



CoVEs for the Tourism Industry

TourX



D5.1 – POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. Executive summary

The TourX project brings together a pan-European partnership of vocational education and training (VET) providers, umbrella organisations, public authorities, and industry stakeholders to strengthen the tourism sector through skills development, innovation, and excellence. In the context of a rapidly evolving tourism landscape shaped by digital transformation, sustainability imperatives, and changing labour market dynamics, the project aims to deliver a comprehensive set of policy recommendations that respond to current and future skills needs.

This report presents 16 integrated policy recommendations developed under Work Package 5 (WP5), drawing on the collective intelligence and practice-based insights of the project's Knowledge Triangle (KT) partners in Spain, Germany, Greece, China, and Italy, as well as from EU-level umbrella organisations. The recommendations are structured around four pillars: curriculum modernisation, system-wide innovation, inclusive governance, and strategic investment.

Through collaboration among 23 partners in 7 countries (including China), and drawing upon the insights of the TourX Hospitality Toolbox and extensive stakeholder consultations, the recommendations address critical dimensions such as skills intelligence, legal interoperability, funding access, SME engagement, and educational innovation. The project has strongly aligned its work with EU priorities, notably the Pact for Skills, the Green Deal, and the Transition Pathway for Tourism.

TourX not only proposes reforms but provides practical models for replication across Europe and internationally, reaffirming the role of tourism VET as a pillar for sustainable growth, innovation, and social inclusion in the post-pandemic era.

2. Introduction

The tourism sector is a cornerstone of the European Union's economy, contributing approximately 10% of GDP and employing over 12.3 million people across 2.3 million small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Its role in fostering regional development, cultural exchange, and social cohesion underscores its importance. However, the sector faces profound challenges, including the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid technological advancements, and increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices. These dynamics have exposed significant skills gaps in the workforce, necessitating innovative approaches to education and training, particularly through upskilling and reskilling initiatives.

In response to these challenges, the TourX project aims to transform Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the tourism and hospitality sectors. TourX – CoVE for the Tourism Industry (project n. 101056184) is an international initiative co-funded by the European Commission through its programme dedicated to education and training –Erasmus+. The project is led by AKMI, a leading Vocational Education and Training provider in Greece, together with a consortium of other 22 organisations from 7 countries: Greece, Italy, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Belgium and China. The duration of the activities is set at four years of implementation, for an approximate budget of 4 million EUR. TourX is part of a flagship initiative launched by the European Commission under the Partnership for Excellence, whose objective is that of pushing forward the existing limits to VET provision in Europe.

TourX includes the development and implementation of 6 Work Packages, 31 tasks and 22 deliverables. The structure of the project sees, among its objectives, the creation of educational tools and resources aiming to concretely implement the concept of Vocational Excellence. These tools fall under the umbrella of the Hospitality Toolbox, covering instruments that support the governance of CoVEs at the regional level, skills intelligence, VET graduate tracking, education and funding solutions for small and medium sized enterprises, micro-credentials, and the internationalisation of VET centres.

Deliverable 5.1: Policy Recommendations is a cornerstone of Work Package 5, which focuses on fostering sustainable and systemic impacts within the tourism sector through enhanced Vocational Education and Training systems. The primary purpose of these recommendations is to provide actionable insights and strategies for strengthening tourism-oriented VET provision at both the EU and national levels. Drawing on the experiences and lessons learned during the

implementation of the TourX project, particularly the pilot execution of the TourX Hospitality Labs Toolbox, these recommendations address critical areas necessary for the sector's adaptation and growth.

The deliverable encompasses key aspects such as legal frameworks, funding mechanisms, and the interoperability of existing Centers of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). By offering a clear pathway for the adoption and replication of successful interventions, it aims to equip policymakers and stakeholders with practical tools to align VET provision with the evolving demands of the tourism industry. These recommendations not only respond to immediate challenges, such as skills shortages and workforce adaptability, but also provide a long-term framework for building resilience and fostering sustainable growth.

3. Context and rationale

Skills gaps and workforce development needs

The tourism sector plays a pivotal role in the economic and social fabric of the European Union, with its contribution to GDP being particularly significant in TourX Knowledge Triangle countries. According to the EU Tourism Dashboard (2024), tourism accounted for 18% of Italy's GDP, 13% in Greece, 12.3% in Spain, and 11% in Germany. These figures not only underline the sector's vital economic importance but also expose its vulnerability: any workforce-related challenges have a direct and disproportionate impact on national economies, especially in regions heavily reliant on tourism.

Despite this critical role, the sector continues to face persistent and growing skills gaps. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated shifts in consumer behaviour and operational models, forcing rapid digitalisation and a stronger focus on sustainable practices. However, many tourism professionals lack the competencies required to adapt to these changes. The widespread adoption of digital technologies, from online booking systems to data-driven customer experiences, has outpaced the sector's ability to provide adequate training and support for its workforce. Simultaneously, the transition towards greener and more sustainable tourism models demands new skillsets that are not yet fully integrated into existing training pathways.

The TourX Training Needs Analysis (TNA) has highlighted critical areas for upskilling and reskilling across participating countries. Common priorities include digital marketing, customer relationship management (CRM) systems, and eco-tourism. National nuances also emerged: Italy and Portugal have identified an urgent need for green skills to support sustainable tourism development, while Greece places particular emphasis on enhancing customer service excellence and strengthening multilingual communication abilities. These findings illustrate how skills shortages are not only a general sectoral challenge but also a specific bottleneck hindering the economic performance and resilience of tourism-dependent regions.

To address these challenges, it is imperative to integrate upskilling and reskilling programmes into the core of Vocational Education and Training systems. This requires a systemic approach that bridges the gap between education, industry, and policy. The Knowledge Triangle model, promoted by the TourX project, serves as an effective mechanism to foster collaboration among VET providers, tourism businesses, and policy makers. By aligning educational offerings with the

actual needs of the sector, this model enhances the relevance and impact of VET programmes, ensuring they are responsive to both current market demands and future trends.

Ultimately, tackling the skills gap is not only a matter of workforce development but a strategic priority for the economic stability of regions where tourism represents a cornerstone of GDP. A workforce equipped with digital, green, and customer-centric skills will be essential for maintaining competitiveness, supporting post-pandemic recovery, and ensuring long-term resilience in the face of future disruptions.

Sustainable tourism and technological transition.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the imperative for the tourism sector to prioritise sustainability and digital transformation. These twin transitions are central to the European Union's strategic vision, particularly as outlined in the **EU Transition Pathway for Tourism**. This comprehensive framework identifies 27 action areas designed to guide the sector towards greater resilience, sustainability, and competitiveness.

A key focus of the Transition Pathway is the integration of sustainability into tourism practices. This includes promoting circular economy principles, reducing environmental footprints, and enhancing the preservation of cultural and natural resources. For instance, action areas emphasise the need for sustainable consumption, carbon-neutral mobility, and the development of circular tourism models. These initiatives align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), advocating for responsible tourism that balances economic growth with environmental stewardship.

However, implementing sustainable practices faces challenges such as resistance to change, limited monitoring mechanisms, and a lack of effective assessment tools. The **TourX project** addresses these barriers by leveraging its collaborative networks and digital platforms, notably the TourX transnational cooperation platform. This facilitates the institutionalisation of sustainable practices within tourism operations, ensuring that sustainability becomes a core component of the sector's ethos.

Simultaneously, the digital transformation of tourism offers both opportunities and challenges. Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and big data analytics are revolutionising service delivery and customer engagement. Yet, many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) struggle to adopt these innovations due to resource constraints. The

Transition Pathway highlights the importance of supporting digital empowerment, enhancing data-sharing practices, and fostering innovation through technology-empowered destinations.

Legal challenges in tourism VET

The legal landscape poses challenges for implementing new tourism policies and integrating them with existing frameworks. One of the most pressing issues is the low mobility of tourism workers across the EU, which remains disappointingly limited despite efforts to promote free movement. A key underlying cause of this is the inconsistent recognition of qualifications across EU member states, making it difficult for professionals to work across borders. Similarly, the slow adoption of digital micro-certifications creates barriers to modernizing training approaches. Additionally, data protection regulations create obstacles when implementing digital tools for customer service and operational efficiency.

To ensure the feasibility of proposed interventions, policy recommendations must address these legal issues by advocating for streamlined qualification recognition, integration of digital credentials, and compliance with EU data protection laws. However, as qualification recognition falls under national jurisdiction, fostering greater willingness among member states is crucial. In this context, the interoperability of the TourX network with existing Centres of Vocational Excellence is essential to achieving these objectives.

Funding opportunities and financial constraints

The recovery and transformation of the tourism sector require significant investment, particularly for SMEs, which form the backbone of the industry. Findings from the TNA reveal that stakeholders in countries like Germany and Italy consistently highlight funding as a critical barrier to implementing innovative training and sustainable practices. Strategies for securing funding, such as leveraging EU programs like the European Social Fund (ESF) and Erasmus+, are central to these policy recommendations. These initiatives provide resources for developing digital infrastructure, sustainable tourism modules, and professional development for tourism educators.

The rationale for these policy recommendations stems from the urgent need to address the skills gap, promote sustainable practices, manage legal challenges, and secure funding to support the tourism sector's recovery and growth. The TourX project's focus on building workforce resilience, leveraging digital and green transitions, and fostering international collaboration provides a robust framework for these interventions. By adopting these recommendations, stakeholders

can contribute to a more competitive, sustainable, and inclusive tourism industry in the post-pandemic era.

4. Objectives

The TourX project develops a set of 16 policy recommendations designed to strengthen the capacity of Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, enhance workforce resilience, and promote sustainable and innovative practices within the tourism sector. These recommendations are grounded in evidence and experiences gathered throughout the project, particularly through the implementation of the TourX Hospitality Labs Toolbox and the engagement of regional Knowledge Triangles.

The primary objective is to provide actionable strategies that enable VET systems to adapt to the evolving needs of the tourism industry, particularly in digitalisation, sustainability, and workforce development. By fostering stronger collaboration between VET providers, industry stakeholders, and policymakers, TourX aims to bridge existing skills gaps and support the sector's transition towards a more competitive and resilient future.

These recommendations are closely aligned with key European Union strategies, including the EU Transition Pathway for Tourism, the European Skills Agenda, and the Pact for Skills, ensuring coherence with broader policy priorities. By addressing structural challenges such as qualification recognition, funding barriers, and digital integration, TourX contributes to the overarching EU objective of fostering Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) that drive regional development and innovation.

1. Anchor recommendations in current EU policy frameworks

Link policy advice explicitly to the European Skills Agenda and relevant EU frameworks, including the Union of Skills, the Council Recommendation on VET, apprenticeships, micro-credentials, and the Osnabrück Declaration. This enhances the legitimacy and uptake of recommendations at national and EU level.

2. Integrate RIS3 strategies into VET and tourism development

Strengthen the connection between VET ecosystems and regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3) by fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration among VET providers, tourism actors, and public authorities. Based on the TourX D2.1 Transnational Ecosystem for Excellence in Tourism Annual Report, this objective supports capacity-building and encourages active VET participation in RIS3 governance, ensuring skills development reflects regional tourism innovation priorities, particularly in view of the next RIS3 programming cycle (2025–2030).

3. Align VET policies with market and industry needs

To ensure the tourism sector remains competitive and resilient, VET policies must respond to evolving market demands in areas such as digitalisation, sustainability, and customer engagement. Aligning VET curricula with these priorities is essential to equip learners with skills relevant to Industry 4.0 and the green transition.

This objective reflects key EU strategies, including the European Skills Agenda, the Pact for Skills, and the Council Recommendation on VET (2020), all of which call for closer cooperation between education providers and industry. The Osnabrück Declaration further reinforces the need for partnerships supporting digital and green skills, while the EU's focus on micro-credentials offers agile solutions for upskilling.

4. Enhance workforce competitiveness and resilience

Support the upskilling and reskilling of tourism professionals to bridge identified skills gaps, particularly in green practices, digital technologies, and transversal skills such as adaptability and cultural sensitivity. This will ensure the workforce remains competitive and adaptable to future disruptions.

5. Institutionalize sustainability in tourism training

Integrate sustainability as a core element of VET programs by embedding green skills and eco-tourism principles into educational frameworks. This objective supports the EU's Green Deal and Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring that the tourism sector contributes to a more sustainable future.

6. Support Europe as a leading sustainable tourism destination

Advance the EU's ambition to position "Destination Europe" as a global leader in sustainable and competitive tourism. This includes reinforcing regional branding and excellence, while supporting tourism SMEs in aligning with EU sustainability benchmarks and competitiveness frameworks such as the 2025 Competitiveness Compass. Additionally, strengthening the capacity of tourism SMEs through targeted VET interventions is essential to enable their alignment with EU competitiveness goals and foster regional excellence.

7. Strengthen cross-Sector collaboration and innovation

Promote partnerships between VET institutions, tourism businesses, and policymakers to foster innovation and knowledge sharing. These collaborations will support the development of cutting-edge training modules and the replication of best practices across regions.

8. Facilitate policy harmonization and legal alignment

Address legal and institutional barriers to ensure the seamless recognition of qualifications and the interoperability of VET systems across EU member states. This includes advocating for the adoption of digital credentials and standardised frameworks to enhance labour mobility and inclusivity.

5. Methodology

The elaboration of the TourX policy recommendations was conducted through a structured, participatory, and iterative process spanning from September 2024 to May 2025. This process was designed to ensure that the recommendations were both evidence-based and grounded in the realities of the tourism sector, while also fostering broad stakeholder engagement.

As leader of Task 5.1, EVTA coordinated the overall process, providing methodological guidance and quality assurance. To ensure a common approach across the consortium, EVTA drafted and circulated two pivotal documents: the *Policy Recommendations Drafting Guidelines* and the *Consultations Guidelines*. The drafting guidelines outlined a clear framework for defining objectives, identifying target audiences, structuring recommendations, and ensuring alignment with existing policies and strategies. They also emphasised the importance of evidence-based content and the use of best practices. Meanwhile, the consultations guidelines provided a methodological approach for engaging stakeholders, detailing consultation methods, stakeholder selection criteria, and reporting procedures.

Building upon the work carried out in Work Packages 2 and 3, particularly the Country Reports and the Training Needs Analysis (TNA), each Knowledge Triangle (KT) was tasked with drafting four policy recommendations. These drafts were developed to address national and regional priorities while contributing to the overarching objective of strengthening tourism-oriented VET provision at European level.

Once the initial drafts were prepared, a dedicated consultation phase was launched to validate and enrich the recommendations through direct engagement with key stakeholders. Following the consultation guidelines, each Knowledge Triangle approached a diverse range of stakeholders, including VET providers, policymakers, industry representatives, Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), and experts in funding mechanisms, legal frameworks, and tourism development. The objective was to gather qualitative insights, validate the feasibility of the proposed recommendations, identify existing barriers, and explore best practices.

To accommodate the different needs and contexts of each Knowledge Triangle, a variety of consultation methods were employed. These included structured interviews conducted either online or in person, focus group discussions with selected stakeholders, online surveys to gather broad-based input, and written feedback for participants unable to attend interactive sessions. In some cases, discussion events and webinars were organised to facilitate collaborative reflection on the draft

recommendations. Regardless of the format, all consultations followed a structured approach to ensure consistency and high-quality data collection.

Throughout the consultation process, all partners were responsible for documenting their activities in a transparent and systematic manner. This included keeping attendance records, drafting meeting minutes, summarising key takeaways, and ensuring GDPR compliance. Quantitative data from surveys and qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups were carefully analysed and synthesised.

The feedback collected was then integrated into the policy recommendations. Each Knowledge Triangle revised its initial drafts, incorporating stakeholders' perspectives to enhance the relevance, applicability, and feasibility of the recommendations. This iterative process ensured that the final recommendations were not only aligned with TourX's strategic objectives but also reflected the actual needs and expectations of the tourism and VET sectors in the participating countries.

The resulting policy recommendations are thus the product of a co-creation process, combining strategic coordination at the European level with bottom-up contributions from regional stakeholders. This methodology has ensured that the final outputs are robust, practical, and capable of informing policy development both at national and EU levels.

6. Policy recommendations from each KT and Umbrella organizations

Greece

Upgrade and modernize vocational tourism education by revising curricula, integrating digital and green skill modules, adopting flexible learning formats, and aligning training with real industry needs.

Tourism vocational education in Greece faces a significant gap between training content and actual labor market demands, particularly in digital and green competencies. Many graduates lack practical experience and exposure to digital tools or sustainable practices, while tourism businesses struggle to find adequately trained staff. The transition to a more sustainable and tech-driven tourism model requires a systemic upgrade of curricula and closer collaboration between education and industry.

Recommendations

To successfully address the challenges and seize the opportunities presented by the digital and green transition in the tourism sector, it is recommended to **upgrade and modernize vocational education programs in tourism**. This should include:

- **Integration of digital skills at all levels of education**, covering topics such as online booking management, digital marketing, data management, the use of digital tools for customer communication, and cybersecurity. This will help address the recognized lack of knowledge regarding the digital transition in the tourism sector.
- **Introduction and strengthening of training in green skills and sustainable practices**, including waste management and recycling, energy and water conservation, promotion of local and organic products, and encouragement of sustainable tourism models. This responds to the growing trend toward green tourism and tourists' increased environmental awareness.
- **Emphasis on practical experience and connection with the labor market**, through internships in tourism businesses and collaboration with industry professionals to develop customized training programs that meet local and regional needs. This will bridge the gap between theory and practice, as highlighted by educators.

- **Creation of opportunities for continuous professional training and upskilling** for employees in the tourism sector, especially during the winter months, focusing on both digital and green skills. This will help retain core staff and reduce workforce turnover.
- **Encouragement of cooperation between vocational education providers, tourism businesses, and public authorities** to identify skills needs and develop effective training programs.

Anticipated impact

The proposed modernization of vocational tourism education is expected to produce a workforce that is better equipped to meet the digital and environmental demands of a rapidly evolving tourism sector. By integrating digital and green skills into curricula, learners will gain competencies in areas such as online booking systems, digital marketing, energy efficiency, and sustainable tourism practices. This will enhance their employability and allow tourism businesses to offer more competitive, responsible, and tech-enabled services. Strengthening links with industry and expanding continuous training opportunities—especially in the off-season—will help reduce staff shortages, lower turnover, and ensure that employees remain up to date with emerging technologies and sustainability standards. Ultimately, these interventions are anticipated to benefit not only individual professionals but also the quality of services, resilience of local economies, and long-term sustainability of the tourism sector.

Modernizing Tourism Education in Greek Universities: Aligning Curricula with Market Demands for Digitalization, Sustainability, Inclusivity and Employability

Graduates of tourism programs in Greek universities often enter the labour market with limited exposure to digital tools, sustainable tourism concepts, and real-world industry practices. This skills gap threatens not only graduate employability but also the long-term competitiveness of Greece's tourism industry in a global context increasingly driven by digital transformation and climate consciousness.

Recommendations

We recommend a multi-level curriculum reform and stronger university-industry collaboration, specifically tailored for Greek higher education institutions offering tourism studies.

- **Digital Tourism Technologies:** platforms, data analytics, AI applications in hospitality.
- **Sustainable and Responsible Tourism:** environmental impact, green certifications, climate change adaptation.

- Crisis and Risk Management in Tourism: especially in response to global shocks (e.g., pandemics, wildfires).
- Integrate interdisciplinary soft skills development (e.g., foreign languages, cultural awareness, digital communication).
- Establish advisory councils with tourism sector stakeholders (hotels, tour operators, DMOs, SETE).
- Make internships or work-based learning mandatory, coordinated through Erasmus+ Traineeships or national programs.
- Support guest lectures, case studies, and field-based projects led by industry professionals.
- Launch micro-credential programs (5–10 ECTS) open to both students and adult learners in:
 - Smart tourism & innovation
 - Cultural heritage promotion
 - Sustainable destination management
 - Inclusive and accessible tourism services
 - Encourage recognition of non-formal learning (e.g., Erasmus+ Youth, volunteering in tourism) in academic credits.
- Implement a yearly feedback loop through alumni/employer surveys.
- Set up curriculum review boards with mixed academic-practitioner membership.
- Align curriculum outcomes with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area).

Anticipated impact

The implementation of these policy recommendations is expected to significantly enhance the **employability and adaptability** of Greek tourism graduates. By aligning academic programmes with current labour market needs and emerging sectoral trends, graduates will be better equipped with the skills required for a competitive and evolving global tourism industry.

Moreover, fostering stronger links between academia and the tourism sector will promote **innovation and sustainability** within curricula and service delivery. Collaborative efforts will drive the development of forward-looking training programmes that reflect both regional economic priorities and broader European objectives, thereby improving the overall **quality and relevance** of tourism education.

These efforts will also contribute to the **international reputation of Greek tourism education**, strengthening its position within the European Higher Education Area. By supporting the integration of Erasmus+ priorities and ongoing higher education reforms, the Greek VET and HE systems will demonstrate clear progress toward **excellence, mobility, and cross-sectoral engagement**.

Strengthening the Tourism Sector in the Attica Region: A Regional Policy Framework for Sustainable, Inclusive, and Smart Development

Attica is one of Greece's most economically and culturally dynamic regions, home to the capital Athens, major heritage sites, cruise ports, and emerging creative industries. Yet, the region faces critical challenges in tourism management, including seasonal overconcentration, insufficient regional diversification, underutilized cultural assets and a skills gap in the tourism workforce. A coherent regional tourism policy is needed to promote sustainable growth, digital transformation and inclusive participation, particularly in light of post-pandemic recovery and green transition goals.

Despite hosting over 35% of Greece's annual tourist arrivals, Attica's tourism development is uneven and concentrated primarily in Athens, the Acropolis, and the cruise port of Piraeus.

Peripheral areas (e.g., Lavrio, Salamina, Eastern Attica) remain underdeveloped or poorly connected to the tourism economy. Moreover, the regional tourism workforce—particularly youth and women—is inadequately prepared for emerging digital, green, and customer-centered roles. There is a lack of structured collaboration between universities, local governments, SMEs, and civil society in tourism planning and innovation.

Policy Objectives

- Promote sustainable and balanced tourism across the Attica region, reducing pressure on central Athens and redistributing economic benefits.
- Enhance tourism skills development and innovation through education, vocational training, and digital tools.
- Foster regional cooperation among municipalities, universities, and businesses to codevelop tourism strategies aligned with local strengths.

Recommendations

- **Establish regional tourism innovation hubs and councils:** Create multi-stakeholder innovation centres and a Regional Tourism Council in Attica, involving universities, local authorities, tourism enterprises, and civil society. These bodies will co-develop regional

strategies, promote collaborative governance, and align tourism development with RIS3 priorities, EU climate goals, and smart tourism models.

- **Develop specialised and inclusive training programmes:** Offer targeted training in areas such as digital tourism, sustainable destination management, and cultural entrepreneurship. Integrate Erasmus+ mobility and cooperation projects to upskill local youth and professionals, enhancing employability while promoting regional capacity building.
- **Promote sustainable and decentralised tourism infrastructure:** Invest in green and heritage-based tourism routes (e.g., wine, maritime, and cultural tourism) and support the creation of small-scale visitor centres, digital storytelling sites, and improved transport links. These actions will foster balanced territorial development and reduce pressure on overvisited areas.
- **Harness digital innovation and smart technologies in tourism:** Develop a regional digital platform that consolidates open data, cultural mapping, booking tools, and real-time visitor flow management. Promote the use of AI, IoT, and big data to improve tourism monitoring, crisis response, and resource efficiency, while encouraging digital co-creation projects through EU funding.
- **Strengthen community-based and heritage-driven tourism models:** Support cooperatives and local tourism initiatives that actively involve residents, preserve intangible heritage, and contribute to inclusive and resilient destination development. Close cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and GNTTO will ensure coherent branding and maximise visibility of regional identity.

Anticipated impact

- Diversified and resilient tourism economy across the Attica region
- Enhanced skills and employability for local youth, women, and professionals
- Better environmental and cultural sustainability in tourism practices
- Improved quality of life for residents and balanced territorial development

Tips for practical and cost-efficient training of the employees in the sector of tourism

Skills related to *Digitalization*, the *Green Transition*, and *Intercultural Competence* define the emerging landscape in the tourism sector. The demand for these skills arises from the evolving

standards and expectations of the clientele in these industries. Prioritization of these skill sets varies across sectors.

The necessity for such competencies is not uniform across all tourism-related sectors. On the contrary, the specific skill-mix requirements differ significantly, especially when taking geographical factors into consideration. Education and training of all actors involved in the tourism value chain is the sole means of improving their competence and service level.

Recommendations

- **Regarding the cost of training:** Due to the reason of the high mobility of the employees in the named sectors, both employees and employers should be incentivized to ensure equitable cost recovery (e.g., employee commitment, cost subsidies, etc.).
- **Regarding the type of the training:** The training of the employees should be focused specifically on the subject areas and to the depth and extent where skill gaps exist among the beneficiaries. No other supplementary topics must be included. Training programs should be designed with the primary aim of benefiting the learner rather than the training provider.

Also, it should take place strictly during the winter season, excluding periods of peak tourist demand.

Anticipated impact

The training will become more attractive to both sides (employers and employees), since it will respect their time, avoid unnecessary activities and topics, and may offer a kind of solution to the problem of the investment and work stability.

Integrating green and digital skills into regional vocational training strategies for tourism smes

The consultation process implemented within the framework of Task 5.1.2 of the TourX project aimed to systematically gather stakeholder-driven insights that would underpin the development of robust, context-sensitive, and evidence-based policy recommendations. The rationale for adopting a qualitative consultation model was grounded in the recognition that the tourism and hospitality sectors—particularly in regions with seasonal economies and fragmented training ecosystems—require policies that are both reflective of on-the-ground realities and capable of addressing systemic challenges at scale.

Stakeholders from Northern Greece’s hotel associations consistently emphasized the **urgent need to enhance both green awareness and digital competency** among the workforce in small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMEs). While sustainability and digital transformation

are recognized as critical to long-term competitiveness, employees often **lack the foundational knowledge and skills** to implement these practices.

Recommendations

- **Embed digital and green skills as core components of tourism VET:** Make digital and sustainability competencies foundational in all hospitality-related VET programmes—not optional extras. Focus on practical applications such as property management systems (PMS), online review management, low-energy operations, and waste reduction. These skills should be taught using real-life case studies from local businesses and embedded throughout the curriculum.
- **Design modular, accessible, and blended learning pathways:** Develop **concise, modular training units** that can be delivered through **blended learning formats**, including mobile-first, asynchronous e-learning and short in-person workshops. This flexibility enables participation in remote or low-connectivity areas and accommodates tourism seasonality. Prioritise delivery formats suited to the needs of SMEs and tourism workers.
- **Establish quality assurance through certified trainers and micro-credentials:** Invest in **train-the-trainer programmes** and promote the certification of instructors in digital tools and sustainability standards. Introduce **recognisable micro-credentials** (e.g. “Eco-Ready Staff”, “Digital Front Desk Operator”) aligned with **EQF Levels 4–5**, supporting international recognition and mobility for tourism professionals.
- **Co-develop training content with industry and sustainability experts:** Form training consortia with VET providers, hotel associations, chambers of commerce, NGOs, and tech/environmental partners. These collaborations will ensure up-to-date, hands-on learning content reflecting current tools, technologies, and sustainability benchmarks relevant to tourism SMEs.
- **Integrate monitoring, impact assessment, and financial incentives:** Introduce **post-training performance indicators**—such as reduced energy or water usage—to track tangible sustainability outcomes. Encourage the use of digital tools for monitoring (e.g. carbon calculators, utility tracking apps) and support training participation through co-financing via EU or regional development funds.

Anticipated impact

The integration of green and digital skills into regional VET strategies for tourism SMEs is expected to significantly strengthen the sector’s adaptability, sustainability, and long-term

competitiveness. By embedding twin transition competencies into training programs, SMEs in tourism—especially in remote or seasonal regions—will be better equipped to adopt eco-friendly practices and leverage digital technologies in their daily operations. Micro-credentials will enhance workforce mobility and recognition of upskilling efforts, while modular, flexible delivery formats will make learning more accessible for seasonal workers. Strengthened local alliances among VET providers, hotel associations, and public authorities are anticipated to increase training relevance, improve participation rates, and foster continuous professional development. Ultimately, the alignment of training with measurable outcomes (e.g., energy savings, digital adoption) will contribute to the broader goals of environmental responsibility, innovation, and social inclusion within the regional tourism economy.

Germany

Promotion of digital skills for tourism professions

Digitalisation is rapidly changing the tourism market. However, many companies and employees do not have the necessary digital skills to work with new technologies such as big data, virtual experience spaces or artificial intelligence (AI). This reduces the competitiveness, resilience and innovative strength of the industry.

Recommendations:

- Further development and expansion of modular training and further education programmes on digital skills such as online marketing, CRM systems, booking platforms and AI-supported customer services
- Cooperation between vocational training providers, tourism companies and technology companies to create practical training courses
- Integration of online courses into existing VET programmes to facilitate access
- Introduction and recognition of micro-certificates for digital competences to facilitate continuous learning.
- Use of EU funding programmes to finance the development of new education and training programmes
- Subsidies for SMEs that invest in digital training for employees

Expected impact:

- **Improved employability** of skilled workers and greater attractiveness of tourism professions
- **Higher participation in further training** through low-threshold micro-certificates
- **Stronger networking** between education and business through practice-oriented programmes
- **Increased innovative strength** thanks to improved utilisation of data analysis, digital services and AI
- **Strengthening the competitiveness** of tourism companies through more efficient use of digital tools

Sustainability as a core competence in tourism training

The tourism industry needs to focus more on sustainability goals in order to combat climate change and remain competitive in the long term. However, many professionals are not sufficiently prepared for sustainable practices.

Recommendations:

- Anchoring sustainability topics in VET programmes: Circular economy, CO₂ reduction, sustainable mobility, environmentally friendly hotels
- Cooperation with environmental organisations to develop practical training courses
- Development of accredited certificates for sustainability competences in tourism professions
- Government incentives for companies that offer sustainable training programmes
- Linking sustainability certificates with support programmes for companies
- Utilisation of EU initiatives for financing

Expected impact:

- **Sensitising and empowering** employees to act in a climate-friendly manner in the company
- **Increased attractiveness for young skilled workers** who are more orientated towards ecological values
- **Increasing the credibility** of sustainable tourism offers
- **Long-term cost savings** through energy-efficient and resource-saving processes
- **Strengthening regional economic cycles** by promoting sustainable mobility and regional products

Improvement of the legal framework for tourism training programmes

Different systems for recognising qualifications in the EU member states make the mobility of skilled workers more difficult. There is also a lack of standardised regulations for digital qualifications.

Recommendations

- Harmonisation of VET qualifications in the tourism sector at EU level
- Adaptation of labour law regulations to new forms of employment (e.g. digital nomads, hybrid working models)
- Cooperation between the EU and member states on the recognition of digital VET qualifications
- Introduction of digital certificates for tourism professions that are internationally recognised
- Promotion of digital platforms for the exchange of skilled labour across Europe

Expected impact:

- **Strengthening the European internal market** through harmonised training standards
- **Legal certainty for new working models**, which increases the attractiveness of hybrid workplaces
- **Increased mobility** of skilled workers within the EU through recognition of digital qualifications
- **Competitive advantage for companies providing training**, as digital qualifications are modern and flexible to use

Financial support for SMEs in tourism training

Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) do not have the financial resources to invest in further training for their employees. This exacerbates the shortage of well-trained specialists.

Recommendations:

- Introduction of a "training budget" for SMEs that can be used specifically for training courses

- Introduction of funding programmes for SMEs to finance further training in digitalisation and sustainability
- Tax incentives for companies that invest in VET programmes
- Use of existing EU funding programmes such as the European Social Fund (ESF) and Erasmus+ to finance training networks in tourism
- Greater involvement of tourism organisations in the allocation of funding

Expected impact:

- **Increasing further training activities** in SMEs that have so far refrained from doing so for cost reasons
- **Increase in employee qualifications**, leading to better service and customer satisfaction
- **Strengthening the competitiveness** of small businesses compared to large companies.
- **Long-term retention** of qualified employees through development prospects

Promotion of hybrid learning and working models in tourism

Digitalisation is enabling new forms of work, but many tourism professions are still strongly geared towards physical presence. At the same time, there is a shortage of skilled labour that could be alleviated by more flexible working and training models.

Recommendations

- **Adaptation of training guidelines** for dual training models with digital components
- **Development of hybrid VET programmes** that combine online and face-to-face training
- **Promotion of remote workplaces** in tourism, especially for administrative and creative activities (e.g. marketing, customer service).
- **Incentives for companies** that enable remote working, e.g. through tax concessions
- **Expansion of co-working spaces** in tourism regions for location-independent working
- **Promotion of pilot projects** that test the use of digital technologies for practical online training.

Expected impact:

- **Promoting a digital learning culture** and innovative spirit in companies

- **Making training and further education more flexible**, thereby reaching new target groups (e.. people returning to work, part-time employees)
- **Reduction of skills shortages** through more attractive working conditions (home office, location-independent activities)
- **More efficient staff training**, especially in rural areas without local training facilities

Improve career models with new skills to increase the attractiveness of tourism professions

Many young people see tourism professions as unattractive, particularly due to insecure working hours and limited career opportunities. This leads to a shortage of young talent in the industry.

Recommended measures and implementation:

- **Creation of clear career paths** with transparent promotion opportunities
- **Introduction of a mentoring programme** for young professionals by experienced industry representatives
- **Promoting co-operation** between companies and universities to develop new study and further education models.
- **Development of a centralised information platform** on career paths in tourism

Expected impact:

- **Changing the image of tourism professions** to modern, sustainable fields of work
- **Greater motivation and retention of** young professionals through clear development prospects
- **Promotion of female specialists** through predictable career paths
- **Strengthening the next generation of skilled labour**, especially in structurally weak regions.

Simplification of the recognition of foreign qualifications for tourism

There is a great shortage of skilled labour in tourism, but the bureaucratic hurdles for foreign skilled workers are high. Many qualified workers cannot be quickly integrated into the labour market.

Recommendations

- Acceleration and simplification of recognition procedures for foreign qualifications in tourism professions
- Adaptation of legal requirements for faster professional recognition
- Introduction of a digital recognition procedure with standardised processes
- Support through language and integration courses for foreign skilled workers
- Financing of professional qualification measures for foreign skilled workers

Expected impact:

- **Increased efficiency** in recognition procedures through digitalisation and standardisation
- **Faster integration** of qualified foreign skilled workers into the labour market.
- **Reducing the shortage of skilled labour**, particularly in bottleneck occupations.
- **Increased diversity** in tourism companies to appeal to new target groups

Improvement of social security for seasonal workers in tourism

Many employees in tourism work seasonally in temporary jobs. This leads to financial insecurity and reduces the attractiveness of the industry.

Recommendations:

- **Legal adjustments** to provide social security for seasonal workers (e.g. through flexible pension schemes or unemployment benefits)
- **Incentives for companies** to employ seasonal workers for longer periods (e.g. tax breaks for permanent contracts)
- **Promotion of further training programmes** in the off-season to improve employment prospects
- **Promotion of companies** that offer sustainable employment models.

Expected impact:

- **More stable employment relationships** in the industry, which leads to greater job satisfaction.
- **Reduced labour turnover** thanks to better security and planning certainty.
- **Improved quality of life** for employees in seasonal businesses, especially in structurally weak regions.

- **Increasing the attractiveness** of seasonal work for new target groups (e.. students, older employees).

Spain

Integrate sustainability as a cross-cutting theme in vocational training for tourism.

Sustainability was highlighted by respondents as a top priority. Key areas mentioned include energy efficiency, waste and water management, circular economy, heritage conservation, and the promotion of local products.

Recommendations:

- Introduce dedicated modules on sustainable tourism in all training programs.
- Train teaching staff in topics related to tourism sustainability.
- Establish partnerships with local businesses committed to responsible tourism to offer hands-on internships.

Expected impact:

- Alignment of training programs with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the sustainable tourism model demanded by the European market.
- Increased employability of graduates with environmental and social awareness.

Embed strategic digital skills tailored to the island's tourism environment.

The most valued digital tools identified were CRM systems, online booking platforms, artificial intelligence, digital marketing, and Big Data—considered essential for enhancing the competitiveness of local businesses.

Recommendations:

- Provide hands-on training in CRM, tourism-focused AI, data analysis, and process automation.
- Update VET curricula to include digital tools for tourism management.
- Promote collaborative projects with local businesses to develop real-world digital skills.

Expected impact:

- Enhanced operational and commercial efficiency of local tourism businesses.
- Better alignment of professional profiles with current digital market demands.

Strengthen training in new skills, multicultural customer service, and key foreign languages.

Respondents emphasized the importance of multicultural customer service, leadership, change management, and communication. The most in-demand languages were English, German, and French.

Recommendations:

- Develop microlearning modules on new skills with a focus on tourism.
- Enhance language learning using active, locally adapted methodologies.
- Establish agreements with businesses to carry out real-life customer service simulations.

Expected impact:

- Improved quality of the tourist experience delivered.
- Greater inclusion of local professionals in the international tourism workforce.

Promote practical VET–business partnerships to better align training with real sector needs.

Participants emphasized the urgent need to bridge the gap between training and practical experience. Proposals included dual training programs, business involvement in curriculum design, and more hands-on learning opportunities.

Recommendations:

- Facilitate agreements between VET centres and businesses for dual training and extended internships.
- Involve industry representatives in curriculum advisory committees.
- Encourage joint initiatives (challenges, site visits, mentoring) between students and companies.

Expected impact:

- Direct alignment between acquired skills and labour market demands.
- Higher immediate employability rates for VET graduates

Italy

Fostering Sustainable Tourism through Integrated Skills Development and Financial Incentives

The tourism sector in Veneto, and more broadly, faces significant structural and operational challenges in genuinely integrating sustainability principles. As highlighted in the PSTV, climate change effects are a critical concern for the sector.

One of the biggest obstacles is the shortage of skilled personnel. This challenge is compounded by the **dynamic nature of sustainability itself**, where regulations, best practices, and technological solutions are constantly evolving. The PRT 2025-2027 emphasizes "Qualità Sostenibile" (sustainable quality) as a key theme, noting its clear relations and integrations with other themes like pervasive innovation, models and products, and governance.

These challenges hit Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) especially hard, as they make up a significant portion of the regional tourism sector.

Many SMEs resist or remain unaware of the immediate benefits and long-term necessity of sustainable practices, often seeing them as costly burdens rather than valuable opportunities. They frequently possess **limited financial and human resources** to invest in sustainable initiatives, comprehensive training, or the complex processes required for environmental certifications. Furthermore,

the current environmental certification process is often seen as too complex and cumbersome, making it hard for businesses to integrate into their operations without dedicated training. This ultimately hinders SMEs' ability to accurately measure their sustainability progress and communicate it transparently and effectively to an increasingly environmentally conscious clientele.

A key challenge is balancing sustainability goals with economic competitiveness, so sustainable practices do not unfairly weigh down businesses or hurt their market standing. The current

monitoring and evaluation systems for sustainability are often not adequately adapted to the limited resources of SMEs, making transparent reporting difficult.

Sustainability represents a strategic objective for the sector in Veneto. The PRT 2025-2027 defines some concrete actions its achievement. It promotes initiatives for the elimination of single-use products, the start of circular economy actions, and the optimization of packaging as well as food waste reduction as part of its strategy for the daily application of sustainability.

Beside the above-mentioned challenges, the Vocational Education and Training sector faces also further difficulties in finding and attracting trainers with deep, up-to-date expertise in sustainable tourism practices, circular economy principles, and green technologies, thus making it difficult for training organisations to keep pace and anticipate the future "green" skills needed by the industry.

Recommendations:

- a) Incentivise the adoption of **circular economy measures** in tourism businesses. The adoption of **self-assessment tools** can help businesses to define their programme to gradually improve in sustainability starting from viable solutions – such as, optimising packaging and reducing food waste. On the other hand, staff's training can facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices by all employees across business processes.
- b) Integrate **sustainability criteria** into quality certification processes and tourism marketing to attract clients who prioritise these values.
- c) Develop and implement **new training courses focused on "green" skills** for the tourism sector, alongside **professional development for trainers** to update their knowledge. TourX up-/re-skilling programmes represent a starting point for further implementation through time.
- d) Establish **financing sources** enabling businesses and employees to jointly invest in specialised sustainability courses offered by the CoVEs networks.
- e) Promote **public-private alliances** involving regional bodies, businesses, and training institutions to align training experimentation with local strategies and stakeholder needs, and to pilot innovative professional training programs.
- f) Encourage participation in the initiatives of European projects like TourX to **access funding and foster international collaborations**. Particularly, **study visits and mobility programmes** give access to new ideas, solutions and contacts to companies. This can grow

through time to networks among virtuous businesses to facilitate the sharing of best practices and stimulate sustainable competitiveness.

Anticipated impact:

These measures will enhance the tourism sector's capacity to adopt sustainable practices, improve resource efficiency, and adapt to climate change.

Businesses, especially SMEs, will be better equipped to meet sustainability goals, measure their impact, and communicate it effectively to customers and stakeholders, thereby increasing their competitiveness and attractiveness.

The workforce will possess the necessary "green" skills, contributing to a more sustainable and resilient tourism ecosystem.

Accelerating Digital Transformation in Tourism through Targeted Training and Infrastructure Support

The tourism sector in Veneto, while recognising the undeniable importance of digitalisation, faces a multi-faceted set of challenges in fully embracing and leveraging digital transformation. A foundational issue is **unequal access to and proficiency with necessary digital technologies**. This extends beyond mere hardware availability to encompass reliable internet infrastructure, particularly in more remote or less developed tourism areas. On the other hand, for students, this can mean a disparity in their ability to participate fully in digitally enhanced learning environments, while for trainers and teachers, it can limit their capacity to deliver cutting-edge digital curricula. The *Piano Strategico del Turismo Veneto (PRT) 2025-2027* identifies "Technologic Innovation and AI" as a "hot topic" for businesses and destinations until 2027, noting that the development of technology-supported services has redefined customer expectations and accelerated digital service adoption during the pandemic.

A significant bottleneck is the **development of advanced digital skills among trainers and teachers**. Many current trainers, though experts in tourism, lack the specialised skills needed to teach new digital tools and strategies shaping the modern tourism industry. This creates a gap between industry needs and the training offered. Furthermore, the **rapid and constant evolution of digital technologies and market demands** makes it extremely difficult to anticipate future training needs, risking that current educational offerings quickly become obsolete. The PRT 2025-2027 also mentions that the revolution linked to artificial intelligence will be impactful in the creation and personalization of content and for data analysis.

Developing human capital is essential to realizing this vision and forms the foundation of the policy recommendations presented.

The digital divide worsens due to a shortage of customised technical support and accessible training tailored to SMEs' unique needs and limited resources

Data-driven planning is central to the strategy, with the "*Osservatorio del Turismo Regionale Federato*" (Regional Tourism Observatory, OTRF) dashboard serving as an advanced digital ecosystem for analysing a wide range of data, including hospitality data intelligence, online reputation, and tourist spending. The PTA 2025 aims to consolidate and expand this infrastructure, enhancing its analytical capabilities and improving information accessibility for businesses. It will also strengthen predictive models to facilitate planning and personalisation of the tourism offer.

One of the main initiatives encourages the transformation of destinations into "**Smart Tourism Destinations**." It emphasises digital innovation, efficient management models, and the development of sustainable tourism products. New digital platforms are also being introduced to enhance the digital ecosystem, providing comprehensive tools for both visitors and operators.

Recommendations:

- a) Implement strategies to guarantee **universal access to necessary digital technologies** for all students and teachers in tourism training.
- b) Offer specialised training courses in **digital competences tailored for the tourism sector**, covering areas such as digital marketing and online reservation management.
- c) Prioritise the development of **advanced digital skills among trainers** and teachers within the tourism sector through dedicated programmes. Include the use of digital tools to enhance the interactivity and engagement of training courses. The TourX Training of Trainers programme offers an opportunity for professional development.
- d) Establish **platforms for "matching" students/workers with tourism enterprises**, leveraging digital tools for more effective connections. To this purpose the Graduate Students' Tracking System (GSTS) represents a good starting point. This tool coupled with the TourX Skills Watchtower can represent predictive tools for training needs in collaboration with businesses and alumni.
- e) Promote **public-private alliances** to ensure vocational training aligns with the digital skills demanded by the market, as outlined in the PRT 2025-2027, and support micro-credential programmes for worker upskilling.
- f) Provide **dedicated technical support and specific training for SMEs** to facilitate their adoption of digital tools for business management, online marketing, and customer communication, aiming to overcome the existing digital divide.
- g) Integrate virtual reality and augmented reality solutions to offer **practical simulations and immersive training experiences** in tourism.

Anticipated impact:

These actions will bridge the digital divide in the tourism sector, particularly for SMEs, leading to improved operational efficiency, enhanced online presence, and better customer engagement.

The workforce will gain crucial digital competences, fostering innovation and adapting the sector

to the evolving digital landscape. The enhanced digital infrastructure and skills will also contribute to a more secure and adaptive tourism ecosystem.

Coupling OTRF data with regular investigation in tourism employment and skills, as proposed in TourX Skills Watchtower, can inform precise human capital investment decisions. This can represent a significant advancement, moving beyond general training needs to targeted skill development based on market and labour insights.

Enhancing Intercultural Competence for a Global Tourism Experience

Veneto's tourism sector, growing more global and dependent on international visitors and diverse staff, faces often overlooked but critical challenges in building effective intercultural communication. The *Piano Strategico del Turismo Veneto (PRT) 2025-2027* highlights global tourism trends, including the growing number of international tourists and shifts in source markets, such as the robust growth from the USA, China, and India, and rapid growth from countries like Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. These trends underscore the increasing need for intercultural competence.

In this panorama, **shortage of trainers** who possess not only excellent communication skills but also **a profound and nuanced understanding of intercultural dynamics** specific to the tourism context represents an issue to tackle.

Trainers must move beyond basic language skills to cover cultural sensitivity, body language, etiquette, and conflict resolution across various cultures.

This deficiency in trainer expertise directly impacts the development of crucial skills in students and employees. There is a pressing need to ensure that individuals in the tourism sector develop not only the necessary technical competences (e.g., hospitality management, booking systems) but also **essential transversal (soft) skills vital for effective intercultural communication**. These include active listening, empathy, adaptability, cultural intelligence, and the ability to navigate diverse perspectives. The PRT 2025-2027 emphasizes "civiltà dell'accoglienza" (culture of hospitality) as a key aspect of social sustainability.

Adapting training content to the diverse cultural and linguistic realities of recipients, especially in a region like Veneto which attracts visitors from various parts of the world, adds another layer of complexity.

The challenge of integrating foreign workers into local tourism teams, where cultural misunderstandings or a lack of specific support can hinder effective collaboration and service delivery can be a barrier to the attraction of international talent.

Despite the recognised benefits, **enabling cultural exchange and international mobility for both students and trainers remains a significant challenge**. Practical barriers often include funding limitations, bureaucratic hurdles for international placements, visa complexities, and a lack of established networks for such exchanges. This limits exposure to diverse cultural environments, which is crucial for truly enriching intercultural competences beyond theoretical learning.

Recommendations:

- a) **Integrate themes of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion** into training modules, with a specific focus on actively involving local communities for a tourism development that respects local stakeholders.
- b) Develop **micro-credential programmes for transversal skills**, with dedicated modules on intercultural communication challenges. The TourX up-skilling/re-skilling programmes include soft skills training which can be adjusted according to data gathered through the "Skills Anticipation Mechanism (Skills Watchtower)". This will help businesses enhance service quality, prevent cultural misunderstandings, and build loyalty with an international clientele.
- c) Foster **closer collaboration between businesses and vocational training institutions** to assess and improve intercultural policies and practices.
- d) **Incentivise** the creation of **intercultural exchange networks** among tourism businesses from different regions or countries.
- e) **Promote international mobility and intercultural training** opportunities for students, trainers, entrepreneurs, and professionals through European projects. The TourX mobility programme will build a real network of companies, vocational training organisations, universities, and public institutions paving the way for further initiatives possibly leading to regular exchanges.
- f) Implement an "**Intercultural Mentoring Programme among Employees**" supported by the TourX SME Technical Support Box to facilitate awareness of cultural change within companies and provide personalised support to new hires from diverse backgrounds.

Anticipated impact:

These measures will significantly enhance the intercultural competence of the tourism workforce, leading to improved service quality and enriched customer experiences for a diverse international clientele. They will also foster a more inclusive and understanding work environment within tourism businesses and reduce cultural misunderstandings.

The sector will be better positioned to attract and retain a global workforce and cater to a wider range of international visitors.

Promoting Social Inclusion and Dignified Work in the Tourism Sector

The tourism sector in Veneto, despite its potential as a driver for local development and social cohesion, confronts significant and multifaceted challenges in fostering genuine social inclusion and ensuring dignified work conditions. The *Piano Strategico del Turismo Veneto (PRT) 2025-2027* identifies the mismatch between labour demand and supply as a key issue, stating that the tourism sector has faced a problem of losing attractiveness in the labour market and **difficulty recruiting new personnel**.

A major challenge is **effectively integrating and retaining vulnerable groups**—like NEETs, migrants, people with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds — in training programmes and later employment. These groups often face a higher risk of dropout from vocational training due to various factors, including a lack of foundational skills, inadequate support structures, and personal circumstances. The PRT 2025-2027 also specifically mentions inclusion and accessibility as a sub-theme within "Impresa e lavoro" (Enterprise and work). It also refers to "inclusivity" as a primary area of attention, both for social subjects participating in the offering and for tourists, with a focus on "universal design" of structures and specialised hospitality.

Furthermore, persistent **prejudices and systemic barriers to labour market entry** disproportionately affect these vulnerable individuals. Employers may lack the necessary knowledge and resources to accommodate diverse needs (e.g., accessibility requirements for people with disabilities, services for elderly clients/women travelling alone, etc.). They often rely on informal recruitment channels or are reluctant to invest in long-term professional development.

The sector struggles with a widespread perception—and often the reality—of unstable jobs and a lack of professional career paths. This contributes to a high turnover rate and difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled talent. The PRT 2025-2027 mentions working conditions and safety in critical environments and worker satisfaction not just in the workplace as relevant topics. There is an acute need to **ensure dignified and equitable working conditions** across the board, addressing issues like irregular hours, work-life balance, and fair wages.

Beyond these internal challenges, the tourism sector struggles to **effectively communicate the positive aspects and career opportunities** within its various professions. This includes highlighting pathways for professional growth, skill development, and the rewarding nature of customer interaction, which are often overshadowed by the mentioned negative stereotypes.

This communication gap hinders efforts to attract new talent and promote a more professional image of the industry.

Lastly, adapting **training programs** to the diverse learning needs and specific requirements of people from various disadvantaged backgrounds and ensuring the active, meaningful involvement of local communities in inclusion processes remain complex undertakings.

Recommendations:

- a) Design and deliver **training courses that are accessible to all**, including students with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- b) Actively promote **gender equality** within training programmes and across the tourism sector.
- c) Establish a "**Socially Inclusive Hospitality Brand**" at a regional or national level to certify tourism businesses that implement inclusive policies for both employees (including vulnerable groups, migrants) and clients (with specific accessibility or cultural diversity needs). CoVEs should play a key role in developing the criteria and offering consultation for this brand.
- d) Promote **structured collaborations among tourism businesses, employment services, intermediary agencies, and third-sector organisations** to facilitate the employment of vulnerable persons. This should include creating dedicated Work-Based Learning (WBL) pathways and providing personalised support for their integration into the workplace.
- e) **Utilise tourism as a vehicle for social inclusion** by developing relevant competences in collaboration with vocational training organisations.
- f) **Sensitise students and trainers/teachers** to the vital importance of **social inclusion** within the tourism sector. This can happen through the integration of themes of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion into training modules, with a specific focus on actively involving local communities for a tourism development that respects local stakeholders.
- g) Develop **tools and courses for the upskilling and reskilling of NEETs** to facilitate their integration into the tourism value chain.
- h) **Launch broad awareness campaigns** targeting younger generations (e.g., through "open days" and "best graduate ceremonies") to enhance the attractiveness of tourism professions, showcasing positive testimonials and career pathways.

- i) Redefine and **improve** both internal (among tourism operators) and external (towards potential employees) **communication** to address common misconceptions about job quality and security, emphasising opportunities for full-time employment and professional growth.
- j) **Engage directly with businesses** (e.g., through internship agreements) to define necessary up-skilling/re-skilling training, focusing on priorities related to inclusion.

Anticipated impact:

These recommendations will create a more inclusive and equitable tourism sector, fostering the integration of vulnerable populations and providing dignified employment opportunities.

Better communication can draw in and keep a diverse workforce by tackling recruitment challenges and improving the image of job quality.

The "Socially Inclusive Hospitality Brand" will recognise and promote businesses committed to inclusion, driving positive change across the industry. Ultimately, this will lead to a tourism sector that is more representative, resilient, and socially responsible.

China

Optimizing the structure and layout of tourism vocational education

The layout and structure of tourism vocational education majors are not entirely reasonable, and there is a gap with the development requirements of the tourism industry. Some tourism majors have unclear characteristics and uneven development.

Recommendations

By optimizing the structure and layout of tourism vocational education, the overall quality and adaptability of tourism vocational education can be improved to meet the diversified needs of tourism industry development. Targeting the following target audience: Tourism Vocational Colleges, Tourism Education Management Departments. Stakeholders: Tourism companies, Tourism Industry Associations, Tourism Education Experts.

- The relevant government departments of China guide tourism vocational colleges to combine their own advantages, scientifically and accurately position themselves, and develop professional characteristics.
- The Chinese Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the National Tourism Administration, will select and construct a number of national level demonstration and characteristic professional sites, forming a tourism professional group that meets the needs and has distinct characteristics.
- Build a "National Tourism Vocational Education Employment Information Platform" to connect in real-time with the employment needs of enterprises and the job seeking intentions of students.
- Implement the "1+X certificate system" and incorporate industry certifications (such as tour guide qualifications and hotel management) into the credit system.

Anticipated impact:

The perfect talent training system provides students with a clear career development path. Secondary vocational students can enter higher vocational colleges for further studies through entrance examinations, higher vocational students can improve their academic qualifications through upgrading from junior college to undergraduate or taking postgraduate entrance

examinations, and undergraduate students and above have the opportunity to enter tourism research institutions, large tourism companies, etc. to engage in management or research work. At the same time, the talent training standards at different levels are interconnected, and students can gradually improve their knowledge and skills in learning at different levels.

Related evidence:

- The Chinese Ministry of Education and the China National Tourism Administration have jointly issued a document requiring the optimization of the structure of tourism vocational education and the strengthening of the construction of demonstration and characteristic professional points. And practice has proven that a distinctive tourism vocational education major can enhance students' employment competitiveness and career development prospects.
- The Lausanne Hotel Management Institute (EHL) in Switzerland has achieved a 98% employment rate for its graduates through a "theory+practice+innovation" course model.
- In 2023, Zhejiang Province piloted the "Vocational Education Employment Platform", which increased student signing efficiency by 50% and reduce enterprise recruitment costs by 30%.

School enterprise cooperation and Integration with industry and VET

The lack of a long-term stable cooperation mechanism in school enterprise cooperation has led to talent loss due to the low salaries of graduates in the tourism industry. The practical teaching of tourism vocational education is relatively weak, and there is a certain gap between it and the actual needs of enterprises.

Recommendations

Target group: tourism vocational colleges, tourism enterprises.

Stakeholders: Tourism industry associations, education management departments, students, and parents

By deepening school enterprise cooperation and integrating industry and education, improving the practicality and pertinence of tourism vocational education, and cultivating high-quality technical skills and management service talents that meet the development needs of the tourism industry. For example:

- Promote the pilot of modern apprenticeship system through joint enrollment, joint training, and integrated education between schools and enterprises.
- Support tourism enterprises to take the lead in establishing tourism vocational education groups, and leverage the important role of tourism vocational education groups in promoting the organic integration of the tourism industry chain and the tourism vocational education chain.
- Promote “on-the-job internship” models such as "multi semester, segmented" and "alternating work during peak and off peak seasons".
- Provide tax reductions and exemptions for enterprises deeply involved in school enterprise cooperation (such as reducing education surcharges by 10% -15%).

Anticipated impact:

This cooperation model is of great significance to the development of vocational education, student growth, enterprise progress and social and economic prosperity. The expected effects are mainly reflected in the following aspects: Improve students' professional skills. Enterprises provide a large number of practical operation opportunities for cooperative students. Students can practice repeatedly in a real working environment to improve their operation proficiency and accuracy. Taking the cooking major as an example, when students practice in the school kitchen, they are restricted by equipment, ingredients, etc., and their operation opportunities are limited. During the internship in the hotel kitchen, they have to participate in the preparation of a large number of dishes every day. From ingredient preparation, cooking skills to dish presentation, they can be fully exercised and their cooking skills can be rapidly improved.

During internships, students can gain a deeper understanding of industry trends and corporate employment needs, thereby clarifying their career direction and development goals. For example, during internships in hotels, tourism students may find that they are more interested in hotel marketing or customer service, and then improve their related skills in a more targeted manner in subsequent studies, preparing for future career development.

Related evidence:

- *The Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education* was released in 2014. Propose "integration of industry and education, school enterprise cooperation" as the core path for the development of vocational education. Encourage industry enterprises to participate in talent cultivation and promote models such as "modern apprenticeship".

- In 2018, six departments including the China Education Ministry, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China issued the *"Measures for Promoting School Enterprise Cooperation in Vocational Schools"*: clarifying the forms of school enterprise cooperation (such as co building training bases, order classes, on-the-job internships, etc.). and Enterprises are allowed to receive support through tax incentives, financial subsidies, and other means.
- Sanya Zhongrui Hotel Management Vocational College: Cooperating with Marriott, Hilton and other groups for "order classes", graduates have a starting salary 20% higher than the industry average.
- Guilin Tourism College: Offering bilingual courses on "ASEAN Tourism Culture", with 15% of international students, radiating to the Southeast Asian job market.
- Under the "dual system" model in Germany, 80% of tourism majors' courses are completed in enterprises, and the employment matching rate exceeds 85%.

Strengthening the construction of the teaching staff in the tourism profession

The teaching staffs for tourism vocational education is insufficient, and there is a lack of experienced teachers with practical experience. Some teachers' teaching methods and tools are relatively backward, making it difficult to adapt to the diversified needs of the rapidly developing tourism industry. The practical teaching of tourism vocational education is relatively weak, and there is a certain gap between it and the actual needs of enterprises.

Recommendations

Target group: faculty and staff of tourism vocational colleges.

Stakeholders: Education management departments, tourism companies, students, and parents

By strengthening the construction of the teaching staff in tourism vocational education, improving the professional quality and teaching level of teachers, and providing strong support for the development of tourism vocational education. For example:

- Improve the evaluation and appointment methods for full-time teachers, and increase the proportion of personnel with practical experience in enterprises, advanced technical skills, and management service talents serving as full-time teachers.
- Strictly implement the system of new teachers practicing first, then taking up their posts, and regular teacher practice.

- Encourage teachers to participate in corporate practice, international short-term exchange training, scientific research projects, and innovation and entrepreneurship activities to enhance their practical abilities and teaching level.
- Implement the "dual mentor system": enterprise experts undertake more than 30% of practical course teaching.

Anticipated impact:

Teachers can keep abreast of new developments, new technologies and trends in the tourism industry by participating in industry training, corporate practice, academic exchanges and other activities, and integrate these cutting-edge knowledge into course teaching. For example, with the rise of smart tourism, teachers add content such as big data analysis and the application of artificial intelligence in tourism services to the curriculum to make the teaching content more contemporary and practical.

High-quality teachers are more willing to try new teaching methods and technologies, such as project-based learning, case teaching, virtual simulation teaching, etc. Taking project-based learning as an example, teachers can organize students to participate in practical projects such as tourism route design and tourism marketing planning, so that students can learn and grow in practice, and cultivate students' teamwork ability, problem-solving ability and innovation ability.

Related evidence:

- In 2019, the Ministry of Education, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security issued the "Implementation Plan for Deepening the Reform of the Construction of the 'Dual Teacher' Teacher Team in Vocational Education in the New Era",* Clearly stating that building a high-quality "dual teacher" teaching team is a fundamental task in accelerating the modernization of vocational education. Specific goals have been proposed, such as by 2022, the proportion of "dual teacher" teachers in vocational colleges to professional course teachers will exceed half, and 100 school enterprise cooperation "dual teacher" teacher training bases and 100 national enterprise practice bases will be established.
- 90% of teachers in Japanese tourism vocational colleges have more than 3 years of industry experience, and students' practical ability scores are 30% higher than those of similar institutions in China.

Enhancing the internationalization level of vocational education in tourism majors

The internationalization level of tourism vocational education is not high and lacks integration with international advanced levels. Some Chinese tourism vocational colleges have limitations in international exchange and cooperation.

Recommendations

- Support tourism vocational colleges to carry out international exchanges and cooperation, learn advanced educational concepts, and introduce high-quality educational resources.
- Expand overseas internship and training channels, and increase the scale of overseas internships.
- Promote the implementation of high-level and exemplary Sino foreign cooperative education projects.
- Collaborate with tourism departments or industry associations from other countries, as well as UNWTO, to develop an "International Tourism Talent Certification System" and promote bilingual teaching and overseas internships.
- Support vocational colleges and overseas tourism colleges to jointly establish "cross-border micro majors" (such as international exhibition management).

Anticipated impact:

Improving the internationalization level of tourism vocational education will bring multi-dimensional positive expected effects, covering aspects such as education quality, student development, industry support and international influence:

Education quality and resource upgrades, student ability and competitiveness leap, colleges and overseas tourism companies jointly build training bases, and customize the training of talents that meet international standards. For example, training cultural and tourism project planning talents for countries along the "Belt and Road" to help Chinese companies "go global". Colleges and universities join organizations such as the World Tourism Alliance and establish cooperative relations with hundreds of colleges and universities around the world. For example, through the "Luban Workshop" project, tourism training centers are built in Southeast Asia and Africa to export the Chinese vocational education model.

Related evidence:

- SHRM Singapore has achieved an international employment rate of over 40% for its students through fully English taught courses and global paid internship programs
- The Australian TAFE system: Through the "Skills Passport" system, students can certify their vocational skills across states and countries.

Umbrella organizations

Strengthening mobility, recognition, and lifelong learning in tourism VET

To enhance career progression and flexibility in the tourism sector, vocational qualifications must be widely recognized and learning pathways must accommodate continuous upskilling. A more standardized European framework for recognizing tourism-related VET qualifications will facilitate cross-border employment, allowing professionals to move between countries without skills mismatches. At the same time, flexible and modular learning options will enable workers to update their skills throughout their careers without leaving the workforce. Together, these approaches will create a more resilient and mobile tourism workforce, better aligned with evolving industry needs and EU priorities for skills and mobility.

Policy recommendations:

- **Enhance the recognition and portability of tourism qualifications across Europe:** Strengthen the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and promote the development of a cross-border "Tourism Skills Passport" to enable mutual recognition of competencies. These tools will facilitate international mobility, allowing tourism professionals to validate and transfer their qualifications easily within the EU.
- **Promote modular and micro-credential pathways for flexible learning:** Support the implementation of stackable short courses and micro-credentials that enable learners to incrementally build qualifications. These modular learning opportunities should be accessible online, part-time, or in blended formats, making it easier for current workers to upskill or reskill without leaving employment.
- **Align Lifelong Learning in tourism with EU strategic objectives:** Ensure that all VET and continuous training programmes reflect EU sustainable tourism goals and key market trends such as digitalisation and green transition. Lifelong learning in tourism must prepare professionals to adapt to new tools, evolving customer expectations, and sector-specific innovations.

- **Remove legal and administrative barriers to labour mobility:** Simplify procedures that prevent or discourage cross-border mobility of tourism professionals, including posting of workers and participation in apprenticeships abroad. Addressing these bureaucratic constraints will particularly benefit SMEs and support a more mobile, adaptable, and regionally balanced workforce.

Anticipated impact:

- **Improved cross-border mobility:** With qualifications more transparently aligned and recognized, tourism professionals will find it easier to work in different EU countries without needing redundant retraining, filling skills gaps where they exist.
- **Higher workforce adaptability:** Modular courses and micro-credentials will make it simpler for workers to acquire new skills on the fly, keeping the workforce agile and able to meet new market demands (such as new digital tools or sustainability practices in tourism).
- **Lifelong learning culture:** Greater availability of flexible learning options and incentives for continuous development will encourage a culture of lifelong learning in tourism, resulting in a steady upskilling of the workforce.
- **Economic growth and job creation:** A mobile and continuously learning workforce can better address labour shortages and seasonal peaks, boosting productivity. Regions with skill deficits can attract qualified workers, and a well-trained, mobile workforce will support stronger tourism economies across the EU.
- **Stronger alignment with EU policy goals:** Efforts to harmonize qualifications and promote mobility are in line with European objectives for a **European Education Area** and the **Digital and Green transitions**, contributing to a more integrated and competitive European labour market in tourism.

Strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships for tourism VET innovation

Keeping tourism VET responsive to fast-changing skill needs requires close collaboration between training providers, industry stakeholders (including SMEs), and policymakers. Multi-stakeholder partnerships – such as regional skills councils, sectoral alliances, or knowledge networks – can help ensure curricula remain relevant, facilitate work-based learning opportunities, and drive innovation in training methods. The TourX consultations underscored the importance of including smaller enterprises in such collaborations, as they often lack the resources to engage on their own. Initiatives like the Pact for Skills in Tourism have already shown

the value of coordinated action to tackle skills gaps. Building on these models, stronger partnerships will bridge the gap between VET institutions and the day-to-day needs of tourism businesses.

Policy recommendations:

- Establish **regional competence centres and industry advisory councils** for tourism. These platforms should bring together VET colleges, tourism businesses (large and small), local authorities, and other stakeholders to jointly assess skill needs and update training content. Regional hubs can tailor education and apprenticeships to the specific needs of local tourism markets, while sharing insights nationally.
- Promote **public-private partnerships (PPPs)** to expand work-based learning. Encourage collaboration between VET providers and companies to create more apprenticeships, traineeships, and internship programmes in tourism. SMEs should be supported (financially or logistically) to participate in these partnerships so that students can gain practical experience in a wider range of business settings.
- **Simplify collaboration processes** and reduce bureaucratic barriers that prevent SMEs from engaging in VET initiatives. For example, streamline the administrative requirements for companies to host trainees or participate in EU-funded projects, and provide small businesses with templates and intermediary support to ease their involvement.
- Facilitate **knowledge-sharing and joint innovation projects** between education and industry. Create platforms (virtual networks, annual forums, etc.) where VET institutions, tourism firms, and tech providers can exchange best practices, co-develop innovative training tools (such as simulators or e-learning content), and collectively address skills challenges (for instance, developing training for new technologies or sustainable practices).

Anticipated impact:

- **Higher employability for graduates:** Expanded work-based learning and on-the-job training opportunities will equip VET students with practical skills and experience, making them more job-ready and attractive to employers upon graduation.
- **Greater innovation in training:** Closer cooperation between educators and industry experts will foster the development of cutting-edge training methodologies, curricula, and materials (for example, using real industry case studies, or adopting new

technologies in the classroom). This will ensure tourism education stays ahead of industry changes.

- **Inclusion of SMEs in skills development:** By lowering barriers and providing support, more micro and small tourism enterprises will engage in training partnerships. This inclusivity means the benefits of VET innovation (such as tailored training programmes or access to apprentices) extend across the whole sector, not just to larger companies.
- **Adaptable local workforce:** Regional competency centres and stakeholder councils will continuously align training with local tourism developments, leading to a workforce that can swiftly adapt to shifts in tourist profiles, seasonal trends, or new opportunities in their region.
- **Stronger regional economies:** When training is closely aligned with local industry needs, it feeds directly into economic growth. Well-designed local partnerships will help ensure that tourism development strategies (e.g. introducing eco-tourism or digital services) are supported by the right skills, thereby boosting sustainable growth and employment in those regions.

Expanding funding and policy support for tourism VET and SMEs

Limited access to finance is a major barrier preventing both VET institutions and tourism SMEs from modernizing training programmes, investing in new technologies, and pursuing innovative projects. While numerous funding schemes exist (Erasmus+, ESF+, Recovery and Resilience Facility, etc.), stakeholders noted that these are often complex to navigate or not tailored to the needs of smaller organisations. Expanding and adapting financial support at EU, national, and regional levels will help ensure high-quality vocational training, strengthen SME competitiveness, and foster continuous innovation in the tourism sector. In particular, simplifying funding procedures and creating SMEtargeted instruments will enable broader participation – including by micro enterprises – in training and development initiatives.

Policy recommendations:

- **Expand and diversify funding for tourism VET and workforce development:** Increase EU, national, and regional investment in tourism-focused VET by establishing or reinforcing dedicated funding lines for modernising training infrastructure, updating curricula, and supporting the reskilling of the existing workforce. Ensure funding priorities reflect strategic EU goals such as sustainability, digital transformation, and inclusivity.

- **Create SME-friendly financial instruments to foster innovation and skills development:** Develop tailored funding tools for tourism SMEs, including innovation vouchers, tax incentives, micro-loans, and training subsidies. These mechanisms should be simple, proportionate to business size, and easy to access – enabling small enterprises to invest in upskilling, technology adoption, and sustainability practices.
- **Strengthen public-private co-investment models in tourism education and innovation:** Support joint funding partnerships between public authorities, private investors, and industry associations to co-finance Centres of Vocational Excellence, innovation labs, and incubators in the tourism sector. These partnerships can leverage diverse resources to accelerate the development and scaling of innovative training models.
- **Ensure equitable access to funding through simplification and regional targeting:** Streamline funding procedures, reduce administrative burdens, and offer technical assistance to lower access barriers for small organisations and first-time applicants. Provide targeted grants to VET institutions in rural, remote, or economically disadvantaged areas to address territorial disparities and promote balanced regional development.

Anticipated impact:

- **Stronger VET institutions:** Increased and more accessible funding will allow vocational schools and training centres to modernize their equipment, update course materials, and expand offerings. This financial sustainability translates into higher-quality training for students and trainees.
- **Enhanced SME competitiveness:** With greater support, tourism SMEs will be able to invest in their workforce's skills and adopt new technologies or sustainable practices. Over time, this will improve productivity, service quality, and innovation in thousands of small tourism businesses, making them more competitive.
- **Accelerated digital and green transition:** Earmarked funds and incentives (like innovation vouchers and tax breaks) will speed up the integration of digital tools (for instance, reservation systems, data analytics, or virtual reality) and sustainable operations (energy efficiency, waste reduction, etc.) in the tourism sector. This accelerates progress toward environmental and digital transformation goals.
- **Inclusive growth:** By tailoring funding and reducing bureaucracy, a wider range of actors – including small family-run tourism enterprises and training providers in less-developed

areas – will access support. This broader participation ensures that the benefits of innovation and skills development are distributed across regions and community sizes, not just concentrated in well-resourced organizations.

- **Continuous innovation:** A funding environment that encourages experimentation and collaboration (through public-private co-investments and innovation grants) will create a virtuous cycle of innovation. Successful new training models or technologies can be piloted and scaled, keeping the European tourism sector at the forefront of global best practices in skills and education.

Simplify sustainability reporting and compliance for SMEs

New sustainability reporting requirements are increasingly impacting the tourism industry – notably the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) which extends certain environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting obligations through supply chains. However, current reporting frameworks are often complex, lengthy, and technical, which makes compliance challenging for SMEs and can dampen their enthusiasm for sustainability initiatives. Simplifying these processes and tailoring them to the capacity of smaller enterprises will improve transparency and engagement. When sustainability reporting is straightforward and proportionate, both internal and external stakeholders can more easily assess a business's progress on sustainability goals, leading to better decision-making and stronger trust in tourism's commitment to responsible practices.

Policy recommendations:

- **Simplify sustainability reporting frameworks for SMEs:** Ensure that sustainability guidelines and reports use plain language, focusing on a core set of relevant metrics for tourism (e.g. energy use, waste reduction, community impact). Regulatory frameworks like the CSRD should apply the principle of proportionality, allowing simplified formats and flexible requirements for small and micro tourism businesses.
- **Provide digital tools and technical support for implementation:** Develop user-friendly digital reporting tools, templates, and dashboards tailored to SMEs. Complement these with training and advisory services—such as helpdesks, workshops, and mentoring—to guide businesses in data collection, reporting processes, and alignment with international frameworks like GRI or the SDGs.
- **Encourage targeted and audience-specific sustainability communication:** Support tourism organisations in producing customised sustainability reports for different

stakeholders. This includes concise, visual summaries for tourists and partners, alongside more detailed compliance documentation for regulators. Clear communication enhances transparency, trust, and stakeholder engagement.

Anticipated Impact:

- **Increased stakeholder engagement:** By simplifying language and focusing on key metrics, sustainability reports will become more digestible. Non-specialist readers – from employees and local communities to tourists choosing service providers – will better understand and support the company’s sustainability efforts, leading to greater overall engagement.
- **Improved management decisions:** Clearer and more concise reporting will help business owners and managers spot trends and issues in their sustainability performance. They can make more informed, timely decisions (such as where to invest in energy savings or which practices to change) based on reliable, easy-to-read data. This leads to more effective allocation of resources toward sustainability goals.
- **Reduced administrative burden:** Especially for small businesses, streamlined reporting translates to time and cost savings. By aligning reports with common frameworks and providing digital tools, the effort required to comply with sustainability regulations will drop. This frees up SME resources to focus on implementing sustainability measures rather than paperwork, while still meeting regulatory expectations.
- **Greater transparency and trust:** When tourism companies (regardless of size) communicate their environmental and social performance openly and clearly, it builds trust with customers, partners, and regulators. A commitment to transparent reporting signals accountability. Over time, this can enhance the brand reputation of European tourism businesses as being genuinely sustainable and trustworthy.
- **Stronger sustainability culture:** Making sustainability data accessible empowers employees at all levels to engage with a company’s goals. As staff see clear evidence of progress (or areas needing improvement), they are more likely to contribute ideas and take initiative. This fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in sustainability practices within the organisation.

Incentivising circular economy adoption in tourism

Tourism operations can generate significant waste and consume large amounts of resources, especially in popular destinations. Adopting a circular economy approach – which emphasises

reducing waste, reusing materials, and recycling – can dramatically shrink the environmental footprint of tourism while opening up new business opportunities. However, transitioning to circular models often requires upfront investments and changes to established practices. By introducing strong incentives and recognition for circular economy initiatives, policymakers and industry leaders can encourage tourism SMEs to innovate in areas like waste management, product design, and resource efficiency. Such incentives will stimulate green innovation, improve resource efficiency, and align the sector with global sustainability goals.

Policy recommendations

- **Provide fiscal incentives for circular practices:** Offer tax benefits such as VAT reductions, tax credits or accelerated depreciation for tourism businesses that invest in circular economy solutions (for example, purchasing reusable/refillable equipment, installing water/energy saving systems, or developing circular products). Financial incentives will help offset initial costs and reward early adopters.
- **Offer direct financial support for circular initiatives.** Establish grant programs or low-interest loans for SMEs implementing concrete circular economy projects – e.g. setting up on-site recycling and composting facilities, launching upcycling workshops for old materials, or creating sharing platforms for equipment. This support will lower the risk for small businesses to experiment with circular models.
- **Encourage circular procurement and supplier selection:** Governments and larger companies in the tourism value chain should adopt procurement policies that favour providers using circular models. For instance, hotels or tour operators could give preferred supplier status or bulk purchasing contracts to vendors who use recycled materials, minimize packaging, or offer take-back schemes for products.
- **Recognise and reward circular economy leaders:** Create certification programs or awards to publicly acknowledge tourism establishments that excel in circular economy practices (such as achieving zero-waste or 100% renewable resource use in certain operations). This positive recognition can serve as a marketing tool for those businesses and inspire others to follow suit.
- **Support co-branding and marketing of eco-innovative products:** Tourism boards and industry associations should assist SMEs in promoting products or services that stem from circular innovation – for example, souvenirs made from recycled ocean plastic or tours that educate travelers about local sustainability efforts. Joint marketing campaigns can highlight these offerings, giving circular businesses a competitive edge.

- **Adopt circular economy criteria in public funding and permits:** When authorities provide tourism-related grants, licenses, or permits (such as licenses for festivals, concessions in parks, etc.), include criteria or bonus points for circular economy plans. This encourages event organizers and tourism operators to incorporate waste reduction and reuse measures from the outset.

Anticipated impact

- **Reduced environmental footprint:** Widespread circular economy adoption in tourism will significantly cut down waste sent to landfill and lower consumption of virgin resources. More recycling, reusing, and refurbishing means less pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, helping tourist destinations remain attractive and aligning with climate change mitigation efforts.
- **Economic benefits and job creation:** Circular practices can spur new business models and local enterprises – from repair services and recycling facilities to creative reuse of materials (like turning old hotel linens into local handicrafts). These activities create jobs and keep economic value circulating within communities, especially benefiting SMEs and entrepreneurs who can carve out niches in the circular supply chain.
- **Stakeholder mindset shift:** By incentivising circular approaches, the policy drives a broader change in mindset among tourism stakeholders – business owners, employees, and even tourists. It encourages everyone to view “waste” as a resource and to value sustainability. As these practices become normalized, sustainability moves from a niche consideration to an integrated part of daily operations and consumer expectations.
- **Alignment with global sustainability goals:** Embracing the circular economy aligns the tourism sector with international frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (notably SDG 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production). It also prepares businesses for future regulations that may mandate waste reduction or recycling, effectively future-proofing the sector.
- **Innovation and competitiveness:** Tourism businesses that innovate in circular processes will improve their efficiency (and often reduce costs over the long term through savings on materials and waste disposal). Additionally, destinations known for sustainable, circular practices may attract a growing segment of eco-conscious travelers, giving those places and businesses a competitive marketing advantage.

7. TOURX Policy recommendations

Recommendation 1: Modernize tourism VET curricula for future skills

Context

The tourism sector is evolving rapidly with digitalization, sustainability imperatives, and changing traveler expectations. Many vocational education and training (VET) curricula in tourism are outdated or misaligned with industry needs, leading to graduates who lack emerging skills. This skills mismatch undermines growth as businesses face difficulty finding talent proficient in new technologies or green practices. A more collaborative, forward-looking approach is needed – one that actively involves industry and community stakeholders and aligns training with regional tourism strategies for innovation and sustainability.

Recommendations

- **Co-design tourism curricula with industry stakeholders:** Vocational education providers should engage closely with tourism sector representatives (including hospitality businesses, destination managers, and tourism associations) to ensure that training programs reflect the latest market demands. Regular consultation cycles, knowledge triangle partnerships, curriculum advisory boards, and joint pilot projects should become a standard mechanism for curriculum development.
- **Embed future-oriented skills as core components:** Integrate **key transversal skills** into all tourism programs, not only digital literacy, data analytics, and intercultural communication, but also customer service excellence, language proficiency, and knowledge of universal design for accessibility. These competencies (e.g. managing online platforms, catering to diverse guest needs) should be taught through practical projects and assessed against industry standards so that graduates are prepared for smart, inclusive tourism destinations.
- **Enable flexible, stackable learning pathways:** Adopt modular course structures and micro-credentials so that learners (including workers returning to upskill) can build qualifications over time. Stackable credentials and credit transfer arrangements support lifelong learning, allowing tourism employees to update their skills in areas like sustainability or digital marketing without enrolling in a full program. Such flexibility makes VET more attractive and responsive to the dynamic nature of tourism careers.

Anticipated impact

Modernised curricula – co-created with stakeholders and aligned to both industry needs and regional strategic priorities – will produce graduates equipped with relevant digital, green, and interpersonal skills. They will be immediately valuable to employers, helping close skill gaps in areas like technology use or sustainable operations. Training programs grounded in real-world needs and future trends will foster a more resilient and innovative tourism workforce. Embedding accessibility, modular pathways, and micro-credentials ensures inclusiveness and alignment with long-term territorial strategies.

Recommendation 2: Integrate digital innovation in tourism training

Context

Digital technology is transforming tourism through online platforms, virtual experiences, data analytics, and automation of services. However, many tourism workers and SMEs lack advanced digital skills, and VET programs often have limited digital content or outdated training methods. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital readiness (e.g. virtual tours, remote working, online marketing) in tourism. Without incorporating digital innovation, tourism education risks falling behind, and the sector could struggle with competitiveness and resilience in a digital economy.

Recommendations:

- **Update VET curricula with emerging digital tourism technologies:** Incorporate structured modules on digital competencies specific to tourism. This includes training in online marketing and branding, data analytics for hospitality, e-commerce and booking systems, and the use of immersive technologies (virtual/augmented reality) to enrich travel experiences. Emphasize hands-on practice with real platforms and introduce cutting-edge topics like AI applications in customer service or smart destination management systems, so students learn to apply technology in enhancing tourist services.
- **Modernize infrastructure and bridge the digital divide:** Invest in modern digital facilities for VET – from simulation labs equipped with industry-standard software to e-learning platforms enabling hybrid learning. Ensure reliable internet connectivity and access to digital tools for all training centers, including in rural or remote regions, so no

learner or trainer is left behind. Teachers should be trained in blended teaching methods, combining classroom instruction with online modules and simulators to reflect contemporary work environments.

- **Partner with tech industry and support SMEs:** Develop collaborations with technology companies, innovation labs, and destination management organizations to co-design digital training content and provide expertise. Such partnerships can grant VET students and staff access to the latest tools (e.g. reservation systems, data dashboards) and certifications. At the same time, extend outreach and mentoring to tourism SMEs to help them adopt digital solutions – for example, by offering short courses or on-site training in CRM systems, cybersecurity, or digital payment platforms. Recognize and incentivize businesses that invest in digital upskilling of their workforce, creating a culture of continuous digital innovation.

Anticipated Impact

Strengthening digital competencies in tourism training will create a workforce that can harness technology to improve tourist experiences and business operations. Employees will be able to innovate with new digital services (such as interactive virtual tours or efficient e-commerce for travel bookings), making the tourism sector more competitive and resilient to disruptions. For VET learners, familiarity with digital tools increases their employability in a market that increasingly values tech-savvy professionals. In the long term, widespread digital proficiency in the tourism industry will facilitate productivity gains, foster innovation (e.g. new tourism tech startups), and enable the sector to adapt quickly to future technological changes or challenges. Ultimately, integrating digital innovation in training future-proofs the tourism workforce and helps destinations realize the Smart Tourism vision.

Recommendation 3: Embed sustainability and green skills in tourism education

Context

Sustainability has become a strategic priority for the tourism industry amid climate change and growing demand for responsible travel. Regulators and consumers increasingly expect tourism businesses to operate in environmentally and socially conscious ways. Yet traditional tourism training often treats sustainability as an afterthought rather than a core skill set. Many workers

and SMEs lack knowledge of eco-friendly practices – from energy efficiency and waste reduction to carbon footprint tracking or community-based tourism development. Small tourism operators can also perceive sustainable measures as a cost burden due to complex certification processes and limited resources. This gap makes it difficult for the sector to implement “sustainable quality” standards or meet circular economy goals. Embedding green competencies throughout VET – supported by incentives and simpler pathways for businesses – is essential to drive a genuine transition to sustainable tourism models.

Recommendations:

- **Make sustainability a core component of all programs:** Revise VET qualification standards to prioritize sustainable tourism knowledge and practices. Define mandatory learning outcomes related to environmental management, climate adaptation, circular economy principles, and corporate social responsibility. Develop new training modules on topics like resource-efficient hotel operations, eco-tourism product design, or sustainable food supply chains, and provide upskilling for trainers so they remain current in green innovations. By treating “green skills” as fundamental (on par with operational or digital skills), VET will consistently produce professionals capable of implementing sustainability in every tourism role.
- **Expand hands-on learning through green partnerships:** Encourage VET providers to collaborate with eco-certified tourism businesses, environmental agencies, and local community initiatives to give learners practical experience in sustainability. These public–private alliances should align training with regional sustainability plans and allow experimentation with real-world solutions. For example, students and companies could jointly pilot waste reduction and recycling programs, energy-saving measures in hospitality, or heritage conservation projects as part of the curriculum. Such “learning-by-doing” in cooperation with local stakeholders not only reinforces green skills but also helps enterprises identify viable sustainability measures (like eliminating single-use plastics or optimizing food waste management) that can be adopted long-term.
- **Support SMEs with tools, incentives and recognition:** Provide user-friendly toolkits and self-assessment checklists that help small tourism businesses gradually adopt greener practices and track their progress. Simplify environmental certification and reporting processes so they are attainable for SMEs, focusing on a clear core set of metrics (e.g. water usage, waste recycling rate). Policymakers should offer financial incentives – for instance, co-funded training grants or tax benefits – to encourage

businesses and their employees to invest time in sustainability training and certification. Additionally, link training outcomes with regional quality labels (e.g. Veneto's *Qualità Sostenibile*) and marketing campaigns to recognize “green” excellence: businesses that achieve sustainable operations could earn an eco-certification or be featured in promotions, attracting environmentally conscious customers. These combined measures will turn sustainability from a perceived cost into an opportunity for innovation and competitive advantage in the tourism market.

Anticipated Impact

By deeply embedding sustainability in tourism education and supporting its uptake in the workplace, the sector will accelerate its shift to a greener and more resilient model. New graduates and retrained workers will have the expertise to implement energy-saving technologies, waste reduction programs, and sustainable supply choices, helping tourism enterprises reduce their environmental footprint. Especially for SMEs, access to tailored tools and co-financing will lower barriers to action – they will be able to measure improvements (e.g. cutting utility costs or emissions) and communicate them credibly to an increasingly eco-aware clientele. Over time, widespread adoption of sustainable practices will not only improve resource efficiency and compliance with environmental regulations but also enhance destination appeal and brand value (as regions known for “quality sustainable tourism”). The workforce’s proficiency in green skills will contribute to achieving climate goals and safeguarding natural and cultural assets that tourism depends on. In sum, making sustainability a cornerstone of VET creates a virtuous cycle: a well-trained workforce drives greener business operations, which in turn boosts competitiveness and paves the way for tourism’s long-term viability. The link with regional labels and governance ensures that sustainability is not only a training outcome but also an incentive-driven practice, raising competitiveness and brand value.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen VET–business partnerships for practical skills

Context

A persistent challenge in tourism VET is the gap between classroom learning and real-world skill needs. Employers often find that graduates, while theoretically qualified, lack practical experience and familiarity with day-to-day operations. Small and medium-sized tourism enterprises – from hotels and restaurants to tour operators – also face obstacles engaging with

training providers, resulting in too few apprenticeship and internship opportunities. Without robust partnerships between VET institutions and industry, curricula risk becoming outdated and students miss out on hands-on learning that improves their job readiness. Strengthening these links, including through structured collaboration platforms and incentives for companies, will ensure that training stays demand-driven and that learners acquire experience in live hospitality and tourism settings before graduation.

Recommendations:

- **Expand apprenticeships and internships:** Foster formal agreements between VET schools and tourism businesses to implement dual training models. Students should split their learning time between classroom instruction and structured on-the-job training in real workplaces (hotels, attractions, travel agencies, etc.). These apprenticeships or long-duration internships must be well-supervised and aligned with the curriculum, so that practical exposure complements theoretical knowledge. Scaling up work-based learning (with clear learning outcomes and mentoring) gives students essential experience in customer service, operating procedures, and problem-solving on the ground.
- **Establish regional tourism skills councils and Hospitality Kabs:** Create multi-stakeholder platforms at regional or sector level that bring together VET providers, tourism companies (including SMEs), industry associations, and local authorities. These councils or skills clusters should meet regularly to align training provision with current labor market needs and innovation goals in the area. Use Hospitality Labs as structured innovation and training spaces where VET providers, SMEs, and authorities co-design practical learning and pilot sustainable and digital solutions. They can jointly review curriculum relevance, forecast emerging skill demands (for example, due to new tourism developments or trends), and coordinate initiatives like job fairs, guest lectures, or the creation of local training hubs. By institutionalizing VET–industry dialogue (as opposed to ad hoc contacts), regions ensure education is continuously tuned to the evolving tourism landscape and that employers have a direct voice in shaping training content.
- **Incentivize business participation in training:** Encourage more companies to actively engage in VET delivery by lowering costs and recognizing their contributions. This can include financial incentives such as tax credits, training subsidies, or grants for businesses that host trainees, release staff to teach as adjunct trainers, or invest in upskilling their employees. Public authorities and chambers can also offer awards,

certifications, or publicity to “VET-friendly” enterprises that distinguish themselves by mentoring students or co-developing curricula. Such incentives not only motivate large companies to partner with schools but also bring in small family-run businesses that might otherwise lack capacity. The result is an expanded training ecosystem where businesses see themselves as co-educators and benefit from helping shape a pipeline of skilled workers.

Anticipated Impact

Closer collaboration between VET and industry will produce a workforce with stronger practical skills and smoother transitions into employment. Students who complete substantial on-the-job training as part of their studies will enter the labor market already acquainted with workplace standards, customer expectations, and operational workflows – making them productive employees from day one. Companies benefit by gaining access to talent trained in alignment with their needs; many interns or apprentices can be retained as full employees, reducing recruitment costs and turnover. In the long run, a culture of partnership will keep training programs agile: as industry trends shift (toward, say, new digital tools or sustainability practices), businesses and educators will adjust content together, preventing skill shortages. This continuous feedback loop also helps address youth unemployment and staffing gaps, since VET can rapidly respond to demand (e.g. increasing training for tour guides if a region develops a new cultural route). Ultimately, ingraining practical collaboration – including potentially using hospitality labs or training hotels as joint learning sites – elevates service quality across the sector because graduates are both theoretically knowledgeable and practically experienced. It also fosters mutual understanding: educators better grasp industry realities, and employers gain trust in the VET system as a reliable source of skilled labor.

Recommendation 5: Enhance mobility and recognition of qualifications in tourism

Context

Tourism is a global industry, and the ability for workers to move between regions or countries enriches the talent pool and spreads best practices. However, inconsistent qualification frameworks and bureaucratic hurdles often make it difficult for tourism professionals to have their skills recognized across borders (or even between different regions of the same country). A hospitality diploma, tour guide license, or other credential earned in one European country may

not be fully understood or accepted in another, which discourages mobility and career progression. Additionally, emerging forms of learning – such as micro-credentials, online courses, or informal on-the-job training – are not always formally recognized, limiting their value. These barriers reduce the flexibility of the tourism labor market and can deter individuals from pursuing careers or further training if they fear their qualifications won't be portable. Enhancing the recognition and comparability of skills, while promoting international exchanges, will help build a more dynamic and qualified tourism workforce.

Recommendations:

- **Align and mutually recognize qualifications:** Map national and regional tourism qualifications to a common reference like the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to improve transparency. Governments and accrediting bodies should establish bilateral or multilateral agreements to recognize each other's core tourism credentials – for example, agreeing that a certified hotel management diploma or tour guide certificate in one country is equivalent to the qualification in another. This may involve harmonizing certain curriculum standards or competency definitions. By simplifying recognition of formal VET awards, tourism workers can more easily transfer jobs across EU Member States (and partners), filling seasonal or skill gaps and enriching destinations with diverse expertise.
- **Implement a tourism skills passport with modular credentials:** Develop a digital “skills passport” system for tourism professionals that records all relevant certifications, courses, and language proficiencies an individual obtains. This passport would allow accumulation of stackable micro-credentials (e.g. a badge in sustainable tourism management, a certificate in wine tourism, a first-aid training, etc.) alongside full qualifications. It would enable both students and current workers to continuously build their competencies and have them recognized formally. Standardizing such a system across countries means someone who upskills in a new area can carry that achievement anywhere in Europe's tourism sector. It also encourages lifelong learning, since even short courses or in-company training modules would have visible, portable value in one's career.
- **Expand international mobility programs in VET:** Strengthen and diversify programs like Erasmus+ to offer more exchange opportunities specifically in tourism training. This includes not just student study exchanges, but also cross-border apprenticeships, internships and staff mobility (teacher exchanges or industry staff placements abroad).

Facilitate partnerships between tourism schools in different countries for joint projects or knowledge exchange networks (for instance, pairing schools in a coastal tourism region with those in a mountain or urban tourism region to learn from each other's specialization). By supporting more learners and educators to gain international experience – and by involving tourism businesses in these exchange networks – the sector can cultivate intercultural competence, language skills, and a broader perspective on service innovation.

Anticipated Impact

Easier qualification recognition and greater mobility will make the tourism labor market more flexible and robust. Workers will have the freedom to pursue opportunities in different regions or countries without having to retrain from scratch, helping regions address labor shortages (e.g. experienced staff from one area can relocate to support another area's peak season). As professionals move and mix, they carry their knowledge with them – spreading best practices, new service ideas, and a multicultural approach to hospitality. For employees, knowing that their diplomas, certificates, and skills are honored beyond their home region greatly increases the appeal of investing in tourism VET, since it opens up a European (even global) career horizon. Over time, progress on common frameworks and a skills passport will also drive quality convergence: training programs across countries will improve to meet shared standards, and innovative courses that prove effective in one place can be adopted elsewhere. All these effects contribute to a more integrated European tourism workforce that is both highly skilled and able to respond to industry needs wherever they arise, thereby improving service excellence and competitiveness in the tourism sector as a whole.

Recommendation 6: Increase funding and incentives for tourism training and SMEs

Context

Transforming tourism education and upskilling the workforce requires adequate financial investment, which is often a constraint. Vocational institutions may struggle with limited budgets for updating curricula, equipment, or facilities (e.g. building a training kitchen or VR lab for tourism). At the same time, many small tourism businesses operate on tight margins and cannot easily afford to release staff for training or pay for external courses, especially when facing immediate pressures. Ambitious initiatives – such as integrating advanced digital tools into

classrooms, launching new sustainability programs, or enabling international exchanges – frequently need funding beyond regular allocations. Without targeted funding and incentive schemes, even well-designed policy reforms risk not being implemented at scale: VET providers may delay necessary upgrades, and SMEs may remain reluctant to engage in training, perpetuating skill gaps (particularly among the smaller operators that form the backbone of the tourism sector). Therefore, public authorities and industry partners must collaborate to mobilize resources and share the cost of building excellence in tourism VET.

Recommendation:

- **Boost investment in modern VET infrastructure and curricula:** Allocate dedicated funding at EU, national, and regional levels to modernize tourism training. Governments should utilize instruments like the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), Recovery and Resilience Facility, or green transition funds to upgrade VET infrastructure – for example, creating state-of-the-art hospitality training centers, digital simulation labs, or sustainability demonstration sites. Funding should also support the development of new curricula and teaching materials on emerging topics (digitalization, sustainable tourism, accessible tourism services, etc.). By earmarking money for tourism VET innovation, policymakers ensure that lack of funds does not hinder the introduction of modern, high-quality training aligned with strategic priorities (such as the twin digital and green transition).
- **Create incentives for employer training participation:** Encourage tourism businesses, especially SMEs, to invest in human capital by offsetting some of the costs. This can include grants or vouchers that co-finance external training programs for employees, tax deductions for expenditures on staff training, or wage subsidies to employers who hire apprentices or provide paid training leave. Such measures make it financially viable for small operators to continuously upskill their workforce. Additionally, consider establishing joint training funds or public-private financing schemes where employers and government both contribute (e.g. matching funds) to support employee development. By lowering the financial barrier, more companies will engage with VET institutions (for instance, sponsoring tailored courses or sending staff for certification), thereby raising the overall skill level in the sector.
- **Support learners through scholarships and shared-cost training schemes:** Implement financial support for individuals pursuing tourism VET or further training. Scholarships or stipends can target students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those

opting for specialized fields like eco-tourism or heritage management that society needs. For workers, develop co-funded training programs in which local authorities, training providers, and employers share the cost of short courses or reskilling programs (this is especially useful for upskilling unemployed tourism workers or those transitioning from declining sub-sectors). By easing the personal cost of education – for example, providing living allowances during a mobility exchange or covering exam fees for a certification – these schemes encourage more people to enroll in tourism training and lifelong learning, including mid-career.

Anticipated Impact

With greater financial support, tourism VET institutions will be empowered to offer cutting-edge programs and facilities, ensuring training keeps pace with industry developments. Modern equipment and well-resourced curricula will improve the quality of education, producing graduates proficient in the latest tools and standards (e.g. digital guest management systems or sustainable operations techniques). For the industry, incentives mean that many more SMEs will actively participate in training ecosystems – rather than seeing training as a luxury, small hotels, restaurants, and tour agencies will take up available grants or tax breaks to skill their staff. This leads to a more uniformly skilled workforce across the sector, not only in large cities or big companies but also in rural, small-scale operations. Over time, consistent funding streams will foster innovation: schools and companies can pilot new training approaches (like virtual internships or community-based hospitality labs) knowing support is available, and successful models can then be expanded. Crucially, by reducing the financial burden on individuals, these measures widen access to tourism careers and upskilling opportunities, contributing to inclusion. In the long run, robust funding and incentive structures ensure that workforce development in tourism is sustained as a public-private priority, yielding higher productivity, better service quality, and a workforce that's continually learning.

Recommendation 7: Reform and simplify legal frameworks supporting tourism VET

Context

Outdated or rigid regulations can slow down innovation in tourism education and hamper collaboration. In some countries, the legal framework governing VET (accreditation standards, curriculum approval processes, trainer qualification requirements, etc.) is cumbersome, making

it difficult to introduce new courses quickly or to recognize novel forms of learning (like micro-credentials or informal training). Similarly, complex labour and education laws may limit work-based learning or cross-institution partnerships – for example, restrictions on apprenticeships in certain occupations, or lack of legal provision for joint degrees between VET and higher education. Ensuring the legal environment is flexible and supportive is key to enabling the other policy recommendations: it should facilitate quick adaptation of curricula to emerging skills, smooth recognition of skills, and integration of initiatives like the TourX model into mainstream practice. Moreover, simplifying regulatory requirements (especially around compliance and reporting) can encourage more employers and training providers to engage in innovative programs without fear of red tape.

Recommendations:

- **Streamline curriculum and qualification updating:** Revise accreditation and qualification frameworks to allow faster introduction of new training programs or modules. For instance, create an expedited process for approving industry-endorsed micro-credentials in tourism (covering areas like artificial intelligence in hospitality or pandemic health protocols) so that VET providers can respond to urgent skills needs in months rather than years. Likewise, enable modular curriculum updates without overhauling entire qualifications – this could involve giving training institutions more autonomy to pilot electives or specializations aligned with local tourism trends, under light regulatory supervision. Such reforms retain quality control but remove unnecessary bureaucratic delays, keeping VET agile.
- **Facilitate flexible learning and career pathways:** Adapt laws to support non-traditional learning trajectories in tourism and encourage embedding reforms into regional governance frameworks so that legal updates are consistent with territorial innovation and skills policies. This can mean formally recognizing prior learning and on-the-job experience toward qualifications (so seasonal workers, for example, can convert experience into credit). It can also include allowing hybrid programs (combining vocational and academic elements) or dual qualifications – e.g. a student could simultaneously earn a tourism VET diploma and a related certificate from a university or professional body. Legal recognition of stackable credentials and lifelong learning credits will help workers progress in their careers more fluidly. Governments should also simplify procedures for foreign qualification recognition in tourism jobs by cutting down approval

times and administrative barriers (aligning with Recommendation 5's goals through legal instruments).

- **Simplify compliance for training initiatives and SMEs:** Review and simplify regulations that affect tourism training delivery and SME participation. For training providers, reduce excessive paperwork in establishing partnerships or accessing public funds – a one-stop digital portal for all compliance filings can help. For businesses, ensure that any requirements to host apprentices or trainees (like insurance, safety regulations, or mentor certifications) are clear and not overly burdensome, possibly by providing standardized guidelines or legal templates. In the area of sustainability and quality compliance, move towards plain-language guidelines and harmonized standards so that tourism SMEs can more easily meet training-related obligations (for example, understanding criteria for offering recognized training placements or participating in government-supported upskilling programs). A clearer, leaner regulatory framework gives both educators and employers confidence to innovate and engage in VET initiatives.

Anticipated Impact

A more flexible and enabling legal framework will accelerate the evolution of tourism VET. Training institutions will be able to keep curricula current with industry developments – for instance, swiftly integrating new digital skills or health & safety protocols as needed – without being held back by red tape. This means graduates' skills will more closely match real-time market demands, benefitting employers and reducing skill shortages. Workers will experience smoother career progression and mobility: as laws recognize diverse learning achievements, an employee can more easily upskill mid-career or move abroad with their qualifications, knowing the legal system supports these moves. Simplified regulations will also encourage more small businesses to participate in training and certification schemes, since compliance is straightforward and not intimidating. Overall, the relationship between the tourism industry and the education system will become more collaborative and dynamic when supported by modernized legislation – less about ticking boxes, and more about achieving outcomes like better-trained staff and high-quality, safe training experiences. In the long term, these legal reforms underpin a responsive VET ecosystem that can continuously adapt to and anticipate changes in the tourism sector, thereby strengthening the sector's resilience and innovation capacity.

Recommendation 8: Promote hybrid and flexible learning models in tourism VET

Context

Traditional classroom-based learning alone may not fully suit the needs of today's tourism learners or workers. Many tourism employees work irregular hours or seasons, making it hard to attend full-time courses; meanwhile, the pandemic experience showed that learning can often continue online or in blended formats. Additionally, tourism as an industry values practical experience and rapid skills acquisition, which calls for more flexible training delivery (such as on-the-job e-learning modules, evening courses, or intensive bootcamps in off-season periods). Without embracing hybrid (online/offline) and flexible learning models, VET programs risk excluding those already in the workforce and miss an opportunity to use technology to enrich education.

Recommendations:

- **Implement hybrid learning strategies combining theory and practice:** Develop course formats where theoretical instruction is delivered online, while practical training is conducted in physical environments, such as simulated hotel spaces or on-site work placements. This makes learning more accessible without sacrificing experiential quality.
- **Offer modular and seasonal learning formats:** Design short training units and modular courses that learners can complete at their own pace. Schedule courses during low tourism seasons or in part-time formats to better accommodate working learners and tourism calendars. Ensure that flexible delivery is inclusive by addressing accessibility, digital inclusion, and participation of disadvantaged groups
- **Train trainers and accredit flexible delivery models:** Equip educators with skills to deliver engaging digital content and mentor learners remotely. Governments and accreditation bodies should recognize online and blended learning outcomes as part of formal qualifications.

Anticipated Impact

Embracing hybrid and flexible learning models will broaden access to tourism education and continuous training. Workers who previously couldn't attend full-time courses can continue to develop their skills through online modules or flexible scheduling, leading to a more skilled existing workforce. Students will benefit from a richer learning experience that combines theory with practice and uses technology to simulate real-world scenarios (for example, using virtual reality to practice tour guiding). In terms of outcomes, this approach will produce graduates who are adept at self-directed learning – a valuable skill in the ever-changing tourism industry – and who have been trained in the latest digital collaboration tools as part of their education. The tourism sector as a whole will gain from a more inclusive training system: more people can participate in VET (including those in remote areas or with jobs), thereby increasing the talent pool. Additionally, the flexibility to quickly update online course content means the training can stay current with new developments, continuously injecting up-to-date knowledge into the industry.

Recommendation 9: Improve the attractiveness and quality of tourism careers

Context

Careers in tourism and hospitality often suffer from an image problem – they are sometimes perceived as low-paying, highly seasonal or unstable, and offering limited advancement. This has led to difficulties in attracting new talent to the sector and retaining experienced workers. Contributing factors include long or irregular working hours, limited social protection (e.g. for seasonal workers who face gaps in employment), and unclear career progression pathways. If these issues aren't addressed through policy measures, even the best training programs may not translate into a strong workforce, as graduates might opt for other industries or leave the sector after a short stint.

Recommendations:

- **Establish fair labor standards and social protection in tourism employment:** Implement policies to ensure fair wages, reasonable working hours, and off-season security through benefits such as seasonal unemployment insurance or subsidized training. These protections increase job stability and help professionalise tourism work.

- **Develop structured career ladders and link them to VET guidance:** Design clear occupational pathways within the tourism sector, for example from receptionist to front office manager to operations director. Integrate these into VET guidance services to help learners understand growth potential and long-term opportunities. Include specific measures to promote youth employment and link career progression with regional branding initiatives such as sustainable tourism quality labels.
- **Promote tourism careers through awareness campaigns and training incentives:** Launch national or regional campaigns to improve the image of tourism jobs, celebrate success stories, and promote emerging digital and green roles (e.g. sustainability coordinators, tourism data analysts). Encourage businesses to reward training achievements with promotions or pay increases.

Anticipated Impact

By addressing wages, working conditions, and career clarity, tourism jobs will become more enticing to both new entrants and existing workers. Connecting career ladders with branding initiatives elevates prestige and aligns youth pathways with sustainable regional strategies. Better social security and working standards will reduce burnout and turnover, ensuring that trained individuals remain in the sector longer, thereby retaining valuable skills and experience in the industry. As more people view tourism as a viable long-term career (and not just a temporary job), the sector will benefit from a more stable and professional workforce. Clear advancement opportunities and rewards for upskilling will encourage continuous professional development, leading to higher service quality and innovation as employees bring more expertise to their roles. Over time, these improvements will also elevate the public perception of tourism careers, helping to attract diverse talent including those with high skill levels who might otherwise overlook the sector. In short, making tourism a career of choice (rather than last resort) will greatly enhance the human capital available to the industry, which is crucial for its sustainability and competitiveness.

Recommendation 10: Strengthen educator training and industry exposure for instructors

Context

The quality of tourism VET is heavily dependent on the instructors and trainers who deliver the curriculum. In many cases, VET teachers may not have recent industry experience or may lack training in new pedagogical methods and content (digital tools, new sustainability practices, etc.). Tourism is a sector that changes quickly, so without continuous professional development, educators might teach outdated content or miss out on innovative teaching approaches. Additionally, limited exchange between industry and educators can result in a gap where instructors are unaware of current industry challenges, and industry professionals are not involved in teaching. Addressing the skills and exposure of teachers is essential to ensure that they can effectively impart the up-to-date knowledge and practical skills that students need.

Recommendations:

- **Invest in targeted upskilling programs for educators:** Organise regular CPD workshops on digital tourism tools, sustainable tourism integration, and evolving customer service standards. Training content should be aligned with market changes and pedagogical innovation.
- **Facilitate real-world industry placements for teachers:** Encourage and support short-term internships for VET instructors in tourism companies, such as hotels, tour operators, or restaurants. These immersive experiences allow teachers to bring updated knowledge and practical insights into their teaching.
- **Enhance industry-educator collaboration and recruitment standards:** Invite industry experts to participate in teaching (e.g., co-teaching, guest lectures), and revise teacher recruitment criteria to value recent professional experience. International teacher exchanges should also be promoted to broaden perspectives.

Anticipated Impact

Better-trained and industry-connected educators will significantly improve the quality of tourism VET. Students will benefit from instruction that is grounded in the latest industry realities and uses effective, modern teaching methods. Courses will become more dynamic and relevant, as teachers incorporate new case studies, technologies, and practices they have learned. This, in turn, produces graduates who are more in tune with what employers currently need. For the educators themselves, increased industry exposure and training will boost their confidence and enthusiasm, reducing stagnation and improving job satisfaction. On a systemic level, stronger links between schools and industry via teacher exchanges and guest instructors create a two-way knowledge transfer – education informs industry of theoretical advancements, and industry

informs education of practical evolutions. All of this contributes to a virtuous cycle of quality improvement in tourism skills development, ultimately yielding a workforce that is expertly trained and adaptable.

Recommendation 11: Encourage international collaboration and language skills

Context: Tourism is a global industry, and even local tourism destinations serve visitors from around the world. Thus, tourism professionals benefit greatly from international exposure and strong language skills. Currently, not all tourism VET programs emphasize foreign language proficiency or cultural awareness to the extent needed. Moreover, there are untapped opportunities for international collaboration between training institutions – for example, exchanging best practices or enabling students to learn abroad – which are sometimes hindered by lack of networks or support. Without deliberate focus on languages and international exchanges, the workforce may be less prepared to cater to diverse markets or to adopt global best practices in tourism services.

Recommendations:

- **Make foreign language training mandatory in tourism VET:** Require learners to acquire practical, workplace-relevant proficiency in at least one (ideally two) foreign languages aligned with inbound visitor trends. Prioritise applied language learning through tourism-specific contexts, such as hotel front desk scenarios or guided tour dialogues.
- **Facilitate international exchanges and partnerships:** Establish formal collaborations between VET institutions in different countries to enable student and staff mobility, joint projects, and curriculum sharing. Utilise EU programs like Erasmus+ as well as bilateral agreements to support these exchanges.
- **Include intercultural competence in all training programs:** Ensure learners gain skills in cultural awareness and international guest service, even if they do not travel abroad. This could include case studies, guest speakers from diverse backgrounds, or simulated global tourism scenarios

Anticipated Impact

Emphasizing language and international skills will produce tourism professionals who can communicate effectively with a broad range of guests and work in multicultural teams. Improved language proficiency (especially in English and other key languages) directly enhances service quality and guest satisfaction in destinations, as staff can address needs without language barriers. The experience gained from international exchanges will broaden learners' perspectives, making them more adaptable and innovative – for example, a student who interned abroad might introduce a new hospitality practice they learned overseas to their hometown business. For the sector, a workforce with global awareness and language abilities is crucial in attracting and accommodating international tourists, thereby boosting a destination's competitiveness. In the long run, international collaboration among VET institutions will lead to harmonization of quality standards and spread of best practices, elevating training outcomes across countries. This creates a more globally connected network of tourism excellence, aligning with the idea of Centers of Vocational Excellence extending beyond national borders.

Recommendation 12: Establish regional centers of excellence and knowledge networks

Context

Tourism skills development often involves a wide range of actors – education providers, industry companies, local governments, and sometimes research bodies – yet these actors may operate in silos. A coordinated approach is needed to address regional tourism needs holistically. The concept of Knowledge Triangles or Centers of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) emphasizes integrating education, business, and government to create ecosystems of innovation in VET. Some regions lack a formal structure for such collaboration, resulting in missed opportunities to share resources, avoid duplication, and plan strategically for skills geared to local tourism development (for example, linking training provision to a region's strategy to develop eco-tourism or cultural tourism). Without institutionalizing these partnerships, cooperation might rely on temporary projects rather than a sustainable network.

Recommendations:

- **Create regional centres or networks that unify key stakeholders:** Form structured partnerships that bring together VET institutions, universities, tourism SMEs, large employers, local governments, and industry associations. These entities should jointly

design curricula, coordinate innovation projects, and run collaborative initiatives aligned with regional tourism strategies.

- **Secure public backing and designate coordination structures:** Encourage public authorities to support these centres through funding, policy recognition, and formal agreements. Appoint a lead institution responsible for coordinating stakeholders and managing joint activities such as applied research, joint training, and policy dialogue.
- **Connect regional excellence hubs into a European network:** Promote mutual learning and transfer of good practices between centres (e.g. digital tourism innovation, apprenticeship models). These centres should also serve as platforms for upward policy feedback, informing EU-level policymaking from a grassroots perspective.

Anticipated Impact

Establishing these centers of excellence will create a structured environment for ongoing collaboration beyond the lifespan of any single project. Regions will benefit from training that is tailor-made for their specific tourism profile and workforce needs, which can enhance the quality and uniqueness of their tourism offerings. The direct involvement of employers and authorities means training initiatives will have strong buy-in and quick application in the field – e.g., students from the CoVE might directly feed into jobs in new local tourism ventures because those ventures helped shape the training. Over time, these hubs can become innovation engines, where new ideas in tourism services or training methodologies are piloted and evaluated, contributing to the region’s competitiveness. The networked aspect ensures that learning and innovation don’t stay isolated: a solution found in one Center (say, a successful way to train tour guides in smart technology use) can be disseminated through the network, raising the overall standard of tourism VET across the board. Additionally, these centers give policymakers tested models and evidence for what works in skills development, aiding smarter policy at the national and EU levels.

Recommendation 13: Facilitate stakeholder engagement and participatory governance

Context

Effective tourism education policy benefits from the insights of a broad range of stakeholders – including industry players, educators, learners, local communities, and government agencies. However, policy-making and governance in VET can sometimes be top-down, with limited direct

input from those on the ground. In the tourism sector, where community and local culture are integral to the product, excluding local voices (like resident associations or local tourism boards) from discussions about training and workforce development can lead to misalignment. Furthermore, when policies are formulated without stakeholder buy-in, implementation can suffer due to lack of enthusiasm or understanding from those expected to carry them out. Currently, not all regions or countries have regular forums or mechanisms to gather stakeholder feedback on tourism VET and employment issues.

Recommendation:

- **Create national and regional stakeholder councils focused on tourism skills:** Establish formal advisory bodies that regularly convene representatives from VET institutions, tourism businesses (including SMEs), worker organisations, students, local government, and civil society to advise on policy, monitor training outcomes, and respond to labour market changes.
- **Enable inclusive consultation mechanisms on training reforms:** Use digital platforms and public consultation tools to invite input from tourism professionals and stakeholders on major curriculum updates, funding initiatives, or skills strategies. Ensure transparency by publishing how stakeholder input influences policy decisions.
- **Localise skills development dialogues within tourism governance:** Encourage city and regional tourism bodies to establish VET working groups or education sub-committees that coordinate with colleges and training providers. These groups can link local cultural assets, sustainability goals, and tourism strategies with relevant VET content.

Anticipated Impact

Greater stakeholder engagement will lead to more responsive and accepted policies in tourism education and training. When those affected by policies have a hand in shaping them, the resulting measures are likely to be grounded in reality – training programs will address actual skill gaps that businesses and communities observe, and they will incorporate practical wisdom from the field. This also leads to smoother implementation: for example, if hoteliers participate in designing an apprenticeship scheme, they are more likely to offer placements and champion the program. Community input can ensure that tourism development through skills training aligns with local values and needs, contributing to sustainable tourism that has local support. Over time, participatory governance builds trust among stakeholders and policymakers; it creates a

feedback loop where policies continuously improve based on lived experience. The tourism VET system thus becomes adaptive, democratic, and inclusive, which can enhance its effectiveness and innovation. In sum, by giving all stakeholders a voice, the sector gains a sense of shared ownership over workforce development goals, leading to collective effort in achieving them.

Recommendation 14: Integrate lifelong learning pathways in tourism

Context: The tourism industry is characterized by rapid shifts – whether due to technology, consumer trends, or unexpected crises – which means the skill requirements for jobs are continually changing. Workers already employed in tourism (from front-line service staff to managers) need opportunities to upskill or reskill throughout their careers to keep up with these changes. However, lifelong learning in tourism is often underdeveloped: employees may not have easy access to further training after initial education, or they may not receive formal recognition for new skills learned on the job. Without clear pathways for continuing education (like the ability to return to vocational training for advanced courses, or stack new credentials over time), the existing workforce can become stuck, and the industry may face skill obsolescence. This also affects career mobility – for instance, a receptionist might lack a pathway to train for a higher role like destination marketing without going back to full-time education, which may not be feasible.

Recommendations:

- **Create modular and stackable lifelong learning pathways:** Develop short, accredited training modules and micro-credentials in areas responding to evolving tourism needs, such as digital marketing, sustainable tourism management, data analytics, languages and customer service. These learning opportunities should be designed so that workers can complete individual modules and progressively combine them towards broader or higher-level qualifications. Courses should be offered through flexible formats – including part-time, online, blended and off-season provision – so that seasonal workers and people already in employment can participate without leaving the labour market.
- **Strengthen recognition and accumulation of skills acquired throughout workers' careers:** Establish mechanisms that allow tourism professionals to formally recognise and build upon learning acquired through different routes, including vocational training, short courses, workplace experience and non-formal learning. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) should enable competences developed on the job – such as language

skills, customer service experience or proficiency with booking systems – to be assessed and certified. These mechanisms should be linked to national and European qualification frameworks so that workers can progressively accumulate recognised competences and use them for further education or career progression.

- **Support employer participation and career guidance for continuous professional development:** Encourage tourism businesses to actively support lifelong learning by providing training leave, contributing to course fees, hosting workplace-based training and giving employees opportunities to participate in continuous professional development. Particular support should be provided to SMEs, which may have fewer resources to invest in staff training. At the same time, career guidance and counselling services should be available to tourism workers to help them identify suitable learning pathways and understand how additional training can support progression into new or higher-level roles.

Anticipated Impact: A strong lifelong learning culture in tourism will ensure that the workforce remains agile and capable of responding to emerging industry demands without significant skills gaps. Employees will be able to update their competences regularly, enabling tourism businesses to adopt new technologies, practices and operational models more rapidly, knowing that their existing workforce can learn and adapt. Continuous professional development will also contribute to higher job satisfaction and retention by providing workers with visible opportunities for professional growth and career progression. The ability to accumulate new qualifications and recognised competences over time will facilitate mid-career advancement, allowing experienced workers to progress to higher-level positions or transition towards emerging roles, such as sustainability coordinator or other digital and green tourism occupations. At sector level, lifelong learning will contribute to a culture of excellence by enabling tourism businesses to continuously develop their existing human capital rather than relying exclusively on external recruitment to address new skills needs. In the long term, this will contribute to a more experienced, versatile and committed tourism workforce, capable of driving innovation, maintaining high service standards and adapting to the continuous evolution of the tourism sector.

Recommendation 15: Establish tourism skills foresight and data-driven planning

Context: One of the challenges in aligning education with industry needs is anticipating what skills will be needed in the future. The tourism sector is influenced by trends like demographic shifts (e.g., rise of Chinese tourists), technological advancements (AI in customer service, blockchain in bookings), and global events (pandemics, climate events), which can create new skill requirements almost overnight. Historically, many training programs have been reactive – adjusting only after skill shortages become apparent. Without a proactive approach to skills forecasting (sometimes referred to as a “skills watchtower” or observatory), there is a risk that VET programs will always lag behind industry change. Conversely, robust data on labor market needs and future projections can significantly inform and improve policy decisions and curriculum design.

Recommendations:

- **Create or integrate a dedicated tourism skills foresight mechanism:** Establish a sector-specific observatory, or incorporate tourism into national labour market intelligence systems. This body should monitor trends in job creation, technological disruptions, and emerging roles (e.g. sustainability officers, digital experience designers).
- **Utilise multi-source data and publish regular insights:** Collect and analyse information from job postings, employer surveys, tourist behaviour studies, and EU-wide datasets. Disseminate forecasts and skills gap reports that can guide VET institutions, learners, and policymakers.
- **Feed intelligence into VET planning and guidance systems:** Ensure that findings from the observatory inform curriculum development, training investments, and student career advice. Develop channels for collaboration with guidance counsellors, industry stakeholders, and public authorities to act on the data collected.

Anticipated Impact

A data-driven approach to skills planning will make tourism education and training far more responsive and future-proof. By anticipating needs, training providers can update courses before a shortage becomes acute – for instance, starting a program on hospitality data analytics right as hotels begin to adopt data-driven decision-making widely. This helps businesses too, as they will

face fewer skill shortages and can rely on the education system to supply the needed expertise in time. For learners, it increases confidence that the qualifications they pursue will be valued in the job market, since those qualifications are informed by forward-looking evidence. Policymakers will benefit by being able to target investments (Recommendation 6's funding aspect) to areas of strategic importance for tourism's future, ensuring better returns on spending. In the broader scope, a well-informed skills development system means the tourism workforce can lead rather than lag in adopting innovations – staying ahead of regional or global competitors. Ultimately, foresight-driven planning contributes to a more resilient tourism sector that can quickly adjust to change because its people have the right skills at the right time.

Recommendation 16: Foster innovation and entrepreneurship through tourism VET

Context

Tourism is a sector ripe for innovation – from tech startups offering new travel experiences to social enterprises involving local communities. However, traditional VET often focuses on preparing students for existing jobs rather than empowering them to create new ventures or innovative solutions. In the face of challenges like market saturation in certain destinations or the need for new post-pandemic business models, developing an entrepreneurial mindset in tourism professionals is crucial. Additionally, many regions would benefit from diversifying their tourism offer, and that often comes from fresh business ideas (eco-tours, cultural immersion programs, etc.) which educated entrepreneurs can drive. Without integrating innovation and entrepreneurship in training, the sector may miss out on home-grown innovations and struggle to rejuvenate itself with new products and services.

Recommendation:

- **Integrate entrepreneurship into the core VET curriculum:** Include modules on business planning, product innovation, digital marketing, and customer-centric design. Enable learners to work on practical entrepreneurship simulations, such as pitching a sustainable tourism product or developing a tourism tech prototype.
- **Establish incubation hubs and hospitality labs within VET institutions:** Partner with business accelerators, tourism boards, and universities to offer mentoring, workspaces,

and seed funding for student-led projects or startups. Engage successful entrepreneurs to inspire and guide participants.

- **Link VET to broader innovation and startup ecosystems:** Inform graduates about relevant grants, competitions, or innovation funding opportunities. Promote intrapreneurship by teaching students how to implement innovation within companies, not just start their own.

Anticipated Impact

By nurturing entrepreneurship in tourism education, we will see more graduates equipped not just to take jobs, but to create jobs. In the short term, this could lead to a surge in micro-ventures and innovative projects led by young people in the tourism sector – injecting creativity and potentially addressing gaps in the market (for example, new tours targeting niche interests or apps that improve tourist navigation in a city). These new businesses can invigorate local economies and increase the competitiveness of destinations. For those who enter established companies, having an innovation mindset means they can help those businesses evolve – such employees might spearhead the adoption of new technologies or develop new services that improve customer experience. Over time, a culture of innovation makes the tourism sector more resilient and adaptable; when facing shifts in tourist preferences or global disruptions, an industry populated with creative problem-solvers and entrepreneurs will find new ways to pivot. Additionally, embedding entrepreneurship in VET raises the prestige of vocational training by aligning it with dynamic career possibilities, and it empowers individuals from a skills background to become leaders and innovators, thereby driving the entire sector forward.

8. Lessons learned & replicability

8.1 Pathways for replication and adaptation across europe

The TourX project's approach is designed as a **transnational model** that can be replicated and adapted in various European contexts. By creating a **network of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in tourism**, TourX has piloted a cooperation model that brings together vocational institutions, businesses, and public authorities from different regions – all working towards common goals through shared activities. This bottom-up approach, centered on the *knowledge triangle* serves as a **pathway for other EU Member States** to adopt similar structures. The methodology is presented as a “*ready-to-use recipe*” for tourism ecosystems, providing tools and practices that can be widely applied **across Europe and beyond**. In practice, this means that regions facing skills gaps in tourism can establish their own excellence hubs or “hospitality labs” (as piloted by TourX) and leverage the TourX Toolbox to address local needs. Crucially, the model is flexible: it can be scaled to different administrative levels (regional or national) and customized to specific tourism niches or workforce profiles. The Veneto case reinforced that embedding VET innovation within regional governance frameworks (e.g. Piano Strategico del Turismo 2025–2027) ensures sustainability and integration into long-term strategies. TourX showed that alignment with smart specialisation, sustainability priorities, and regional branding initiatives makes replication more effective and attractive to policymakers and businesses.

Importantly, TourX also demonstrated **international potential** for its model. One of the project's partners outside the EU (in China) provided a test-bed for adapting European best practices in a different national context. This collaboration showed that the TourX approach – with its emphasis on industry-driven skills development and continuous learning – resonates even beyond Europe's borders. It opens opportunities for knowledge transfer and partnerships internationally, indicating that other countries or regions (for instance, in Asia or the Americas) could replicate the *TourX model* to modernize their tourism and hospitality training ecosystems. By showcasing success in a non-EU context, TourX underlines that its framework is not EU-specific but globally relevant, offering a blueprint for **workforce upskilling in tourism worldwide**.

8.2 Lessons from Knowledge Triangles

An essential part of TourX's development was the **pilot implementation in four countries** – Greece, Germany, Spain, and China – each providing valuable insights. These pilots functioned as case studies, revealing both effective practices and challenges encountered locally. Key lessons learned include:

- Greece:** The Greek pilot highlighted the importance of aligning VET programs with *real industry needs* and regional priorities. A local *Hospitality Lab* in Attica region facilitated close collaboration between tourism businesses, vocational institutes, and authorities. Stakeholder feedback in Greece emphasized significant gaps in **digital literacy and green skills** among graduates, reflecting the need to modernize curricula. The project's interventions (e.g. introducing digital marketing and sustainable tourism modules) showed that **updating curricula** in partnership with industry can quickly improve graduates' employability and address labour shortages. A unique challenge in Greece was the seasonality of tourism; thus, the pilot underscored the value of off-season upskilling programs (e.g. winter training courses) to retain skilled workers year-round. The Greek experience reinforced that continuous dialogue with industry (through knowledge triangles and regional skills partnerships) is vital for keeping training relevant.
- Germany:** In Germany (with a focus on the Brandenburg region), the pilot demonstrated the benefit of **strong industry associations** and dual-training traditions in shaping tourism VET excellence. Local implementation was supported by partners like the regional hospitality association, which helped identify skill needs and mobilize SMEs. A lesson learned was the need for better **attractiveness of tourism careers** – German stakeholders noted difficulties in attracting youth to the sector, in part due to perceptions of unstable or seasonal work. This led to recommendations such as developing new career pathways and improving working conditions (e.g. hybrid training models, social security for seasonal workers) to make the sector more appealing. The German pilot also showed the importance of data-driven planning: establishing a regional “skills watchtower” to collect labour market data helped in forecasting needs, though it highlighted challenges in data sharing and standardization across regions. Overall, Germany's case underlined how **public-private cooperation**, supported by regional authorities, can drive curricula innovation (for example, integrating AI tools and sustainability practices into vocational programs) while also addressing structural issues like qualification recognition across borders
- Spain:** In Spain, the pilot was concentrated in a high-tourism region (the Canary Islands), illustrating how the TourX approach can support regions heavily reliant on tourism. A major lesson was the effectiveness of tailoring VET initiatives to **regional development strategies**. Spanish stakeholders integrated TourX's training modules with local priorities such as eco-tourism and digital transformation of tourism services. The pilot saw success in embedding **sustainability** into training – for instance, including modules on circular economy, energy efficiency in hotels, and sustainable mobility, aligning with the islands' green transition goals.

Feedback from Spain highlighted that engaging **regional government and tourism boards** early on helped in scaling impact (e.g. by adopting new curricula region-wide). However, challenges were noted in reaching smaller businesses spread across islands; to address this, the project used blended learning and mobile training units, improving access for SMEs. The Spanish case confirmed that **flexibility and stakeholder engagement** at the regional level are key: by adapting the TourX Toolbox to local context (such as language needs and cultural heritage tourism), the pilot achieved strong buy-in and demonstrated improved skills among participants (including better foreign language proficiency and customer service skills, which were identified as gaps). This experience serves as a replicability model for other regions, especially those with distinct local tourism products or geographic constraints.

- Italy:** The Italian Knowledge Triangle contributed a strong regional model for connecting vocational education with territorial tourism development strategies. A key lesson was the effectiveness of embedding VET innovation within regional governance frameworks, such as the Piano Strategico del Turismo (PRT) 2025–2027. The pilot promoted an inclusive and participatory co-design process, engaging SMEs, vocational schools, tourism boards, and civil society to define training needs aligned with sustainable, smart, and accessible tourism goals. Another important insight was the use of “Hospitality Labs” and local experimentation as mechanisms to prototype new training formats, with a strong emphasis on accessibility, digital inclusion, and youth employment. The Italian case also demonstrated how regional branding initiatives, like the “Qualità Sostenibile” tourism label, can be linked to VET content and certification, providing a clear incentive for learners and businesses to adopt green and quality standards. Lastly, Veneto’s model highlighted the importance of lifelong learning frameworks embedded in regional innovation systems, showing how micro-credentials and modular training can be scaled when coordinated with smart specialisation strategies.
- China (International Pilot):** The involvement of a Chinese partner (Chengdu, China) provided a unique perspective, testing the TourX concepts in an international setting. One lesson from China was the **importance of cultural and systemic adaptation**: European vocational training models had to be adjusted to fit China’s educational framework and industry practices. The pilot activities (such as exchange of curricula and benchmarking of hospitality labs) indicated that core components of the TourX Toolbox are indeed transferable abroad, but require localization – for example, aligning with local qualification standards and language. Chinese stakeholders appreciated the focus on **skills intelligence tools** and collaboration platforms, noting that such approaches could help address their own tourism skills gaps. A notable outcome was the mutual learning: EU partners gained insight into innovative practices in

China's tourism sector (such as use of advanced digital platforms in hospitality), while Chinese partners saw the value of TourX's comprehensive approach to vocational excellence. The China pilot reinforced the idea that the TourX model can inspire **international cooperation** in tourism education. It also showcased the EU's leadership in vocational training innovation, potentially paving the way for future partnerships and exchange programs that extend the TourX network globally. In summary, the international pilot confirmed the *global replicability* of TourX's lessons – demonstrating that with proper adaptation, the approach can strengthen tourism skills ecosystems in diverse socio-economic contexts.

8.3 Funding mechanisms to support replication

Scaling the TourX approach to other regions requires strategic use of **funding and support mechanisms**. A variety of EU-level and regional funding instruments are available to facilitate replication and adaptation:

- **Erasmus+ (Partnerships for Excellence):** Erasmus+ provided the initial funding for TourX as a Centre of Vocational Excellence project. Other regions or consortia aiming to create similar initiatives can leverage Erasmus+ calls (especially CoVE or innovation partnerships) to kick-start new tourism excellence networks. This program supports cross-country collaboration and innovation in VET, making it ideal for launching pilot projects modeled on TourX. However, Erasmus+ is competitive and project-based; stakeholders have noted that while it stimulates innovation, longer-term or wider roll-out may require additional resources.
- **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+):** Once a model like TourX has been piloted, **ESF+** is identified as one of the most appropriate programs to fund broader implementation and institutionalization. ESF+ can support capacity-building in education and training at national and regional levels, including curriculum reforms, trainer training, and investment in equipment or infrastructure for VET. A policy recommendation emerging from TourX is to create dedicated funding lines under ESF+ for establishing or operating regional skills partnerships in tourism. By tapping into ESF+, Member States or regions can integrate TourX-style activities into their mainstream funded programs – for example, funding ongoing Hospitality Labs or regional skills observatories as part of their operational programs.
- **Interreg (European Territorial Cooperation):** For cross-border regions or multi-country tourism initiatives, **Interreg** programs (under the European Regional Development Fund) offer funding to promote collaboration across borders. As TourX's approach is collaborative and transnational by nature, Interreg could be used to replicate the model in neighboring regions

that share tourism markets or challenges. For instance, regions in different countries around the same sea basin or mountain range could jointly establish a Hospitality Lab network. The TourX review has suggested that Interreg support would be valuable once regional partnerships are ready to cooperate cross-border. This mechanism ensures that knowledge transfer and synergies occur between countries, strengthening the overall European tourism skills ecosystem.

- **Regional and National Funding:** In addition to EU programs, **national or regional development funds** can play a role. Governments can allocate part of their budgets (or use EU structural funds like ERDF) to invest in VET excellence centers, digital platforms, or training programs for tourism. For example, a regional authority might fund a local Tourism Skills Observatory or provide grants to VET colleges to adopt the TourX Toolbox components. Some regions may incorporate TourX follow-up activities into their **Smart Specialisation Strategies** and use regional innovation funds to maintain the momentum. Moreover, public-private partnerships (e.g. industry co-funding training centers) can amplify the impact; tourism companies might contribute resources if they see direct benefits in workforce development.
- **Other EU Initiatives:** Beyond the major funds mentioned, there are other potential sources like **Erasmus+ mobility grants** (to support exchange of staff and students as part of internationalization efforts), **Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs** (for entrepreneurship in tourism), or the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** in countries' recovery plans (some of which include digital and green skills training measures). Additionally, programs like **Erasmus+ Forward-Looking Projects** and **Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills** have been used in related sectors to develop new training content and partnerships, and could be avenues to further expand on TourX outcomes. Aligning TourX replication with such funding opportunities will increase financial sustainability.

When planning replication, a blend of these funding mechanisms may be used. For example, a region could start with a small Erasmus+ project to plan its Tourism CoVE, then secure ESF+ funding for scaling training programs, and use Interreg to collaborate with adjacent regions for knowledge exchange. By proactively **mapping funding sources to specific needs** (infrastructure, curriculum development, staff training, etc.), stakeholders can create a robust financial plan for sustaining and expanding the TourX model. Notably, TourX partners have advocated for simplifying application procedures and providing targeted grants for tourism VET initiatives, which indicates a need for policymakers to ensure these funding streams are accessible to VET providers and SMEs.

8.4 Alignment with EU-Level frameworks and priorities

The TourX approach aligns closely with several major EU initiatives, reinforcing its relevance and easing its replicability across Member States. This alignment ensures that expanding TourX will contribute to broader European objectives:

- **Pact for Skills (Tourism Ecosystem):** TourX embodies the collaborative, multi-stakeholder spirit of the *EU Pact for Skills*. In fact, the project has been promoted in cooperation with the Pact's Large Skills Partnership for Tourism, networking with hundreds of organizations to spread the TourX approach. The Pact for Skills in tourism aims to upskill or reskill 60% of the tourism workforce each year by 2030, addressing challenges like seasonality and skills gaps in the sector. TourX contributes directly to this goal by establishing structures (like regional skills partnerships and training programs) that facilitate continuous upskilling. By replicating TourX, other regions will be strengthening their commitment to the Pact's objectives – fostering public-private cooperation in skills development and significantly increasing training provision in tourism. In essence, TourX serves as a practical implementation of the Pact's principles, turning high-level commitments into on-the-ground actions.
- **European Green Deal and Sustainability Goals:** A cornerstone of TourX is the integration of sustainable tourism practices into VET – which aligns with the EU Green Deal's emphasis on greener industries and the fight against climate change. The TourX curriculum updates (e.g. modules on energy efficiency, circular economy in tourism, eco-tourism) are in line with the Green Deal's vision for all sectors to contribute to climate neutrality. The European Green Deal and related SDG commitments underscore the need for a workforce skilled in green practices and resource efficiency. By equipping learners with green skills and promoting sustainable operations in hospitality (as seen in the pilots), TourX helps advance these goals. Replicating TourX will mean more tourism workers are capable of implementing environmentally friendly practices – from reducing waste in hotels to guiding tourists in sustainable behavior – thus pushing the tourism ecosystem toward the Green Deal targets. Moreover, the emphasis on sustainability in TourX also resonates with younger generations' values, indirectly supporting the Green Deal by attracting new talent to a greener tourism sector.
- **Transition Pathway for Tourism:** The European Commission's Transition Pathway for Tourism (published in 2022) outlines a roadmap of **27 areas of action** for making the tourism sector more green, digital, and resilient. TourX's approach is highly complementary to this pathway. For example, the Transition Pathway calls for more circular and environmentally friendly services, enhanced data sharing, and improved accessibility in tourism – all areas that TourX

addresses through its training in sustainability, its Skills Intelligence tools, and its focus on inclusivity in skills development. By strengthening the skills base, TourX indirectly supports many measures of the pathway: a workforce adept in digital tools will enable innovative and accessible tourism services, and a workforce trained in sustainability will drive circular economy practices in the sector. Additionally, the Transition Pathway emphasizes stakeholder co-creation and commitments; TourX is a manifestation of stakeholder co-creation in VET, as it was developed through extensive consultation and partnership in each region. As regions replicate TourX, they are effectively implementing parts of the Transition Pathway – notably the human capital development aspects crucial for a successful transition.

Scaling up the TourX model in Europe will **reinforce EU policy frameworks**. The project's alignment with the Pact for Skills ensures that replication efforts have political support and community buy-in at European level, since they contribute to a headline target for workforce development. Its alignment with the Green Deal guarantees that the replicated training programs will support Europe's environmental objectives, making the tourism sector more sustainable. Finally, its alignment with the Transition Pathway for Tourism means TourX can be a vehicle to achieve many of the strategic changes envisioned for the industry's future. This synergy with EU frameworks not only adds credibility to the TourX approach but also opens doors for policy support and funding. Policymakers and stakeholders in other Member States can be confident that by adopting the TourX "lessons learned and replicability" strategies, they are not working in isolation but are part of a larger European movement towards a **greener, more digital, and more resilient tourism sector**. Such coherence with EU-level priorities will facilitate the uptake of TourX recommendations across different countries, ensuring long-term sustainability and impact of the project's legacy.

9. Consultations to stakeholders

In order to ensure the policy recommendations were grounded in real-world needs, , and as mention in point 5. Methodology, the TOUR-X consortium carried out a series of stakeholder consultations across multiple countries and at the European level. The main objectives of this process were to gather feedback from key tourism and VET stakeholders, validate preliminary findings, and incorporate diverse perspectives into the recommendations. A combination of methods was used – including online surveys, semi-structured meetings/workshops (often through the project’s regional *Knowledge Triangles*), and dedicated stakeholder events – to engage participants in an open dialogue. This approach allowed the project to involve stakeholders representing the “knowledge triangle” of vocational education, industry (notably tourism SMEs), and public authorities in each target region. All individual inputs were treated confidentially (with participant names anonymised in reporting) to encourage frank and honest feedback.

The consultation activities engaged a broad mix of stakeholder types in the tourism and education ecosystem. In each country or region, the following groups were represented:

- **VET providers and institutions:** e.g. tourism colleges, vocational training centers, and universities offering tourism programs.
- **Industry representatives (SMEs and associations):** e.g. small and medium tourism/hospitality enterprises, business associations, and chambers of commerce representing tourism employers.
- **Policy makers:** e.g. regional development agencies, municipal or regional government departments, and national qualification bodies involved in tourism or education policy.
- **EU-level:** the stakeholder consultation process involved a diverse group of representatives drawn from both the education and business sectors. On the one hand, VET providers, training centres, and coordinators of European skills partnerships contributed institutional perspectives on curriculum design, mobility, funding access, and cross-border cooperation. On the other, small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, innovation managers, and business support consultants offered insights into the operational challenges faced by SMEs in areas such as digital transformation, sustainability compliance, and workforce development. Several participants also held advisory or leadership roles in EU-level platforms, chambers of commerce, or sector-specific policy bodies, ensuring that the consultation reflected both grassroots experience and strategic policy viewpoints.

This multi-faceted engagement ensured that voices from both the supply side (education/training providers) and demand side (industry employers), as well as policy-makers, were heard in shaping the recommendations.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the stakeholder consultation methodology and reach in each targeted country/region. It lists the methods used, and the main types of stakeholders consulted in each case. It covers the TOURX Knowledge Triangle (Italy, Greece, Germany, Spain), an international partner country (China), and the EU-level (pan-European umbrella stakeholders).

Country	Consultation methodology	Main stakeholder consulted
Greece	National <i>Knowledge Triangle</i> workshop; online survey inputs from stakeholders	VET providers; SME/business associations and chambers; regional public authorities
Germany	Regional stakeholder meetings (Brandenburg <i>Knowledge Triangle</i>); focus group with local tourism associations	VET college providers; tourism industry associations; local/regional authority representatives
Spain	Regional workshop in Canary Islands (<i>Fuerteventura</i> cluster); follow-up survey consultation	VET training institutions; tourism SME association; local municipal authorities
Italy	Veneto Knowledge Triangle workshops; participatory co-design meetings; integration with regional tourism strategy	VET institutions; SMEs; regional tourism boards; civil society organisations; regional policy-makers
China	EU–China VET Forum 2024 (Chengdu) and study visits	Vocational colleges and institutes; tourism and hospitality industry representatives; education authorities (regional)
EU-Level	Brussels expert panel event and targeted stakeholder meetings	European VET networks; federations, EU policy makers, tourism experts

Table 1: Overview of stakeholder consultations by country/region – methods, scale of engagement, and stakeholder categories.

Overall, the stakeholder consultation process was extensive and inclusive. Across the targeted contexts – **Greece, Germany, Spain, Italy, China, and the EU level** – the consortium engaged well over a

hundred stakeholders in total. The process emphasized collaboration and listening: stakeholders were invited to share experiences, validate the feasibility of proposed measures, and highlight any gaps or additional needs. This approach helped to build consensus and ensure that the final policy recommendations are practical, relevant, and endorsed by those who will be implementing or affected by them. The feedback and outcomes from these consultations have been carefully analyzed in the project's work, creating a strong evidence base for the recommendations presented in this deliverable. In conclusion, the consultations with stakeholders provided a crucial feedback loop in the TOUR-X project, reinforcing a bottom-up ethos.

10. Conclusions

The policy recommendations developed under TourX's Work Package 5 offer a comprehensive, forward-looking strategy to modernise and align tourism vocational education with the evolving realities of the sector. The challenges addressed—including the digital and green transitions, regional disparities, labour shortages, and SME constraints—are complex and interconnected. Yet, through multi-stakeholder collaboration and regional engagement, TourX has demonstrated that practical, inclusive, and systemic solutions are achievable.

The recommendations are not abstract ideals but grounded in data, stakeholder consultations, and pilot activities across the TourX Knowledge Triangle countries and beyond. Their success lies in their adaptability: they respond to both common European priorities and the specific needs of regional tourism economies.

Crucially, TourX has validated the potential of the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) model in tourism, showing that innovation and excellence in training can drive competitiveness, sustainability, and equity. The combination of digitalisation, green skills, lifelong learning pathways, and flexible training models demonstrated in the pilots provides a blueprint for replication in other regions of Europe and beyond. Moving forward, the recommendations call on EU and national policymakers, VET institutions, industry actors, and regional authorities to adopt and scale the proposed measures. Through coordinated action, these stakeholders can ensure that the tourism workforce is equipped not only for current demands but also for the transformations of tomorrow.

TourX reaffirms the importance of tourism VET as a strategic enabler of Europe's green, digital, and inclusive future. By fostering cooperation through CoVEs, encouraging participatory governance, and embedding training in regional innovation systems, the project has provided a model that is both replicable and globally relevant.

