

# DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULA FOR INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE TOURISM: EXPERIENCES FROM THE ERASMUS+ PROJECT IN-TOUR

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**Abstract:** Inclusivity is a pertinent driver for the development of the tourism industry, but the concept has not been sufficiently reflected. It is a way of making sure that everyone who visits or utilizes a service feels comfortable and welcome. ‘Inclusive’ or ‘accessible tourism’ or ‘tourism for all’ as a holistic concept is a social right which concerns all citizens. This not only challenges tourism companies who try to integrate inclusive concepts in their services according to the needs and accessibility requirements of disabled customers, but this has also a significant impact on international and national tourism policy development. Moreover, the European Commission has recently conducted research that indicates that there is a significant gap in the supply of accessible services for tourists with special needs. The gap is likely to increase over the next few years, and it is estimated that at least 2.3 million tourism enterprises will need to provide accessible services to meet future demand. Against this backdrop, the Erasmus+ IN-TOUR Project intends to fill this gap in the European training system by providing quality education and training on tourism for all. This project aims to create competency-based, flexible and modular VET- and higher education curricula for ‘Inclusive Tourism Manager’ and ‘Inclusive Tourism Frontline Staff’ on EQF levels 5 to 7 that can be implemented in the different EU Member States. Against this backdrop, this paper will present its approach for the curriculum development, local piloting and evaluation. Conclusions will be drawn regarding practical implications to enhance the competences of different stakeholders in tourism like leisure facilities, hotels and destinations and to future research direction to support the knowledge transfer between science and industry.

**Keywords:** accessible/inclusive tourism, curriculum development, customer journeys, sustainability, tourism stakeholder

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## Introduction

Inclusivity and accessibility are one of the most important trends in the contemporary tourism industry, in relation to other trends such as sustainability, digitalization, or even luxury expedition voyages. Tourism providers should give proper attention to customers with specific needs and must be open to all kinds of potential customers. Therefore, tourism companies are asked to respond to changing customer demands by continuously improving and redesigning their products and processes. In this context, accessible services will become a critical factor in the tourism industry. This will also affect tourism destinations and vice versa. In this regard, tourism managers and respective frontline

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staff need to understand the specific requirements and accessibility issues of all kinds of customers to provide specific services to all target groups.

Inclusivity is a pertinent driver for the development of the tourism industry but has not so far been sufficiently recognized and reflected in the education sector. It is a way of making sure that everyone who visits a destination or uses a service feels comfortable and welcome. ‘Inclusive’ or ‘accessible tourism’ or ‘tourism for all’ as a holistic concept is a social right which concerns all citizens. This not only challenges tourism companies who try to integrate inclusive concepts in their services according to the needs and accessibility requirements of customers with impairments, but this has also a significant impact on international and national tourism policy development. Moreover, the European Commission has recently conducted research that indicates a significant gap in the supply of accessible services for tourists with special needs. The survey *Mapping and Performance Check of the Supply of Accessible Tourism Services in Europe* (European Commission, 2015, p. 43) found 313,286 accessible tourist providers throughout the EU’s 28 member states. 224,036 providers were identified using publicly available data from 79 Accessibility Information Schemes throughout 24 EU member states. This gap is likely to increase over the next years. It is estimated that at least 1.2 million tourism enterprises will need to provide accessible services to meet future demand (European Commission, 2015, p. 7). This has a significant impact on the tourism industry. A recent survey from the United Nations World Tourism Organization found that “[s]ix out of ten EU residents made one or more trips in 2015. In total, they made 1.2 billion trips and spent 6.0 billion nights, with 58% of trips to, and 75% of nights in, destinations in their own country” (World Tourism Organization, 2018, p. 9).

The Erasmus+-Project IN-TOUR: INclusive TOURism professions: European curricula for Accessible Tourism Manager & Frontline Staff (IN-TOUR), which is the focus of this paper, intends to bridge a gap in the European training system to offer quality education and training for accessible tourism. The paper aims to present the conceptual approach for curriculum development, national piloting, and evaluation. Conclusions will be drawn regarding practical implications to enhance the competences of different stakeholders in tourism like leisure facilities, hotels, and destinations and to future research directions to support the knowledge transfer between science and industry.

## **Inclusivity in Tourism**

For the development of the tourism industry, inclusivity is an impactful driver, which has not been sufficiently considered yet. There are only a few white papers available in the field of tourism, mostly published by economic or political actors (e.g. European Commission, 2015). The following main drivers can be identified that impact the potential growth of the inclusive tourism:

- demographic development in European societies (‘ageing societies’);
- international and national tourism policy development (i.e., inclusivity as a cross-section topic in the sustainable-goals-agenda of the United Nations);
- gaps in the supply of accessible services for tourists with special needs.

Recent research in tourism science has not put much attention on this specific topic. Most papers mention the topic of inclusive or accessible tourism indirectly or it is ‘hidden’ in other forms of tourism.

The most important forms of tourism where inclusivity plays a dominant role are (1) accessible tourism, (2) pro-poor tourism, (3) social tourism, (4) peace through tourism, (5) community-based tourism and (6) responsible tourism (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2017, p. 596). The commonalities with inclusive tourism include the aspects of participation, empowerment and widening of access for different target groups. The main difference between these forms of tourism is that inclusive tourism deals, in its essence, with all marginalized people in an economic, social and (sometimes) ecological sense. It is not fixed on special groups and issues. The main problem in the tourism field is the theoretical and empirical lack: the definitions are often vague and incomplete, there is no validated analytical framework, and the research efforts can be increased:

“Development can be inclusive – and reduce poverty – only if all groups of people contribute to creating opportunities, share the benefits of development and participate in decision-making. Inclusive development follows UNDP’s [United Nation Development Program] human development approach and integrates the standards and principles of human rights: participation, non-discrimination and accountability” (Arts, 2017, p. 58).

Inclusive tourism can also be defined as transformative tourism in which marginalized groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits. Inclusive Tourism is an environment where people of all abilities are welcome and invited as customers and guests (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2017). Moreover, it is also assumed as a tool for social integration because participation in travel is a question of equal rights and freedom. Nevertheless, the value of the inclusive approaches is discussed controversially because of many constraining factors and barriers, in the implementation of inclusive elements. For example, many products and services are built on diversity and difference: Maybe when rich tourists from urban jungles meet poor and mostly ‘neglected’ minorities in tropical jungles (Scheyvens, 2011, p. 83).

To better understand the holistic concept of inclusive tourism, Scheyvens and Biddulph (2017) suggested seven elements to be considered (figure 1). These various aspects help to answer the questions of ‘who is included’, ‘on what terms,’ and ‘with what significance’. In addition, the conceptual framework helps to highlight overcoming barriers, challenging dominant power relations, and widening the range of people for decision making/participating in tourism.

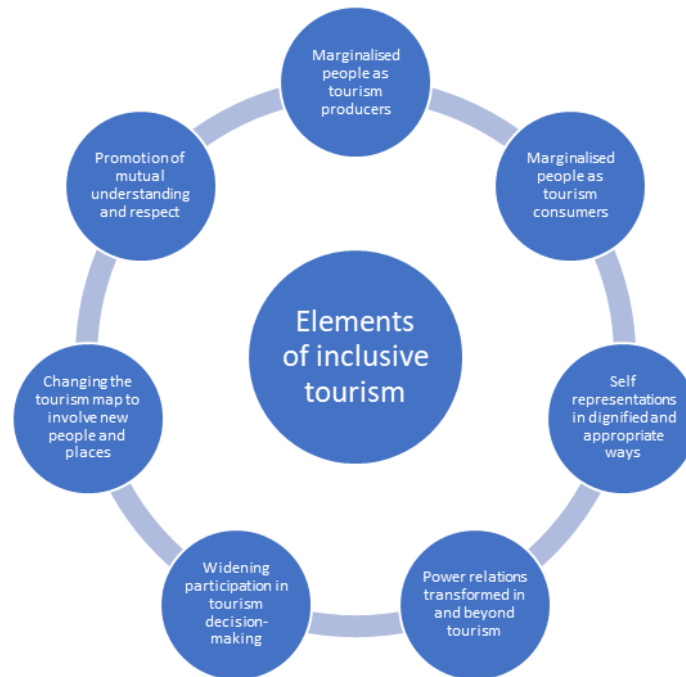


Figure 1. Elements of Inclusive Tourism (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2017, p. 595)

Although all these aspects need to be considered, it has been necessary to summarize inclusivity in the IN-TOUR-Project as follows: It develops curricula for professionals who provide services adapted to people with different capabilities to reduce barriers or boundaries for them. For that reason, the biggest overlap for the IN-TOUR-Project is with ‘Accessible tourism.’ This segment of tourists should have the opportunity to make decisions for the development of tourism that fulfils their needs and expectations, i.e., creating solutions and ideas for a ‘tourism for all’ from their perspectives. In the following, we introduce the reader to the IN-TOUR project objectives first before we describe the life cycle and stages of the project development.

### **Project IN-TOUR: Objectives**

The IN-TOUR project pursues the aim of ensuring accessible tourism for all. IN-TOUR is an Erasmus+ project composed of a team of 14 partners from six European countries, aiming to equip managers and staff in the tourism sector with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and personal and transversal competences to provide adequate services to all customers, especially those with special access requirements. The idea is to enrich traditional modules of management and frontline staff training with innovative components in product and process design in terms of inclusion and accessibility. This involves, for example, the removal of physical or architectural barriers to tourism experiences on the one hand and virtual or digital accessibility on the other.

The project has two main objectives to improve the quality of the training system in terms of accessible tourism. Firstly, it provides specific sectoral qualifications for accessible tourism by:

- fostering the definition of proper national and localised qualifications and rules and
- fostering collaboration among policymakers/regulatory bodies and VET providers.

Secondly, it promotes the development of Inclusive Tourism Manager (ITM) and Inclusive Tourism Frontline Staff (ITFS) curricula by:

- defining two specific professional profiles and the corresponding skills needs, drawing on the ESCO classification,
- defining two courses (ITM and ITFS) based on European tools relating to skills and qualifications and
- providing VET and higher education providers with guidelines supporting the initiation of localised curricula based on specific EU professional profiles.

Besides these two main objectives, the IN-TOUR project also aims at creating a model and methodology that could be repeated and spread among other European Universities and VET providers. Furthermore, the piloted courses will significantly increase the number of professionals, both managers and frontline staff, who are trained and capable of welcoming guests with specific access requirements in any tourism destination.

### **Project Life Cycle and Stages of the Project**

The life cycle of the project IN-TOUR has been aligned with the following six stages (see figure 2):

1. *Definition of Inclusive Tourism Profile:* Profiles, competences and skills were derived from several analyses: Country-specific customer journey scenarios and service blueprints were developed to assess the situation and requirements of persons with disabilities (“disability awareness”) and customers/visitors with other specific access requirements. The results were matched with the skills and competences of the selected ESCO occupations (for ITM and ITFS) according to the ESCO classification (= European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations).<sup>1</sup>
2. *Design and Localisation of Curricula:* A cross-national curriculum was developed jointly with all partner institutions and provides the basis for its translation into three different countries. Thereby, a distinction has been made between two types of courses Inclusive Tourism Frontline Staff (ITFS, EQF 5) and Inclusive Tourism Manager (ITM, EQF 6 & 7). This included the definition of four Units of Learning that each contains learning outcomes for knowledge, skills and transversal skills to be acquired in the different courses. Additionally, a designer tool and guidelines for teachers provide an overview of the required learning outcomes, methods and respective ECTS.
3. *Training Material and Digital Tools:* This stage of the project is dedicated to the collection of OER material for the pilots. Additionally, a digital and accessible learning management platform is created as the basis for students’ eLearning activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO): <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1326&langId=en>

4. *National Pilot Courses*: Five pilot courses will be developed for testing in three countries and at different EQF levels: The ITFS course will be piloted in Greece (EQF 5) and Germany (EQF 5). The ITM course will be piloted in Italy (EQF 7), Greece (EQF 6), and Germany (EQF 6).
5. *Evaluation of the Pilots*: The development of the learning outcomes, material and the pilots themselves will have to undergo rigorous evaluation to derive a conclusion for their respective optimisation.
6. *Optimisation and Development of Blueprints*: The project concludes with a review and optimisation of the material and pilots developed in the previous stages. The feedback of the students, teachers, and cooperating stakeholders will also allow for the development of blueprints of the course to be implemented in different higher education and vocational education institutions in the future.

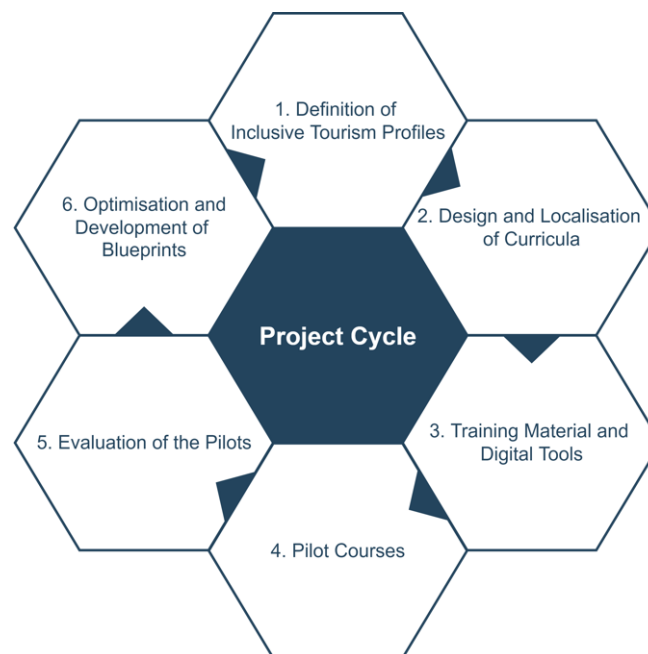


Figure 2. Stages of the Project IN-TOUR (author's own illustration)

### ***Customer Journey as a Conceptual Approach***

Tourism products are primary service products, consist of multiple services and are offered as a service package or set measures (Stickdorn & Zehrer, 2009). Its perception and emotional output, such as tourists' satisfaction, determine the success of tourism companies and destinations. For that reason, understanding customer experience is vital for organizations to act and compete effectively in the tourism market. Therefore, there is a high interest in designing and managing service encounters and service interactions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Additionally, service design is a process of co-creation and requires advanced knowledge of the customer journey of different target groups.

The customer journey approach is of paramount importance to tourism development and research. It is a method of sourcing knowledge from the visitor's or tourist's perspective to explore travel motivations, personal preferences etc. (Yachin, 2018, p. 202). The idea that the customer journey is valuable for the IN-TOUR-Project results from the possibility to analyze needs and requirements along the travel process of 'accessible tourism': e.g., different types of access requirements, tasks, and processes for every responsible actor, technical hardware and IT infrastructure, or the creation of touchpoints to produce trustworthiness and safety as an emotional output on the customer side. The following figure 3 shows the three phases of the customer journey approach.

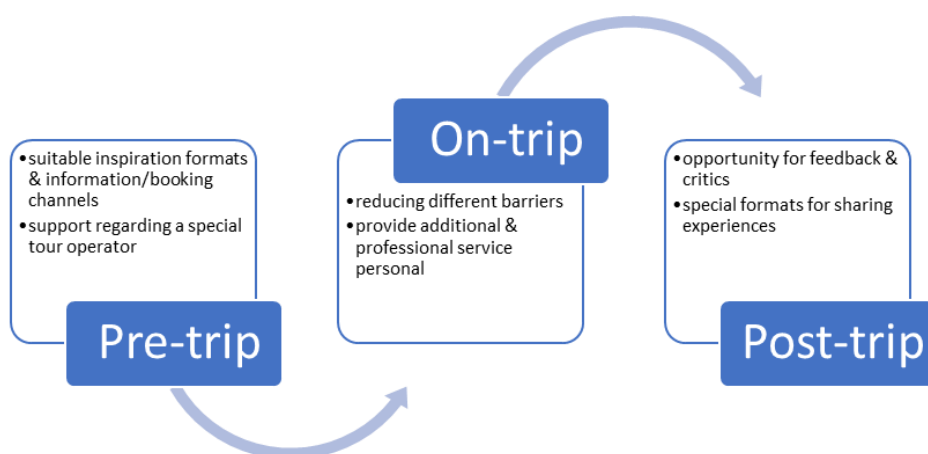


Figure 3. Simplified customer journey in accessible tourism (author's own illustration)

The first phase (*pre-trip period phase*) commences with the tourist's interest and decision for a product or destination. The creation of awareness, inspiration or distribution can be different and challenging in inclusive and accessible tourism. Some tourists, for example, have a limited sense of sight or hearing, so customers cannot be contacted successfully via conventional communication channels. In this specific case, the task for tourism providers is to find suitable other formats, information and booking channels that that target group typically uses. A more general issue would be to look for support from a special tour operator. In the second phase (*on-trip or active phase*), the customer and the service staff meet and interact at the same time in the same place. This phase is the most intense and formative for the quality of the experience. Firstly, it is necessary to reduce different barriers because the value is created by participation and the capabilities are sometimes limited. Secondly, providing additional and professional service personnel that understands the target group and can handle the challenges adequately. The third phase (*post-trip or reflexive phase*) deals with the recollection of the experiences, sometimes in a nostalgic reinterpretation of travel experiences. Similar to the first phase, unique methods and specific formats will be used for sharing experiences or for soliciting comments, criticism and maybe complaints.

### ***Curricula Development***

As previously shown, part of the project cycle is the creation of the professional profiles for the Inclusive Tourism Manager and the Inclusive Tourism Frontline Staff. Considering recent research of the project members and the sectoral requirements, a set of qualification needs in terms of knowledge, skills and competences were integrated into the profiles. These qualification needs have been or are

currently being “translated” into learning outcomes to define the corresponding European curricula (see figure 4). The curricula will meet the following requirements:

- Modular and flexible since it is supposed to be adaptable to different contexts and rules in different EU countries.
- Learning outcome-oriented, applying ECVET (European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training).
- Compliant with the main EU standards and tools for VET, such as EQAVET, ESCO, EQF etc.

Furthermore, the curricula will include:

- a definition of *key activities* and *learning units*, based on the *core competences* of the professional profile;
- the definition of *learning outcomes* in terms of knowledge, skills, and personal and transversal competences;
- the definition of the *modules*, which will be specified in terms of *content*, *methods*, *assessment criteria* and *eLearning* as well as *work-based learning* activities.

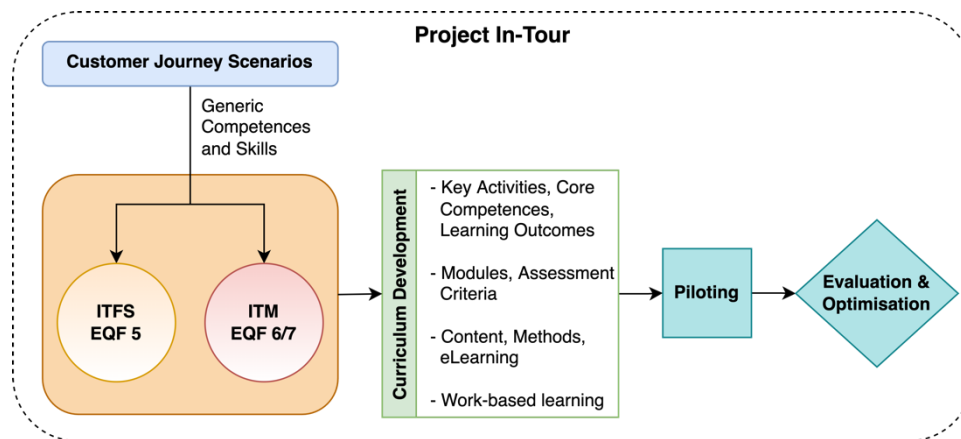


Figure 4. Development of Curricula (author's own illustration)

To implement this, key activities, core competences and learning outcomes for the two curricula (ITFS & ITM) were developed in several process steps based on the various expertise of the project partners. For example, in the ITFS occupational profile, a total of 4 main key activities have been identified and, in turn, subdivided into two core competences per activity, which are required to perform each key activity. From this base, a list of learning outcomes was identified to be achieved to master each core competency. These learning outcomes were identified in terms of knowledge, skills and personal and transversal competences (e.g. competences required to apply knowledge and/or skill in a work context with a degree of responsibility and autonomy). The aim of this course is to train Frontline Staff with complementary skills, competences and knowledge in the field of accessibility/inclusion related to serving tourists with disabilities, impairments of any kind or other access requirements. The current version of the Curriculum targets EQF5 level and includes the following units of learning:



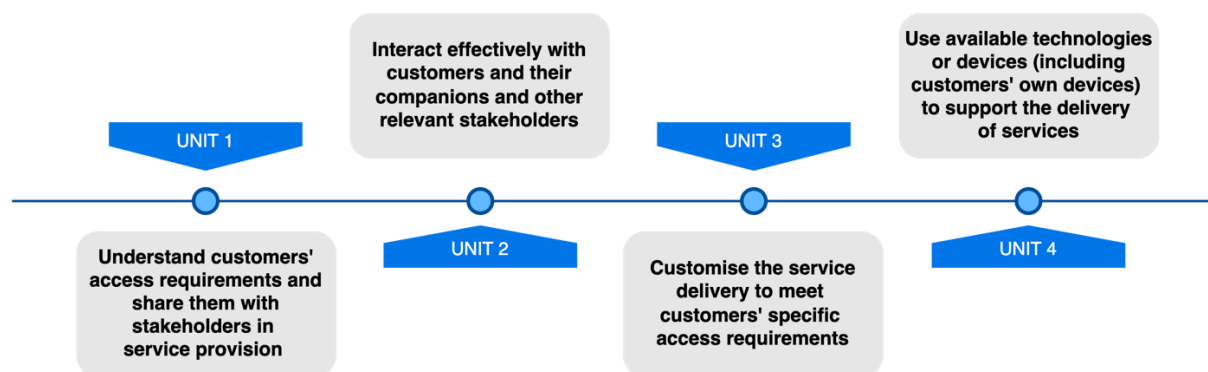


Figure 5. Learning Outcomes for ITFS (author's own illustration)

The same procedure is currently being applied to create the curriculum for the Inclusive Tourism Manager. These curricula will be transferred into three national curricula, which will be piloted in five pilot courses in three different countries (Germany, Greece and Italy). Table 1 shows the details of the planned national pilot courses.

Table 1. IN-TOUR Pilot Courses (author's own illustration)

	UNIGE – University of Genoa (Italy)	FHD – University of Applied Sciences Dresden (Germany)	HOU – Hellenic Open University (Greece)
Courses	Inclusive Tourism Manager	Inclusive Tourism Manager Inclusive Tourism Frontline Staff	Inclusive Tourism Manager Inclusive Tourism Frontline Staff
EQF Level	EQF7, First Level University Master	EQF5 & EQF6, Continuous Education	EQF5 & EQF6, Continuous Education
Workload	1500 hours of course	500 hours each	500 hours each
Duration	6-9 months	1-2 semester(s)	1-2 semester(s)
Credits	60 credits	20 ECTS each	20 ECTS each
Certificate	Master in Inclusive Tourism Manager	Lifelong Learning Certificate	Certificate of Further Education
Entrance requirements	Bachelor's degree (EQF6)	Vocational Training at level EQF4 or higher	Qualification at level EQF4 or higher

These courses will combine traditional elements of management education with innovative elements from social and health sciences that will be closely linked to inclusion and accessibility.

### ***Piloting and Evaluation of the Developed Courses***

The next steps in the project include the development and adjustment of the localized pilots and their evaluation. The *pilot courses* for the ITM and ITFS curricula will be created and tested using the tools and methods mentioned in the previous section to implement the key activities, core competences and learning objectives. The piloting partners will execute courses in their home countries in various situations and settings, considering the specialized curricula. The primary objective is to assist in validating the efficacy of the EU curriculum and standards to allow for further improvement and to offer a final release after the project's conclusion. The success of the curriculum will be assessed on a formative and summative basis, allowing VET and higher education institutions to rearrange some

parts of local delivery to achieve better outcomes. The partners from Germany, Greece and Italy will deliver the following the aforementioned courses.

Throughout the piloting, there will be continuously *monitoring and evaluation*. A full summative assessment of the pilots will be conducted based on the project's evaluation monitoring strategy. This will also include the interventions and results of formative assessment measures. The formative process evaluation will help to examine the pilots' acceptability and efficacy throughout the project, allowing for improvement and correction. During the piloting period, ongoing input from students, instructors and providers will be gathered, analyzed, implemented, and monitored. The pilots will be evaluated formatively and summatively based on EQAVET principles, indicators and descriptors. Beneficiaries, employers, labor market representatives and professional organizations will be included in feedback loops to guarantee the sustainability of the project outcomes and the continued development of the curriculum and pilots. A specific PDCA Quality Cycle, a feedback loop for general activities in quality assurance for VET systems and VET providers, will be created and offered to VET providers to improve VET quality.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Inclusivity is an essential motivator for tourist growth but has not been fully recognized and reflected in education and training. It is a means of making sure everyone who comes or utilizes a service feels welcome. 'Accessible tourism' or 'tourism for everyone' is a social right that affects all people. This not only affects tourist enterprises trying to incorporate inclusive principles into their services but also has a substantial influence on international and national tourism policy development. Aiming to bridge this theory-practice gap in the European training system, the IN-TOUR Erasmus+ Project aims to provide excellent education and training for accessible tourism managers and frontline staff. The project creates different curricula, content and methods that will be publicly available and can be used and taught at other vocational and higher education institutions to train staff for accessible tourism. By achieving this objective, the project will support the development of a society where the inclusion of people with access requirements are welcome to customers in accessible services. In the context of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), the conceptual approach and curricula presented in this paper could also be used to develop target-group specific services and products in other branches and domains. Maybe, this can increase the willingness of relevant stakeholders to use this best practice example for successful inclusive projects.

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## **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interests.

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