



SKILLS 4CMT

Country Report (Ireland)

Sector-Specific Skills Development in
Coastal and Maritime Tourism: IO1 Occupational Profiles

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Executive Summary

This report analyses the knowledge, skills and competencies required for the development and delivery of specific Coastal and Marine Tourism (CMT) curricula. A review of existing curricula in the area of CMT was carried out followed by primary research with micro-entrepreneurs and destination managers in coastal regions in Ireland. This research is part of an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Skills4CMT Project.

The aim of the research is to identify and understand the existing skills gap in this specific sector and to collaborate with other partner universities and institutes in Finland, the Netherlands, Latvia and Estonia to develop a quality educational curriculum aimed at individuals working in the area of CMT operations and management.

Desk research was initially conducted which analysed current existing national tourism and marine strategies in Ireland and the existing curricula in Ireland with elements/modules related to CMT. Following this, interviews and questionnaires were conducted with local micro-entrepreneurs and destination managers to evaluate the opinions of employees and employers working in the area of CMT with regards to the skills, knowledge and competencies required to work in this area.

The results of this analysis detailed a need for business operations and management skills to ensure the efficient running of organisations. A particular emphasis was placed on the need for marketing skills and more specifically digital marketing skills due to both the impacts of Covid-19 and also the changing marketplace. A need for customer care and communications skills were also identified. The area of sustainability was identified as requiring a key focus in any future curriculum covering all areas of economic, environmental and social sustainability for both the micro-entrepreneur and the destination manager. The importance of employees and employers having local cultural and historical knowledge of their area was also highlighted. To ensure a complete destination wide tourism strategy is applied, the involvement, collaboration and co-operation of all stakeholders is essential.

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Research Aim

European Commission highlights that limited awareness of the specific skill needs and a requirement for professional skills hamper coastal and maritime tourism (CMT) competitiveness at the EU level. The European Strategy for More Growth and Jobs in Coastal and Maritime Tourism states that education should be used to match the supply of skills with the demand of the labour market. Thus, the EU member states are invited to take into consideration challenges related to sector-specific skills development facing the EU tourism industry for taking advantage of new opportunities. In particular, the European Commission underlines the importance of closing skills gaps and promoting the development of the skills required for tourism professionals.

The research aim is to increase understanding of the needed sector-specific skills and qualifications in coastal and maritime tourism to tackle skills gaps and mismatches. In this project, occupational profiles corresponding the EQF levels 6 and 7 are designed with a complete description of the knowledge, skills and competencies using the ESCO tool to increase understanding of the needed sector-specific skills and qualifications in coastal and maritime tourism. These occupational profiles are a significant tool in curriculum and course design: they are translated into a new curriculum and courses in the following phase of the project.

The key occupations chosen for the development of occupational profiles are:

- 1) resort manager responsible for destination planning and development,
- 2) micro entrepreneur offering blue experiences, and
- 3) sustainability manager.

The development of the occupational profiles was executed with the following activities:

A1: Desk research was performed to identify occupational profiles with sector-specific professional knowledge, skills, competencies and qualifications in each country.

A2: New data was gathered related to the selected occupational profiles and sector-specific key skills in coastal and maritime tourism in each country. A sectoral reference group was established in each country consisting of experts of the selected occupations. In each country, a focus group meeting was organised with the reference group. In addition, six key experts working with coastal and maritime tourism were interviewed in each country.

A3: Occupational profiles were developed with a complete description and provisioning of the knowledge, skills and competencies. First, each country developed their own profiles and later these were summarized in order to develop joint occupational profiles.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

A number of research methods were used to collate the data for this project. Firstly, desk research was conducted which reviewed current existing courses and modules relating to Coastal and Marine Tourism (CMT) which are delivered through further and higher educational institutions and universities in Ireland. Also, a review of national and regional tourism strategies and policies took place to identify if a need for enhanced skills, knowledge and competencies in the area of CMT is identified. This enabled identification of these skills, knowledge and competencies that are required in delivery of a specific programme focused on CMT.

Secondly, interviews and two small focus groups were carried out with 8 micro-entrepreneurs/small business owners and 5 destination managers. The micro-entrepreneurs/small business owners were based along the coastal region of the Northeast of Ireland, mainly the tourist area of Carlingford and the destination managers were from a number of destinations in Ireland. In addition to this, a questionnaire was designed and sent to 15 small business owners in the region to gather more data and a further 3 destination managers responded to a questionnaire designed specifically for them. The focus of the business owners interviews and questionnaire related to their view of the skills, knowledge and competencies required to operate a small business in a CMT area and also their current situation following the impact of Covid-19, their future strategies for their businesses and their view of the role of sustainability in their business and tourism destination. The interviews, focus groups and questionnaires which were designed for the destination managers took a broader and more regional approach to the current and future situation within key coastal areas in Ireland and addressed the challenges and sustainable approaches to CMT in their areas.

The contributors to this were from the following range of businesses:

- Cafe/Restaurant Owners

- Walking Tour Company Entrepreneur
- Adventure Centre Owner
- Boating Tour Owner
- Greenway Bike Hire Owner/Escape Rooms
- Hotel Owner
- Food Tourism Officer
- Destination Manager – Ireland’s Ancient East
- Programme/Experience Manager – Failte Ireland
- Destination Food Series Co-ordinator
- Tourism Area Officers

The issue of sustainability was captured within the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires held with the micro entrepreneurs and the destination managers. As there is no person employed in the tourism regions identified above as a ‘Sustainability Manager’, it was not possible to interview such person.

All results are summarised in the report to follow.

Desk Research Results

The findings of the desk research have identified that although Coastal and Marine Tourism is seen as a very important aspect of the overall tourism product in Ireland, there is very little specific focus on the delivery of educational modules in Coastal and Marine Tourism. Many tourism degree programmes and courses have a focus on the development of key management skills and competencies through the delivery of marketing, finance, entrepreneurial and management modules. The tourism programmes delivered in Ireland have quite a broad tourism focus, with no specific modules identified in the area of coastal and marine tourism but some have modules in tourism sustainability. Some Level 5 programmes delivered focus on adventure tourism, with a more specific focus on key marine adventure activities and instructing along with the activities in the wider adventure tourism spectrum. One degree in Marine Science which is delivered focuses on development of knowledge of the broader marine environment and not on marine tourism. It is evident that there is a definite need for more focused education for managers and staff working in the delivery of products and services in Coastal and Marine Tourism.

Interview and Focus Group Discussion Results

Ireland, as an all-island country, has an extensive coastline and coastal regions which are very rich in natural and cultural resources. These resources, when combined, are significant contributors to Ireland's economy and are also essential to the livelihoods of many people living in the coastal regions of Ireland.

Many of the micro-entrepreneurs interviewed and surveyed are based along the North-East coast of Ireland, from an area called 'Carlingford' on the Cooley Peninsula to Annagassan, in Co. Louth, which is located north of the capital, Dublin. The vikings invaded Ireland in the 9th Century and apparently occupied Carlingford Lough. The name Carlingford is Scandinavian translating to 'Fjord of Carlinn'. Co. Louth is the smallest county in Ireland and has over 70km of coastline with several Blue Flag beaches offering many activities and water sports. This coastline is also home to a large port which handles cargo of all shapes and sizes.

All respondents are very much aware of the beauty and uniqueness of the coastal area where they are located and the majority of them wish to incorporate the health and wellbeing associated with coastal and marine tourism destinations in the provision of their products and services as they believe they can capture competitive advantage through the inclusion of this.

Many of the businesses surveyed have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, some suffering more than others and had been forced to completely close their businesses due to restrictions. Others, more fortunate, have been able to amend or diversify their products and services and remain open for business to some extent. However, most are very optimistic for when all restrictions are lifted that the tourism business in the area will significantly improve in the coming months, initially with domestic tourism and looking to the future when many more international tourists visit again. Coupled with

this optimism, is the recent launch of a new regional tourism development plan titled 'Ancient Destination Experience Development Plan', which encompasses the total area of this coastline detailed. A key focus of this plan is the development of experiences where the natural, historic and cultural elements of the regional tourism product can be encompassed into providing a unique tourism experience to the visitor.

A) Micro-Entrepreneurs

The following is a summary of the interview and questionnaire results from the micro-entrepreneurs.

One of the key challenges that face the development and future planning for micro-entrepreneurs is *knowing what business supports are available* for them in both the setting up of their business and also in the operational and managerial running of the business once it is setup. Many micro-entrepreneurs mentioned this point and a lack of direction being given to them with this data. It was highlighted that the reason for this is possibly a *lack of actual destination management* in a particular region in the area. This area has had a disjointed approach to destination management in the past, but hopefully looking to the future there seems to be a more formal, planned strategy. This disjointed approach was highlighted also with regards to other aspects. Another challenge identified at this level was *lack of access to flexible education*. Many courses and modules are available to new and small business owners but require physical attendance at a specified time for a particular duration, therefore a need for a more flexible and adaptable approach in the delivery of further education to these entrepreneurs was identified in the form of online/hybrid delivery, but also with some face-to-face delivery in order to allow networking of business owners also.

In line with the point raised above, lack of business acumen was identified as a challenge to micro-entrepreneurs. Some of them felt that they did not have the correct business management skills, e.g., accounting, marketing, digital marketing and business planning to assist their business in progression and expansion. It is important to note that emphasis was placed on the need to deliver them with specific focus to tourism-based industries and not just delivery within a generic business management course. Many of the market segments for these businesses has changed since Covid-19, and therefore a greater need for education about market segmentation and amending of the product/service to suit the needs of changing consumer needs and wants was identified. The issue of being able to produce quality digital and social media marketing and possibly sell the product via e-commerce was seen as critical going forward.

A major challenge identified by the micro-entrepreneurs was the challenge of recovery from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a challenge which can be seen worldwide, however emphasis was detailed in the way that national and regional governments are allowing the opening of their countries and the assistance which they are giving to businesses is really critical in the ability of these businesses to survive until a full recovery is in place. This will be discussed further in the report.

The issue of Sustainability was addressed by each of the micro-entrepreneurs interviewed and those who responded to the questionnaire also. There was certainly a mixed reaction to this issue, with many businesses having an immense focus on sustainability in the operation and management of their businesses and also in the creation and maintenance of sustainability within their local area and region. The owners of the boating tour company and the walking tour company were very focused on sustainability within their companies and also in the preserving of the environment in delivery of their products and services. There was mixed messages regarding sustainability from the cafe and restaurant owners, one of whom has a huge focus on

sustainability by recycling as much as possible, giving coffee grinds out to local gardeners for composting, upcycling furniture and using compostible packaging where possible. The same company also encourage cyclists to visit by providing space and cycling tools at their cafe. Another restaurant owner detailed that his company does not focus much on sustainability and identified the cost implications of adopting sustainable practices as the key barrier. It was indicated by some of the micro-entrepreneurs that the benefits and realities of sustainability need to be marketed to the businesses in order for them to see true value to incorporating it as part of their product or service and really embedding it in their organisations. A lack of education on sustainability was identified and a need for more enhanced education on this particular issue would be very beneficial.

The idea of inclusion of the local community was detailed as very important and the inclusion of locals as key stakeholders in the overall tourism product was noted as very important. 92% of those interviewed and surveyed do engage with the local community with some giving back to the community as a message of thanks. One micro-entrepreneur is a member of some local tourism committees and cluster groups, where members of the local community also participate. Another micro-entrepreneur is very passionate about buying local, employing local and partnering with other businesses owned by locals for mutual tourism benefit. A quote from another business owner states *"we live and breathe our community, it is key to support the local community in jobs, sponsorships, wellbeing, etc. And in return, the people in your community will support your business and feel part of it."* It is very interesting to see this level of community involvement, as this is the view of the destination managers interviewed and they very much endorse the inclusion of 'everyone' in the local tourism product. Some micro-entrepreneurs alluded to the notion of cluster development within regions and having/establishing the correct and also enough facilities and services to attract tourists

to a particular region. As previously mentioned, the collaboration of all stakeholders in the provision of a specialised form of tourism in a particular area is understood and wanted by the micro-entrepreneurs, however in some areas this has not been successful from a destination perspective.

Table 1 – Summary of Skills and Competencies for Micro-Entrepreneurs

<p>Summary of Skills & Competencies Required by Micro-Entrepreneurs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication skills • Customer service skills • Teamwork • Leadership skills • Cultural awareness • Sustainable knowledge, principles and practices • Local history and knowledge • Decision-making skills • Marketing and Social Media marketing • First Aid skills • Business planning, management and development skills
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B) Destination Managers

There were some similar findings from the destination managers with regards to the challenges faced in the future development of tourism regions/clusters in Coastal and Marine Tourism areas. The first challenge detailed is that of instilling the confidence and knowledge in micro-entrepreneurs to develop their product from an idea in the mind of the originator to an actual product/service available to the tourism market. Many micro-entrepreneurs do not have the knowledge of how to progress their ideas and have a fear of failure or don't have access to the appropriate knowledge to develop their ideas. This relates to not knowing where to seek funding, supports that may be available

through national and regional networks, business and marketing knowledge, etc. It was emphasised by one destination manager that their role is sometimes very challenging to ensure that the potential entrepreneur can envisage the potential that their idea has and how to commercialise their product/service. This could relate to many coastal and marine tourism products and services, where the destination manager believes that what is ordinary to one person may have the potential for an extraordinary experience for a tourist to the region. Two of the destination managers interviewed were very focused on the belief that their role is to nurture and find people with crafts that relate to the tourism experience on offer within a particular region. They also identified the fact that many potential entrepreneurs do not know where to seek funding for the businesses and therefore possibly do not develop their product. This was noted by the entrepreneurs also.

Having access to specific tourism related business management knowledge was identified also and specifically in new product development, marketing, accounting, digital marketing and business planning. The destination managers need to know where they can source education of this type for entrepreneurs within their regions and be able to provide relevant and specific advice.

A challenge identified by another entrepreneur related to the idea of creating 'destination experiences' and getting buy-in from all stakeholders to develop the region/area rather than each micro-entrepreneur focusing on their own business and not seeing the larger scale idea of creating an experience. They also relate this to 'storytelling'. This seems to have a major focus in the provision of Irish tourism in recent years and is progressing into the future also. The idea of being able to tell a story about a region, e.g., Food Tourism, Adventure Tourism, Coastal Tourism, etc. will assist in the branding of the area for marketing purposes to key target segments. It is envisaged to create more 'stories' and an immersive experience for the tourist, however involvement

of all stakeholders is essential for success of this marketing strategy. The story needs to be embedded in the DNA of the people within the area also. Each business needs to understand how they 'fit' under the branding of the area. There is evidence already in Ireland that the creation of an experience works as a unique selling point for a region, e.g. The Wild Atlantic Way, Boyne Valley Food Flavours and a new scenic seafood trail, Sea Louth, is being launched in June, 2020.

A challenge also identified was the creation of differentiation of place and getting away from the tourism hotspots in the country, through the formation of regional development plans and investment in specific regions by the national tourism organisation. It needs to be seen that regions are getting investment and dedication of resources are being given to the area in order to make the region fit for purpose and to ensure the long-term development and sustainability of the tourism product.

Sustainability is another challenged which the destination managers have identified as a factor which must be embedded in tourism development strategies within all regions in the future. The difficulty identified for regional and destination managers is to ensure participation of all stakeholders to ensure the long-term success of a sustainable tourism destination. If individual micro-entrepreneurs are not willing to adopt sustainable practices, it is very difficult to adopt a destination wide approach. It is recognised that Ireland is lagging behind many other countries with regards to the level of sustainability offered in tourism products and services. From speaking to the destination managers, there is certainly a willingness and an understanding of the need for enhanced sustainable tourism practices both regionally and nationally, so the challenge is to present the benefits and gains of adopting the practices to the micro-entrepreneurs and marketing the destination as a sustainable destination. It is the belief of one of our interviewees that consumers of the future will book a location based on the marketing of the sustainable businesses within that destination. They recognise the benefits of

the adoption of sustainability both at business level and at destination level. The national tourism body in Ireland, Failte Ireland, has a central focus on sustainability in all its development strategies.

The skills, knowledge and competencies identified by the Destination Managers included the following: business management skills, marketing and destination branding, product and service pricing and creating value for the customer, cross selling and up-selling, environmental impact assessments, communications, digital marketing, sustainability and sustainable practices, creating resilience, designing competitiveness, provision of financial supports and also local history and knowledge.

Table 2 – Summary of Skills and Competencies for Destination Managers

<p>Summary of Skills and Competencies required for Destination Managers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business planning, development and management skills • Tourism Destination planning and development. • Development of Destination Stories/Branding/Experiences • Marketing, digital marketing and brand development • Cross-selling/up-selling • Provision of financial supports • Environmental Impacts and Assessment • Communications • Sustainability principles, practices and management • Local History and Knowledge • Competitiveness • Resilience • Networking Skills • Co-operation and Collaboration skills
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Impacts of Covid-19

The impacts of Covid-19 are evident across the world and the overall tourism industry has been greatly impacted in many ways. Many micro-entrepreneurs have been forced to close their businesses and unfortunately are not in a position to re-open. Others have had the opportunity to revise/amend their business products and services and diversify. Although this may have been possible, the micro-entrepreneurs interviewed and surveyed all detailed significant impacts, including financial loss.

As businesses look towards reopening, there are many aspects of both the daily operation and the strategic planning of their businesses that they have been forced to review and alter. Growth in and dominance from in domestic tourism has had to be responded to due to current and ongoing travel restrictions within countries and regions, as many international tourists will not visit the country during the Summer 2021 season.

Businesses have adopted new approaches, policies and operational functions in order to respond to the impacts of Covid-19. These include the following:

- Increase in safety precautions within the business for both staff and customers,
- Increase in safety signage within the organisation,
- Increasing overall hygiene protocols,
- Reviewing of staff contracts
- Reskilling in marketing and digital marketing in particular
- Focusing on the attraction of new market segments and tailoring their product/service to meet the needs of these customers,
- Re-design and re-build of some facilities within the organisation to make it more Covid-19 safety friendly.

Many businesses identified that this time has also given them the opportunity to review their business in total and identify other aspects of their business and opportunities which they could develop into the future. It has also given them an opportunity to re-skill in key areas of product/service specific skills and also in the area of digital marketing, which was seen as a critical aspect of business for micro-entrepreneurs.

One particular business has had time now to develop a specific niche product for a niche market segment which they believe has great potential for increased revenue in the future. They would not have had the time to invest in this if Covid-19 had not occurred. The provision of the pandemic support payments from national government to businesses and staff has allowed business owners to cease this opportunity.

All businesses interviewed and surveyed have also realised how vulnerable and volatile the tourism industry is and how important it is for them to constantly upskill and be resilient in their operations. The need for enhanced sustainability was also identified as a focus for many businesses post-pandemic.

Occupational Profiles

The following Occupational Profiles were designed based on the data collected from the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires completed for this research for the micro-entrepreneur and the destination manager. Many overlapping skills, knowledge and competencies were identified for the micro-entrepreneur and the destination manager, detailed below.

A) Micro-Entrepreneur

Table 3 – Occupational Profile – Micro-Entrepreneur

Micro-Entrepreneur Responsible for the provision of a product/service through the operation of a small business utilising local staffing and resources.	
Knowledge Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of own product/service and how to create differentiation of product. • Marketing and creation of value for market segments • Sustainable product/service development • Related legislations to their business and local area • Local and regional tourism knowledge • Local and regional tourism supports available and support networking bodies. • Sector trends • Creation of a 'story' around their product/service and how to embed the CMT of the area in this also. • New Product Development Knowledge
Skills and Competencies Required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Skills – Business Plan Development, new product development, accounting, marketing, etc. • Human Resource skills • Networking • Communications Skills • Customer Care Skills

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable Pillars and Industry Practices • Marketing and Digital Marketing • Entrepreneurship – Idea generation to product/service development • Local geographical knowledge
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B) Destination Manager

Table 4 – Occupational Profile – Destination Manager

<h3>Destination Manager</h3> <p>A person responsible for the strategic planning and overseeing of tourism destination planning, development and support within a particular region.</p>	
<p>Knowledge Profile</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy Development • Coastal and Marine Tourism Knowledge – Development and Preservation • Regional Brand Development • Cluster Development • Knowledge of the Environment • Sustainable principles and practices • Market Trends and Consumer Behaviour • Local area legislations • Destination Planning Models – Best Practice Case Studies • Destination Marketing
<p>Skills and Competencies Required</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Destination Marketing and Branding • Relevant area legislation • Collaboration Skills - All Stakeholders • Communication Skills • Experience Creation – CMT Experience • Environmental Impact Analysis and Assessment • Area Conservation • Market Analysis and Consumer Buyer Behaviour • Funding Availability and Opportunities • Sustainability – Business Level & Destination Level - Principles, practices, models, certifications, etc. • Consumer Trend Data • Data Analysis – Destination Level

Conclusion

From completing this research, it is evident that very little specific curricula exists in the area of Coastal and Marine Tourism, and both micro-entrepreneurs and destination managers have identified many skills, competencies and also knowledge that they believe would be essential and beneficial in the delivery of quality Coastal and Marine Tourism products and services. Much of the identified skills and knowledge could be identified as generic to other industries however, micro-entrepreneurs and destination managers have recognised the great benefits that there would be in the development and delivery of CMT industry specific modules.

The development of key business knowledge and skills was identified as essential for both the micro-entrepreneurs within their own business and also for the destination managers to ensure effective development of destination. A focus on sustainability was recognised as an extremely important element of the development of a programme in Coastal and Marine Tourism. The principles and practices of sustainability must be understood within the context of individual businesses operational practices and also from a destination wide perspective. It is identified that some businesses operating in Coastal and Marine Tourism destinations in Ireland already have a keen interest and understanding of these principles and practices that may be applied, however others are not as knowledgeable about sustainability, yet the fact that it is referred to as a focal strategic element of all national and regional tourism plans, it is inevitable that it must be included as a core module. It is imperative that all aspects of sustainability are included, economic, social and environmental.

Although barriers were identified in the ability to create destination wide experiences and ensure that all stakeholders benefit, the micro-entrepreneurs and destination managers interviewed and results from the questionnaires gave the viewpoint that in the long-term, a destination-wide approach to creating sustainable, creative and inclusive tourism experiences for target markets is the way forward.