

Interreg Central Baltic Project
**Boosting Tourism Business Growth through Higher Professional
Education**

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WP 1 Identifying and Aligning the Skillset

Higher Vocational Tourism Education in Latvia
Identifying Current Situation and Industry's Future Needs

About the Project

The project BOOSTED aims at providing an aligned and relevant skillset for the tourism industry in the Central Baltic Region (CBR) to grow as a coherent tourism destination. In practice, the project aligns higher vocational tourism education with the needs of the tourism industry and labour market in Finland, Estonia and Latvia into a new, joint curriculum and a study programme (32 ECTS).

A research was conducted within the project in order to identify the tourism industry's needs related to skill development. This report summarises research results in Latvia. It consists of the following parts: (1) skill development in context of tourism development planning; (2) skill development needs according to previous tourism studies; (3) insight into the current higher vocational tourism education offer; (4) summary of the results of interviews with representatives of the tourism industry in Latvia.

Research results in Finland and Estonia as well as the joint report of all three partner states can be found on the project's website projectboosted.eu.

Skill Development in Context of Tourism Development Planning

Several national development strategies and plans in Latvia contribute to the tourism development. The following national planning documents were overviewed: (1) Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030; (2) National Development Plan of Latvia 2014 – 2020; (3) Latvian Tourism Development Guidelines 2014-2020. Development strategies of Vidzeme, Zemgale, Kurzeme and Riga planning regions were also taken into consideration.¹

The planning is aimed at sustainable tourism development by wise use of resources in competitive product development, promotion and attracting international tourists. Forming regional cooperation clusters, joint Baltic tourism marketing, as well as smart and contemporary promotion are in focus. Innovation, high added value and quality are the key settings for the product and destination development. The need for close cooperation of the higher education institutions (HEI) with the enterprises and organizations is emphasized in order to maintain well qualified human resources.

Skill Development Needs According to Previous Studies

There are indications about the skill development needs in such recent reports as the Study of High Priority Tourism Markets (2016) and Consumer Behaviour of Foreign Tourists in Riga (2014). Lack of good quality tourism information in foreign languages and shortage in tourism product offers for various market segments can be pointed out. There are also some indications about insufficient level of communication and cooperation. Although majority of international tourists have been satisfied with the quality of tourism services in Latvia, low expectations and weak image of Latvia as a tourism destination might be an explanation for that. Also the Reviews on Tourism Markets of Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany (2016) indicate that Latvian tourism offers are rather unknown. It can be concluded that skill development is needed for destination marketing, including product development, quality management, international promotion, and cooperation of stakeholders.

¹ Latgale planning region was not included in the research as it is not part of the CBR Interreg Programme.

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Insight into the Bachelor Level Vocational Tourism Study Programmes in Latvia

Seven bachelor level vocational tourism study programmes offered by six HEIs (Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Latvia University of Agriculture, Liepaja University, Turība University, Baltic International Academy, ISMA University) were overviewed. The following areas of competences and skills were represented in most of the analysed programmes: (1) general understanding of the tourism and hospitality industry; (2) marketing skills; (3) management skills; (4) communication skills; (5) skills in using IT.

Sales skills are developed mostly within the marketing courses, not as a separate subject, which might be insufficient considering that some previous studies indicate shortage in promotion and sales of Latvian tourism offers. The structure of management courses is rather standardised and general, thus not fully covering all the specifics of tourism and hospitality industry. While several courses in all study programmes are dedicated to various communication aspects, ICT is taught in a rather fragmented way paying attention to some specific aspects such as GDS and e-commerce. Internships are significant part of the higher vocational tourism education; however, cooperation between the HEIs and the placement companies and institutions should be improved in order to maintain meaningful training for young professionals.

Interviews with the Tourism Industry Representatives

In order to clearly identify the skills needed in the Latvian tourism industry 42 semi-structured individual and group interviews were organized between February and April, 2017 with representatives of various tourism enterprises and institutions in the regions of Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Zemgale.² The total number of informants was 51 representing state, municipality, non-governmental, and private sectors – tourist attractions, museums, accommodation establishments, restaurants, tour operators and agents, tourism information centers, and tourism associations were involved in the research, see Annex 1. The questions were aligned to the sectors represented by the informants and aimed to identify both professional and personal characteristics, which are expected from the employees, cooperation partners, and crucial for the informants personally. The informants were asked to describe current needs and activities regarding professional trainings, as well as prospects regarding job positions, which will experience changes in the future. Also a question about experience with trainees or recent graduates was asked in order to identify underdeveloped competencies. Most of the informants were of managerial level; some represented several institutions and sectors, e.g. both a municipality and a private company.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by quantitative and qualitative methods coming to identification of the following competency categories: (1) personal traits and attitude; (2) business management; (3) product development; (4) customer service; (5) internationalization & cross-cultural competence; (6) sales skills and marketing communication; (7) networking and sectoral cooperation; (8) destination management strategy; (9) digitalization; (10) foreign languages.

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The key characteristics mentioned by the informants regarding the personal traits needed in the tourism and hospitality industry were self-efficacy, motivation to work and continuously learn together with general erudition, especially in such areas as geography, history, culture, and art. Also creativity, positive thinking, quick reaction and physical fitness were mentioned as significant. It was observed that often personality plays a bigger role than professional qualification when it comes to choosing employees.

General business management issues were frequently mentioned, such as project management, financial management, human resource management. Several informants indicated that understanding trends and acting accordingly is important. It can be observed that the event management skills are becoming more important as the number of events in many institutions represented by the informants has been increasing recently. Psychological knowledge was often emphasized as important for understanding and serving the customers, cooperating with colleagues and partners, and coping with frequent stress situations, which are characteristic for tourism and hospitality industry.

Analysis of the tourism development planning documents and former studies pointed out the significance of the product development skills. Also the interviews confirm the need for skillful product development, including wise use of resources and understanding customers. Many informants indicated shortages in customer service. Quality, innovation, and creativity were the key words often mentioned regarding the product improvement.

Integrated marketing communication and sales, including use of digital channels was another area frequently covered by the informants. When characterizing sales skills, many informants stressed out importance of understanding the customer and offering the right product in the right way. Public speaking and writing skills were indicated as crucial for work in tourism, in several cases also basic design knowledge and skills were mentioned (e.g. for elaboration of marketing materials).

Cooperation and networking skills were seen from various perspectives – local, regional, national, international, as well as cross-sectoral. Several informants suggested that general understanding about the significance of cooperation, as well as about the complex and interdisciplinary structure of the tourism industry is still underdeveloped. Representatives of state and municipal institutions draw attention to skills needed for strategic destination management – analyzing, planning, investment attraction, cooperation and other aspects.

Foreign language skills were characterized as highly important and sometimes insufficient, especially regarding the Russian Language. Knowing at least two foreign languages was often stated as a norm for those employed in tourism.

Conclusion

During the interviews many informants expressed appreciation about the aim of the research and the project, i.e. aligning higher vocational tourism education with the needs of the tourism industry. Many commented that it was the first time when a HEI communicated with them regarding such questions. Development areas indicated by the informants were also evident in the national tourism development strategy, which aims at competitive product development, promotion and attracting international tourists by forming regional cooperation clusters, joint Baltic tourism

marketing and innovation. Although formally the bachelor level study programmes cover important competences for work in the tourism industry, the interviews (as well as the overview of recent tourism studies) indicated several directions for improvements: (1) personal traits and attitude; (2) business management; (3) product development; (4) customer service; (5) internationalization & cross-cultural competence; (6) sales skills and marketing communication; (7) networking and sectoral cooperation; (8) destination management strategy; (9) digitalization; (10) foreign languages. Industry representatives suggested hands-on study methods as crucial for moving from formal to actual competence of young professionals. Also cooperation between the HEIs and the industry should be intensified in order to constantly align the study contents with the recent trends. The research also rose a question about general motivation: do employees, entrepreneurs, local governments, and other stakeholders actually see the need for improvement and are they willing to involve in the development.

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Annex 1. Characteristics of Informants

Sector	Informants	Number	Location
Municipality	Tourism information centers	14	Capital, major cities, towns, rural areas
State/ Municipality/ NGO/ Private	Museums	3	Capital, towns, rural areas
NGO	Associations	6	Capital, major cities, towns
Private	Accommodations and restaurants	8	Capital, towns, rural areas
Private	Tour operators and agencies	4	Capital
State	Nature parks and protected areas	2	-
Private	Adventure parks	3	Rural areas
State/ Municipality/ Private	Other organizations	4	Major cities, towns, rural areas