or divided into multiple smaller focus groups. Additionally, focus groups could be held online using video tools such as Microsoft Teams. In some cases, individual interviews were conducted instead of focus groups due to difficulties in engaging participants. These interviews could be conducted online or via phone.

Participants were recruited through partners' professional channels and open calls for participation. Interested participants filled in an online registration form, which collected important information such as name, surname, country, region, profession, position, sector, email address, GDPR consent, and whether they wished to receive future information and news about the project or other events organised by the group. For in-person focus groups, participants signed an attendance list that also included data protection information.

Initial contact with interested participants was made by phone or email, providing a brief description of the project, an overview of the focus group/interview structure, and information about the timing and venue of the session. For online or phone interviews, potential participants were contacted by phone, and either a phone interview was conducted, or a link to the online questionnaire was provided. Issues regarding the protection of personal data and GDPR compliance were also addressed. Participants were reminded that the information they provide would be completely anonymous, confidential, and used solely to develop materials for the project.

During the preparation stage, the focus group questionnaire was translated into native languages and converted to digital form if needed. The procedure for focus groups/interviews included a brief introduction to the EXTOR project, along with its objectives and activities, and the purpose of the focus group/interview. After addressing consent issues, the main discussion took place, followed by a summary of the main points and thanking the participants. Participants were asked if they wished to be further informed and involved in the next stages of the project.

## Focus Group Description in Each Country

### Italy

In Italy, focus groups were conducted through telephone interviews and video calls in Palermo from April to August 2024. Eight professionals from various vocational education and training (VET) backgrounds participated, including representatives from Associazione Italiana Turismo Responsabile, the European University School of Tourism, and local educational institutions. The interviews, led by project managers from EXTOR, covered the project's goals, interview questions, and follow-up actions. While some participants expressed great interest, particularly in rural tourism and training opportunities, others, especially traditional VET providers, were less engaged due to a lack of specific programs for rural tourism in Italy.

### Spain

In Spain, an online focus group was held in May 2024, in Valladolid, with three VET professionals specializing in rural tourism, digitalization, and regional development. The session lasted an hour and was led by two facilitators with expertise in innovative training, learning methodologies, and marketing. The group discussed the EXTOR project and future steps, with all participants actively sharing their views. The discussion was lively, and participants engaged deeply with the topics, often addressing issues scheduled for later discussions.

### **Cyprus**

In Cyprus, six online interviews took place between April and June 2024 due to difficulties in gathering participants for a single focus group. The participants, consisting of VET teachers and trainers in the tourism sector, were interviewed using Microsoft Teams, telephone calls, and online questionnaires. Interviews covered topics related to sustainable development, hotel management, and experiential tourism. The focus group process was adjusted to accommodate individual preferences, with questionnaires translated into Greek and delivered via Microsoft Forms. Despite the challenges, participants contributed valuable insights into the VET landscape for tourism.

### **Austria**

Austria hosted two online focus groups and one individual interview at the end of April 2024, lasting an hour each. Five VET trainers from various regions participated, representing Lower Austria, Burgenland, Upper Austria, and Tirol. The sessions were managed by a project manager from die Berater, who is responsible for the EXTOR project. The discussions focused on rural tourism and the questionnaire provided for the project. Participants showed a strong interest in future developments and actively engaged in the discussions.

### **Greece**

In Greece, three focus groups were conducted in May 2024, both online and in person in Krestena. Each session lasted two to three hours and included VET providers and trainers with experience in rural tourism, sustainable tourism, and EU-funded rural development projects. Participants, many from the private sector, discussed various aspects of rural tourism, including agricultural entrepreneurship, ecotourism, and cultural tourism. The sessions were led by two facilitators, with active participation from all attendees who were eager to contribute their knowledge and perspectives on rural tourism.

### **Iceland**

An online focus group was conducted in Iceland via Zoom in May 2024, with seven participants from rural tourism marketing offices and educational institutions. The 40-minute session was facilitated by Magdalena, an expert in tourism development. Despite the busy tourist season, the group engaged in a concise discussion about rural tourism trends, existing VET programs, gaps in offerings, and recommendations for improving VET services. Participants were familiar with each other, which enhanced the fruitful exchange of ideas.

In summary, these focus groups across six countries provided valuable insights into rural tourism's VET landscape, with varying levels of engagement depending on regional circumstances and existing

educational programs. Each session contributed to the EXTOR project's understanding of how to improve vocational education for rural tourism professionals.

## Results

The results were presented across four main sectors: trends and opportunities in each country, VET offers and programs available, engagement of authorities and communities, and finally, suggestions and recommendations.

### 1. Trends and opportunities

There is a growing interest in **sustainable tourism**, **ecotourism**, and minimizing environmental impact across all partner countries. In Italy, this includes guided nature tours, back-to-the-land experiences, and bike tours. In Iceland, companies are increasingly focusing on practicing sustainable and regenerative tourism and connecting with local communities. In Greece, it was noted that the global pandemic and climate change are influencing travel preferences, leading people to seek lifestyle changes and embrace sustainable behaviours and healthy eating habits. In Austria, numerous initiatives include projects like traditional timber construction, adaptive reuse of historic buildings, digital innovations, and climate adaptation efforts.

**Agritourism** is a common trend in Italy, Cyprus, and Austria. In Sicily, it is a popular sector featuring local cuisine and winemaking experiences, integration of rural life, and creating job opportunities in animal husbandry and related production. In Cyprus, many rural tourism accommodations are becoming closer to nature and farms. In Austria, WWOOFing combined with volunteering is a trend, and agritourism opportunities are mainly located in East Tyrol and Salzkammergut, creating job opportunities in tourism and agriculture. Popular tourism sectors in Austria also include holidays in nature, and in mountains and meadows, with Zillertal as a prime example. The potential for agritourism was also mentioned in the region of Western Greece.

**Experiential tourism** was mentioned as a trend in Italy, Spain, and Cyprus, and presents opportunities in Western Greece. In Sicily, hands-on activities are offered, allowing tourists to engage in local traditions and lifestyles, enhancing their travel experience. Accommodation units in Cyprus offer additional experiences like winery visits, hiking, and showcasing local organic products, with many featuring local items like jams, cured meats and other items related to Cypriot culture.

**Outdoor activities** were highlighted in Italy, Austria, and Iceland. In the region of Sicily, these include hiking, cycling, and nature exploration, promoting engagement with local communities and participation in social and cultural projects. In Austria, adventure tourism with animals is on the rise, and while skiing remains popular, it is becoming less so due to climate change. Iceland is seeing a rise in activity-based tourism, focusing on hiking, skiing, and snow-related experiences.

In addition, **slow tourism** is becoming popular in Italy, Spain, and Austria, emphasizing a leisurely travel pace that allows for a deeper connection with local culture, nature, and lifestyle fostering a stronger connection with the region.

Different trends are also evident across partner countries. For example, in Sicily, **root tourism** is a trend, focusing on exploring ancestral heritage and cultural roots, offering emotionally enriching experiences through personal and historical connections. Rural tourism in Sicily is also expanding throughout the year, offering businesses more opportunities to attract visitors and enhance economic sustainability. It was also mentioned that in Italy, trends vary by geographic and cultural region. In Spain, there is a move towards intermediate destinations over traditional ones, with increasing popularity of itinerant destinations and coastal villages. Gamification, murals, and astrotourism are also emerging trends. In Cyprus, wine tourism is popular, while in Austria, focus group participants listed wellness tourism as a trend. They also observed a shift from long-term planning to spontaneous trips, with a growing interest in last-minute offers and all-inclusive services. In Iceland, there is growing demand for luxury services and accommodations in rural tourism, and there is a trend towards building more hotels and investing in digital solutions for tourism.

## 2. VET offers/programs available

Across all partner countries except Spain and Cyprus, VET programs related to marketing and communication, applicable to rural tourism and tourism in general, were identified. Specifically, in Iceland, participants mentioned that VET programs mainly consist of short-term, ad hoc programs focused on marketing and communication. They also mentioned that there is a lack of formal education and emphasis on marketing, management, and communication skills, as evidenced by the high demand for courses in these areas by businesses. In Iceland, generally, programs are set up based on specific needs or demands from tourism businesses.

In addition, programs related to sustainable practices were reported to exist in all partner countries except Spain and Iceland. In Cyprus, it was noted that some companies provide training on implementing sustainable practices for hotels and wineries. There is also a small focus on agritourism and sustainability in hotel management, with some programs offered by the Deputy Ministry of Tourism and small organizations.

In Austria and Greece, programs related to green practices were also identified, while in Italy, courses related to tourism management and ICT were mentioned. It is worth noting that in Greece, the above-mentioned programs are often linked with more general VET programs. In Spain, some available programs are related to tour guides, and there was a suggestion that training for free tours should be implemented. Additionally, in Greece, some specific VET training programs were mentioned, which can be accessed in the full report.

Regarding programs that support the professional development of rural tourism professionals, participants in Italy highlighted a lack of specialized training programs in Sicily, although some programs can be found in the full Italy report. The same applies to Cyprus, where some participants noted that there are general tourism programs rather than ones specifically for rural tourism, some mentioned a lack of programs, while others were unsure. In Austria, it was noted that these programs are provided by tourism schools, VET providers, and businesses in the form of internal projects. Tourism associations also support such programs.

Perceived gaps in VET training provision for rural tourism in Italy, Cyprus, and Austria include insufficient focus on sustainable practices, lack of support for promoting rural tourism VET programs, gaps in technology and digital skills, and limited training opportunities. In Italy, it was mentioned that while some training opportunities are available, they are limited and often do not address the specific needs of rural and experiential tourism professionals. Main obstacles in Spain include limited training opportunities, a lack of innovative training beyond basic management, and insufficient involvement from local authorities.

### 3. Engagement of the authorities/community

In response to the question about the efforts made by authorities to promote rural tourism, respondents from Italy, Cyprus, and Austria mentioned informational and educational campaigns, such as seminars to inform about rural tourism, development of infrastructure, promotion of policies supporting rural tourism, and the creation of informational resources. Additionally, in Italy, some participants mentioned that there is a desire from authorities to support collaboration and network creation at the local level. However, other participants stated that there are no efforts are being made.

In Iceland, efforts by national and local authorities focus on promoting rural tourism through policies supporting rural solutions and infrastructure development. There is also an emphasis on supporting small tourism companies rather than larger ones. Funding for training programs is seen as crucial, but there are challenges in adapting courses to the needs of companies and providing sufficient funds.

In Greece, participants noted that local authorities and chambers of commerce periodically create informative materials and publish articles to promote rural tourism. Over the past five years, municipalities have shifted focus to using funds for cultural activities and organizing events that reveal the character of each region, highlighting local food products. Furthermore, the Developmental Company of Olympia (ANOL) in Elis has taken on the role of Destination Management and Marketing Organization (DMMO). ANOL's objectives include providing scientific, advisory, and technical support to municipalities on promoting and marketing destinations, creating and implementing tourism policies, studying and monitoring the upgrading and modernization of infrastructure, and preparing strategic plans for sustainable tourism development and management. Infrastructure developments in Elis, expected by 2025, aim to improve accessibility from Athens and positively impact rural development.

In Spain, it was identified that marketing and communication by provinces lack strategy and monitoring and need significant improvement. Moreover, few improvements in infrastructure, both in access and transportation, were noted.

Participants in Italy and Austria suggested that collaboration between industries, such as facilitating partnerships between VET providers and rural tourism businesses, professional development opportunities like training programs to stay updated on industry trends and best practices, and support in promoting VET programs would be beneficial to rural tourism VET providers. Enhancing promotional initiatives and improving information campaigns were also included in the suggestions made in Cyprus. In Italy, support for promotion and training related to public calls for proposals was also suggested.

### 4. Suggestions/Recommendations



Participants from partner countries shared various suggestions for enhancing the VET offer in rural tourism. A common recommendation across Italy, Spain, Cyprus, and Iceland was to create more networking opportunities between students, entrepreneurs, trainers, and policymakers. There were also calls for a stronger focus on personal development and growth. In Italy, for instance, participants emphasized the importance of education and training at all levels for professional growth within the tourism supply chain. In Spain, international mobility was highlighted as a valuable opportunity for professional development. Participants from Cyprus identified the need for specialized training in key areas.

Promotion was another key theme. In Italy, participants suggested creating short, impactful commercials to promote the tourism sector and improve visitor reception, emphasizing sustainability as an asset rather than a constraint. Participants from Spain focused on promoting innovative initiatives, while in Austria, the suggestion was to promote educational projects outside the mainstream. Cyprus participants also stressed the importance of promoting VET programs, suggesting that agencies such as hotel associations, chambers of commerce, and local agents should assist in this effort.

In Cyprus, Iceland, and Greece, the integration of smart solutions and artificial intelligence into VET programs was recommended. Participants emphasised the need to focus on technology, digital skills, sustainable practices, and general management for rural tourism providers, along with the use of new e-marketing and e-branding technologies.

Additional recommendations included encouraging private-sector training in Italy, offering incentives and financial support in Cyprus. Participants from Austria suggested that the final apprenticeship examination could be used as a long-term tool to promote vocational training programs. In Greece, there were calls to develop training programs that focus on new and alternative forms of rural tourism, tailored to the unique resources of each destination. Iceland participants emphasised the need for increased funding for training programs, making them more adaptable to the needs of local companies.

## Complete Reports

To access the complete reports of Focus Groups, click on the hyperlinks:

Focus Groups: [Italy – National Report](#)

Focus Groups: [Spain – National Report](#)

Focus Groups: [Cyprus – National Report](#)

Focus Groups: [Austria – National Report](#)

Focus Groups: [Greece – National Report](#)

Focus Groups: [Iceland – National Report](#)

## Conclusions

In Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Austria, Greece, and Iceland, rural tourism has become an expanding sector, marked by its emphasis on sustainability, local experiences, and a growing preference for authentic experiences. Despite this growth, common challenges and needs emerge across these countries.

Entrepreneurs across all partner countries reported using personal funds to start their businesses. In Italy, Cyprus, and Iceland, almost all entrepreneurs used personal funds, whereas in Greece, although the majority used personal funds, the percentage was lower. In Austria, participants did not feel comfortable answering this question, so no responses were provided. In Spain, many rural tourism entrepreneurs face significant hurdles in securing funding. While some have successfully obtained EU or national funding, others rely heavily on personal investments or bank loans. The complexity and competitiveness of grant applications pose a barrier for many.

Awareness of funding opportunities varies by country. Entrepreneurs in Italy, Cyprus, and Greece are more aware of these opportunities, whereas in Austria and Iceland, many are either unsure or unaware.

Financial challenges and the lack of necessary human resources are common issues mentioned by entrepreneurs in all partner countries. Professionals mentioned insufficient training, lack of support for digital transition, and lack of infrastructure as their more significant challenges. They also recognize several gaps in rural tourism, including depopulation, lack of infrastructure, inadequate training programs, and insufficient financial support. These gaps are noted in nearly every country.

Despite these challenges, entrepreneurs in all countries are taking measures to ensure sustainability. Common strategies include ensuring tourist satisfaction and involving the community. In Italy and Cyprus, preservation of culture and encouraging responsible tourism are also frequently mentioned.

Participation in VET programs related to rural tourism varies by country and target group. For instance, in Austria, all entrepreneurs and professionals participated in such programs, while in Iceland, most of both groups did not. In Cyprus, about half of both groups have participated in VET training, with similar percentages not having done so. In Greece and Italy, the results vary between target groups: in Greece, most entrepreneurs have participated, while most professionals have not; in Italy, the opposite is true. In Spain, the lack of adequate training and education programs is a common concern.

Similar trends are observed in the provision of VET to employees. In all countries except Austria, most entrepreneurs did not provide training to their employees, although there is not a significant difference between those who did and those who did not. Awareness of VET programs remains low, with most entrepreneurs in all countries except Austria being unaware or uncertain about the available programs.

There is a growing interest in professional development training across all countries. Digital marketing and e-commerce are significant areas of interest, as is sustainable tourism. Basic skills development in video making, rural tourism, ecotourism, and EU funding and norms for SME development are also important topics, though not uniformly across all countries.

In summary, while rural tourism across Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Austria, Greece, and Iceland demonstrates potential, it is essential to address common challenges such as infrastructure deficiencies, financial constraints, and the need for specialised training. The findings from desk research, individual interviews,

and focus groups in the partner countries indicate a clear need for more targeted training programs specific to rural tourism.

The VET offerings require renewal and enhancement to better equip rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate industry challenges effectively. Additionally, acquiring digital skills and understanding green practices are crucial, especially in today's context. By focusing on improving VET programs, the sector can better meet the evolving demands of professionals and travellers and support sustainable growth.