1st Policy Brief

Virtual Vocational Education and Training

Findings of the VIRTUS needs analysis

Brief Project Description

The main aim of the "Virtual Vocational Education and Training – VIRTUS" project is the development of an innovative, fully functional virtual vocational education and training centre, which will provide appropriately designed modular certified courses in 1. Tourism and Hospitality Services and 2. Social Entrepreneurship, corresponding to regional growth potential and skills needs and targeting at increasing the participation rate of Adult Learners in continuing VET.

Needs analysis

In the framework of the project, a **needs analysis** was conducted in order to identify and assess the end-users needs of the Virtus target groups: **adult learners, VET teachers, representatives of SMEs in Tourism and Social Enterprises**[1] . The needs analysis report is the basis on which the modular courses in **Tourism and Social Entrepreneurship** will be developed and provided through the VIRTUS virtual VET center. The training needs of the following project target groups were assessed in Greece, Spain, Italy, and Austria:

- Representatives of SMEs in the field of tourism
- VET teachers in the field of tourism

- Adult learners in the field of tourism
- Representatives of SMEs in the field of social entrepreneurship
- VET teachers in the field of social entrepreneurship
- Adult learners in the field of social entrepreneurship

Findings in the field of tourism

According to the participants' responses, there is increased interest in attending VET courses in order to enhance their employability in the field of tourism or to gain specific skills necessary to improve their work in this field.

[1]You can download the VIRTUS Needs Assessment Report here: http://virtus-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Needs-Assessment-Analysis-Report.pdf

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1 It is necessary to highlight that most of the participants stressed the importance of **more active, practical and participative tasks and exercises during a course, which can stimulate creativity, promote interaction and help to maintain a high level of attention throughout the course's duration.**

These could be role plays, group activities, discussions, simulations, case studies and product design. It was also argued by several respondents that activities and tasks should be as close to reality as possible giving deep insight to the world of tourism business, which will help in future to work efficiently in this sector. Moreover, it is important at the beginning of the course for the teachers to provide the participants with the same basic theoretical knowledge to avoid any knowledge gaps among participants. Nevertheless acquisition of theoretical parts should take place in a more interactive and practical way, applying the method "**learning by doing**". This approach will also help participants to acquire the skills that they consider most relevant for their professions.

Communication skills, soft and interpersonal skills were identified by the respondents, as the most relevant types of skills to be developed for working in the tourism sector through a VET course.

A significant part of respondents identified assessment at different stages of the course as well as the final evaluation as an important aspect of the training process. This aspect is connected to the necessity of having permanent contact with the trainer, since most of the participants in a course sometimes have personal fears and doubts in relation to their abilities as well as lack of motivation.

The **Scheduling of the course**, has to take into consideration the different levels of knowledge and experience of the participants, and allow for flexibility regarding time and information. This is even more so if we consider that the Virtus VET courses will be implemented in a Virtual VET organisation. Participant that are already knowledgeable about a topic should not need to spend a lot of time on that subject. As a possible solution the respondents suggested to develop modular courses and to provide detailed information about each module and the contents included therein. Some participants need more time than the others to fulfil tasks and assignments due to lack of experience, or they are simply busier at work and with other obligations, consequently for a lot of potential trainees flexibility of the VET course is a priority.

Findings in the field of social entrepreneurship

From the data analysis of the different three target groups participating in the survey, a lot of similar problems emerged, and aspects of the VET system in the field of social entrepreneurship. All three groups have specified that the practical activities such as: role plays, group activities, discussions, sim-

ulations, case studies and product design, are most relevant for a VET course than the theory.

2   All three groups pointed out at the importance of **balance between theory and practice with a stronger focus on practice that could be more inspiring and motivating for both trainers and trainees**. All the activities should be **connected to reality as much as possible**, so that during the course participants could get experience relevant to their future activities.

This could be starting a new business or improving an existing one. They also suggested to present the information in a more interesting way trying to avoid boring presentations or recordings which are hard to follow.

Participants provided different **suggestions on how to improve the virtual VET courses:** to develop courses which respond to learners' needs; to try to be interesting and to include innovative materials which would keep learners interested and motivated; to include more practical approach providing real experience such as visiting social enterprises and making a report or preparing a business plan.

It was strongly emphasized by representatives of SMEs that a group of trainees should have a well-balanced level of knowledge and experience. This is because when the participants have too different levels, some of them start lagging behind, lose motivation and do not let others to move forward which has negative impact on all the participants.

Acquisition of **theoretical parts** should be also run in more interactive and practical way, applying the method **"learning by doing"**, that will also let participants to acquire the skills important for growth in their profession: **communicative skills, soft skills and interpersonal skills.**

Another important aspect mentioned by the participants is the role of a **facilitator** or advisor who would guide them through the whole process while providing assessment at different stages of the course. This aspect is connected to the necessity to have permanent **contact with the trainer**, as besides assessment participants of the course need general support as a lot of them have personal fears, lack of confidence and doubts in relation to their abilities as well as lack of motivation.

One more important aspect of VET course mentioned by the participants is the **schedule**. Participants have different opinions about the duration of the course, for some of them it was considered too short for others too long.

Consequently, for a lot of potential trainees, **flexibility of the VET course is a priority.**

Findings from the focus group meetings

In order to better assess the needs of the project target groups and foster dialogue, focus groups were organized in the Greece, Austria, Spain and IT.

There was a big expectation to know

more about the courses to be developed in the project, due to the large types of profiles included in these sectors. Inside Tourism and Hospitality services sector, the profiles can be from the manager to the receptionist in a hotel, a worker in a travel agency, etc.

In social entrepreneurship, there is support (financial, training, administrative) to set up a company or start running it. But there is a lack of support for companies that have been running for more than one or two years already. In such cases training is necessary for the sustainability of the business.

According to all the participants it is very important to train the learners on how to use the VET virtual center which will be delivered within the project.

In Spain, the differences between sectors (Tourism and Hospitality Services and Social Entrepreneurship) made it difficult to conduct a single meeting on two different sectors. It was easy when the discussion was related to common aspects (need of training, new ways of training) but not very fluent when the discussion was about the two sectors and their experiences.

In Greece, the dialogue about the problems and training needs of tourism sector was the focus rather than social entrepreneurship. since the tourism sector is the main resource of income in Greece. The social entrepreneurship is a relatively new sector in Greece and in combination with the lack of legal and institutional framework it is not as well developed.

Key to the appropriate preparation of people who want to work in tourism sector and hospitality services is dual

education and apprenticeship. **A balanced combination between education, technical training and apprenticeship is ideal.**

It was noted that according to studies, almost 90% of people that work in hospitality services have no education and training in this field. A big percentage of people who start working in tourism want to find another job. Many participants noted that the biggest problem in the tourism sector is the lack of training and education. A large part of the workforce in the tourism sector have to learn basic skills such as how to think critically, how to organize all the tasks that they have, how to plan all the tasks that they have to do at work. Conflict resolution was also highlighted as another critical factor.

The main message that people involved in the tourism sector and hospitality services conveyed was that the most important skill is the "Passion", the way of thinking about their job, of loving it as well as the guests visiting the hotels in which they work.

Deep knowledge on hospitality services is another crucial factor of success.

Peoples' specific characteristics, their personalities and their characters can contribute greatly to efficient work performance.

For many years, a lot of people working in the tourism sector did so because they could not find a job in their sector. This leads to unskilled employees, with lack of knowledge and skills in the specific sector of hospitality services. This is gradually changing in recent years.

Another important factor that emerged in the Greece meeting in relation to

tourism sector is the background of the owners of the hotels. They also have to participate in education and training activities in order to acquire the appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes, qualifications for the hotelier.

4 About the environment to be developed in the virtual VET, all noted that it better to be simple, and easy to use.

The environment of the virtual VET shouldn't be complicated and difficult to manage.

There is a big percentage of people in hospitality services and tourism that do not have the digital skills needed in order to undertake online training in a complicated digital environment.