

WINTER SCHOOL

INVEST Winter School 2022 Summarization

On November 21-28, 2022, the Winter School entitled POST CODE - POTential of Sustainable Tourism in COMMunity DEVELOPMENT took place in Slovakia under the auspices of INVEST - European university alliance and European Union. It was a joint winter school originally intended for BSc, MSc, and Ph.D. students from all disciplines. The course was implemented in a hybrid form with an online preliminary phase (1th November – 20th November) and an on-site phase (21st November – 28th November) organized by the Slovak University of Agriculture (SUA) in cooperation with all partner universities represented by Karelia University of Applied Sciences (Karelia UAS), University of Agribusiness and Rural Development (UARD), University of Thessaly (UTH) and Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences (VHL). The interest of the students based on the completed application form was great, in the end, 24 students represented by each university were selected and completed this course.

During the preliminary phase, video lectures were subsequently accessible to students and provided by experts from several countries. The main goal was to introduce students to the issue of sustainable tourism from several directions that have an impact on it. They could gradually make notes from the professional content, which they could later use during the on-site phase to finalize their concept of sustainable tourism. For this stage, students were divided into initial teams. Each team needed to find, analyze and prepare a presentation about one example of sustainable tourism from their country (the country of the university or their home country in case these two differed). The reason was to start working together as a group and to familiarize themselves with the issue that has been the main topic of the winter school while preparing the presentation and gathering essential information. These presentations were a part of the social event on the first day evening, to strengthen the intercultural exchange. Also, the students in groups prepared and presented some facts about the country of their studies or their home country. The students from different universities were kindly asked to bring some food samples representing their home countries e.g. candy, biscuits, cheese, dried fruit/dried food, canned food, etc. to become familiar with the different cultures and try some traditional food. The point of this social event was to get to know each other, learn something new and interesting and also have fun.

A big advantage was that after times when travel options were limited due to the pandemic and students often had to be educated online, the main phase of this course was conducted in a fully face-to-face format. During the full-fledged 8 days, the students had the opportunity to get to know not only the space in which they had to focus and then develop two of the four set tasks, but also the main center of the region and the regional city of Nitra, where SUA is located. During the course, multidisciplinary multinational groups worked on creating a concept of sustainable tourism in specific conditions tackled from three angles related to sustainability – environmental, economic, and socio-cultural. For the first four days, they were accommodated in the Mojmirovce mansion situated in the village to get to know it and its surroundings in more detail, as well as individual actors in the region represented by the municipality officials, representatives of the local action group and other stakeholders. Familiarization of students throughout the process of the multi-stakeholder partnership was an important part of understanding the importance of cooperation of all interested entities which also helped participants of the course to be able to recognize and apply different aspects of sustainability and sustainable process in tourism and related fields. Additionally, the groups were exposed to expert lectures presenting knowledge, examples, and experiences from various fields related to sustainable tourism given by lecturers from Slovakia and partner countries. The expert lectures they received during their stay in Mojmirovce were focused on topics such as Sustainable Rural Tourism and Agri-tourism, Environmental Impact Assessment of Rural Development on the Example of Tourism Facilities, Community Engagement, and Stakeholders Consultations, Impact of Local NGO on the Landscape, Trade as an Effective Tool for the Economic Development of the Region and Tourism, Framing Sustainable Tourism in Social Innovations and Social Entrepreneurship Context or Bioeconomy in Everyday Life. Students actively participated in lectures, methodological activities, and practical workshops with experts and stakeholders to analyze the initial situation of the given location and then propose and present their innovative solutions. The work on a real case allowed them to work with primary data and in cooperation with local stakeholders also gave them the possibility to experience Slovak mentality and culture.

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A combination of the methodological and practical parts, the students visited the next day agricultural cooperative in Mojmírovce, which except for primary plant and animal productions is also focused on the cultivation and harvesting of grapes and subsequently the production of various types of wine. A professional lecture connected with a tour of the vineyards and facilities of the agricultural cooperative Mojmírovce was presented by the wine manager and wine technologist. They introduced the history of the cooperative to the students, as well as the methods and techniques of grape processing, supply chains, customer services, and many others.

Wednesday morning, the students had the opportunity to visit the regional museum, where they met the mayor of the village, who, together with the director of the museum, clarified the history of the village and the region and answered their questions, which were focused on several aspects and relationships that have an impact on the sustainable tourism topic. Later, they moved to the community center, where the director of the local action group representing the micro-region provided them with information about the projects and the cooperation of all the actors who operate in the region and influence positively its development and its inhabitants.

Subsequently, students of winter school absolved several intense methodological exercises in the afternoon and realized the form of workshops within the groups they were divided into (2x economic group, 2x environmental group, 2x socio-cultural group). As the focus of the methodological workshops was the development of the student's soft skills, the task of each group was to create several goals related to the development of sustainable tourism in the Mojmírovce area, based on the initial analyzes carried out in the first phase of the Winter School. Consequently, the individual groups presented their goals to all the students, who tried their hand at the role of constructive critics. Based on the discussion, each group had to narrow down the given goals to a maximum of two goals according to their importance, measurability, and reality. These main objectives formed the basis of their concept.

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On Thursday, the individual groups presented the first results of their assignments in front of experts, not only from the theoretical point of view but also from practice, based on which they received feedback, further recommendations, or guidelines on how to proceed with the proposed innovative solutions for the development of sustainability of a specific location. Later, they attended another methodological lecture regarding the creation of a logical matrix, which is necessary for the whole process of planning the projects in the territory, since it is one of the outputs that they had to submit after the winter school was finished and that will be evaluated by the designated experts. After lunch, they moved to Nitra, where the second phase of the Winter School began. The first point of the program was one additional lecture aimed at customers/tourists with disabilities followed by a visit to the castle and surroundings of Nitra with a professional explanation, after which the students had free time.

On Friday morning, the students attended a tour of the university campus and a rotating lecture session at the Agrobiotech research center, where they were welcomed and familiarized with the functions and facilities of the center by the director of Abrobiotech. The students were especially excited by the tour of the laboratories that the research center uses for various purposes. They were also happy to use the opportunity to participate in the production of non-alcoholic beer, which they will get after the fermentation process during the final presentation of their results on Monday. In addition, the students completed the tasting of fruit juices with several natural plant additives, which are currently part of the ongoing research. The last workshop activity before lunch was a short demonstration and then sensory testing of the developed edible packaging, during which they also received a professional explanation. After lunch, the last lecture on Landscape Planning was presented, after which they were accessed to work in the facilities of the university on their assignments according to the division into individual groups. During that time, individual coaches from SUA and Karelia were available with their guidance. In the evening, the students went together to the Christmas town in the pedestrian zone, where they discussed together and gently absorbed the approaching Christmas spirit. The students completed their presentations on the concept of sustainable tourism on Saturday, while they were allowed to organize their productive time independently so that they subsequently had the opportunity to get to know Nitra and its surroundings in more detail.

On Sunday, November 27, the organizers of the winter school took the students by bus on a trip to Podkylava, where they met the owner of an agricultural-tourist operation, who showed them his perspective on how even a small company can be sustainable and how it is possible to combine ecological agriculture, accommodation for tourists and production using the resources that the local area offers. He showed them the possibilities where the region can directly and positively influence people who come here from almost all over the world. At the same time, he explained to them how to use the potential that the surrounding nature offers and how to do the same things that facilities and businesses of a similar type offer, but in a different, more interesting, innovative, ecological way, still based on traditions and family values.

During the visit to the facility, the students were provided with valuable information, which they could then use in the preparation of the concept of sustainable tourism, which was one of the outputs that they were to present in groups to a jury of evaluators at the end of the winter school. The excursion was on the premises of the newly built chocolate factory, which was preceded by a short demonstration of the processing and drying of fruit and the production of fruit juices. At the same time, they had the opportunity to taste individual products. Subsequently, they moved next door to a small brewery, where they learned more about the production of beer and the process of its preparation. All these activities were supplemented with the idea of how to offer the people of the region the services of this factory, so that they would be available for them and they could use them for their interests, especially in the processing of fruit and the production of unique beer according to customer requirements.

After the excursion, the participants of the winter school moved to the agro-tourism accommodation facility. After lunch prepared exclusively from local sources, they had the opportunity to see for themselves how even a medium-sized accommodation facility can offer a variety of services and attractions for tourists from different corners of the world who are looking for a type of rest and recreation based on the greening and sustainability of the surrounding environment's resources.

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On Monday, 28th of November, the awarding ceremony of INVEST Winter school took place at the SuPerUni CoWORK center of the SUA. The students presented their final assignments on the topic of Innovative solutions for sustainable tourism within 3 thematic groups they were divided into. Their presentations were assessed by an expert jury composed of representatives of several partner universities. Students' group outputs were very innovative and creatively presented, focused mostly on environmental, economic, or socio-cultural aspects of sustainable tourism located in Mojmírovce. Subsequently, they were presented with certificates for their participation, which were awarded to them by prof. Bandlerová as deputy of the rector of the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. On this day the strategic meeting about the future of INVEST European Alliance was taking place in SUA, the project partners from all involved countries and also new possible partners such as universities such as Milano and Reims came to see and support the participating students. In the end, the project coordinator, doc. Pašová and the facilitator of the Winter School, Ing. Cifranič made a speech about their excitement about the student's progress and outputs experienced throughout the Winter school.

The last actions are still ongoing in the final phase of the winter school, associated with the recording of completed assignments and tasks as well as their evaluation. One of the conditions that are expected from students as well as other involved actors is feedback, from which the views and evaluations of all who participated in this course and who contributed to its implementation will be significantly clearer. The opinions and reports from the students so far generally agree with the views of the SUA organizers. The overall preparation, setup, implementation, and achievement of the required level of outputs, knowledge, and skills as well as the fulfillment of the course objectives was at a very good level. We would like to thank the students for being a part of a wonderful winter school, which we believe none of us will easily forget. We spent a nice, but also full-fledged, educational and working week together, full of new acquaintances, knowledge, experiences, new ideas, and friendships. We are sure that what students take away with them will help them in the future, both in their personal and career life.

Written by Ing. Michal Cifranič, PhD.