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Enricher hubs New Approaches to Sustainable Tourism

Erasmus+ project ENRICHER hubs
Capacity Building in Higher Education

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List of Abbreviations

Universities	
HHUAS	Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences
MSU	Moldova State University
USPEE	University of European Political and Economic Studies “Constantin Stere”
ATSU	Akaki Tsereteli State University
TeSaU / TESAU	Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University
KDU	Comrat State University
CU	Caucasus University
MCI	Management Center Innsbruck (“MCI The Entrepreneurial School”)

EU programmes and research bodies	
CBHE	Capacity Building in Higher Education (Erasmus+)
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
JRC	Joint Research Centre
TRIMMIS	A Horizon monitoring observatory

Methods and project concepts	
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
RDIL	Research, Development, Innovation and Learning
HMW	How Might We (a design-thinking question format)
BMC	Business Model Canvas
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

Local and regional actors	
DMO	Destination Management Organization
LAG	Local Action Group
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ANTRIM	National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association of Moldova
BNS	National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova

International tourism and sustainability organisations	
UN Tourism	United Nations Tourism
WTO	World Tourism Organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
GSTC	Global Sustainable Tourism Council
INSTO	International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories
TYSTO	Tyrolean Sustainable Tourism Observatory
ETIS	European Tourism Indicator System

General terms	
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
AI	Artificial Intelligence

Executive summary

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About the report

Sustainable tourism will not be built by environmental measures or new tourism products alone. It also depends on how tourism challenges are understood, how future professionals are educated, and how universities and businesses work together. This report is built around that idea.

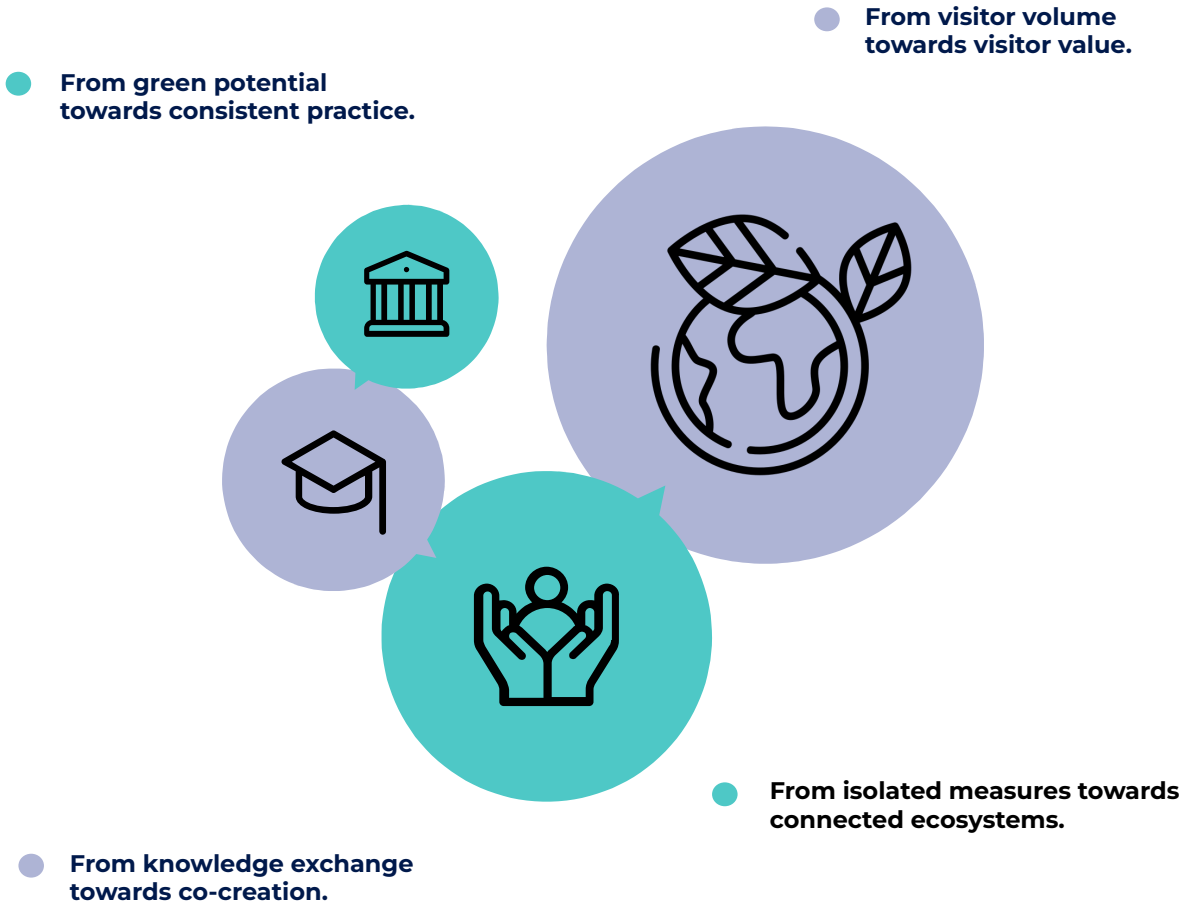
The report *New Approaches to Sustainable Tourism*, is the joint work of nine universities from Finland, Austria, Italy, Georgia and Moldova. It tells what happens when universities step out of the classroom and become partners of the tourism sector.

The report begins with the reality on the ground. Georgia welcomed 6.85 million international visitor trips in 2025, and its protected areas received a record number of visitors. Yet infrastructure, skills and uneven sustainable practices lag behind this growth. Moldova has remarkable wine tourism, cultural heritage and authentic hospitality, but it faces weak eco-infrastructure, strong seasonality and a limited international brand. In both countries the potential is clear. The challenge is turning it into consistent practice.

The report then shows one way of doing that. Students learned Service Design and Design Sprints, and then worked on real problems of real businesses, including wineries, a spa resort, a cheese producer, a hotel and a travel agency. They interviewed owners, visited sites, built prototypes and presented ideas to business representatives. The experience was clear: real cases raise motivation and a sense of ownership. But the results depend on good preparation, a solid understanding of the business context and early, continuous involvement of the businesses.

These activities were more than isolated events. They led to six Green Tourism Hubs, six new courses, stakeholder trainings and two dissemination conferences, in Tbilisi and Chișinău. The report asks a practical question: what keeps such structures alive once project funding ends? Its answer is that Hubs last through active networks of universities, businesses and public bodies, not through physical space. European partners add experience by combining RDI with learning, management of innovation hubs and monitoring of sustainability in the Tyrolean tourism observatory.

A common principle runs through all of these chapters. Sustainable tourism grows stronger when education, research, business practice and stakeholder knowledge are connected instead of kept apart.



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Introduction

1.1 ENRICHER hubs – Advancing Sustainable Tourism in Georgia and Moldova

(Nora Lappalainen, Project Manager, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences)



Sustainable tourism requires new skills, innovative approaches, and closer collaboration between education and industry. The ENRICHER hubs project was launched to strengthen competences in sustainable tourism and service design in Georgia and Moldova while supporting the green and digital transition of the tourism sector.

As an Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) project (2024–2026), ENRICHER hubs brings together nine universities from Finland, Austria, Italy, Georgia, and Moldova. The project focuses on identifying skills and competence gaps between higher education institutions and the labor market, developing innovative teaching and training activities, and strengthening cooperation between universities, tourism businesses, and regional stakeholders.

A key achievement of the project has been the establishment of six Green Tourism Hubs in partner universities in Georgia and Moldova. These hubs serve as collaborative learning environments where students, educators, businesses, and local communities work together to develop new solutions for sustainable tourism. Through service design, experiential learning, and practical business challenges, students have gained opportunities to address real-world tourism issues while building skills that support future employment and innovation.

The project demonstrates how international cooperation can enhance sustainable tourism education, strengthen university-industry collaboration, and foster knowledge sharing across regions. The experiences, insights, and practices presented in this report highlight new approaches to sustainable tourism development and showcase how education, innovation, and stakeholder collaboration can contribute to a more sustainable future for the tourism sector.

This report is intended for tourism entrepreneurs, SMEs, tourism professionals, educators, and students who are interested in practical ways to promote sustainability, innovation, and competitiveness in tourism. By sharing lessons learned and examples from the ENRICHER hubs project, the report aims to inspire new ideas and support the continued development of sustainable tourism ecosystems.

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1.2 Objectives of the Report and Consortium Collaboration

(Tatiana Bulimaga, Head of International Co-operation Department, Moldova State University)

The transition towards more sustainable tourism requires more than the adoption of isolated environmental measures or the introduction of new tourism products. It calls for changes in how tourism challenges are understood, how future professionals are educated, how businesses and universities interact, and how knowledge is transformed into practical solutions. In this context, higher education institutions can play an important role not only as providers of education and research, but also as facilitators of innovation, collaboration and knowledge exchange within regional tourism ecosystems.

This report has been developed within the Erasmus+ ENRICHER hubs project as a joint reflection on new approaches to sustainable tourism and on the experience accumulated by the consortium throughout project implementation. It brings together perspectives from Georgia, Moldova and the European partner institutions and connects them with the practical activities implemented within the project. Rather than approaching sustainable tourism exclusively as a theoretical or policy-related concept, the report focuses on how sustainability can be translated into education, innovation, university–industry cooperation and practical action.

The first objective of the report is therefore to provide an updated and practice-oriented perspective on sustainable tourism development in the two ENRICHER hubs partner countries, Georgia and Moldova. Building on the previous project research and particularly on the Status Quo and GAP Analysis of Green Tourism Development in Georgia and Moldova, the report considers recent developments, emerging opportunities and remaining challenges. The national perspectives presented in the following chapters provide the contextual foundation for understanding why new competences, educational approaches and cooperation models are needed and how these approaches can respond to the specific characteristics of the tourism sectors in both countries.

A second objective is to document and reflect on the innovative learning methodologies introduced and tested within ENRICHER hubs. The project has placed particular emphasis on experiential, challenge-based and collaborative learning, including Service Design, Design Sprints, Business Challenges and other methods that bring students closer to real tourism environments. These approaches represent an important shift from predominantly classroom-based learning towards educational models in which students investigate authentic problems, interact with external stakeholders, develop and prototype solutions, receive feedback and reflect on the feasibility and sustainability of their ideas. The report therefore seeks not only to describe these methodologies, but also to capture the lessons generated through their practical application in different institutional and regional contexts.

Closely connected to this is the report's third objective: to examine how stronger cooperation between higher education institutions and the tourism sector can contribute to sustainable tourism development. The experience of the project demonstrates that businesses and other external stakeholders can play a much more active role in education than simply providing occasional guest lectures, internships or consultations. Through Business Challenges, stakeholder trainings, workshops, conferences and Hub activities, tourism enterprises, public authorities, professional organisations, civil society actors and local communities can become partners in identifying challenges, developing ideas, testing solutions and creating new knowledge. At the same time, universities can increasingly function as conveners and innovation intermediaries, connecting students, academics and external stakeholders around shared regional and sectoral challenges.

The Green Tourism Hubs established within the project are particularly important in this respect. They provide an institutional framework through which the relationships created during ENRICHER hubs can develop beyond individual project activities. The report consequently considers the Hubs not merely as physical or organisational structures, but as emerging innovation ecosystems capable of supporting education, stakeholder dialogue, experimentation, professional development and collaborative initiatives in sustainable tourism. Experiences from both the partner countries and European institutions contribute to a broader reflection on how such structures can remain active, relevant and connected to their regional environments after the formal project period.

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A Collaborative consortium perspective

The integrative character of this report reflects the collaborative model on which the ENRICHER hubs project itself has been built. The consortium brings together nine higher education institutions from Finland, Austria, Italy, Georgia and Moldova, combining different academic traditions, institutional profiles, tourism contexts and areas of expertise. Throughout the project, this diversity has enabled knowledge and experience to circulate between institutions and countries rather than following a one-directional model of knowledge transfer.

The European partners have contributed methodological and institutional expertise, including approaches related to Service Design, Research, Development, Innovation and Learning, sustainable tourism monitoring and the management of university-based innovation ecosystems. Georgian and Moldovan universities have brought their knowledge of national and regional tourism environments, their relationships with local stakeholders and the practical experience generated through the establishment and operation of the Green Tourism Hubs. The interaction between these perspectives has allowed methods and models to be adapted, tested and reconsidered in different contexts.

This collaborative process has been especially visible in the capacity-building and practical components of the project. Training activities provided a common methodological foundation, while subsequent implementation at partner universities created opportunities to adapt these methods to different institutional, business and regional realities. Business Challenges enabled universities to work directly with tourism enterprises and other stakeholders on authentic problems. Stakeholder activities extended cooperation beyond the consortium, while dissemination conferences created broader spaces for sharing experiences and discussing sustainable tourism with academic, business, public-sector and civil-society representatives.

The report itself follows the same collaborative logic. Its chapters have been prepared by representatives of different consortium institutions and combine national analysis, methodological expertise, institutional experience and reflection on practical implementation.

Consequently, the diversity of perspectives presented in the report should be understood as one of its strengths. Sustainable tourism challenges differ across countries, destinations and organisations, and there is no single model that can simply be transferred unchanged from one context to another. The consortium experience instead demonstrates the value of sharing approaches, testing them locally, learning from implementation and adapting them to specific needs.

At the same time, collaboration within ENRICHER hubs has gradually evolved from knowledge exchange towards co-creation. Partners have jointly developed and tested educational approaches, exchanged experiences from implementation, engaged businesses and other stakeholders, and reflected on how the Green Tourism Hubs can develop as sustainable platforms beyond the lifetime of the project. In this sense, consortium collaboration is not only the mechanism through which project activities have been implemented; it is itself one of the project's important outcomes. The relationships, shared methodologies and mutual understanding developed among the participating institutions create a foundation for continued cooperation in education, research, mobility, innovation and future international initiatives.

The overall purpose of this report is therefore both reflective and forward-looking. It consolidates what has been learned through the ENRICHER hubs experience while identifying approaches that can inform future activities in sustainable tourism education and university–industry cooperation. The chapters that follow move from the broader tourism context in Georgia and Moldova to innovative educational methodologies, practical experiences with Business Challenges, stakeholder collaboration and Green Tourism Hubs, and finally to complementary perspectives and practices contributed by the European partners.

Taken together, these contributions illustrate a common principle emerging from ENRICHER hubs: sustainable tourism development is strengthened when education, research, business practice and stakeholder knowledge are connected rather than treated as separate domains. Universities can provide spaces where these different forms of knowledge meet, where students work on authentic challenges, where businesses participate in learning and innovation processes, and where international experience is adapted to local and regional needs.

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2. Current State of Sustainable Tourism in Georgia and Moldova

2.1 Overview of the Sustainable Tourism Trends and SWOT-analysis in Georgia

(Giorgi Bregadze, Affiliated Professor at Caucasus University)

This chapter provides a concise and updated overview of the current state of sustainable tourism in Georgia. It builds partly on the Status Quo and GAP Analysis of Green Tourism Development in Georgia and Moldova, prepared in 2024 within the Erasmus+ ENRICHER hubs project. The study combined desk research with semi-structured interviews with tourism businesses and other stakeholders and examined existing practices, success factors, challenges and future needs related to green tourism development.

The detailed findings, methodology and recommendations are available in the full report, which can be accessed through the ENRICHER hubs website. The present chapter therefore summarizes the most relevant conclusions for Georgia and updates them with recent tourism statistics, policy developments and emerging sustainability trends.

Georgia has considerable potential for sustainable tourism development due to the concentration of diverse natural and cultural resources within a relatively small territory. The Caucasus Mountains, Black Sea coastline, protected areas and rich biodiversity are complemented by cultural heritage, traditional rural landscapes, distinctive gastronomy and the country's long winemaking tradition. Together, these resources provide a strong foundation for ecotourism, nature and adventure tourism, rural and community-based tourism, wine and gastronomic tourism, and other forms of tourism capable of generating economic benefits but at the same time contributing to the preservation of natural and cultural assets. The Ecotourism Strategy for Georgia 2020–2030 has already provided a policy framework by integrating conservation and protection, community engagement, capacity building, sustainable infrastructure and promotion of ecotourism.



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The importance of sustainability has increased further as Georgia's tourism sector has moved beyond post-pandemic recovery and returned to strong growth. In 2025, Georgia recorded 6.85 million international visitor trips, 6.2% more than in 2024. International tourist visits reached a historical maximum of 5.52 million, increasing by 8.4%, while receipts from international travel reached approximately USD 4.69 billion, an increase of 6% [2]. These results demonstrate tourism's continuing economic contribution while also indicating the importance of managing tourism growth in a way that protects the environmental, social and cultural resources on which the country's long-term competitiveness depends. Sustainable tourism development therefore requires attention not only to visitor numbers but also to visitor value, geographic and seasonal distribution, quality of experience, resource use and benefits generated for local communities.

Recent data also point to continued changes in the structure of international demand. During January–June 2026, Georgia recorded 2.73 million international visitor trips, compared with 2.81 million in the corresponding period of 2025, representing a 2.7% decrease. Despite this overall decline, several important source markets demonstrated strong growth. In particular, international visitor trips from European Union countries and the United Kingdom reached a record 249,201, increasing by 23.4% compared with the first half of 2025 [3]. This development indicates continued diversification of Georgia's tourism demand and growing importance of European markets. While market diversification does not automatically make tourism more sustainable, it strengthens the case for developing competitive, higher-value and differentiated tourism products based on Georgia's natural and cultural assets, gastronomy and authentic local experiences rather than relying predominantly on visitor-volume growth.

Nature-based tourism demonstrates particularly clearly the relationship between tourism growth and sustainability. In 2025, Georgia's protected areas received a record 1,250,417 visitors, almost 13% more than in 2024. Foreign visitors accounted for 735,229 visits, representing growth of 14%, while the Agency of Protected Areas continued to invest in recreational infrastructure and visitor services [4]. Growing interest in protected areas creates opportunities for regional economies through accommodation, guiding, transport, food services and other local businesses. At the same time, increasing visitation raises the importance of visitor management, trail maintenance, waste management, biodiversity protection and appropriate management of tourism activity in environmentally sensitive locations.

At enterprise level, the practices identified in the 2024 research remain highly relevant. Larger hotels and internationally connected accommodation providers have introduced measures related to energy efficiency, waste separation, recycling and resource conservation, while smaller accommodation establishments have tended to adopt less capital-intensive measures such as reducing unnecessary linen changes and energy consumption. Rural tourism businesses and family wineries provide particularly important examples of the relationship between sustainability and local development. Identified practices included the use of local and organic products, composting, reuse of agricultural waste, environmentally responsible production methods and involvement of local communities. These business models demonstrate that sustainable tourism is not limited to explicitly labelled "green" products. It can also be reflected in authenticity, local sourcing, efficient resource use and stronger economic linkages between visitors and host communities.

Such developments are particularly relevant for rural Georgia. Wine tourism, gastronomy, hiking, adventure activities, agritourism and community-based experiences can diversify tourism supply while increasing opportunities for small enterprises and households outside the main tourism centres. They can also strengthen the use of locally produced goods and services, thereby increasing the share of tourism expenditure retained within destinations. From this perspective, sustainable tourism can simultaneously support environmental objectives, preservation of local identity and more geographically inclusive economic development.

Nevertheless, the application of sustainable tourism principles and practices remains uneven across businesses and destinations in Georgia. The 2024 research identified substantial differences between larger or internationally connected businesses and smaller enterprises in their capacity to adopt environmental technologies and sustainable management practices. Waste collection and separation, recycling and wastewater treatment remain particularly important constraints in tourism destinations outside major urban centres. The research also highlighted shortages of qualified personnel, limited access to green technologies and specialised suppliers, sustainability knowledge gaps and an unequal geographic distribution of tourists. This indicates that sustainable tourism cannot be achieved solely through voluntary actions by individual hotels, wineries or tour operators. Effective destination-level infrastructure, municipal services, planning, coordination and monitoring are equally important.

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Alongside market and business-level changes, Georgia's institutional framework has also evolved. The current Law of Georgia on Tourism explicitly addresses sustainable tourism development. Article 5 defines it as the management of resources in a manner that enables economic and social objectives to be achieved while preserving cultural identity, essential ecological processes and biodiversity. The law also requires the Government to approve and monitor the national tourism strategy and action plan, protect environmental and natural resources in tourism planning, ensure rational use of tourism resources and involve local populations in the tourism development process [5]. This provides a stronger legal basis for integrating environmental and social considerations into tourism policy and destination development. A further important development is the preparation of Georgia's National Tourism Strategy 2035. The official Terms of Reference identify sustainable resource management, climate change, workforce development, technological integration and changing visitor behaviour among the issues that the new ten-year strategy needs to address [6]. The document emphasizes the opportunity to respond to new tourism trends through more sustainable approaches and to translate the future strategy into measurable economic and social outcomes. The preparation of the Strategy 2035 therefore creates an important opportunity to move sustainability from general policy principles towards measurable actions in destination management, regional development, infrastructure, human resources and environmental performance.

Climate change is also becoming increasingly relevant to tourism planning. Georgia's Fifth National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change assesses climate vulnerability across key economic and environmental sectors, including tourism, and identifies adaptation, capacity-building and investment needs [7].Tourism's reliance on natural landscapes, biodiversity, mountain and coastal environments makes resilience an increasingly important component of sustainable destination planning. Climate-related risks should therefore be considered in tourism infrastructure investment, product development and long-term destination management rather than being treated solely as a separate environmental-policy issue.

Taken together, the findings of the 2024 research and subsequent developments can be summarized in the following updated SWOT analysis.

Strengths

Diverse natural and cultural resources. Mountains, protected areas, biodiversity, the Black Sea, wine, gastronomy and cultural heritage provide a strong basis for sustainable tourism products.

Strong tourism demand. High levels of international visitor trips and tourism revenues provide a solid market base for further product development.

Authentic and locally based products. Rural tourism, wine, gastronomy and community-based experiences can link tourism directly with local economies.

Strengthening policy framework. The Tourism Law, Ecotourism Strategy 2020–2030 and preparation of Tourism Strategy 2035 increasingly integrate sustainability into tourism policy.

Growing practical experience. Hotels, wineries, rural accommodation providers, tour operators and destination organisations provide an expanding base of sustainable practices.

Weaknesses

Environmental infrastructure gaps. Waste management, recycling and wastewater treatment remain insufficient in a number of tourism destinations.

Uneven implementation. Sustainability practices differ considerably between enterprises, regions and destinations.

Skills and knowledge gaps. Many SMEs require stronger practical capabilities in sustainability management and green technologies.

Financial constraints. The initial cost of renewable energy, resource-efficient technologies and other green investments can be difficult for smaller enterprises.

Geographical and seasonal concentration. Tourism pressure remains concentrated in established destinations and seasons, while other areas remain underutilised.

Opportunities

Tourism Strategy 2035. An opportunity to mainstream sustainability, climate resilience and destination management into national tourism development.

Higher-value specialised tourism. Ecotourism, adventure, wine and gastronomy, rural and community-based tourism can increase value without relying exclusively on visitor-volume growth.

Regional diversification. Sustainable tourism can distribute visitor flows and economic benefits towards rural and less-visited areas.

Green technologies and resource efficiency. Renewable energy, energy efficiency and circular-economy solutions can reduce both environmental impacts and long-term operating costs.

International cooperation and knowledge transfer. EU programmes, development partners and academic cooperation provide opportunities for financing, skills development and adoption of good practices.

Threats

Climate change. Increasing climate vulnerability may affect natural resources, infrastructure and tourism-dependent destinations.

Environmental pressure from tourism growth. Poorly managed growth can increase waste, congestion and pressure on sensitive natural and cultural sites.

Poorly planned development. Uncontrolled construction and land-use change may damage landscapes, ecosystems and local identity.

International competition. Destinations with stronger sustainability standards and environmental infrastructure may be better positioned in environmentally conscious markets.

Policy–implementation gap. Sustainability objectives may have limited impact if they are not translated into measurable actions, monitoring and sufficient implementation capacity.

Table 1. ***SWOT Analysis of Sustainable Tourism Development in Georgia***

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Overall, Georgia has a strong resource base for sustainable tourism and an increasingly supportive policy environment. Compared with the situation assessed in 2024, sustainability has acquired a clearer position within tourism legislation, the preparation of a new long-term tourism strategy is underway, nature-based tourism continues to expand and the economic case for diversified and higher-value tourism products is becoming stronger. At the same time, many structural constraints identified in the earlier analysis remain relevant, particularly deficiencies in environmental infrastructure, uneven capacities among tourism enterprises, financing and skills gaps, and the concentration of tourism flows.

The central challenge for Georgia is therefore not a shortage of sustainable tourism potential, but the ability to convert this potential into consistent practice at national, destination and enterprise levels. Future progress will depend on combining tourism growth with effective destination management, improved environmental infrastructure, practical sustainability standards, stronger support for SMEs, local community participation, professional skills development and climate-resilient planning. If these priorities are effectively incorporated into the Tourism Strategy 2035 and its subsequent implementation mechanisms, sustainable tourism can make an increasingly important contribution to Georgia's tourism competitiveness, regional development, environmental protection and higher value creation.

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2.2 Overview of the Sustainable Tourism Trends and SWOT-analysis in Moldova

(Larisa Trifonova, Associate Professor, Economic, Marketing and Tourism, Employment at Moldova State University)

This chapter presents an updated assessment of sustainable tourism development in the Republic of Moldova, highlighting its current characteristics and emerging trends. The analysis draws, in part, on the findings of the *Status Quo and GAP Analysis of Green Tourism Development in Georgia and Moldova*, conducted in 2024 under the Erasmus+ ENRICHER Hubs project [1]. The Moldova-focused research integrated a review of existing literature and secondary data with semi-structured interviews involving representatives of the tourism sector and relevant stakeholders, including rural accommodation providers, wineries, travel agencies, scientific reserves and museums. The study explored current sustainability practices, key drivers of success, existing barriers and priorities for the future development of green tourism in the country.

The detailed findings, methodology and recommendations are available in the full report, which can be accessed through the ENRICHER hubs website https://www.enricher.eu/2024/07/31/status-quo-report-published/. The present chapter therefore summarizes the most relevant conclusions for Moldova and updates them with official tourism statistics for 2025 and the first half of 2026, recent policy and institutional developments and emerging sustainability trends.

The Republic of Moldova offers significant opportunities for sustainable tourism, supported by its diverse natural landscapes and rich cultural heritage. Its predominantly rural territory features wooded hills, river valleys and wetlands along the Prut and Dniester rivers, while historic monasteries, archaeological sites, traditional villages, local culinary traditions and centuries-old winemaking practices further enhance the country's appeal as a sustainable tourism destination. Wine is the most visible element of the national offer: the four protected geographical indications – Codru, Ștefan Vodă, Valul lui Traian and Divin – are protected nationally and in the European Union, while the cellars of Cricova and Milești Mici and the National Wine Day are internationally recognised attractions [2].



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The Orheiul Vechi archaeological landscape, included in the UNESCO Tentative List in 2017, combines cultural heritage, natural landscape and a living rural community [3]. Together, these resources provide a strong foundation for wine and gastronomic tourism, rural and community-based tourism, ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism. The analysis underpinning the new national tourism programme estimates that about 90% of tourism resources lie outside Chișinău, which makes this potential predominantly rural [3].

Sustainability has become increasingly important in the context of Moldova's expanding tourism sector. In 2025, tourist accommodation establishments recorded 525.1 thousand arrivals, representing a 10.7% increase compared to 2024. Of these, 286.2 thousand were non-resident visitors, accounting for 54.5% of total arrivals and reflecting a 12.7% annual increase [4]. Inbound tourism organised through travel agencies and tour operators also experienced substantial growth, with the number of visitors rising by 33.8% to 90.5 thousand. Nevertheless, outbound tourism continued to represent approximately two-thirds of agency-organised travel [5]. Despite these positive trends, several structural challenges persist. The average length of stay among non-residents remained relatively short at 2.9 days, while the net occupancy rate of accommodation establishments reached only 32.0%, declining to 20.8% for tourist and agritourist guesthouses. Moreover, tourism activity remained highly concentrated in the capital, with Chișinău accounting for 68.0% of all registered arrivals [4], and same-day excursionists representing the majority of inbound visitors served by travel agencies [5]. These trends highlight the increasing economic significance of tourism while emphasizing the need for a more balanced approach to its sustainable development. Beyond attracting more visitors, greater attention should be directed towards extending the duration of stays, increasing tourism expenditure, improving the geographical and seasonal distribution of tourist flows, enhancing accommodation capacity utilisation and ensuring that tourism generates tangible benefits for rural communities.

Recent statistics also indicate ongoing shifts in the composition of international tourism demand. During January–June 2026, accommodation establishments registered 159.6 thousand non-resident tourists, 24.7% more than in the first half of 2025, while resident arrivals grew by only 3.6% [6]. After international arrivals exceeded 2019 levels by 62% in the first half of 2025 [7], UN Tourism data placed Moldova first in Europe for growth in international arrivals in the first half of 2026, with an increase of 25% [8].

Ukraine (39.5%) and Romania (20.8%) remained the main source markets, while Romania, Italy, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom together accounted for almost one-third of non-resident arrivals [6], and agency-organised inbound travel came mainly from Romania, Italy and Spain [9]. This indicates the growing importance of European markets, but also a dependence on neighbouring countries that exposes demand to regional security risks linked to the war in Ukraine. While market diversification does not automatically make tourism more sustainable, it strengthens the case for higher-value products based on wine, gastronomy, rural heritage and nature, and for longer stays outside the capital rather than visitor-volume growth.

Nature-based tourism highlights the close connection between tourism growth and the principles of sustainable development. Moldova's protected area network includes the Codrii Scientific Reserve, established in 1971, the Plaiul Fagului and Lower Prut reserves, Orhei National Park and three Ramsar wetlands [3], while the Lower Prut Biosphere Reserve was included in the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves in 2018 [10]. With forest cover of only about 11% of the territory [11], these ecosystems are both a key tourism resource and highly vulnerable. Consolidated official visitor statistics for protected areas are not published, which limits evidence-based visitor management. Growing interest in hiking, cycling, birdwatching and wine trails [12] creates opportunities for local accommodation, guiding, transport and food services. However, the 2024 research pointed to poor access to remote sites, poorly maintained trails and insufficient visitor facilities [1], making visitor management, signage, waste management and biodiversity protection increasingly important.

Hotels and eco-resorts reported measures related to energy and water efficiency, sustainable construction and renewable energy, while smaller rural guesthouses tended to adopt less capital-intensive measures such as composting, reducing single-use plastics, water-saving fixtures, organic farming and farm-to-table services. Wineries, from large producers such as Cricova, Milești Mici and Purcari to small family wineries in Gagauzia and other regions, highlighted sustainable viticulture, water conservation and waste management [1]. At the same time, wineries reported difficulties in financing renewable energy systems and eco-friendly materials, access to grants was described as limited, and eco-certification remained marginal [1]; the low occupancy of rural guesthouses further restricts self-financed green investment.

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These business models demonstrate that sustainable tourism is not limited to explicitly labelled “green” products. It can also be reflected in authenticity, local sourcing, efficient resource use and stronger linkages between visitors and host communities.
These developments are especially significant for rural areas of Moldova, where agriculture continues to play a central role in local economies. Wine tourism, gastronomy, agritourism, ethno-cultural experiences, hiking, cycling and community-based tourism can diversify rural incomes and increase opportunities for small enterprises and households outside Chișinău. They can also strengthen demand for local agricultural and craft products, increase the share of tourism expenditure retained within destinations and support the preservation of traditional crafts and intangible heritage, including the distinctive identity of Gagauzia [1]. EU-funded initiatives such as the EU4Moldova: Focal Regions programme in Cahul and Ungheni have shown how Local Action Groups can support community projects that make rural areas more attractive for residents and visitors [13]. From this perspective, sustainable tourism can simultaneously support environmental objectives, local identity and more geographically inclusive economic development.

The integration of sustainable tourism approaches in Moldova varies considerably, reflecting significant differences in the level of adoption among tourism enterprises and across destinations. The research identified a regulatory framework lacking tailored provisions for sustainable practices, complex permit procedures, underdeveloped rural infrastructure, limited access to finance, low environmental awareness among tourists and communities, and limited marketing capacity [1]. Waste collection, separation and recycling remain national challenges addressed by the National Waste Management Programme 2022–2027 [14] and are particularly visible in rural destinations. The new programme’s situation analysis also points to weak transport and tourism service infrastructure and limited availability of skilled labour [3]. Tourism flows remain highly concentrated: in the first half of 2026, Chișinău accounted for 75.2% of accommodated tourists, while the North, South and Gagauzia together accounted for about 10%, and occupancy (28.4%) remained below the annual average, indicating pronounced seasonality [4], [6].

Achieving sustainable tourism development requires more than independent environmental initiatives undertaken by guesthouses, wineries and tour operators. It also depends on well-developed infrastructure, efficient municipal services, coordinated destination management, strategic planning and systematic monitoring.

In parallel with developments in the tourism market and changes in business practices, Moldova has made progress in strengthening its institutional and policy framework. The Law No. 352/2006 on the Organisation and Conduct of Tourism Activity provides the legal basis for the sector: Article 4 defines the creation of conditions for the sustainable development of tourism as a form of state support and assigns the Government responsibility for ensuring it, while tour operators and travel agencies must ensure the sustainable use of tourism heritage [15]. A major development is the Government’s approval, on 24 June 2026, of the National Tourism Development Programme “Tourism 2029” for 2026–2029, with a planned budget of about MDL 618.2 million. The programme prioritises tourism infrastructure, specialist training, digital promotion, diversification of the offer, rural tourism and more effective use of cultural, natural and wine heritage, and is expected to create around 5,000 jobs [16], [17]. Its strategic targets include at least 30% more tourists by 2029 and at least six capacity-building programmes for tourism SMEs, covering digitalisation, sustainability, efficient management and social inclusion [18]. In May 2026, the Government also approved the transfer of tourism from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalization to integrate it more closely into economic and investment policy [19], while the partnership with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, joined by the National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association (ANTRIM), offers a reference framework of international sustainability criteria [12]. However, the publicly presented targets focus on visitor growth, investment and employment rather than measurable environmental indicators. The implementation of “Tourism 2029” therefore creates an important opportunity to move sustainability from general legal principles towards measurable actions in destination management, regional development, infrastructure, human resources and environmental performance.

Climate change is also becoming increasingly relevant to tourism planning. The National Climate Change Adaptation Programme until 2030, approved in 2023, focuses on agriculture, health, transport, energy, water and forestry [11] and projects further warming, an approximately 13% decline in annual precipitation and longer and more severe droughts, following severe droughts in 2007, 2012, 2020 and 2022 [20]. Tourism is not treated as a separate adaptation sector, although wine and gastronomic tourism depend on viticulture and agriculture, and ecotourism on forests, rivers and wetlands. Climate-related risks should therefore be considered in tourism infrastructure investment, product development and long-term destination management rather than being treated solely as a separate environmental-policy issue.

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Strengths

Distinctive wine, cultural and rural resources. EU-protected wine regions, underground cellars, monasteries, Orheiul Vechi, traditional villages and gastronomy provide a strong basis for differentiated sustainable tourism products.
Dynamic growth of international demand. Non-resident arrivals increased by 12.7% in 2025 and by 24.7% in the first half of 2026, providing an expanding market base for further product development.
Authentic and locally based products. Rural guesthouses, family wineries, farm-to-table and ethno-cultural experiences link tourism directly with local producers and communities.
Emerging policy and legal framework. Law No. 352/2006 recognises sustainable tourism development as a state responsibility, and the "Tourism 2029" programme provides dedicated funding for infrastructure, skills and rural tourism.
Growing practical experience. Hotels, eco-resorts, wineries, rural guesthouses and sustainability-oriented travel agencies already apply energy, water, waste and local-sourcing measures that can be scaled up.

Weaknesses

Environmental and rural infrastructure gaps. Waste collection and recycling, access roads, trails, signage and visitor facilities remain insufficient in many rural and nature-based destinations.
Concentration in Chișinău and short stays. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of accommodated tourists are registered in the capital, and non-residents stay on average fewer than three days.
Financial constraints. Low occupancy, especially in rural guesthouses, and limited access to grants and credit restrict investment in renewable energy and resource-efficient technologies.
Skills and knowledge gaps. Many SMEs lack qualified staff and practical capabilities in sustainability management, certification and green technologies.
Weak monitoring and standards. The absence of visitor data for protected areas, marginal use of eco-certification and lack of sustainability indicators hinder evidence-based management.

Opportunities

Implementation of "Tourism 2029". Programme funding, SME capacity-building and the closer integration of tourism into economic policy can mainstream sustainability and destination management into national tourism development.
Higher-value European market segments. Growing demand from EU markets can be served by wine, gastronomy, hiking, cycling and birdwatching products that increase length of stay and spending rather than visitor volumes alone.
Regional diversification. Sustainable tourism can redistribute visitor flows and economic benefits from Chișinău towards the Centre, North, South and Gagauzia.
Green technologies and resource efficiency. Renewable energy, energy efficiency, water saving and circular-economy solutions in wineries and guesthouses can reduce both environmental impacts and long-term operating costs.
International cooperation and knowledge transfer. EU programmes, UN agencies, the GSTC partnership and academic cooperation such as ENRICHER hubs provide opportunities for financing, skills development and adoption of good practices.

Threats

Climate change and water scarcity. More frequent droughts, heatwaves and floods may affect vineyards, forests, wetlands and the attractiveness of rural destinations.
Regional insecurity and demand volatility. The war in Ukraine and dependence on neighbouring source markets make international demand vulnerable to external shocks and changing safety perceptions.
Environmental pressure from unmanaged growth. Rapid visitor growth without adequate infrastructure can increase waste, congestion and pressure on sensitive sites such as Orheiul Vechi and the Lower Prut wetlands.
International competition. Neighbouring destinations with better connectivity, infrastructure and sustainability credentials may be better positioned in environmentally conscious European markets.
Policy–implementation gap. Sustainability objectives may have limited impact if institutional reorganisation and limited administrative capacity prevent their translation into measurable actions and monitoring.

Table 1. ***SWOT Analysis of Sustainable Tourism Development in Moldova***

The updated SWOT analysis presented below reflects the key insights from the research and incorporates recent developments shaping the sustainable tourism sector in Moldova.The Republic of Moldova possesses significant natural and cultural assets that create favourable conditions for sustainable tourism development, supported by ongoing improvements in the national policy framework. Since the 2024 assessment, the tourism sector has undergone several important changes, including a substantial increase in international visitor demand and a growing share of European markets. The introduction of the "Tourism 2029" programme has established clearer medium-term development priorities and allocated financial resources for their implementation. Furthermore, the integration of tourism into the country's broader economic development agenda, together with stronger engagement in international sustainability initiatives, has created additional opportunities for sectoral advancement. Nevertheless, progress continues to be constrained by persistent challenges. Inadequate environmental infrastructure and limited facilities in rural areas, insufficient financial resources and professional expertise among small tourism enterprises, and the geographical concentration of tourist activity in Chișinău remain major obstacles. These difficulties are further compounded by relatively short visitor stays and the lack of a comprehensive system for monitoring sustainability performance across the tourism sector.

Moldova's main priority lies in transforming its considerable sustainable tourism potential into tangible and coordinated outcomes, particularly in light of expanding tourist demand and recent policy developments. Achieving this requires a comprehensive approach that connects national strategic objectives with practical measures implemented across tourism destinations and individual enterprises. Particular emphasis should be placed on developing effective regional destination management systems, modernising waste management, water supply and transport infrastructure, and establishing measurable sustainability criteria. Equally important are improving financial accessibility and institutional support for small and medium-sized enterprises, encouraging active involvement of local communities, enhancing workforce competencies and incorporating climate adaptation measures into long-term tourism development strategies. The successful implementation of these priorities through the "Tourism 2029" programme and its associated action plan could strengthen Moldova's position as a competitive and sustainable tourism destination while supporting rural economic diversification, preserving natural resources and increasing the economic value generated by tourism activities.

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2.3 Green Tourism Development in Georgia and Moldova: Shared Challenges and Opportunities

(Giorgi Bregadze, Affiliated Professor at Caucasus University)

Georgia and Moldova share favourable conditions for green tourism development. Both countries combine cultural heritage, winemaking traditions, distinctive gastronomy, rural landscapes and hospitality that can support authentic tourism experiences. These assets create opportunities to strengthen local enterprises, preserve traditions and generate income for rural communities. Achieving these benefits requires responsible management of natural and cultural resources and the active involvement of local people.

The two countries also face several common challenges. Infrastructure remains a major constraint, including inadequate waste management and insufficient facilities and services in rural destinations. Individual businesses may introduce environmentally responsible practices, but their effectiveness depends on reliable public infrastructure and services. Green tourism development therefore requires coordinated action at enterprise, destination and national levels.

Financial and human resource constraints further limit progress. Smaller enterprises often struggle to afford resource-efficient technologies, renewable energy systems and improvements to their facilities. Shortages of qualified personnel and limited practical knowledge make it difficult to introduce and maintain sustainable practices. Training needs to be connected with business realities, helping enterprises understand implementation costs, potential savings and opportunities to improve their services.

A further shared challenge is translating sustainability commitments into practical support. The 2024 Status Quo analysis identified gaps in regulatory guidance, government support and access to standards and certification in both countries. Clear responsibilities, accessible advice and appropriate incentives are needed to help businesses put sustainability principles into practice. Awareness among visitors and communities is equally important, since business investment alone cannot ensure responsible behaviour or local participation.

Tourism diversification offers opportunities in both countries. Linking wine and gastronomy with cultural, rural and nature-based experiences can broaden tourism products, encourage longer stays and spread economic benefits across destinations and seasons. Community involvement is essential to ensure that development responds to local priorities and creates opportunities for local suppliers and workers.

Differences in natural resources influence how these shared priorities are applied. Georgia's mountain and coastal environments support a wide range of nature and adventure activities, while Moldova offers opportunities through wine routes, rural landscapes and cultural and ethnographic experiences. Both countries nevertheless need to protect sensitive sites, manage resource use and prepare for climate-related risks. The appropriate measures will vary by destination and business, as well as by country.

The central challenge in both Georgia and Moldova is converting strong tourism potential and individual examples of good practice into wider, consistent implementation. Progress depends on combining infrastructure investment, financial support, practical skills, clear institutional guidance and community participation. These shared needs provide a strong basis for cooperation through ENRICHER, particularly in applied learning, knowledge exchange and the development of green tourism services suited to local conditions.

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3. Innovative Learning Methods for Sustainable Tourism

3.1 Innovative Learning Approaches: Service Design Method

(Janosch Untersteiner, Teaching & Research Assistant, MCI The Entrepreneurial school)

Introduction to Service Design in Tourism

Service design has become a prominent approach in tourism due to its practical, human-centered approach for improving experiences across complex ecosystems (Untersteiner & Bosio, 2023). Widely adopted in destination management (Bosio and Prunthaller, 2018; Stickdorn and Frischhut, 2012; Untersteiner, 2015), it offers tools – such as customer journeys and personas – often replacing traditional business administration and marketing tools (e.g., service value chain, target groups). As consumers become increasingly demanding and competition increasingly fierce, organizations are required to adopt a more customer-centric mindset. Accordingly, there is a need for methodologies that meet these demands and methods for analysis, problem framing, and solution development (Vargo & Lush, 2004; Amaro 2016; Carroll, 2012; Fotis et al., 2012; Stickdorn et al., 2018). Service design as a promising approach is defined as a collaborative and cross-disciplinary methodology, orchestrating places, processes, and interactions to create holistic experiences for customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders (Ostrom, 2010). It aims to co-create value by understanding users' needs and behaviors and by visualizing, testing, and iteratively refining future service concepts (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2011; Wetter-Edman, 2011; Brown, 2008; Wilson and Zamberlan, 2015; Mager, 2009). A defining feature of design-led practice is the separation of the problem and solution spaces. Inductive research is used to uncover and understand the right problem; abductive and deductive approaches then guide rapid prototyping and evaluation. Rather than linear stages typical of management processes, service design is cyclical and iterative, enabling early, low-cost experiments that allow fast learning and reduce risk (Stickdorn et al., 2018; Wetter-Edman, 2011; Matthews & Wrigley, 2017).

ENRICHER hubs Service Design training for teachers

The project included training of trainers. One of the training weeks was about Service Design. This online training introduced participants to the foundations and process of service design, combining concise lectures, case examples, and practical assignments.

Day 1 provided a compact overview of the evolution from service management to service ecosystem design, highlighting milestones such as the design of services (intangibility, blueprinting), design for services (design thinking, experience economy, service-dominant logic), and service ecosystem design (service design thinking). The trainers emphasized core characteristics (systemic, iterative, interdisciplinary, ecosystem-oriented) and principles (user-centered, co-creative, sequencing, evidencing, holistic). In groups, participants explored Moritz's (2005) service design process and mapped suitable methods and instruments to each stage.

Day 2 focused on the "Discover" and "Define" stages of a service design process. In the Discover stage, participants learned to build a broad, interdisciplinary understanding using desk research and qualitative methods such as contextual interviews, observation, and shadowing. Triangulating methods allows gaining and validating comprehensive insights in a short period of time. In the Define stage, participants practiced organizing and prioritizing findings, creating a Research Wall, employing affinity mapping and clustering to detect patterns and connections. Based on that synthesis, they developed personas, customer journeys, service blueprints, and other design drivers, allowing them to frame precise "key insights" and "How might we...?" questions to guide ideation.

Day 3 linked service design to sustainability. For social sustainability and equity, the training introduced tools such as the Inclusivity Canvas, Cards for Humanity, the Universal Score, and the Liberatory Design Toolkit. For environmental sustainability and circularity, participants explored methods from the Danish Design Center, the Circularity Deck, and the Circular Canvas. They then applied the Business Model Canvas to connect impact aspirations with revenue and cost structures. A keynote by Markus Hormeß (Workplay; co-editor of "This Is Service Design Doing") showcased contemporary practice and fielded participant questions.

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Day 4 applied learnings to context-specific targets from Moldova and Georgia (Work Package 2 Status Quo Report).

Participants had to develop personas and customer journeys for wine lovers and foodies, adventure travelers, or festival and event visitors, using Smaply (a digital Persona and Customer Journey tool) to experience a modern digital workflow. The session concluded with a wrap-up and a preview of the upcoming in-person Service Design Sprint.

Service Design Sprint for ENRICHER hubs teachers

This on-site service design sprint workshop in Comrat, Moldova, immersed participants in a real scenario, using the Double Diamond framework (Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver) to structure activity while allowing flexible method selection. A live partner anchored the process: Gagauz Sofrasi in Congaz, an ethno-tourist complex founded by Ana Statova to preserve and promote Gagauz heritage, operating a museum, traditional restaurant, and eco-friendly guesthouse. The challenge was to develop local green tourism routes that share cultural heritage with visitors and locals. Throughout, participants documented their work and progress in Miro for transparent collaboration and reporting.

Day 1 began with the sprint setup and industry case briefing. Participants prepared by reviewing context and drafting interview questions. During an on-site visit to Gagauz Sofrasi, they experienced the customer journey end-to-end (welcome ceremony, museum, guest apartments, dinner), observed operations, and interviewed the owner, her daughter, the head of the tourism organization, and a regional development manager. This immersion built empathy and grounded the subsequent analysis.

Day 2 emphasized desk research and synthesis. Working in groups, participants combined their field insights with secondary sources and structured knowledge on Research Walls. They discussed and triangulated perspectives, identified patterns and gaps, and distilled findings into key insights. These were articulated as clear problem statements using “How might we…?” formulations, ensuring that ideation addressed well-defined challenges.

Day 3 transitioned into the solution space. After a creative warm-up (“shitty first draft”), participants used Crazy 8s to generate rapid ideas and then clustered, got rid of duplicates, and prioritized with a feasibility–impact matrix.

Each group selected three promising concepts and created simple service ads to clarify value propositions and test them quickly with peers. Feedback - coded green (positive) and red (constructive) - allowed a first iteration.

Groups then developed two concepts further using methods such as desktop walkthroughs, Lego Serious Play, and cardboard prototyping, preparing them for the next iteration with external experts.

Day 4 focused on expert testing and refinement. Regional tourism professionals and a representative of the industry partner reviewed the prototypes, offering practical feedback. Each group selected one concept to refine further and prepared the concept for the pitch. Teams delivered 3-minute presentations, which were recorded for reflection and dissemination. The complete process documentation in Miro enabled rapid compilation of a comprehensive report shared with participants, experts, and the partner.

Conclusion

This workshop combined a focused theoretical design thinking introduction with a hands-on service design sprint anchored by a local industry partner. Participants learned to separate problem space from solution development, apply design thinking tools meaningfully, and use rapid, low-cost prototypes to test assumptions and iterate to deliverable project ideas. The online training built foundational literacy in methods and mindsets; the contextual on-site sprint converted that literacy into practice through field immersion, structured synthesis, and iterative prototyping. The collaboration with Gagauz Sofrasi ensured relevance and community value, while digital tools (Miro, Smaply) supported transparency and efficient knowledge transfer.

The theoretical methods introduced in Section 3.1 were subsequently transferred to the classroom in Section 3.2, where teachers applied the acquired knowledge to guide students through experiential, challenge-based learning activities in collaboration with an industry partner.

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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Sustainability must be operationalized

Tools for inclusion and circularity help translate values into criteria, features, and business logic (via the Business Model Canvas), avoiding superficial “green” claims

02

Real context boosts relevance and learning

A live challenge such as with Gagauz Sofrasi increases empathy, motivation, and accountability, while generating outputs with immediate local utility

03

The Double Diamond provides clarity without rigidity

Clear phase boundaries create shared orientation; flexible method selection preserves creativity and fit-for-purpose choices

04

Problem-first discipline improves solution quality

Thorough discovery and structured synthesis (research wall, clustering) lead to sharper “How might we…?” questions and more targeted, feasible concepts

05

Rapid prototyping accelerates progress and reduces risk

Simple artifacts (service ads, low-fidelity mockups, role-play) challenge assumptions early, enabling quick and low-barrier interaction (testing & iteration) before significant investment

06

Co-creation and interdisciplinarity are essential

Diverse perspectives – from participants, experts, and partners – enrich insights, challenge biases, and improve solution robustness

07

Digital collaboration enhances transparency and continuity

Real-time documentation in Miro and structured mapping in Smaply create traceable records, support cross-team alignment, and simplify post-workshop reporting

08

High transferability and scalability

he methods and sequence used – field immersion, research wall, creative and evaluative methods, quick prototyping and expert testing – are easily applicable to different practical contexts and service challenges

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3.2 Experiential and Challenge-Based Learning with Industry

(Tamta Demetradze, Head of International Projects Development and Management Unit, Akaki Tsereteli State University)

As HEI students in Georgia and Moldova enter the job market in the years to come, it was important that they gain contemporary knowledge and up-to-date competences related to developing innovative service concepts in travel and tourism already during their studies at the university. The ENRICHER hub project gave opportunity to do that through training of HEI staff both in green tourism development as well as experiential learning methods, including tools for service development and business mindset.

As the teaching and learning approaches at the HEIs in the target countries are still rather traditional, introduction of innovative learning methods to upgrade the competences to match the requirements of future of work and the tourism industry took place. New experiential learning methods were introduced and used while teaching in classes. Design thinking tools, such as business model canvas and design sprints, were embedded in the teaching/learning process.

Thus, the project was an opportunity to bring HEI staff, students and businesses in the tourism industry together to develop new green tourism concepts and services with experiential learning methods and the tools of service design to answer to the challenge existing in Georgia.

Design Sprint for Akaki Tsereteli State University students

Business Challenge – Design Sprint was organized for the Akaki Tsereteli State University students majoring in Tourism within the project Designing Green Tourism Concepts Through Learning – ENRICHER hubs. The Design Sprint included the following stages:

Day 1. Presentation of the challenge

The practical implementation of the Design Sprint at ATSU took place in collaboration with stakeholders - Baia's Wine and Destination Management Organization DMO Imereti .

Presentation made by the owner of the winery who proposed a real challenge that the winery wanted to deal with.
The above mentioned stakeholders have been cooperating with the faculty and department based on the Agreement. In addition the stakeholders are providers of practice for the students from ATSU. The winery was chosen based on the rich experience in producing bio products as well as hosting tourists. The young female stakeholder despite her practical experience of provision of tours in vineyard and winery, degustation and accommodation was thinking about the ways that would help her to provide a better service to her guests. Presentation made by the owner of the winery who proposed a real challenge that the winery wanted to deal with. The challenge was overcoming seasonality and transferring knowledge about traditional wine-making and cuisine to the Baia's Winery guests.

Before the presentation of the company, its challenge and the visit to the company, the students were divided into small groups of 4-5 student per group (5 groups) and then were provided with the introductory part using the Double Diamond (Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver) to activate the students. That helped the students stay focused and showed them straight away, that was a new way of learning.

Later the involved stakeholder presented the company, its background, some data and stated the problem that the company wished to cope with or improve. The onsite excursion was great opportunity for students to observe the winery and conduct interview with the field representatives. The students could document their work and progress in Miro that explicitly serves to support transparent collaboration and reporting.

Day 2. Research

After the onsite visit on previous day, the students started the next step implying research. The students were explained that research was more than just collecting data. After gaining lots of primary data, data from the interviews and visit, they needed to build insights within the data to create value and understanding. The students were invited to work in groups, combine the date gathered onsite with the secondary data. They were reminded to use previously presented Research Walls, Customer Map, HMW (how might we) questions, Personas, Service blueprint, Stakeholder Map and other tools of service design aiming to provide opportunity to better understand the needs of the business and better designing the entire service experience.

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In order to visualize findings and define the problem statement majority of students used research walls. The students supposed that way of structuring data that way simple for visualization of the data they had. Formulation of 3 How might we (HMW) question was the result of the phase. Debriefing and feedback took place. The important thing is to stop, take a step back and reflect. Getting proper feedback was rewarding for students after their hard work.

Day 3 Ideation and First Prototyping

The next phase started with having at least two ideas and continued with prototyping them. Having at least two ideas was essential – if one failed, students had another one to try and not to fail. Also students were instructed to be focused on right evaluation of ideas and correct prioritizing and choosing. During the prototyping it was advised to remember that realistic prototypes were not obligatory. The more important was to use them as a basis for testing with target stakeholders. First tests were done by presenting the service ad to other students.
Testing of the ideas was followed by the debriefing and feedback.

Day 4 and Day 5 Prototyping

The next step was physical prototyping (Desktop Walkthrough, Cardboard prototyping, Wireframe, Marvel for App development, Roleplays). The cardboard and paper prototyping was done by the students. Although the prototypes are not supposed and asked to be 'perfect', student did their best and presented well prepared prototypes that gave them opportunity to better explain and present their ideas.
After the previous testing with other students, the groups of students met with the experts (trained staff and the second stakeholder, representative of Destination Management Organization DMO Imereti). The students made notes and documented everything in order to be ready for the next phase of the Design Sprint.
Despite the fact that the final step including Revising the prototype and making final presentation could take place on separate day, possibility to incorporate two days into one was used.
That meant that the groups were given some time to revise proposed prototypes and decide which prototype to focus on. The chosen prototype was then presented during the final presentation. As the students had prototypes, no additional presentations, tools or apps were needed.

The pitching restricted the students in time – only 3-5 minutes were granted for the final presentation. The participants from ATSU used different formats of presentation including sketch and prototype demonstration that helped them better present and introduce the idea, solution, explanation and brief list of strengths and limitations.

The final step of the Design Sprint was the feedback provided by the stakeholders, experts selected at the initial preparation phase as well as other interested parties invited as a jury members. In ATSU case the feedback was done by the winery owner who proposed the challenge, the interested stakeholder representative of Destination Management Organization DMO Imereti, one expert, trained staff, but as for the last decision regarding the winning team, it was up to the Baia's winery as the main interested party. Getting the feedback from the stakeholder who defined the problem was very rewarding and motivating for the student teams, even the ones who were not winning teams.

Conclusion

The "Business Challenge – Design Sprint" was a valuable opportunity to combine a focused theoretical design thinking introduction with a hands-on service design sprint supported by the local winery stakeholder. The students had a chance to learn from each other. In addition they were motivated by the real challenge provided by the reals stakeholder, who also benefited because was exposed to interesting, cost effective and simple solutions that objectively were considered as ones that could be implemented as a problem solving in real life.

Through experiential learning, students were exposed to unfamiliar tasks in a real-world context. Completing provided tasks was possible if students could figure out what they knew, what they did not know, and how to learn and close the gap. The students were pushed to reflect on existing knowledge and deepen it via further reflection and feedback and would lead to shifting to new ideas, contexts resulting in mastering new concepts, principles, and skills (Linn, et al., 2004).

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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Design Sprint knowledge is essential for effective participation

It was an opportunity to replace traditional methods with a more thoughtful and impactful approach to problem-solving, one that harnesses the strengths of the entire team and ensures that time is focused on what truly matters.

02

Ensuring understanding of the Design Sprint methodology is advisable

In majority of cases most students were already familiar with Design Sprint tools as they had previously participated in the training course covering the topic. In case of lack of knowledge on Design Sprint methodology among students, additional session/training should be suggested.

03

Real industry challenges create mutual value

Working with industry representatives on real-world challenges helps students develop practical solutions. Businesses benefit from fresh ideas and innovative perspectives. Students gain valuable hands-on experience solving real-world problems.

04

Business visits reveal insights beyond desk research

Business visits allow students to observe operations, ask questions, and interview staff. Semi-structured interviews reveal hidden challenges and customer needs beyond desk research. Depending on availability, businesses can be visited or invited for interviews.

05

Thorough preparation strengthens sprint outcomes

Preparation for the sprint implying correctly identifying a suitable partner, clearly defining the challenge in advance, and engaging relevant experts and stakeholders is very important and ensuring that students gain valuable experience and skills as much as possible

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4. Universities' Experiences with Business Challenges

4.1 The Green Tourism Hub as an Innovation Platform: Lessons from a Business Challenge

(Giorgi Bregadze, Affiliated Professor at Caucasus University)

The Green Tourism Business Challenge organized at Caucasus University within the Erasmus+ ENRICHER hubs project provided an opportunity to test how a university-based Green Tourism Hub can support more practice-oriented and innovation-driven tourism education. The challenge was not conceived simply as a student activity or a short workshop. Instead, it was used as an experimental learning format through which students could work directly with a tourism business, apply service design methods and collaborate in interdisciplinary teams around a real industry challenge. This approach reflected a broader understanding of the Green Tourism Hub as a platform connecting education, business and innovation rather than as a purely academic structure. The underlying objective was to explore whether a structured university–industry collaboration could simultaneously strengthen student learning, generate new ideas for businesses and provide a replicable model for future challenge-based activities. The presentation developed after the challenge similarly framed the experience around practice-based learning, service design, university–industry collaboration and innovation-oriented tourism education.

More than 20 students from different schools of Caucasus University participated in the four-day Design Sprint. The use of students from different academic backgrounds was intentional, as the challenge aimed to bring together different perspectives and approaches rather than relying exclusively on tourism students. The business case was provided by Legends Tskaltubo Spa Resort, giving participants a real tourism enterprise and destination context within which to work. The process covered research, problem analysis, idea generation, prototyping, testing and final presentations, allowing students to experience the main stages of a Design Sprint within a relatively intensive period.

The central challenge focused on how the resort could position itself as a destination capable of connecting different generations of visitors.

This required students to think beyond a narrowly defined tourism product and consider visitor needs, experiences, communication and the wider identity of the resort. At the beginning of the sprint, students interviewed the resort owner and facilitators with previous research experience in Tskaltubo. This was complemented by contextual and online research aimed at helping the teams understand the destination, potential users and the business environment. Students then moved from problem exploration to ideation, concept development and prototyping before presenting their proposed solutions to a jury consisting of academic and business representatives. The resulting ideas addressed sustainability, tourism experience improvement and visitor engagement.

The real business case was one of the most important features of the challenge. Direct interaction with the resort partner created a stronger sense of ownership than is typically possible in conventional classroom exercises. Students were not responding to an abstract assignment prepared solely for teaching purposes but to an actual tourism business seeking new perspectives. This increased the perceived relevance of the work and encouraged participants to consider whether their ideas could respond to real customer and business needs. The experience therefore demonstrated the value of using actual industry problems as learning inputs within the Green Tourism Hub.

The final concepts also illustrated the diversity of possible responses to the same business challenge. Two teams were specifically recognized during the concluding presentations: Wellnest received the award for the most innovative solution, while Ecohost was recognized for the most sustainable solution.

More broadly, the concepts presented by the teams demonstrated creativity, practical orientation, sustainability considerations and user-centred thinking. The importance of the exercise was therefore not limited to identifying a single "correct" answer. Rather, the Design Sprint showed how different teams could interpret the same challenge in different ways and produce alternative concepts that could subsequently be explored, tested or refined.

One of the clearest outcomes was the high level of student engagement. Students became noticeably more active than in conventional classroom settings, particularly when research, discussion and decision-making were directly linked to the real business case.

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Direct communication with the resort increased motivation and responsibility, while interdisciplinary teamwork exposed participants to perspectives and approaches outside their own academic backgrounds. The new presentation similarly identifies high student engagement, real business interaction, interdisciplinary teamwork and practical learning as the strongest elements of the experience.

This type of engagement is important because challenge-based learning changes the role of students. Instead of primarily receiving and reproducing knowledge, they are required to investigate a problem, interpret incomplete information, negotiate ideas within a team and make decisions under time constraints. The four-day format intensified this process. Students had to move rapidly from research to idea generation and from abstract concepts to prototypes that could be communicated and evaluated. In this respect, prototyping was particularly valuable because it required participants to make their ideas sufficiently concrete to expose weaknesses, discuss alternatives and receive feedback. The value of the sprint therefore lay as much in the learning process as in the final concepts produced.

At the same time, the challenge revealed several limitations that are important for the future development of the Green Tourism Hub model. One issue concerned the amount of contextual knowledge available to students. Despite interviews and desk research, some participants found it difficult within a short period to develop a sufficiently deep understanding of Tskaltubo, the resort's business needs, its visitors and the owner's expectations. A real business case increases authenticity, but it also introduces complexity that cannot always be understood through a short briefing. The challenge therefore demonstrated that the quality of problem framing and contextual preparation has a direct influence on the quality of subsequent ideation.

The composition and organization of the teams also generated lessons. Different levels of experience, knowledge and confidence contributed positively to diversity but sometimes resulted in uneven participation. In addition, overlapping university lectures and other academic commitments affected continuity during the four-day process. These issues show that interdisciplinary collaboration does not automatically result in effective teamwork. Future challenges require stronger preparation of participants, clearer scheduling and more deliberate facilitation of team formation and roles.

Another important lesson concerned expectations about the purpose of the Design Sprint. Some participants and jury members expected highly developed final solutions at the end of the four-day process. However, the central purpose of a Design Sprint is not to produce a finished business strategy or fully implementable product within several days. Its value lies in rapidly exploring a problem, generating alternatives, making ideas tangible and testing assumptions. When participants evaluate a sprint primarily by the completeness of the final solution, there is a risk that experimentation and learning are undervalued. This experience therefore highlighted the need to explain the methodology and expected outputs clearly to students, business partners and evaluators before the process begins.

These observations also suggest that industry participation should extend beyond the initial presentation of a challenge. Businesses can contribute most effectively when they are involved at several stages: helping formulate the problem, providing relevant contextual information, responding to emerging concepts and participating in final feedback. Earlier and more continuous engagement can reduce misunderstandings and help students distinguish between creative possibilities and solutions that are realistically compatible with the business environment. At the same time, the university must retain the learning-oriented character of the activity rather than allowing the sprint to become a short-term consultancy exercise in which students are expected to deliver finished commercial solutions.

Implication for future Green Tourism Hub activities

1. Use real industry cases wherever possible and involve the business directly in the learning process.
2. Provide stronger pre-sprint materials, destination information, stakeholder input and, where possible, direct exposure to the destination.
3. Introduce team-building, clearer roles and initial orientation to create a more balanced basis for collaboration.
4. Clarify the purpose, process, expected outputs and evaluation criteria before the sprint begins.
5. Include business representatives at intermediate feedback points as well as final presentations.
6. Plan challenges within dedicated periods or coordinate participation more closely with academic schedules.

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The experience also demonstrated that the impact of the Business Challenge can be considered at several levels. For students, it provided a more practical and collaborative learning environment in which they could develop problem-solving, communication, teamwork and service design skills. It allowed them to experience uncertainty and time pressure that are difficult to reproduce through conventional assignments. For Caucasus University, the challenge demonstrated the potential of challenge-based and innovation-oriented learning and showed how interdisciplinary cooperation can be integrated into tourism education. For the industry partner, the process created direct contact with students and generated a range of new perspectives and concepts around an existing tourism challenge.

These different forms of value help define the potential role of the Green Tourism Hub. The experience suggests that the Hub should not be understood only as a physical space or a collection of sustainability-related activities. Its stronger role can be as an intermediary innovation platform connecting tourism businesses, students, academic staff and other stakeholders around real problems. Businesses contribute practical challenges and sector knowledge; students bring new perspectives and creative capacity; and the university provides methodology, facilitation and a structured environment in which ideas can be explored and tested.

At the same time, the CU experience shows that successful university–industry collaboration does not emerge automatically from bringing students and businesses together. The quality of the process depends on the design of the challenge, the preparation of participants, the availability of contextual information, team composition, realistic expectations and continuous facilitation. These process conditions are particularly important when working with sustainability-oriented tourism challenges, which are often complex and involve environmental, social, operational and commercial considerations simultaneously.

The Green Tourism Business Challenge therefore provided value beyond the individual concepts generated during the four-day sprint. It served as a practical test of how the Green Tourism Hub can operate as a mechanism for experiential learning and university–industry interaction. The experience demonstrated that a relatively short challenge can generate strong student engagement, encourage interdisciplinary learning and provide businesses with alternative perspectives, while also revealing the organizational conditions required for such collaboration to be effective.

The central lesson is that the Green Tourism Hub's innovation potential depends not simply on bringing stakeholders together, but on how their interaction is designed and facilitated. With clearer challenge framing, stronger contextual preparation, appropriate scheduling, continuous business involvement and a common understanding of the Design Sprint methodology, future Business Challenges can become a scalable component of the Hub's activities. In this form, the Green Tourism Hub can contribute not only to sustainability-oriented tourism education but also to a more systematic relationship between universities and the tourism industry, in which real business challenges become opportunities for learning, experimentation and collaborative innovation.



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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Real business challenges increase engagement and ownership

Students were more actively involved when working with an actual tourism enterprise.

02

Context matters

Students needed a deeper understanding of Tskaltubo, visitors and the resort's business needs.

03

Interdisciplinary teams generate diverse ideas but require facilitation

Differences in knowledge and experience affected team dynamics.

04

The Design Sprint methodology needs to be clearly understood

Some participants expected finished solutions rather than rapid experimentation and testing.

05

Continuous industry feedback improves relevance

A single initial interaction may not provide enough information for teams to refine their concepts.

06

Academic scheduling affects participation

Overlapping lectures reduced continuity for some students.

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4.2 ATSU Experience in Business Challenge: Lessons Learned

(Izolda Khasaia, Associated Professor at Akaki Tsereteli State University)

The Business Challenge implemented within the Green Tourism Hub at Akaki Tsereteli State University (ATSU) provided an opportunity to explore practice-based learning, cooperation with a real tourism business, and the application of innovative educational methods. The main objective was to create a learning environment in which students could move beyond theoretical knowledge and apply what they had learned to a real business problem in the tourism sector.

Business Challenge Context and Business Partner

The business partner in the ATSU Business Challenge was Baia's Wine, a family-owned winery located in the village of Obcha, Imereti. Established in 2015, the winery is associated with traditional Imeretian winemaking and the use of local grape varieties. Its tourism offer already included several key wine tourism components, such as wine tasting, winery tours, and accommodation. Therefore, the purpose of the Business Challenge was not to create an entirely new tourism direction, but to develop the existing offer and improve the visitor experience.
The main challenge identified by the business concerned seasonality and the possibility of using green tourism approaches to attract visitors throughout the year. Particular attention was given to presenting local cultural heritage and traditional winemaking more effectively. Students were therefore asked to address the following question:

How can Baia's Wine use green tourism to reduce the impact of seasonality and better share the experience of Imeretian winemaking and local culture with visitors?

The issue was relevant not only to the particular winery but also to small family-owned wine businesses more broadly. Seasonality may affect visitor numbers, income stability, staff workload, and the efficient use of business resources throughout the year. The challenge therefore enabled students to connect the principles of sustainable tourism with the operational needs of a real small business.

Applying the Design Sprint Method

The Business Challenge was implemented using the Design Sprint methodology, which provided a structured process for understanding the problem, generating ideas, developing concepts, and creating prototypes within a limited period. At ATSU, the process was organized as a five-day activity.
On Day 1, students were introduced to the history, activities, and challenges of Baia's Wine. This provided them with a clear understanding of the specific business context rather than approaching the task only from a general perspective of wine tourism.
On Day 2, students visited the vineyards and winery in Obcha. They observed the physical environment, explored the location, and had an opportunity to communicate directly with business representatives. The field visit helped students connect the information provided during the first stage with the actual conditions in which the business operates. It also enabled them to consider the relationship between tourism resources, infrastructure, cultural heritage, and everyday business activities.
On Day 3, the focus shifted to creativity and idea generation. Students discussed possible solutions and developed initial concepts.
Day 4 focused on prototyping, requiring students to transform general ideas into more concrete and presentable solutions.
On Day 5, the groups presented their concepts to an expert jury.
An important feature of the process was that students were not expected to identify a single "correct" answer. Instead, they developed and considered several possible alternatives. This reflected a professional tourism environment, where specialists often have to understand a problem with incomplete information, consider different solutions, and develop a response within a limited timeframe.

Student Participation and Group Work

The Business Challenge involved 21 tourism students, who were divided into five small groups of four to five students. The shared academic background facilitated communication and the use of common tourism-related knowledge. At the same time, the groups developed different perspectives on the challenge, focusing on aspects such as accommodation, entertainment activities, cultural heritage, local experiences, youth involvement, souvenirs, and the use of local resources.

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The experience showed that small groups of four to five students were particularly effective. This format encouraged active participation, more equal distribution of responsibilities, direct communication, and faster decision-making. It also reduced the risk of some students remaining less involved in discussions, which can occur in larger groups.

Although the participants came from the same academic field, the diversity of their ideas demonstrated that different interests, experiences, and creative approaches can contribute to varied solutions. Depending on the specific challenge, future Business Challenges may also involve students from other disciplines, such as business, design, environmental sciences, or digital technologies.

Student Learning Outcomes and Business Value

The Business Challenge created a direct link between academic knowledge and a real business context. Working with an actual tourism enterprise enabled students to understand the complexity of a practical problem and consider the constraints within which a small family business operates.

The process contributed to the development of several transferable skills, including teamwork, communication, critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and decision-making. At the same time, the field visit and direct interaction with the business strengthened students' understanding of the relationship between sustainable tourism principles and local tourism development.

For Baia's Wine, the Business Challenge provided an opportunity to receive a range of creative ideas for developing and diversifying its visitor experience within a short period. The student proposals addressed different aspects of the business, including accommodation, nature-based activities, cultural experiences, local food, transportation, youth engagement, and souvenirs. Taken together, the proposals demonstrated different ways of extending the winery experience beyond wine tasting itself.

Key Considerations For Future Business Challenges

The ATSU experience suggests several considerations for the organization of future Business Challenges.

First, the business problem should be clearly defined while leaving sufficient space for students to develop independent solutions. The challenge should be realistic but also manageable within the available timeframe.

Second, student preparation is essential. Participants should receive sufficient information about the business, destination, target visitors, and existing tourism product before beginning the challenge. The field visit to Baia's Wine demonstrated the particular value of direct observation and communication with the business.

Third, business involvement should continue throughout the process rather than being limited to the initial presentation of the challenge. Intermediate feedback can help students understand whether their ideas correspond to the actual capabilities and needs of the business. At the same time, the educational character of the activity should remain central; students should not be expected to produce a fully developed commercial solution within a short period.

Fourth, group size should be carefully considered. The ATSU experience showed that groups of four to five students supported active participation and a more balanced distribution of responsibility.

Finally, the purpose and assessment criteria of the Design Sprint should be communicated clearly in advance. Students should understand that the objective is to analyse a real problem, develop alternative solutions, create a prototype, and present a reasoned concept rather than produce a complete business strategy.

Overall, the ATSU Business Challenge demonstrated the practical value of combining a real tourism business problem, field-based learning, small-group work, and the Design Sprint methodology. The experience provided students with an opportunity to apply tourism knowledge in a real context while giving the business access to new ideas for developing its tourism offer. These elements provide a useful basis for further Business Challenges within the Green Tourism Hub.

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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Real Business Engagement Enhances Learning Outcomes

Working with a real tourism business significantly strengthened the practice-based character of the learning process. Instead of working with an abstract or hypothetical case, students had to respond to an actual challenge presented by a business partner. This required them to consider the specific characteristics, resources, limitations, and needs of the enterprise.

02

Seasonality is a Multifaceted Challenge

The experience demonstrated that seasonality should not be viewed simply as a problem of low visitor numbers during certain periods. For a small family-owned winery, it can also affect income stability, workload, staffing, and resource utilization. Addressing seasonality therefore requires solutions that diversify the visitor experience and create reasons to visit beyond the traditional peak season.

03

Experience Design is Central to Small Wine Tourism Businesses

The Business Challenge highlighted the importance of creating a broader wine tourism experience. For small wineries, family traditions, local history, food, nature, and interaction with hosts can complement wine tasting, preserve local identity, and support economic development.

04

Design Sprint is Effective for Addressing Practical Problems

The Design Sprint helped students understand problems, generate ideas, and develop prototypes under time constraints. Clear expectations are essential: the goal is to explore solutions and present a concept, not to create a complete business plan.

05

Innovation Must Correspond to Small Business Capacities

An important lesson was balancing creativity with feasibility. Students should consider the financial, human-resource, and infrastructure limitations of small family businesses, ensuring that solutions are practical, sustainable, and suitable for gradual implementation. These aspects can also inform future Business Challenge assessment criteria.

06

University–Business Cooperation Creates Mutual Benefits

The Business Challenge strengthened university–business cooperation. Students gained practical experience and communication skills, while Baia's Wine received creative ideas to develop its tourism offer, fostering collaboration on real-world challenges.

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4.3 Rethinking Strategy: Solving TESAU's Business Challenge

(Tamar Aslanishvili, PhD. Head of Internationalization and Public Affairs Office of Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University)

Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University (TeSaU) implemented its Business Challenge as part of the ENRICHER Hub activities. The initiative aimed to strengthen students' practical competencies, deepen their understanding of a real business environment, and connect academic knowledge with professional practice. The challenge centered on Tsivis Kveli, a local cheese producer associated with quality production and regional identity.

The trainers and moderators prepared the thematic structure, logistics, communication with the company, methodological materials, and student assignments before the activity began. They developed guidance for SWOT analysis, social media research, and the preparation of research walls to support structured group work.

The challenge followed a sequence of research, direct engagement with the business, and presentation of proposed solutions:

- **Introduction and assignment:** Students learned about the ENRICHER hub goals, heard a presentation from the company representative, and took part in a question-and-answer session. They formed three teams—Burgundy, Green, and Yellow—and were asked to prepare a SWOT analysis, conduct desk research, develop a research wall, and present their findings.
- **Team research and ideation:** The groups used brainstorming and collaborative online work to examine the company's situation, prepare analytical materials, and develop possible responses to its challenges.
- **Company visit:** Students visited Tsivis Kveli to observe production, labeling, quality and safety standards, and marketing and distribution practices. They spoke directly with the director about the company's mission, vision, and development plans.
- **Refinement and presentation:** Following the visit, the teams compared their initial assumptions with what they observed, refined their recommendations, and presented their business plans and innovative ideas to company representatives. After consultation with the director, the company representative selected the team whose proposal best addressed its business needs and strategic challenges.
- **Sharing the outcome:** With support from the trainers and moderators, the winning team refined the structure and visual presentation of its work for the ENRICHER hubs meeting.

The initiative involved 21 students from different academic backgrounds and levels of study. This mix of perspectives supported interdisciplinary discussion and teamwork. Students worked in three groups:

- **Burgundy Team;**
- **Green Team;**
- **Yellow Team.**

Each group operated as a small consulting team. Its tasks included researching the company, identifying business challenges, analyzing its market position, and proposing strategic recommendations. Students used brainstorming, sketching, analytical discussions, social media research, and SWOT analysis to inform their decisions.

The trainers provided methodological guidance, consultations, and practical feedback throughout the process. The format placed students in an active problem-solving role and connected learning to a real business case.

Tsivis Kveli, a local cheese-producing company, was the business partner for TeSaU's challenge. Its representatives shared information about the company's processes, production standards, development goals, and current challenges. This allowed students to consider actual business conditions and strategic questions.

The company contributed by:

- Presenting its work and discussing its challenges with students;
- Answering students' questions;
- Hosting the site visit and explaining production and quality standards;
- Reviewing the teams' strategic recommendations; and
- Selecting the winning team after consultation with the director.

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The cooperation provided a practical setting for university–business engagement and gave the company an opportunity to hear students' perspectives.

The challenge combined several related areas of analysis and solution development:

1. SWOT analysis. Teams identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to assess internal and external factors affecting the company.
2. Social media and marketing research. Students examined the company's digital presence, communication approach, and opportunities to improve customer engagement and brand visibility.
3. Research wall development. Teams organized and visualized findings and strategic ideas to support discussion and the presentation of their conclusions.
4. Innovation and business development. Students generated ideas for business growth, customer communication, product promotion, and future development.
5. Practical problem-solving. Teams applied academic knowledge to the company's circumstances and considered whether their proposed solutions were realistic and implementable.

Together, these tasks required analytical, strategic, and creative work. The company visit helped teams test their initial ideas against observed business practice.

The Business Challenge gave students experience in teamwork, applied research, business communication, strategic thinking, and presenting recommendations to a real company. In feedback collected after the training, participants particularly valued the practical activities, group work, and opportunity to address a real business case. Students reported applying planning and analytical skills and strengthening collaboration, communication, problem-solving, and strategic thinking. They also valued combining different perspectives to develop recommendations for the company.

The activity supported the development of:

- Analytical thinking and research skills;
- Teamwork and interdisciplinary collaboration;
- Presentation and communication skills;
- Practical problem-solving; and
- Creativity and innovation.

Students also identified areas for improvement. Some requested more time and resources for particular tasks, while others wanted additional practical examples and business scenarios in future activities. Their feedback provides useful guidance for the design of subsequent challenges.

For TeSaU, the initiative provided a concrete example of practice-oriented education through cooperation with a local business. It strengthened the ENRICHER Hub's role as a place for innovation, collaboration, and applied learning within the university.

The activity contributed to:

- Stronger cooperation with an industry partner;
- Student engagement and motivation;
- Greater visibility of ENRICHER hub activities;
- The integration of practical learning into academic activity; and
- Experience with interactive educational methods.

The experience can inform future business challenges and further cooperation between TeSaU and local enterprises.

For Tsivis Kveli, the challenge created an opportunity to receive fresh perspectives on customer communication, marketing, product promotion, and future business development. It also increased the company's visibility among students and the university community and enabled contact with potential future professionals.

For the ENRICHER hubs project and its partners, TeSaU's activity demonstrated a local application of the Hub approach: students, university staff, and a business partner worked together on an actual company challenge. The winning team's presentation at the ENRICHER hubs meeting shared the students' work and the results of this collaboration with the wider project partnership.

TeSaU's Business Challenge connected 21 students, university trainers, the Green Tourism Hub at TeSaU , and Tsivis Kveli in a structured exercise focused on real business needs. Students researched the company, visited its facilities, developed and presented recommendations, and shared the winning proposal with the wider ENRICHER hubs partnership. The experience strengthened practical skills and provided a basis for continued cooperation between the university and local business.

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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Real business cases strengthen learning

Applying theory to a company's current challenges increased students' motivation and helped them see the relevance of their academic knowledge.

02

Different perspectives improve team proposals

Students benefited from combining their varied backgrounds, ideas, and skills.

03

Direct business contact adds essential context

The site visit and discussions with company representatives helped students understand production and operational realities before finalizing recommendations.

04

Preparation and guidance support effective work

Clear tasks, methodological materials, logistics, and continuous trainer support helped teams progress from research to proposals.

05

Future challenges can build on student feedback

Additional time, resources, and practical examples should be considered when planning similar activities. Students' interest in participating again supports continuing this format.

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4.4 The Business Challenge as a Collaborative Learning Model: Insights from KDU

(Alla Levitskaia, Dr. Habil., Prof. Univ., Comrat State University)

Within the ENRICHER hubs project, Comrat State University (KDU) piloted Design Sprint and Business Challenge models as practice-oriented learning approaches that bring together students, academic staff, and tourism sector representatives to address real business challenges. Unlike the traditional case-study method, students worked not with simulated learning situations, but with real problems faced by existing or emerging tourism initiatives in the region. The Business Challenge was implemented from September to November 2025 and was subsequently integrated into the "Project Management in Tourism" course.

Real Cases as a Basis for Co-Learning

Four real cases representing different areas of tourism development in Gagauzia were selected for the Business Challenge:

- Honey Museum in Cismichioi village;
- development of glamping in Baurci village;
- the museum and tourism potential of Ferapontievca village;
- development of the tourism potential of Comrat municipality.

Thus, the teams worked with different types of tourism products and development contexts, including rural and eco-tourism, cultural heritage, local gastronomy, and destination development.

At the first stage, four student teams were introduced to the principles and tools of the Service Design methodology and assigned their respective business cases. Direct interaction with entrepreneurs and other stakeholders was an important element of the process. Meetings and field visits were organised, along with semi-structured interviews aimed at identifying the actual needs, challenges, and expectations of the partners.

The interviews were structured around ten practical areas: business activities and target groups; key development barriers; customer interaction and promotional channels; available resources and competitive advantages; the influence of the external environment; unmet customer needs; required investments and innovations; potential partnerships; major risks; and opportunities to improve the sustainability and attractiveness of the business for different categories of tourists. This enabled students to approach each case not as an isolated marketing task, but as a complex business challenge.

From Problem Exploration to Prototyping

The Business Challenge was organised as a sequential process consisting of five stages.

- **First stage.** Following the field research, students conducted desk research, analysed trends, competitors, and existing practices, developed a Research Wall, and formulated key insights and How Might We (HMW) questions. Personas and Service Blueprints were used to structure and analyse the customer experience.
- **Second stage.** At the next stage, the teams moved to idea generation and the selection of the most promising solutions. They developed initial sketches and concepts and received preliminary feedback from business representatives.
- **Third stage.** The prototypes were then refined and tested directly with the business partners. At this stage, students transformed their initial ideas into more detailed and practical solutions, taking into account the specific needs, resources, and operational conditions of each business.
- **Fourth stage.** Two to three weeks were allocated for obtaining structured feedback. This made it possible to go beyond a short design sprint and gave students sufficient time to develop a deeper understanding of the specific characteristics and needs of each business.
- **Fifth stage.** The final stage involved the presentation of the proposed solutions. The teams prepared visual materials using Canvas, Customer Journey Maps, Service Blueprints, and other Service Design tools, and then presented their solutions in a five-minute pitch followed by expert assessment and feedback.

The purpose of the process was not only to generate a new idea, but also to explore in greater depth the opportunities for the practical restructuring of existing businesses and the development of new business concepts.

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Impact on the University at the Regional Tourism Ecosystem

The Business Challenge generated outcomes extending beyond the immediate learning process. During its implementation, cooperation agreements were concluded with several organisations, including Gagauz Sofrası and a Local Action Group (LAG), contributing to stronger interaction between the university, tourism businesses, and regional organisations. In addition, the Challenge provided an impetus for the development of new project initiatives. The team prepared and submitted a project proposal to UNDP for the establishment of the Bujak Gourmet gastronomic tourism cluster.

The experience also influenced KDU's educational activities. A decision was made to integrate Service Design tools into the "Project Management in Tourism" course and to consider scaling them to other disciplines, including "Tourism Marketing" and "Destination Management."

At the same time, a new "Sustainable Tourism" course was developed within the ENRICHER hubs project. The course incorporates case studies, group projects, workshops, a Design Sprint simulation, and the development of practical prototypes. Its final project involves the development of a green tourism business concept.

Thus, the KDU experience demonstrates that the Business Challenge can serve both as a co-learning model and as an instrument for interaction between the university and the regional tourism ecosystem. Its value lies not only in the final ideas developed by students, but also in the learning and co-creation process itself: real business challenge - research process - stakeholder engagement - service design - prototyping - testing - expert feedback - presentation of the solution.

This format transforms tourism businesses and regional partners from external recipients of university knowledge into co-creators and active participants in the educational process, while students move from being passive learners to becoming teams working on real challenges related to sustainable tourism development.



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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Real business cases significantly increase student motivation and engagement

Students begin to perceive the assignment as more than an element of academic assessment because their work is reviewed by a real entrepreneur or organisation. This contributed to improving the quality and practical relevance of the proposed solutions.

02

Stakeholders need to be involved at an early stage of the process

Early entrepreneur involvement helped students identify real business needs and develop market-oriented solutions. Semi-structured interviews revealed challenges and customer expectations that desk research alone could not uncover.

03

Important lesson concerns the prototyping process

Rapid prototyping makes ideas visible, testable, and easier to refine through partner feedback. While intensive Design Sprints suit entrepreneurs familiar with their businesses, students need more time to understand the enterprise, explore alternatives, and develop well-founded proposals.

04

Testing solutions with business partners

Entrepreneur feedback helped teams refine concepts and assess their real-world applicability. Visual tools such as Customer Journey Maps, Service Blueprints, and Personas improved analysis and presentations. However, students need further practice in delivering concise, persuasive, and well-structured pitches.

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4.5 Business Challenge at USPEE: Key Lessons Learned

(Ludmila Frumusachi, PhD, Assoc. prof, USPEE „Constantin STERE")

Context and Organisation of the Business Challenge

The Business Challenge – Design Sprint, conducted at the University of European Political and Economic Studies "Constantin Stere" (USPEE), represented an interactive and practice-oriented learning experience for both students and participating partners. The activity was implemented within the framework of the Erasmus+ ENRICHER hubs project and aimed to strengthen the connection between the educational process and the entrepreneurial environment by engaging students in identifying and developing solutions to real-world challenges in the tourism sector.

At the beginning of the activity, the students were divided into four teams, each with its own name and assigned a specific challenge proposed by one of the business partners. Four partners participated in the Business Challenge: Costești Tourist Complex, "Festival" Cultural–Tourist Guesthouse, "Hanul lui Vasile" Recreation Complex, and "Floare de Cireș" S.E. This approach enabled students to move beyond a purely theoretical learning environment and engage with concrete situations and needs within the tourism sector. Direct collaboration with entrepreneurs provided students with an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how tourism businesses operate, the challenges they face, and the importance of developing innovative and sustainable solutions.

An important stage of the activity involved conducting interviews with representatives of the participating enterprises. The interviews were organised in two different formats. Two teams visited the participating companies, allowing students to observe the business environment directly and engage in discussions with company representatives. For the other two teams, business owners were invited to participate in interviews and discussions with the students. Through these interactions, students were able to clarify the challenges identified by the entrepreneurs, explore stakeholder needs, and collect relevant information for the subsequent stages of the Design Sprint.

Research, Idea Generation and Prototyping

Following the identification and clarification of the challenges, the teams proceeded to the research stage. Students reviewed relevant literature and examples of good practice that could support the development of their proposed solutions.

The information collected was organised and analysed through a research wall, which enabled the teams to structure their key findings visually. Subsequently, the teams participated in brainstorming sessions, during which they generated, discussed, and evaluated different ideas for addressing the identified challenges.

A key component of this stage was initial prototyping. The teams developed preliminary sketches and prototypes of their proposed solutions. The use of various materials and visual tools enabled students to transform abstract ideas into tangible concepts that could be analysed, discussed, tested, and further improved.

The prototyping process was highly practical and collaborative. Team members were required to discuss and negotiate different ideas, select the most relevant solutions, and contribute collectively to the development of the final product. Consequently, the activity was designed not only to produce a concrete outcome but also to foster students' communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving competencies.

The subsequent stage involved advanced prototyping and the final presentation of the projects. The teams presented their projects to a jury, explaining the identified problem, the proposed solution, and how the solution could address the needs of the respective business partner.

Following the evaluation of the projects, the jury selected Team Ecovibe as the winner for its project developed for the Costești Tourist Complex. Importantly, the projects were not confined to the academic setting. The solutions developed by the students were also presented to the entrepreneurs involved in the Business Challenge, enabling the partners to directly assess the ideas and proposals generated by the teams.

Impact of the Business Challenge – Design Sprint

The implementation of the Business Challenge – Design Sprint generated impact at three main levels: students, USPEE, and the participating partners.

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1. Impact on Students

One of the most significant outcomes for students was the opportunity to participate in a complete Design Sprint experience. They were able to engage in the different stages of the process, including understanding the challenge, interacting with entrepreneurs, conducting research, generating ideas, developing prototypes, and presenting the final solution.

The activity contributed to the development of students' analytical and creative skills, while also strengthening their teamwork competencies. At the same time, students had the opportunity to apply sustainability principles within the tourism sector and to use contemporary innovation and design thinking methods. The Business Challenge therefore demonstrated that learning can extend beyond the transmission of theoretical knowledge by actively involving students in addressing real-world problems. Such an approach facilitates the development of competencies that can subsequently be transferred to professional contexts.

2. Impact on USPEE "Constantin Stere"

For the university, the Business Challenge provided an opportunity to successfully implement a Design Sprint within an Erasmus+ project. The activity strengthened cooperation between the academic environment and relevant stakeholders and enabled the effective application of knowledge and skills acquired through previous training activities, including the "Sustainable Tourism and Service Design" course.

Another important outcome was the enhancement of the university's visibility in the fields of innovation and sustainability. Organising practice-oriented activities in cooperation with business representatives contributes to strengthening the role of the university as an environment in which academic knowledge is connected with the needs of society and the economy.

Furthermore, the Business Challenge contributed to improving the practical dimension of the educational process. Students were able to apply previously acquired tools and methods in a context closely aligned with professional practice.

3. Impact on Partners

The Business Challenge also generated benefits for the participating partners. These included increased visibility and promotion of their organisations, including within the academic and student community.

The participation of entrepreneurs provided them with an opportunity to contribute actively to the education and professional development of future specialists. At the same time, interaction with students created opportunities to identify talented young people for potential internships or future employment.

Another significant benefit was access to new ideas for sustainable tourism development, as well as to creative and innovative solutions generated by students. From this perspective, university–business cooperation can create mutual benefits: students gain practical experience, while enterprises gain access to new perspectives and ideas developed by young people.

The experience of the Business Challenge – Design Sprint at USPEE "Constantin Stere" demonstrates the value of experiential learning and cooperation between the university, students, and the business community. The activity created an environment in which students were able to apply previously acquired knowledge and methods to address real-world challenges in the tourism sector.

The process integrated research, analysis, creativity, teamwork, interaction with entrepreneurs, and prototyping. At the same time, the application of sustainability principles provided an important dimension aligned with the objectives of the ENRICHER project. The lessons learned from this experience highlight several key conditions for the successful implementation of future Business Challenges: prior preparation of students in the Design Sprint methodology, rigorous time management, effective cooperation with stakeholders, and an appropriate balance between academic guidance and team autonomy.

Overall, the Business Challenge represents a relevant practice-based educational instrument for developing students' competencies and strengthening collaboration between academia and the tourism sector. The activity contributes to the broader objectives of the Erasmus+ ENRICHER hubs project, which aims to enhance competencies in sustainable tourism and service design methods in the target countries of Moldova and Georgia.

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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Prior knowledge of the Design Sprint methodology is essential

Preparatory training helps students understand the main tools and stages, allowing greater focus on the specific challenges proposed by business partners.

02

Effective time management keeps the sprint on track

Clear daily planning and continuous progress monitoring help teams complete tasks within the five-day period and stay focused on objectives.

03

Stakeholder coordination requires clear communication

Early engagement with entrepreneurs helps define challenges, align expectations, organise interviews, and clarify realistic outcomes.

04

Balancing guidance and student autonomy is crucial

Teachers should act as facilitators, guiding students through questions and methodological support while allowing them to develop, justify, and defend their own solutions.

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4.6 Turning Business Challenges into learning opportunities: The MSU ENRICHER hub journey

(Veronica Bulat, Head of Department, Moldova State University)

The MSU ENRICHER Hub experience demonstrates how a university-based innovation hub can bridge academic learning and the real needs of the tourism industry. A key milestone in this journey was the Green Tourism Business Challenge, organised on 24–28 November 2025, which transformed real challenges faced by tourism organisations and businesses into practice-oriented learning experiences for students.

The initiative brought together 37 students and four key tourism stakeholders: ANTRIM, Mingir Winery, Piligrim Travel Agency and Gregory Hotel. Their direct involvement ensured that the learning process was grounded in authentic industry contexts rather than hypothetical case studies.

The four stakeholders represented different dimensions of the tourism ecosystem. ANTRIM contributed a destination-development, tourism-promotion, networking and sustainability perspective; Mingir Winery brought experience related to wine tourism, local products, rural experiences and sustainable destination development; Piligrim Travel Agency contributed knowledge of tour operation, travel services, customer experience and sustainable tourism-product development; and Gregory Hotel provided a hospitality perspective focused on accommodation services, guest experience, hotel operations and sustainable management.

This diversity exposed students to challenges across the tourism value chain and helped them understand sustainability not as an isolated environmental issue, but as a multidimensional business challenge involving competitiveness, customer experience, innovation, resource efficiency, local development and stakeholder cooperation.

The Green Tourism Business Challenge was based on a clear challenge-based learning pathway:

REAL BUSINESS CHALLENGE → STUDENT INVESTIGATION → MENTORING & CO-CREATION → SUSTAINABLE SOLUTION → BUSINESS FEEDBACK → LEARNING & REFLECTION

Instead of receiving predefined academic cases, students worked directly with challenges connected to real tourism organisations. Representatives of the participating stakeholders provided the business context, practical insights and industry perspective, while students explored the problems, generated ideas and developed possible sustainable solutions.

The role of the MSU ENRICHER Hub was therefore to create a structured interface between business and education. The learning process moved through interconnected stages: understanding the business context; identifying and analysing the challenge; applying knowledge acquired through the Green Tourism Hub activities; working collaboratively in teams; generating sustainable and innovative ideas; developing feasible solutions; presenting proposals; and receiving feedback from stakeholders and experts.

The MSU experience showed that effective challenge-based learning requires an ecosystem rather than a traditional teacher–student relationship.



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Stakeholder	Role in the MSU ENRICHER hub	Value created
37 students	Analysed challenges, researched, co-created and presented solutions	Practical experience, creativity, teamwork and entrepreneurial skills
ANTRIM	Provided sectoral and destination-level perspectives	Connection with tourism development and industry needs
Mingir Winery	Brought a wine and rural tourism business perspective	Understanding local products, experiences and sustainability
Piligrim Travel Agency	Contributed travel and tour-operation challenges	Customer-oriented and market-based thinking
Gregory Hotel	Provided hospitality-related challenges and practical insights	Understanding hotel operations, service quality and sustainability
MSU academic staff	Facilitated learning and linked challenges with academic knowledge	Integration of theory, research and practice
ENRICHER hub / project partners	Provided the framework, methodology and international dimension	Innovation, knowledge exchange and transfer of good practices
Experts and mentors	Guided teams and provided professional feedback	Validation, reflection and improvement of proposed solutions

An important outcome of the MSU ENRICHER Hub experience was the transition from a traditional model of knowledge transfer towards knowledge co-creation.
The participating tourism stakeholders were not simply invited as guest speakers. They became learning partners, bringing real challenges and professional experience into the educational process. Similarly, students were no longer only recipients of knowledge; they became active problem-solvers and co-creators of solutions.

The experience involving 37 students and four different tourism stakeholders demonstrated that real industry challenges can serve as powerful educational resources. By connecting students directly with ANTRIM, Mingir Winery, Piligrim Travel Agency and Gregory Hotel, the MSU ENRICHER Hub created a living learning laboratory where academic knowledge, student creativity and industry experience were combined to explore sustainable solutions for tourism.

As part of the project's research and dissemination activities, an article addressing the project's thematic area was published: Buzdugan, Adriana. *Applying Design Thinking in Experiential Learning: Innovative Methods for Competence Development in Green Tourism*. In: International Scientific-Practical Conference "Science. Education. Culture", dedicated to the 34th anniversary of Comrat State University, 11 February 2025, Comrat. Comrat: Comrat State University, 2025, Vol. 1, pp. 105–114. ISBN 978-9975-83-333-2 (PDF). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15176683

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KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

01

Real-World Challenges Enhance Learning

Real-world tourism challenges strengthen students' practical, creative and entrepreneurial skills by connecting academic learning with real business needs.

02

University–Industry Collaboration

Strong partnerships between universities and industry bridge academic knowledge and business practice, ensuring relevant and experience-based learning.

03

Stakeholder Engagement Supports Sustainability

Diverse tourism stakeholders encourage integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development.

04

Co-Creation Drives Innovative Solutions

Mentoring, teamwork and co-creation foster innovative, practical and feasible solutions.

05

Innovation Hubs Strengthen Partnerships

University innovation hubs strengthen knowledge exchange, employability and industry partnerships.

06

A Replicable Model for Sustainable Tourism Education

Challenge-based learning provides a replicable model for sustainable tourism education and university–business cooperation.

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5. Strengthening University–Industry Collaboration

5.1 Role of Partnerships and Networks

(Irena Melua, Vice President for Internationalization, Caucasus University)

Sustainable tourism development requires cooperation across sectors and institutions. Universities, tourism businesses, public authorities, professional organisations, civil society and local communities all contribute different forms of knowledge, expertise and resources. Universities can provide research capacity, education, innovation methodologies and access to students; businesses bring practical knowledge of markets, customers and operational challenges; public institutions contribute policy and destination-development perspectives; while professional associations, NGOs and communities help ensure that new approaches respond to environmental, social and local development needs.

For higher education institutions, such partnerships are particularly important because they connect academic knowledge with changing labour-market and industry needs. This principle is at the core of the ENRICHER hubs project, which aims to address skills and competence gaps between higher education and the labour market while strengthening collaboration between universities and tourism businesses in the development of new green tourism service concepts. The project brings together nine higher education institutions from Finland, Austria, Italy, Georgia and Moldova and has established six Green Tourism Hubs in Georgia and Moldova.

The ENRICHER hubs experience demonstrates that effective university–industry collaboration should be understood not as a collection of isolated bilateral contacts, but as a network of relationships operating at local, national and international levels. The international consortium provides a platform for knowledge exchange and capacity building, while national and regional stakeholder networks make it possible to adapt this knowledge to local tourism realities. In this way, the project combines international expertise with local engagement and creates conditions for continuous exchange between education, business and society.



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An important feature of this approach has been the diversity of stakeholder engagement activities implemented by the Georgian and Moldovan partner universities. Engagement has not been limited to one-to-one meetings. Partners have organised stakeholder seminars, trainings, workshops, Green Tourism Business Challenges, dissemination conferences and other activities involving tourism enterprises, public-sector organisations, educators, entrepreneurs, students and civil-society actors. The six Green Tourism Hubs themselves were established as learning and collaboration environments where students, educators and regional stakeholders can work together around sustainable tourism development and innovation.

At Caucasus University, stakeholder engagement has similarly developed through several complementary formats. These have included targeted meetings with tourism-sector professionals, alumni working in tourism, educators, environmental organisations and public institutions; practical training and workshops; the Green Tourism Business Challenge; stakeholder and dissemination events; and participation in wider professional tourism platforms. The Caucasus School of Tourism academic team, for example, participated in Turisteri 2025 – the Tourism Summit in Batumi, extending project engagement beyond university-based events and connecting ENRICHER activities with the broader tourism community. The CU project platform reflects this range of activities, alongside trainings, stakeholder seminars, the Green Tourism Challenge and dissemination events.

Participation in wider sector events is particularly valuable because universities cannot build effective industry networks only by inviting stakeholders onto campus. Tourism summits, professional conferences and sector platforms allow academic institutions to enter existing professional communities, communicate project results to a broader audience, identify emerging industry needs and establish new connections with businesses and decision-makers. Such interaction also strengthens the visibility of the Green Tourism Hubs and supports their positioning as active contributors to the wider tourism ecosystem rather than as stand-alone project structures.

Larger international events have complemented these local and national activities. The first ENRICHER hubs dissemination conference, "Shaping the Future of Sustainable Tourism," hosted by Caucasus University in Tbilisi, brought together academic leaders, tourism professionals, entrepreneurs, public-sector representatives and international experts and combined discussion of sustainable tourism trends with European practices, project results and the future role of the Green Tourism Hubs. The second dissemination conference, "Green Tourism Innovation in Action", hosted by Moldova State University in Chișinău in May 2026, continued this process by bringing together universities, tourism professionals, entrepreneurs and international partners around business challenges, sustainable tourism practices and synergies between international initiatives.

These experiences demonstrate that stakeholder engagement is most effective when it is continuous and diversified. Bilateral meetings allow partners to explore specific areas of cooperation; trainings and workshops support competence development; Business Challenges enable students and businesses to work jointly on real industry problems; and conferences and tourism-sector events expand the network and facilitate broader knowledge exchange. Together, these formats help move cooperation from information sharing toward co-creation.

The Business Challenges implemented within ENRICHER hubs illustrate this transition particularly well. Rather than positioning industry representatives only as guest speakers or recipients of university knowledge, businesses provided real cases and practical challenges around which students, academics and external stakeholders could collaborate. Service design and design-thinking methods were used to investigate problems, generate ideas, prototype solutions and receive industry feedback. The project has subsequently consolidated these experiences into practical guidelines that can be used by higher education institutions to integrate real tourism business challenges into education. This model also supports the broader role of Green Tourism Hubs as intermediary platforms connecting education, business and innovation - a role already highlighted by the Caucasus University Business Challenge experience in this report.

At the same time, university–industry engagement is only one dimension of the partnership network created by ENRICHER hubs. An equally important project legacy is the development of stronger institutional partnerships among the participating universities themselves.

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Over the course of the project, the nine institutions have collaborated on research, staff capacity building, curriculum development, innovative teaching methodologies, Business Challenges, Green Tourism Hubs, stakeholder activities and international dissemination. The consortium has maintained cooperation through regular management meetings, shared digital working environments and face-to-face project gatherings.

Such cooperation creates institutional trust and a much deeper understanding of partners' expertise and capacities than can normally be achieved through a single agreement or occasional academic contact. This provides a strong basis for partnerships that continue beyond the formal project period. Cooperation developed through ENRICHER hubs can therefore evolve into student and staff mobility, joint teaching, research, professional training, joint events and other forms of institutional collaboration. From this perspective, one of the most valuable outputs of an international capacity-building project is not only the activities delivered during its implementation, but also the institutional network that remains afterwards.

This network can also provide a foundation for new international initiatives. The ENRICHER hubs project addresses sustainable development, digitalisation, changing skills needs and the development of new green tourism services - areas that will remain important for the tourism sector beyond the current project period. Building on the expertise, partnerships and methodologies developed through ENRICHER hubs, consortium members can jointly initiate new Erasmus+ Capacity Building and other international projects in related areas. These may address topics such as sustainable and regenerative tourism, climate resilience, digital transformation, tourism entrepreneurship and innovation, destination development, new skills for the tourism workforce and further strengthening of university–industry cooperation.

Developing follow-up projects has several advantages. Partners already understand one another's institutional contexts, have experience of working together and can identify complementary expertise more easily. New initiatives can therefore move beyond establishing relationships and focus more quickly on developing and scaling new solutions. They can also widen the existing network by involving additional universities, tourism businesses, municipalities, destination-management organisations, professional associations and civil-society partners.

The ENRICHER hubs project itself already promotes links with related initiatives and identifies synergies with other projects as a means of extending knowledge exchange and impact.

Ultimately, the sustainability of the Green Tourism Hubs will depend less on maintaining a physical space than on maintaining an active network around them. A Hub becomes sustainable when businesses continue to bring real challenges, universities integrate them into education and research, students contribute new ideas, public and civil-society actors share expertise, and institutional partners continue to develop joint activities. ENRICHER hubs has already created a substantial foundation for this model: six Green Tourism Hubs and six new courses have been established, while hundreds of students, educators and external stakeholders have participated in courses, local training and Business Challenge activities.

The next step is therefore to convert these project-based connections into long-term relationships. Strengthening university–industry collaboration should not be measured only by the number of partnerships established, but by the quality, continuity and outcomes of those relationships. Regular stakeholder engagement, active participation in professional tourism networks, institutional cooperation among consortium universities and the joint development of new projects can ensure that the knowledge, competences and partnerships created through ENRICHER hubs continue to generate value long after the formal project period ends.

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5.2 Green Tourism Hubs as Innovation Ecosystems

(Victoria Trofimov, Full Professor, Vice-rector for International Relations and Project Specialist in Economics, USPEE „Constantin STERE")

The development of Green Tourism Innovation Ecosystems represents an important dimension of the long-term sustainability and exploitation of the ENRICHER hubs project results. Beyond the establishment of individual Green Tourism Hubs, the project creates the foundations for a collaborative environment in which universities, local authorities, tourism businesses, communities, students, researchers and other stakeholders can jointly contribute to the development of sustainable and innovative tourism solutions.

A Green Tourism Innovation Ecosystem can be understood as a collaborative network in which knowledge, expertise, resources and innovative ideas are exchanged among different stakeholders with the common objective of improving the environmental, social and economic sustainability of tourism. Within such an ecosystem, universities have an important role as knowledge and innovation providers. Businesses contribute with practical experience and market-oriented perspectives. Local communities provide knowledge of local resources and needs. Students contribute with their creativity, research capacity and new approaches to problem-solving. Public authorities and destination management organisations can further facilitate cooperation by creating an enabling institutional environment and supporting the implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives.

The six Green Tourism Hubs established through the ENRICHER hubs project provide an important institutional basis for this ecosystem approach. Their future exploitation should therefore move beyond the organisation of individual training activities and events and progressively develop into permanent platforms for cooperation, innovation and knowledge exchange. Each Hub can act as a regional focal point for green tourism, connecting academic expertise with the needs of local businesses and communities and facilitating the transformation of identified tourism challenges into innovative and applicable solutions.

An important element of future exploitation is the development of inter-Hub cooperation. The six Green Tourism Hubs have the potential to form a transnational network through which good practices, teaching materials, research results, business challenges, student projects and innovative tourism solutions can be exchanged.



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Regular online meetings, thematic workshops, joint student activities, peer-learning sessions and collaborative research initiatives could support this process. Such cooperation would allow the Hubs to learn from different regional contexts while identifying common challenges related to sustainability, digitalisation, destination management, circular economy, biodiversity protection, local entrepreneurship and community participation.

The creation of a Green Tourism Hub Network could also provide a mechanism for the continued exploitation of ENRICHER hubs project results after the formal completion of the project. The network could facilitate the dissemination of successful methodologies, including service design approaches, design thinking, business challenges, applied research activities and stakeholder-based learning. In this context, the Hubs would not operate as isolated university structures but as interconnected regional innovation platforms contributing to the development of a broader European green tourism ecosystem.

A real value of the Green Tourism Innovation Ecosystem is bringing students into direct contact with real-life business and societal challenges. Instead of limiting learning to theoretical knowledge, students can work together with companies and other stakeholders to investigate problems, generate ideas, develop prototypes and propose solutions that have practical relevance. This approach is particularly relevant for the ENRICHER Green Tourism Hubs because it creates a direct connection between education, innovation and regional development. Activities such as business challenges, stakeholder visits, interviews, desk research, identification of sustainability challenges, ideation, prototyping and final pitching can be further institutionalised within the Hubs and transformed into recurring innovation activities.

Such a model can also contribute to the development of local entrepreneurship initiatives. Green tourism challenges can be transformed into opportunities for students, young entrepreneurs and existing tourism businesses to develop new products and services.

Examples may include sustainable accommodation concepts, local food experiences, eco-tourism activities, circular tourism services, nature-based experiences, digital visitor solutions or community-based tourism products. The Green Tourism Hubs can provide mentoring, methodological support, networking opportunities and access to academic expertise for these initiatives.

Another important dimension is the development of community-based tourism models. Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved exclusively through the actions of tourism businesses or educational institutions. Local communities should be actively involved in identifying tourism resources, defining development priorities and designing experiences that reflect local identity and social needs. The Hubs can facilitate participatory processes in which community members, entrepreneurs, students and public authorities jointly identify opportunities for sustainable tourism development. This can strengthen local ownership and increase the social and economic benefits generated by tourism.

The Green Tourism Innovation Ecosystems should also encourage green innovation partnerships between academia and the private sector. Universities can support businesses through applied research, student projects, professional training and access to specialised knowledge, while businesses can provide real-world cases, data, expertise and opportunities for experimentation. This two-way relationship can create a continuous cycle of knowledge exchange: regional challenges generate research and educational activities, while the knowledge and solutions generated through these activities can subsequently be applied within the tourism sector.

The long-term development of the ecosystems should therefore be based on several interconnected principles: collaboration, knowledge exchange, student engagement, applied research, entrepreneurship, community participation and sustainability.

The objective is not simply to maintain the physical or organisational existence of the Green Tourism Hubs, but to ensure that they become active regional mechanisms for generating and implementing green tourism innovation.

The exploitation of the ENRICHER hubs project results should consequently focus on creating a lasting culture of cooperation between academia, business and communities. The experience of the six Hubs in Georgia and Moldova, combined with reference practices of the partners from the European Union, can provide a foundation for developing a scalable approach to green tourism innovation. By connecting education with applied research, entrepreneurship and real regional challenges, the Hubs can continue to contribute to the transformation of tourism towards more sustainable, inclusive and innovative development models after the completion of the ENRICHER hubs project.

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5.3 Stakeholder Trainings: Case Examples

(Alla Levitskaia, Dr. Habil., Prof. Univ., Comrat State University, Tamar Aslanishvili, Telavi State University)

Introduction and Conceptual Background

Recent research increasingly considers sustainable tourism development as a collaborative process requiring continuous interaction among universities, businesses, public authorities and local communities. Dredge, Ford and Whitford (2011) emphasise the importance of collaboration across organisational and administrative boundaries and demonstrate how training can support more integrated approaches to local tourism management. Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins (2013) further conceptualise sustainable tourism through a multi-stakeholder involvement framework, demonstrating that effective implementation requires not only stakeholder participation but also the systematic management of relationships, implementation capacity and continuous monitoring.

The role of universities in this process is particularly relevant. Rinaldi, Cavicchi and Robinson (2022) show that universities can move beyond their traditional educational role and become active co-creators of sustainable tourism destinations, connecting academic knowledge with businesses, communities and territorial development. Dickinger and Kolomoyets (2024) demonstrate that tourism Living Labs provide environments in which businesses, residents, destination organisations and other actors jointly create and test solutions. Most directly related to stakeholder training, Corona and Melis (2025) examine whether a training course can become a platform for value co-creation in rural tourism.

The experience of Comrat State University (KDU) within the ENRICHER hubs project demonstrated that stakeholder training can serve a significantly broader function than traditional professional development. It became an instrument for building sustainable interaction between the university, tourism businesses, public authorities, development organisations, and local communities. The *Scientific and Practical Centre "Ecotourism Hub",* established at KDU, is positioned as a platform integrating education, research, consultancy, and project activities in the field of tourism development.

Participant Profile and Approach to Target Group Formation

One of the distinctive features of the KDU approach was the involvement of diverse groups of stakeholders in training activities. ENRICHER activities involved students from the programmes "Hotel, Tourism and Leisure", "Business Administration", "Agroecology", and "Public Administration", as well as academic staff and researchers, representatives of tourism businesses and SMEs, local public authorities, NGOs, and Local Action Groups (LAGs) from Gagauzia and Southern Moldova.
Such a diverse composition of participants was important from the perspective of the training methodology itself. Sustainable tourism development cannot be considered exclusively as a task for tourism enterprises. It is closely connected with local production, agriculture, cultural heritage, public administration, entrepreneurship, and territorial development. Therefore, local producers, craftspeople, wineries, LAGs, and the Tourism & Wine Office were gradually involved in the Hub's activities, while cooperation within the university was strengthened among the faculties of economics, agricultural technology, law, and national culture.

From Traditional Training to the Co-Creation of Solutions

An important outcome of ENRICHER for KDU was the transition from the model of "the university trains business" towards a co-creation model, in which the university and stakeholders learn and develop solutions together. The main methods applied included challenge-based, project-based, and problem-based learning, Design Sprints, real business cases in a Living Lab format, and digital educational tools.

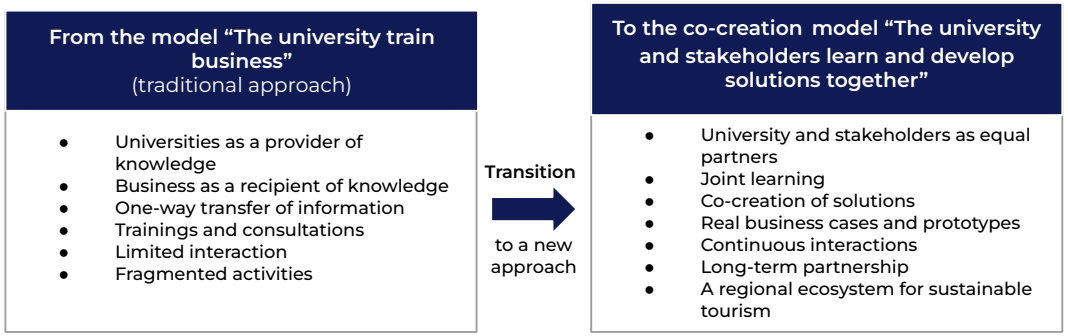


Figure 1. ***From Traditional Training to the Co-Creation of Solutions***

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Interaction with the business sector included joint training and consultations, the development of real-life cases, Design Sprint-based competitions, and the development of business ideas. The partnership model also extended to SMEs, NGOs, and public authorities, while the Tourism & Wine Office of Gagauzia became one of the key institutional partners (MoU).

Practical activities were structured around specific challenges faced by enterprises and territories. Participants analysed the existing situation, tourist needs and customer experience, developed new products and services, discussed opportunities for sustainable development, and tested proposed solutions. During the Business Challenge, four real tourism cases were piloted, while interaction with entrepreneurs included consultations, mentoring, and evaluation of the projects developed.

This experience demonstrated that a short intensive format is particularly effective for existing entrepreneurs, as they already possess in-depth knowledge of their own businesses and can quickly move from learning a new tool to applying it in practice. Students, by contrast, require more time to research an enterprise, understand its customers, analyse alternatives, and develop prototypes. This became one of the important methodological lessons for KDU: the training format should be differentiated according to the profile and prior experience of participants.

Competences Developed through Stakeholder Training

The training content was designed not only to provide knowledge about sustainable tourism, but primarily to develop applied competences. Among the main outcomes identified by KDU were skills in business case analysis and problem solving, Service Design and Customer Journey Mapping, sustainable tourism planning and destination development, teamwork, communication and pitching, as well as research and analytical skills.

As a result, participants acquired tools that could be directly applied in their professional activities. For tourism enterprises, these primarily included customer experience analysis and the development of new tourism services; for public authorities and development organisations, destination planning and stakeholder engagement; and for students, the opportunity to work with real clients and present practically applicable solutions.

The combination of training with a real case, co-development and feedback proved to be the most productive model. In the future, this approach is expected to be used in short-term programmes for the tourism sector delivered through the KDU Centre for Continuing Education. The project already envisages the development of a short online course, while the introduction of paid training programmes is being considered as one of the mechanisms for ensuring long-term sustainability.

Stakeholder Feedback and Directions for Future Cooperation

Feedback and consultations with stakeholders demonstrated the importance of maintaining partnerships after the completion of individual training activities and the project itself. Therefore, KDU's future model is focused not on organising isolated events, but on building a permanent network around the Ecotourism Hub. Priority areas for further development include cooperation with the Tourism & Wine Office, SMEs, NGOs, and local public authorities; the development of joint research and project initiatives; and the expansion of national and international partnerships in the fields of mobility, research, and tourism innovation.

For the practical implementation of this approach, a continuous stakeholder engagement cycle is considered particularly promising: needs assessment - development of a training programme - training - joint work on a real case - consultation and prototyping - feedback - follow-up support and new joint initiatives. Within this model, training becomes the starting point for longer-term cooperation rather than its final outcome.
Project materials also demonstrate the potential for further transfer of results to the business sector through training, workshops, and consultations for SMEs and other tourism stakeholders, business participation in Design Sprints, mentoring and pilot projects, as well as the implementation of developed recommendations and prototypes within tourism enterprises and local communities.

From Training Individual Participants to Building a Regional Ecosystem

The main conclusion drawn from the KDU experience is that the sustainability of stakeholder training is determined not by the number of activities conducted, but by whether continued interaction among participants emerges after the training.

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Therefore, the next task of the Ecotourism Hub is to transform the established network of contacts into a sustainable community of practitioners, experts, academic staff, and students.Thus, the KDU experience demonstrates a gradual evolution of the stakeholder engagement model:

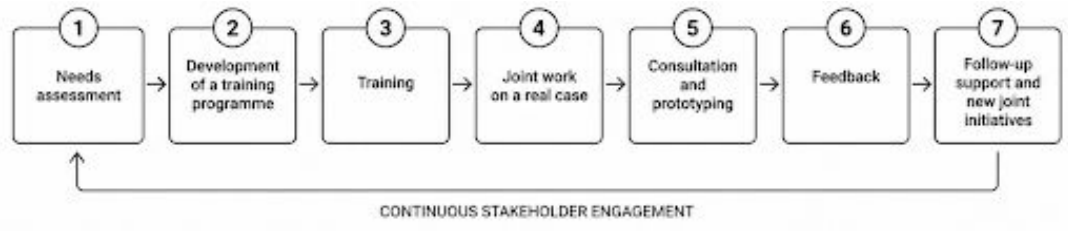


Figure 2. ***Stakeholder engagement model***

Promising formats include regular short-term courses, joint thematic workshops, Business Challenges, consultations for tourism enterprises, work on real territorial development projects, and further development of partnerships with the Tourism & Wine Office, LAGs, local public authorities, SMEs, and NGOs. The Hub is also expected to develop as an inter-university innovation and research platform, expanding its activities in the areas of sustainable tourism, Service Design, digital tools, and cultural heritage.

This model makes it possible to sustain the results of ENRICHER beyond the project period while simultaneously strengthening the university's role as a regional platform for education, research, innovation, and dialogue with the tourism sector.

Within the ENRICHER hubs project, Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University (TeSaU) applied the collaborative approach through two series of workshops for tourism industry representatives and public institutions working in tourism. Held in April and May 2026, the workshops addressed sustainability, tourism impacts, destination management and governance, the Business Model Canvas, and changing consumer behaviour. Through practical cases and interactive discussion, participants connected these themes with their professional experience. The workshops also created an opportunity for TeSaU to strengthen its relationship with tourism stakeholders and identify interest in continued training and cooperation.

Participant Profile and Approach to Target Group Formation

TeSaU's stakeholder workshops brought together external participants from the tourism industry and public institutions working in tourism. The first series was held on 16–23 April 2026, and a second series was organised for another group of stakeholders on 27 April–1 May 2026. Delivering the programme to two groups enabled more tourism stakeholders to take part in the training and discussions.

This participant profile reflected the shared responsibilities involved in sustainable tourism development. Tourism businesses contribute practical knowledge of services, customers and market conditions, while public institutions bring perspectives on destination management and governance. The workshops gave participants an opportunity to exchange professional experiences and consider these connected issues together. TeSaU's published accounts do not specify participants' organisations or numbers, so this profile describes the groups identified in those accounts without assigning them more specific roles.

From Traditional Training to the Co-Creation of Solutions

The programme covered five interconnected topics:

- Sustainability in the Tourism Industry;
- Sustainability and Tourism Impacts;
- Destination Management and Destination Governance;
- Business Model Canvas (BMC); and
- Trends and Changes in Consumer Behaviour in Tourism.

Participants examined sustainability principles and tourism impacts, considered approaches to managing destinations, explored the Business Model Canvas as a planning tool, and discussed how changing consumer behaviour affects tourism businesses.

The interactive format allowed participants to bring their own professional experience into the sessions. Discussions of current sector challenges connected the training topics with the circumstances in which stakeholders work.

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Competences Developed through Stakeholder Training

The workshops sought to strengthen participants' understanding of sustainable tourism and provide tools relevant to their professional activities. In particular, the programme addressed the ability to:

- Recognise sustainability considerations and assess tourism impacts;
- Understand the roles of destination management and governance;
- Use the Business Model Canvas to structure and examine a business idea;
- Consider changes in consumer behaviour when planning tourism services; and
- Discuss sector challenges and possible responses with stakeholders from different professional backgrounds.

These topics linked the development of individual knowledge with wider questions of tourism business development and destination planning.

Stakeholder Feedback and Directions for Future Cooperation

According to TeSaU's reports on both workshop series, participants engaged actively in discussions and shared examples from their professional experience. They valued the relevance of the topics and the practical character of the training. Participants also expressed interest in future workshops and emphasised the importance of continuing activities that support professional development and cooperation between the university and the tourism sector.

This feedback indicates a clear opportunity for TeSaU's ENRICHER Hub to maintain contact with participating stakeholders. Future workshops could build on the questions raised during the sessions and provide further opportunities for knowledge exchange and discussion of practical tourism challenges.

From Training Individual Participants to Building a Regional Ecosystem

TeSaU's experience shows how its Green TourismHub can bring academic knowledge into direct dialogue with tourism professionals and public institutions.

Delivering two workshop series broadened participation and established a common basis for discussion on sustainability, destination governance, business planning and changing visitor needs.

The next step is to build on the interest expressed by participants through continued thematic workshops and cooperation with tourism stakeholders. In this way, the training can contribute both to professional capacity development and to a lasting relationship between TeSaU and the sector it serves.

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5.4 Stakeholder Engagement Activities: Case Examples

(Camelia Rusu, Principal Specialist, Office for International Project Management, Moldova State University)

Effective communication with stakeholders is one of the essential elements of success for any European funded project, and in the case of sustainable tourism, this engagement takes on even greater importance. Tourist destinations function as the result of collaboration between numerous actors: public authorities, tourism industry operators, local communities, educational institutions, and environmental organisations whose interests and priorities must be aligned for the shift towards more sustainable practices to be genuine and lasting.

Within ENRICHER hubs project, Work Package 6 (WP6) Dissemination, aimed not only to disseminate results to interested audiences, but also to build real bridges of dialogue with all those involved in, or affected by, the project's activities.

How Stakeholder Engagement Generally Works

For a project to have a real impact, it is not enough for stakeholders to simply be informed, they need to be engaged gradually, through a process that increases in intensity as the relationship develops. In practice, this engagement typically follows three simple steps:

- **Informing** - stakeholders are made aware of the project's existence, objectives, and activities, through accessible channels such as the project website, social media.
- **Consulting** - their opinions are sought, through surveys, feedback forms, or direct discussions, in order to understand their needs and expectations.
- **Active involvement** - stakeholders are invited to take part directly in activities (events, workshops, conferences), where they can contribute ideas, form partnerships, and influence the future direction of the project.

This progression from simple information-sharing to active involvement formed the basis of the communication strategy adopted within the project, as detailed below.

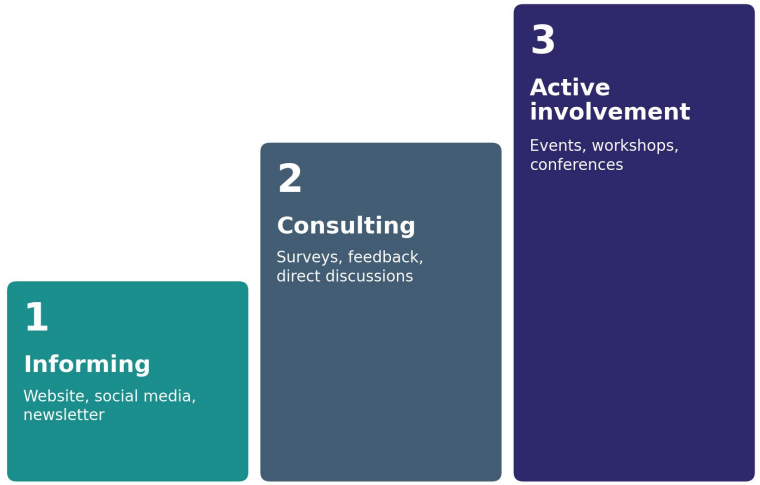


Figure 1. ***Engagement intensity*** *(Image generated by AI)*

A Marketing Perspective

The engagement strategy combined elements of institutional marketing with techniques specific to European project communication, starting with a clear segmentation of the audience into primary and secondary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders — those directly involved in, or most affected by, the project's activities and results — included university faculty and administration, academic researchers and educators, student populations across all partner institutions, tourism operators and entrepreneurs, industry associations and organisations, and policy makers and government representatives. Secondary stakeholders — audiences with a broader or more indirect interest in the project — included the international academic community, media and communication professionals, and the general public interested in sustainable tourism.

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Messages were tailored to each of these segments, and a unified visual identity (logo, presentation template, graphic materials) was used consistently across all channels to ensure recognition and coherence of the project's brand. Each dissemination activity was designed not merely as an isolated event, but as a touchpoint within a broader journey of relationship-building with stakeholders — from awareness to active involvement, and subsequently to supporting the sustainability of the project's results.

Case Study: Dissemination Conference "Green Tourism Innovation in Action" in Chisinau, Moldova

A concrete example of good practice is the dissemination conference "Green Tourism Innovation in Action," organised by Moldova State University on 19 May 2026, in Chișinău. This was the second dissemination conference held within the ENRICHER hubs project following the first edition organised by Caucasus University in Tbilisi in September 2025.

The conference brought together a deliberately broad mix of stakeholders in a single event: representatives of all nine consortium universities, institutional leadership, entrepreneurs and industry practitioners connected to the project's Business Challenges, as well as partners from other EU-funded initiatives working on related sustainability topics.

Rather than functioning as a one-way presentation of results, the event was designed as a genuine engagement opportunity for each of these groups: universities shared and compared lessons learned across countries, entrepreneurs were given direct speaking time (both in person and online) to present their own experience rather than being discussed as passive beneficiaries, and partner projects were invited to explore synergies with ENRICHER hubs, turning the conference into a networking opportunity beyond the project's own consortium.

This approach demonstrated that a dissemination conference can serve several stakeholder-engagement purposes at once — reporting to partners, giving a public platform to entrepreneurs, and building bridges with related projects — while the hybrid, in-person and online format helped widen participation for stakeholders who could not travel to Chișinău.

Methods of Communication with Stakeholders

In addition to the dissemination event, communication with stakeholders was carried out through a mix of complementary channels:

- Direct communication: personalised emails, individual invitations, and bilateral meetings with key partners and local decision-makers;
- Digital channels: the project website, regularly updated with results and news, along with social media (LinkedIn, Facebook) for the rapid dissemination of information and increased visibility;
- Periodic newsletter, sent to registered stakeholders, summarising the project's progress;
- Press releases and relations with local media, to extend the audience beyond the project's direct network;
- The network of associated partners, used as an information multiplier towards the communities and organisations they represent.

This combination of channels allowed for both "push"-type communication (one-way information sharing, via newsletters and social media) and "pull"/interactive communication (via events and direct meetings), ensuring a balanced level of engagement tailored to the various types of stakeholders involved.

Read more about the Key lessons learned from organizing an international project event in the blog post: [Key lessons learned from organising an international project event - eSignals Pro]

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5.5 Sustainability in Erasmus+ projects

(Alessio Tei, Associate Professor in Applied Economics at University of Geneva)

For an educational project, sustainability should not be reduced to keeping every pilot activity unchanged after the grant ends. Moreover, it should differentiate exploitation from the project results from sustainability of the developed action. A stronger definition of sustainability is therefore useful to assure that functions continue, adapt to changing needs and keep producing benefits for learners and institutions over time. This makes adaptation a sign of maturity rather than a departure from the original project.

Looking at Erasmus project websites and different implementation agencies guidelines it is clear that implementation research also shows that continuation of project activities depends on more than initial effectiveness and it should be considered something different from the achievement of project goals. Organisational fit, leadership, resources, staff capability, stakeholder support and the capacity to modify an intervention all influence whether it becomes routine. Considering general definitions, a sustainability plan should convert a successful project into named responsibilities, recurring processes, decision rules and evidence that managers can use after external funding .

In education, scale is similarly broader than participant numbers. It involves depth of change in teaching and learning, spread to new users, sustained use, a shift in ownership from project teams to institutions, and evolution as conditions change. A Hub can therefore be considered sustainable only when it becomes part of normal university practice and remains responsive to regional stakeholders. Such definition of sustainability plan goes beyond the environmental performance perspective but it is more linked to the wider definition of social and economic long lasting activity.

Moreover, higher education institutions are complex systems: strategy, curricula, research, campus operations, outreach and reporting can advance at different speeds. International evidence indicates that sustainability initiatives are more durable when they are integrated across these elements rather than remaining compartmentalised in a single project or unit. The practical implication is that each Erasmus+ needs links to formal curricula, staff workloads, partnership processes, institutional budgeting and performance review .

Education for sustainable development also requires transformation of learning environments, stronger educator capacity, youth engagement and local action. In the case of ENRICHER hubs, for instance Green Tourism Hubs support for a blended model: formal course use provides predictable demand, while community projects, industry cases and open events preserve experimentation and local relevance. Experiential and interdisciplinary settings are particularly important for developing sustainability competences because they combine knowledge with collaboration, self-responsibility and action in real contexts.

Looking in general at the Erasmus+ experience, since 2014 more than 30,000 projects have been funded in the different schemes, CBHE are some of the few in which the need of providing a sustainability plan is always highlighted as part of the long term objective of the framework: most recent calls have all highlighted how sustainability is not optional but it has to be embedded in expected impact - and often as part of the award criteria -, with proposals required to explain long-term structural effects and the tools used to measure them.

Because of this, current EU funding treats sustainability as part of impact and value for money rather than an end-of-project communication exercise. The current CBHE award framework assigns up to 20 points to sustainability, impact and dissemination. It asks how results will be exploited, replicated and measured during and after funding; how tangible impact will be monitored; and how financial and institutional continuity, local ownership and private-sector engagement will be secured. This logic has been stable across the decade: the 2016 and 2020 Programme Guides already required post-project measurement, open access, appropriate resources, accreditation or mainstreaming, and long-term use. A strong plan separates three related functions. Dissemination makes results visible to defined audiences. Exploitation induces adoption, reuse, transfer, scaling or policy influence. Sustainability maintains the organisational capability and resources needed for those uses. Combining them is efficient, but treating website traffic as proof of sustainability is not. The real test is whether learners, staff, institutions and systems continue to use the result and obtain benefits after the grant.

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Quite often, sustainability plans are linked to project impact monitoring systems. Monitoring works best through a compact results chain linked to a sustainability dashboard. Each result can receive - for instance - a traffic-light status against its baseline, target, evidence and next decision, with one named owner and an escalation rule. Reliable sources include academic and accreditation registers, learning-management systems, staff and finance records, equipment logs, web analytics, signed agreements, meeting minutes, surveys, interviews, graduate or employer tracer studies and policy-document reviews. Quantitative indicators should be paired with qualitative evidence explaining why adoption occurred, why it stalled and what changed for users. In case of CBHE, sustainability plan approaches are adapted to the framework concept: thus the practical model is a consortium dashboard supported by institutional annexes. In certain cases, a sustainability committee can review the s.c. sustainability dashboard through the project duration, and at agreed post-grant checkpoints. Partners should retain an evidence file, obtain management sign-off on recurrent commitments and use independent review or peer benchmarking for major claims. In these cases, data-protection rules and proportionate collection matter, especially for learner information. Whenever the plan is developed as part of the learning exercise during the project duration - thus without monitoring tools through the project - such plan should also define trigger thresholds: if enrolment, budget coverage or platform use falls below target, responsibility, deadline and corrective action are already known. This turns sustainability from an aspiration into a manageable institutional process. It is relevant to say that most sustainability plans are considered not public outputs of the project. Only few initiatives (e.g., MORIN, CATALYST, Zero C, NICOPA, DECIDE, INNOCENS, COOPERA, Edu4ALL, MARE and INTERADIS) published a complete version of their respective plans. Thus there is limited capability to compare approaches and/or evaluate long term outcomes.

Nevertheless, as also in the case of ENRICHER hubs, main KPIs and assessment could be considered common and following the concept highlighted above even though applications vary quite substantially.

In essence, while sustainability plans vary substantially from project to project, their key common root is quite similar and to be seen as complementary in respect with traditional dissemination and exploitation plans.

Despite the relevance also for assuring long lasting impact of the projects, it is relevant to notice that no centralized monitoring tool is currently present for CBHE initiatives while such tool is present for other Horizon frameworks, such as the TRIMMIS observatory and the JRC actions that aim at assuring the expected outcomes and strategies have been kept and results are measurable even beyond the project duration. Such missing elements can be easily explained by the different nature of Erasmus+ and Horizon research intensive initiatives, nevertheless a centralized sustainability dashboard could be considered a potential future upgrade to current EU monitoring tools.

The ENRICHER hubs Sustainability Plan can be found on the project website.

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6. Insights from EU partners

6.1 Research, Development, Innovation and Learning (RDIL) in Sustainable Tourism Education

(Annika Konttinen, Senior Lecturer, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences)

Research, Development, Innovation and Learning (RDIL) integrates real-world development challenges into higher education. Rather than learning only through lectures and theoretical assignments, students develop skills and competencies by working on authentic cases or challenges provided by businesses, projects, destinations, or other stakeholders. In sustainable tourism education, RDIL helps bridge the gap between academic learning and the complex realities of the tourism industry.

At its core, RDIL is a goal-oriented process that develops students' research, development, and innovation skills through practical problem-solving. Students are encouraged to investigate challenges, analyse information, collaborate with stakeholders, generate innovative solutions, and reflect on their learning. This approach supports both employability and sustainability competencies, which are increasingly important in the tourism sector.

RDIL can be implemented through several student roles. Students may act as interns, project assistants, or research assistants, supporting activities such as stakeholder engagement, communication, event organisation, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Another option is to integrate students into research and development projects through bachelor's or master's theses that contribute directly to project objectives. A third and highly flexible model is to involve students in innovation teams, where course-based student groups work on development tasks commissioned by external partners.

A practical example comes from the ENRICHER hubs project at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (HHUAS), where RDIL was integrated into a bachelor-level tourism course, Trends and Innovations in Travel and Transportation. Fifteen students worked on a real business challenge related to the sustainability of ENRICHER innovation hubs. Their task was to develop ideas for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the hubs, particularly focusing on future activities and financing after project funding ends.

The project required students to conduct benchmarking, stakeholder mapping, teamwork, and innovation development, while producing presentations to the commissioner (ENRICHER hubs project manager), executive summaries, and learning reflections.

The experience demonstrated several benefits of RDIL in sustainable tourism education. Students reported that working with a real commissioner made the assignment more meaningful and motivating than traditional course tasks. They developed skills in research, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, stakeholder collaboration, and innovation. Importantly, students gained a deeper understanding of sustainable tourism, business models, and innovation ecosystems while learning to operate in complex, multi-stakeholder environments that reflect real professional practice.

The ENRICHER hubs case also highlighted some challenges that educators should consider. Students initially found concepts such as innovation ecosystems and hub development difficult to grasp, and many had to move beyond their usual comfort zones. In addition, real-life projects often operate within limited timelines and involve uncertainty. However, these challenges are also valuable learning opportunities, helping students build professional confidence as well as resilience and adaptability, vital skills for the future of work (World Economic Forum 2025).

For sustainable tourism educators, RDIL offers an effective way to connect teaching, research, and industry engagement. By embedding authentic sustainability challenges into courses, educators can create learning experiences that are both academically rigorous and highly relevant to the world of work. At the same time, external partners benefit from fresh ideas and innovative perspectives generated by student teams. As demonstrated by the ENRICHER hubs experience, RDIL can help prepare future tourism professionals to address sustainability challenges through collaboration, innovation, and evidence-based decision-making.

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Key insights and lessons learnt:

- RDIL combines research, development, innovation, and learning in real-life projects, enabling students to develop future skills and professional competencies while contributing to genuine sustainability challenges faced by tourism organisations and destinations. In the process, students become familiar with different service design tools and methods.
- Commission / challenge: A real-world development task provided by an external stakeholder, such as a company, project, destination management organisation, or public sector actor. The challenge should align with the course objectives and content, enabling students to apply their knowledge and skills to authentic industry needs.
- Commissioner: An external stakeholder who provides a real-world challenge for students to solve. In the ENRICHER case, the project manager served as the commissioner by presenting the development challenge, reviewing the students' proposed solutions, and giving feedback on the final outputs.

Key Benefits of RDIL in Sustainable Tourism Education

For students

- Provides experience with authentic industry challenges and real commissioners.
- Develops research, problem-solving, and innovation skills through hands-on learning.
- Strengthens teamwork, communication, and stakeholder collaboration competencies.
- Enhances critical thinking and the ability to work in complex, uncertain environments.
- Improves employability by exposing students to professional practices and networks.
- Encourages reflection and learning beyond students' comfort zones.
- Increases motivation and engagement by giving assignments a meaningful real-world purpose.

For educators

- Connects teaching with research, development, and industry collaboration.
- Creates opportunities to integrate current sustainability challenges into learning.
- Supports competence-based and experiential learning approaches.
- Enables students to produce outputs that have value beyond the classroom.

For tourism industry partners and communities

- Brings fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to sustainability challenges.
- Provides access to student expertise, research, and development work.
- Strengthens collaboration between higher education institutions and stakeholders.
- Contributes to the long-term development and resilience of sustainable tourism initiatives.

Read more about the HHUAS experience in the blog post:
http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe20260923127934

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6.2 Managing Hubs - Experiences from Ulysseus European University

(Clio Flego, Innovation Hub Manager Ulysseus European University, Fellow Researcher, University of Genoa)

Ulysseus European University is an alliance of eight diverse European higher education institutions working together to create a shared European University through an innovation ecosystem, connecting education, research, innovation and service to society. The alliance was established following the European Commission's 2020 Erasmus+ European Universities call, bringing together different types of institutions —comprehensive universities, a technical university and universities of applied sciences— and connecting them with regional and local authorities, businesses, civil society organisations and other associated partners. This diversity is central to the Ulysseus model: the alliance aims to combine complementary expertise and regional strengths in order to contribute to the development of cities and regions while addressing wider European and global challenges. Its long-term vision to establish by 2030 is to create an internationally attractive, open-to-the-world, person-centred and entrepreneurial European University.

A distinctive element of this model is the Ulysseus Innovation Hub approach: organises collaboration around an innovation ecosystem and concrete research and development challenges. Eight thematically focused Innovation Hubs constitute joint structures—one associated with each partner university—and function as focal points for collaboration across the alliance and its associated partners, creating a link between the European-level alliance and regional innovation ecosystems.

The Hubs are therefore designed to co-create education, research, knowledge-transfer and innovation activities, including the development of joint, challenge-driven and transdisciplinary academic programmes; fostering collaborative research and knowledge transfer across sectors; supporting entrepreneurship among students and staff; promoting citizen engagement and European values; and providing access to scientific and technological resources. In this sense, the Hubs act as meeting points between universities, industry, public authorities, citizens and other stakeholders.



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The Hub activities reflect this multi-stakeholder and co-creation approach though the organisation of thematic and summer schools, workshops, internal calls for innovation and research projects, partnerships, entrepreneurship and design-thinking programmes, Open Classes, Living Labs, citizen-engagement activities, mobility programmes, international cooperation and talent-attraction initiatives. The approach is intended to create a continuous cycle in which challenges are identified with stakeholders, expertise and resources are brought together across universities, and ideas can progress from education and research towards experimentation, entrepreneurship and societal application.

From a management perspective, the Innovation Hubs serve as an organisational bridge between the different levels of a European university alliance and the wider international and regional ecosystems in which its partners operate. In this context, internationalisation becomes a transversal dimension of institutional development, creating opportunities for students, researchers, professors, administrative staff and local stakeholders to engage with international peers and contribute to collaborative European initiatives. The role of the Hub manager is therefore inherently multidimensional: it involves connecting people and expertise across different professional communities, facilitating communication between institutional levels, identifying opportunities for cooperation, and creating the conditions for stakeholders with different backgrounds, responsibilities and expectations to work together.

A key challenge is to connect these different communities not only with each other, but also with the wider international environment. Students need opportunities to engage with peers and learning experiences across Europe; researchers and professors need to access international networks, expertise and joint research opportunities; administrative staff need to develop new forms of cooperation and support structures; and local stakeholders need to be connected to European and international knowledge, networks and innovation ecosystems. The Innovation Hubs provide a framework through which these different groups can meet, exchange perspectives and develop activities with partners beyond their immediate institutional or geographical context.

At the same time, managing an Innovation Hub means managing diversity. The Ulysseus alliance brings together institutions with different organisational cultures, academic profiles, regional contexts and traditions of cooperation. The objective is therefore to create a collaborative experience in which these differences become a source of reciprocal learning and innovation. Developing a common European approach requires bringing together the views and perspectives of all participating institutions and stakeholders, negotiating shared objectives and developing ways of working that respect local specificities while creating a common sense of purpose. In this respect, the Hub manager acts as a facilitator and connector.

The management of a Hub is consequently a continuous process of building relationships, facilitating dialogue and creating connections between the local, institutional, European and international levels. Its success depends not only on the structures and activities established, but also on the capacity to create a sense of shared ownership among the people involved. Through this collaborative approach, the Innovation Hubs can contribute to a European university model in which internationalisation is embedded in everyday institutional practice and where the diversity of students, academics, researchers, professionals and stakeholders is actively used to co-create new forms of education, research, innovation and engagement with society.

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6.3 TYSTO Tyrolean Sustainable Tourism Observatory

(Birgit Bosio, Prof. Dr., MCI The Entrepreneurial school)

Measuring sustainability in the tourism and leisure industry has a long history already. The first sustainability indicators for the industry date back to the 1970s (Hall et al. 2015; Miller & Twining-Ward 2005). UN Tourism (formerly (UN)WTO) published their first handbook for the development of indicators for the sustainable development for tourism destinations in 2004, and were an important player in the establishment of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) who elaborated the destination criteria (GSTC, 2019). On a European level, the European Commission (2016) developed the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) with 43 indicators. Many other publications followed by diverse institutions and researchers. However, demand-side indicators such as arrivals or overnights for a long time served, and still do today, as the measurement for success in the industry (Font et al. 2021; Modica et al. 2018).

So while international tourism continued its growth paradigm and reported record years for a long time, Butler already developed the destination life cycle in 1980, stating that a destination cannot grow indefinitely. Many authors thus realized that sustainability needs to be a key component of tourism success (Buhalis 2000; Cronjé & Plessis 2020; Font et al. 2021; Ritchie & Crouch 2003). Or as Custódio Santos et al. 2021, p. 24 phrased it: ""Competitiveness without sustainability is an illusion."

Already in 2004, UN Tourism launched the so called International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO). Their aim was to establish a data-driven decision making for more sustainable practices in the tourism industry. By providing concrete issue areas and indicators, this should help destinations to develop an integrated approach, empower their stakeholder network, build up a monitoring system and exchange information and knowledge in the network itself. Early pilot regions were mainly situated in China, while after the initial setup, other destinations joined from Europe, the Americas and Indonesia (World Leisure Organization, 2020).

Tyrol as one of the most tourism-intense alpine tourism regions started to develop tourism concepts as early as 1972, where one of the main statements was "quality over quantity". Also the 1982 pointed out that the main aim of tourism should be the improvement of local quality of life. In 2021, a broader participatory approach also put a strong focus on sustainability. Through this, the Tyrolean Tourism Act was amended in 2022. Since then, all 34 tourism associations have to appoint a sustainability coordinator and publish an annual sustainability report from 2023 onwards. This reporting is based on the "Sustainability Check", and the elaborated "Framework Concept for a Multidimensional Sustainability Strategy (2023). Based on all this preliminary work, Tyrol decided to join INSTO in 2024 with an application, which got accepted in the same year. The Tyrolean Sustainable Tourism Observatory (TYSTO) is a cooperation of MCI Tourism, the Tyrolean Regional Government and the Federation of Tyrolean Tourism Associations. Based on the yearly "Sustainability Check" of the 34 tourism associations, the Federation of the Tyrolean Tourism Associations published a Tyrol-wide Sustainability Report, which then serves as the basis for the TYSTO Annual Progress Report, to be delivered to UN Tourism for feedback. The reporting includes 11 obligatory key issue areas. Through joining the INSTO network, the former Tyrolean monitoring system had to be expanded to three new areas, namely accessibility, water and wastewater management. Tyrol further includes two extra areas with regionality and culture. The first TYSTO report is currently under development and will be published by the end of 2026. Please find all the latest updates on www.tysto.tirol .

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7. Recommendations for Future Development and Conclusion

This report began with a simple observation: sustainable tourism will not be built by environmental measures or new tourism products alone. It also depends on how challenges are understood, how future professionals are educated, and how universities and businesses work together. The experience of nine universities from Finland, Austria, Italy, Georgia and Moldova supports this view.

The situation on the ground shows both the opportunity and the gap. Georgia welcomed 6.85 million international visitor trips in 2025, and its protected areas received record numbers of visitors, yet infrastructure, skills and sustainable practices have not kept pace. Moldova has remarkable wine tourism, cultural heritage and authentic hospitality, but it faces weak eco-infrastructure, strong seasonality and a limited international brand. In both countries the potential is clear. The challenge is turning it into consistent practice.

ENRICHER hubs tested one way of closing this gap. Students learned Service Design and Design Sprints and then worked on real problems in partnership with real businesses. They interviewed owners, visited sites, built prototypes and presented their ideas to business representatives. The partner universities reached the same conclusion: real cases increase motivation, teamwork and a sense of ownership, but the results depend on thorough preparation, a solid understanding of the business context and early, continuous involvement of the businesses. In this model, businesses became learning partners and students became co-creators, which marks a shift from knowledge transfer to knowledge co-creation.

These activities led to lasting results: six Green Tourism Hubs, six new courses, stakeholder trainings and two dissemination conferences, in Tbilisi and Chișinău. The report's central finding concerns what comes next. The Hubs will last through active networks of universities, businesses and public bodies. Their future depends on the quality and continuity of these relationships, on regular stakeholder engagement that moves from information to active involvement, and on a simple sustainability plan with clear indicators and responsible owners.

The European partners added valuable models, including learning through RDI projects, the management of diverse innovation hubs, and the annual reporting of the Tyrolean Sustainable Tourism Observatory.

Taken together, the chapters point in four directions: from green potential towards consistent practice, from knowledge exchange towards co-creation, from visitor volume towards visitor value, and from isolated measures towards connected ecosystems.

Sustainable tourism grows stronger when education, research, business practice and stakeholder knowledge are connected instead of kept apart. The Hubs established within this project are a first step towards that goal.

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Use of AI:

AI tools (for example Copilot and Claude).were used to structure the text.