

BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE: PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF THE WENATOUR SPECIALISATION PROGRAMME IN TRAINING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGERS

N. ORIO¹ N.T.D VU¹ A.N. CANDREA²
R.G. ALBU³ D. ZILIO¹

Abstract: *This paper evaluates the effectiveness of the WeNaTour (Welfare, Nature, and Innovation in Tourism) EU Specialisation Programme in training the next generation of Sustainable Managers for Tourism Destinations. The Erasmus+-funded curriculum integrates foundational coursework with an intensive, practical mobility experience across Austria and Italy, emphasising community well-being and environmental preservation. This unique specialisation provided advanced training, including GSTC certification principles, through hands-on fieldwork and workshops with industry experts. Focusing on the opinions of the 16 selected participants, this research finds that the blended approach is highly valued for its success in bridging theoretical knowledge with tangible, practical skills. Furthermore, it highlights that the program effectively cultivates the interdisciplinary competency and holistic perspective, essential for responsible destination management, affirming the project's relevance for future sustainable tourism education.*

Key words: *Sustainable Tourism, WeNaTour Project, Destination Management, Educational tourism, Experiential Learning, Erasmus+*

1. Introduction

Debates on sustainability in tourism have evolved substantially over recent decades. Moscardo and Murphy (2014) argue that tourism is not inherently sustainable; rather, it can become a tool for sustainability only when grounded in responsible planning and effective management. In the same vein, Bramwell and Lane (2011) and Saarinen (2021) emphasise that sustainability is not a static or universal objective but a dynamic, adaptive, and negotiated process constructed through stakeholder collaboration and participatory governance.

¹ University of Padova, Italy.

² Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania, adina.candrea@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9214-3847

³ Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania, ruxandra.albu@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5720-3808

The academic literature on sustainability education in tourism (Boley, 2011; Shakeela et al., 2012; Berjozkina and Melanthiou, 2021) consistently highlights the growing need to professionalise destination management. The increasing complexity of contemporary tourism systems, combined with rising pressures on local communities, ecosystems, and natural resources, has led scholars and practitioners to rethink how future professionals in the field are trained.

The international framework provided by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC, 2021) supports this shift by offering widely recognised benchmarks for evaluating destination sustainability. Such frameworks are increasingly incorporated into tourism education, where they contribute to developing critical thinking and assessment skills. Current research (Maguire et al., 2024) places strong emphasis on competency-based curricula, experiential learning, and the alignment of educational programs with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The current landscape of tourism studies is increasingly defined by a transition toward Work-Based Learning and dual training models, which aim to synchronise academic curricula with the evolving demands of the global industry. Within this shift, specialisation programs serve as a pioneering framework that leverages Blended Learning and digitalisation to deliver theoretical foundations alongside critical digital literacy. Therefore, this paper evaluates the effectiveness of the WENATOUR (Welfare, Nature, and Innovation in Tourism) EU Specialisation Programme in training the next generation of Sustainability Managers for Tourism Destinations. The main purpose is to examine how the strategic incorporation of Experiential Learning and applied projects, facilitated through immersive mobility, may shape the professional identity and interdisciplinary mastery of the participants. By analysing participant perceptions, this research explores the potential of these emerging pedagogical approaches to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and professional practice, offering a holistic blueprint for future sustainable tourism training. In this context, the study provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of experiential and blended learning approaches in sustainable tourism education, highlighting their role in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competencies required in destination management.

2. Literature review

Sustainability education increasingly emphasises transformative competencies rather than the simple transmission of knowledge, as future professionals are expected to contribute actively to sustainable development.

One of the most influential competency-based models is proposed by Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman (2011), who identify five essential sustainability competencies: systems thinking, anticipatory competence, normative competence, strategic competence, and interpersonal competence. In tourism, these translate into the ability to assess impacts, plan strategically, manage divergent stakeholder interests, and adopt interdisciplinary approaches.

Research in Romania highlights the practical importance of these competencies. Brătucu et al. (2017) show that accommodation managers in the Romanian Carpathians implement sustainable development practices only partially, mainly due to insufficient

professional training and limited use of modern management tools. Their findings underscore that managerial education and continuous professional development are essential prerequisites for sustainable destination management.

However, the literature also reveals persistent challenges. Several studies indicate that although sustainability appears in tourism curricula, its integration often remains superficial or fragmented. Boley (2011) observes that many programs treat sustainability as an isolated module rather than embedding it as a cross-cutting principle. Berjokina and Melanthiou (2021) confirm this trend, noting the lack of explicit links between sustainability content, learning outcomes, and professional competencies.

Furthermore, Maguire et al. (2024) show that alignment between tourism programs and the SDGs remains limited. Although many instructors express interest in integrating sustainability, they often lack the methodological resources and institutional support required for systematic implementation.

2.1. Experiential Learning and Applied Projects

Kolb's (2015) experiential learning model remains fundamental in tourism education, emphasising that meaningful learning occurs through direct engagement with real-world contexts. Programs incorporating field activities, case studies, community projects, and industry interactions contribute to producing graduates who are better prepared for the operational and strategic realities of destination management.

Paige and Goode (2009) demonstrate that international mobility experiences significantly contribute to the development of intercultural competence, an essential skill in a globalised tourism environment. Education plays a central role in sustainable tourism development, especially in vulnerable or transitioning regions (Shakeela, Breakey and Ruhanen, 2012). Without proper training, local communities struggle to capitalise on tourism benefits and manage associated risks. This underscores the need for applied learning, reflective practice, and collaborative activities within tourism education programs.

2.2. Blended Learning and Digitalisation in Tourism Education

As universities expand their digital infrastructure, blended learning has become a key pedagogical strategy. Bailey and Morais (2005) highlighted that well-designed online interactions enhance student engagement and satisfaction in tourism programs. More recent research by Gao, Jiang, and Tang (2020) suggests that digital platforms strengthen autonomous learning and participation, particularly when combined with applied activities. For adult learners and industry professionals, blended learning offers additional advantages by combining flexibility with opportunities for in-person collaboration and project development.

Recent literature increasingly explores dual training models in which universities collaborate directly with industry partners to integrate academic learning with practical experience. Quirós-Alpera et al. (2025) emphasise the significant potential of these models to narrow the gap between theory and practice. Their findings suggest that

although dual training can substantially improve sustainability education, its successful implementation depends on institutional flexibility, strong partnerships, and appropriate regulatory frameworks. These models are particularly relevant in sustainable tourism, where destination management challenges are highly contextual and require practical, adaptive solutions.

Overall, the literature indicates several converging trends that are shaping contemporary sustainability education in tourism. Competency-based programs are increasingly essential for preparing professionals capable of addressing complex sustainability challenges. Experiential and applied learning have proven their value in strengthening critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and real-world readiness. Blended learning enhances flexibility and accessibility, especially for adult learners, while alignment with the SDGs remains uneven across institutions.

Emerging dual-training models offer promising opportunities for more coherent integration between theoretical knowledge and industry practice, although their success depends on strengthened institutional collaboration. In this context, the WeNaTour Project (2025) stands out as a compelling example of an applied educational framework designed to train sustainable destination managers. Its focus on practical learning, stakeholder collaboration, and competency-based training aligns closely with the pedagogical directions identified across the literature.

3. Methodology

3.1. The WeNaTour Project and its Specialisation Programme

WeNaTour (Welfare, Nature, and Innovation in Tourism) is a three-year project co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme (grant no. 101111561). The project involves an international consortium of 11 partners with a diverse range of expertise from academia, research centres, consultancy services and tourism operators across Italy, Austria, Ireland, Romania, and the Netherlands. Its aim is to increase the capacity of universities, vocational education institutions, and businesses to support the creation of new products, services, entrepreneurial ventures, and jobs in Sustainable Tourism Destination Management (STDM). To achieve this, the project offers intensive training and networking events, including face-to-face training courses, an online training course and delivery platform, a specialisation school, a training course assigning microcredentials, staff and learner mobility, and health and well-being focused welfare plans.

As part of the project's curriculum, the WeNaTour EU Specialisation Programme for Sustainability Managers for Tourism Destinations (Specialisation Programme) is an intensive, blended-format programme combining online lectures with immersive in-person mobility in two certified sustainable tourism destinations. Participants of this programme are top-performing learners of the WeNaTour Sustainable Tourism E-Learning Course: Welfare, Nature and Innovation in Tourism. The 2025 edition of the Specialisation Programme ran from 3 September to 8 October 2025 and selected 20 participants from partner universities and the wider tourism sector, of whom 16 were able to attend the whole programme. The programme was structured in five phases:

- (i) Online kick-off week. Learners began with an introduction to the course and explored advanced topics in sustainable tourism;
- (ii) GSTC online course delivered by a GSTC-certified trainer, with an optional certification exam;
- (iii) In-person week in Austria hosted by the Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (CUAS). Learners gained hands-on experiences through workshops on the relevance of nature and forests, visitor monitoring and management, sustainable tourism planning, and transboundary sustainable tourism management, with field trips to Ossiacher Tauern, Naturpark Dobratsch, and the GSTC-certified destination of Weißensee;
- (iv) In-person week in Italy hosted by the University of Padova and APT Valsugana. Learners gained hands-on experiences through a GSTC audit simulation, smartphone-based treasure hunt design, AI and accessibility applications in tourism, and a guided visit to the Arte Sella open-air museum;
- (v) Online closing week. Learners engaged in systematic reflections on both in-person weeks, presented the outcomes of the GSTC audit simulation, and participated in a forward-looking session on sustainable destination management careers.

Throughout the course, learners worked on a collaborative podcast activity through which they could develop their communication and professional skills in the context of sustainable destination storytelling. This blended structure was specifically designed to bridge theoretical knowledge with tangible, applied skills: integrating GSTC certification principles, experiential fieldwork, and direct engagement with industry practitioners into a cohesive learning experience.

3.2. Data collection

Feedback for the Specialisation Programme was collected through an online Google Forms questionnaire titled “WeNaTour EU Specialisation Programme – Participant Feedback Survey,” distributed to the 16 programme participants. The survey was open from 8 to 30 October 2025 and received 12 responses. It included 17 questions: one compulsory background question, eight mandatory multiple-choice or checkbox questions, and nine optional open-ended questions.

The questionnaire covered three main areas: participants’ background and perceptions of the online sessions, evaluation of the in-person weeks in Austria and Italy, and overall assessment of the programme. Closed-ended questions focused on the perceived value of the online and in-person components, accommodation and logistics, overall programme quality, effectiveness of the blended learning format, and likelihood of recommendation. Open-ended questions invited participants to explain their ratings, identify key takeaways, suggest improvements, and indicate who would benefit most from the programme.

3.3. Data analysis

The analysis combined descriptive summaries of the mandatory multiple-choice and checkbox questions with an exploratory text analysis of the open-ended responses. All responses were analysed together without distinguishing between students and other participant profiles.

For the quantitative analysis, the built-in “Summary” view in Google Forms was used to produce charts and frequency distributions for the mandatory multiple-choice and checkbox questions, namely Q0, Q1, Q4, Q5, Q8–Q10, and Q14. These automatically generated visualisations, such as bar charts and pie charts of response options and the distribution of ratings on the 0–10 recommendation scale, were used to describe overall patterns in participants’ evaluations of the online sessions, the Austria and Italy in-person weeks, accommodation and logistics, overall programme quality, the blended learning format, and the likelihood of recommendation.

For the qualitative analysis, the full set of responses was exported from Google Forms as a CSV file. In this dataset, only the answers to the open-ended questions were retained for text analysis. Specifically, these questions include Q2 (valuable aspects of online sessions), Q3 (reasons for online sessions rated “Not valuable” or “Not sure”), Q6 (beneficial aspects of valuable in-person components), Q7 (suggestions to make in-person activities more valuable for future careers), Q11 (key takeaways), Q12 (additional suggested topics), Q13 (aspects to enhance to improve the overall experience), Q14 (explanations for recommendation rating), Q15 (who would benefit most and why), and Q16 (additional comments).

The textual responses were pre-processed in Python using Jupyter Notebook. Punctuation and numerical digits were removed, all text was converted to lowercase, stop words were eliminated using NLTK, and only tokens longer than two characters were retained. Word frequencies were then visualised through word clouds generated with the Wordcloud package and matplotlib.

To visualise the results of the word frequency analysis for each question, word clouds were generated using the Wordcloud package (Mueller, 2018) and saved as PNG image files with the matplotlib library (Hunter, 2007). Separate word clouds were produced for each open-ended question, highlighting frequently occurring terms and expressions in participants’ feedback on the online sessions, the in-person weeks in Austria and Italy, and the overall programme. These word clouds support the interpretation of recurring perspectives, which are presented in the results section.

4. Results

This section presents the interpretation of participants’ open-ended responses, which is elaborated through word frequency analysis and visualised as word clouds.

4.1. Online sessions

The word frequency analysis of Q2 (valuable aspects of online sessions) reveals that “tourism”, “gstc”, “knowledge”, and “course” were the most prominent terms. The co-occurrence of “knowledge,” “theory,” and “implementation” suggests that participants perceived the online weeks primarily as a foundation-building phase. The terms “nature-based” and “sustainable” further reflect the thematic coherence of the curriculum with the programme’s core focus on responsible destination management.



Fig. 1. *Participants’ opinions regarding the online sessions of the WeNaTour EU Specialisation Programme*

In contrast, Q3 (aspects rated “not valuable” or “not sure”) produces more diffuse terms, with “future”, “presentations”, and “one” among the most frequent. The mention of “confusing” and “learning” in the word cloud, alongside “future”, points to a subset of participants who might question the direct applicability of certain online content to their professional paths.

4.2. In-Person Weeks in Austria and Italy

The word cloud for Q6 (valuable aspects of in-person activities) is among the most thematically rich, with “activities”, “sustainable”, “tourism”, “audit”, “simulation”, and “Austria” as leading terms. The prominence of “audit” and “simulation” alongside “theory” and “real life” suggests that participants were able to connect the structured GSTC audit exercise to real-world professional practice. The Q7 analysis (suggestions for improvement of in-person activities) centres on “time”, “destination”, “would”, “activities”, and “focus”, suggesting that the in-person schedule was perceived as dense or insufficiently structured. The recurrence of “destination” and “focus” may suggest a wish for sharper thematic concentration on destination management practice. References to “technology” and “treasure hunt” indicate that some participants found certain digital activities, for example, the smartphone-based treasure hunt, less directly relevant to their professional development compared to the sustainability planning and audit simulation components.

programme places it in a practical context, which participants appear to have found particularly useful for understanding its real-world implications. This suggests that the combination of conceptual input with applied activities is not only desirable but necessary in preparing future professionals in this field.

A notable strength of the programme lies in its experiential dimension, especially the mobility periods in Austria and Italy. These components seem to have provided a learning environment in which participants could engage directly with concrete examples of sustainable tourism practices, while also reflecting on their transferability to other contexts. In addition, the interaction with practitioners contributed to a more grounded understanding of the challenges involved in destination management.

At the same time, the results point to several areas that could benefit from further refinement. A more explicit integration of sustainability principles across all learning activities, as well as a closer alignment with professional requirements, could enhance the overall impact of the programme. These aspects are consistent with broader concerns identified in the literature regarding the fragmented implementation of sustainability in tourism education. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution, given the relatively small sample size and the reliance on self-reported perceptions, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of combining experiential and blended learning within programmes such as WENATOUR, showing how these approaches can support the development of practical competencies required in sustainable destination management.

In this context, WENATOUR can be regarded as a promising initiative that moves in the direction of more practice-oriented and competency-based training. While not without limitations, it provides a useful reference point for the design of future educational programmes aimed at supporting the transition toward more sustainable tourism systems, particularly those seeking to better integrate experiential learning with competency-based approaches. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal approaches that examine the long-term impact of such programmes on participants' professional trajectories.

Acknowledgement

The research presented in this paper was conducted within the framework of the WeNaTour project ERASMUS-EDU-2022-PI-ALL-INNO, funded with support from the European Commission - Erasmus+ program under Grant Agreement No. 101111561.

References

- Bailey, K. D., and Morais, D. B. (2005). "Exploring the use of blended learning in tourism education." *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 4(4), pp. 23–36. https://doi.org/10.1300/J172v04n04_02
- Berjozkina, G., and Melanthiou, Y. (2021). "Is tourism and hospitality education supporting sustainability?" *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 13(6), pp. 744–753. <https://doi.org/10.1108/WHATT-07-2021-0101>

- Boley, B. B. (2011). "Sustainability in hospitality and tourism education: Towards an integrated curriculum." *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 23(4), pp. 22–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10963758.2011.10697017>
- Bramwell, B., and Lane, B. (2011). Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4–5), pp. 411–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.580586>
- Brătucu, G., Băltescu, C. A., Neacşu, N. A., Boşcor, D., Țierean, O. M., and Madar, A. (2017). "Approaching the Sustainable Development Practices in Mountain Tourism in the Romanian Carpathians." *Sustainability*, 9(11), 2051. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9112051>
- Gao, B. W., Jiang, J., and Tang, Y. (2020). "The effect of blended learning platform and engagement on students' satisfaction." *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 27, 100272. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2020.100272>
- Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). (2021). *GSTC Destination Criteria (Version 2.0)*. <https://www.gstccouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-destination-criteria/>
- Hunter, J.D. (2007). "Matplotlib: A 2D graphics environment." *Computing in Science & Engineering*, 9(3), pp. 90–95. doi:10.1109/MCSE.2007.55.
- Jupyter Notebook documentation*. Available at: <https://jupyter-notebook.readthedocs.io/en/stable/> (Accessed: 6 February 2026).
- Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson.
- Maguire, K., O'Connor, N., Condrón, R., Archbold, P., Hannevig, C., and Honan, D. (2024). "Examining curriculum alignment with SDGs in tourism education." *Sustainability*, 16(19), 8554. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16198554>
- Mueller, A. (2018). *Wordcloud: A little word cloud generator in Python*. Available at: https://github.com/amueller/word_cloud (Accessed: 6 February 2026).
- Moscardo, G., and Murphy, L. (2014). "There is no such thing as sustainable tourism." *Sustainability*, 6(5), pp. 2538–2561. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su6052538>
- Paige, R. M., and Goode, M. L. (2009). "Intercultural competence development." In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. SAGE.
- Python*. Available at: <https://www.python.org/> (Accessed: 6 February 2026)
- Quirós-Alpera, S., Roets, A. O. S. B., Robina-Ramírez, R., and Leal-Solís, A. (2025). "Bridging theory and practice: Challenges and opportunities in dual training for sustainability education at Spanish universities." *Societies*, 15(2), 32. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15020032>
- Saarinen J. (2021). "Is Being Responsible Sustainable in Tourism? Connections and Critical Differences." *Sustainability*. 13(12), 6599. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13126599>
- Shakeela, A., Breakey, N., and Ruhanen, L. (2012). "Tourism education's roles in sustainable tourism development." *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 24(1), pp. 35–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10963758.2012.10696660>
- Wiek, A., Withycombe, L., and Redman, C. L. (2011). "Key competencies in sustainability." *Sustainability Science*, 6(2), pp. 203–218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-011-0132-6>
- WeNaTour Project. (2025). *WeNaTour – Training sustainable tourism managers*. <https://www.WeNaTour.eu>