



VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING CONNECTING HIGHER EDUCATION AND RURAL COMPANIES (CONNECT-VET) IN THE ESTONIAN RURAL TOURISM SECTOR

Partners: ETHL (Association of Estonian Tourism Education), ERTO (Estonian Rural Tourism Organisation) and EMÜ (Estonian University of Life Sciences)

The challenge:

Feedback from entrepreneurs working within the rural tourism sector showed that while there may be many training courses available they should be more related to the everyday needs of the sector.

Transfer of knowledge is not just about training but also includes exchange of experience, information, mentored workshops, web search, reading material, e-learning etc. Much learning material for knowledge transfer in rural tourism already exists not only in VET Schools & HE Institutions but also in written form on the web as case studies and e-courses e.g. WERT, Ecolnet and wikiversity

Entrepreneurs however often also need courses of a very practical nature and their experience is that those available are not what they require, there are also some issues related to quality and thus it can be concluded that there should be better coordination between demand and supply. Businesses say they would like training to be better or more related to the small businesses needs for qualified workers and that there is an opportunity for ETHL to gain a better understanding about these needs and expectations. Educational institutions recognised they faced a significant challenge in arranging more effective practice.

The specific pilot chosen was a follow up from ENVOLWE project. The pilot concept was selected at the outset of the project and was presented to other partners during the first partners meeting. The pilot was implemented as planned in cooperation with both SMEs and educational institutions and financial support from Enterprise Estonia for a study tour to Finland and ETHL arranged the initial round table meeting

It was clear from the outset that all parties to the cooperation subscribed to the same overall aim which was to create and pilot a **model** for cooperation between R/HE – VET – SMEs in the rural tourism sector for the purpose of:

1. identifying the rural tourism sector learning and information needs
2. providing access to this information and knowledge transfer
3. identifying the steps needed to create the required interaction between the R/HE – VET – SMEs in the sector and ensuring the two-way transfer of information and knowledge

More detailed objectives included:

1. the creation of close cooperation with educational institutions and rural tourism entrepreneurs so that a quality improvement and development strategy could be designed with emphasis on education, training and consultations as part of ERTO's knowledge transfer strategy.
2. identification of missing links or gaps in the rural tourism sector knowledge transfer chain considering the changing markets, marketing tools, growing global competition, access for all, unique selling point etc. and to identify what educational institutions could provide to fill these gaps.
3. identifying partners and writing the outline strategic plan for a long term agreement for the maintenance of the knowledge transfer cooperation between HE – VET – SMEs.

The research phase was undertaken jointly between EMÜ (who represented ETHL), ERTO and a subcontractor through a series of interviews and questionnaires of respondents across the field of rural tourism in Estonia which included key entrepreneurs from different tourism specialisations: accommodation providers, activity tourism, nature tourism, theme parks, catering and events. Questions especially related to the training needs of existing staff and prospective staff.

A study tour to Finland was key to starting the implementation of the research work-plan and obtaining an overview on tourism curriculum development, qualification standards, trainings etc., this was followed by roundtables and meetings.

The results of this work were widely disseminated to the rural tourism sector including through a Connect-VET education workshop during an ERTO annual meeting and during a workshop at the annual meeting of educators in VET and H/RE where the results were presented and discussed. Dissemination was also undertaken in meetings and internationally via websites, newsletters and articles the national Connect-VET seminar in San Sebastian and via a round table at the 2015 EfVET conference and wider twinning plan with the Latvian Rural Tourism Organisation.

The pilot was hugely successful, the headline achievement was the signing of the long term agreement and work-plan for cooperation between ERTO and ETHL. Many other benefits accrued from the pilot too and these included:

- Research on defining needs, expectations and options of rural businesses and educators towards each other and to the labour market.
- Better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing each other and ways in which these problems might be solved in cooperation.
- Quality improvement of rural businesses through: increased opportunities for training, improvements to curricula and better informed educators through new knowledge of the needs and expectations of employers.

Factors contributing to this success included the long history of cooperation between the different partners (VET and R/HE had worked together for many years through the ETHL) and a willingness to look for ways to consolidate this; the time was right for both ETHL and ERTO to go into a deeper/stronger cooperation.

Strong links have been established between R/HE and businesses due in large part to ERTO (as a rural tourism membership organisation) involving education specialists as board members from the outset. Many networks and jointly implemented projects have resulted.

Key to the sustainability of the cooperation strategy will be continued success of the two central organisations (ETHL and ERTO) and persons responsible for implementation and evaluation of the cooperation work plan.