



## A STUDY OF COMPETENCE PROFILE FOR THERMAL SPA THERAPIST IN PROJECT PARTNER COUNTRIES

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Project No: 2016-1-TR01-KA202-034712, IO1

Occupational Competence Profile for Thermal Care Agents through ECVET in European Tourism

#### Partner Organizations

P1: Turkey, Tuzla Municipality

P2: Turkey, Istanbul Medeniyet University

P3: Turkey, Lodos Ltd.

P4: Bulgaria, Zgura-M Ltd.

P5: Belgium, Horeca Partners

P6: Portugal, Caldas da Felgueira, Termas & SPA

P7: Slovenia, University Rehabilitation Institute



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#### Abstract

*This report is the first intellectual output of the project titled 'Occupational Competence Profile for Thermal Care Agents through ECVET in European Tourism' (2016-1-TR01-KA202-034712). The purpose of the report is to identify the required occupational competencies for 'thermal care agents', as well as the methods for the attainment of these competencies in project partner countries, namely Belgium, Bulgaria, Portugal, Slovenia and Turkey. It starts by drawing attention to the diversification of tourism products in the face of declining international tourism market share in Europe and growth of medical and wellness tourism which calls for the extension and development of new occupational profiles in the health and wellness area. After that, the report reviews the occupations and competency profiles of vocations that are closely related to thermal spa therapy in the countries involved in the project. Then, some examples of vocational qualifications relating to thermal spa therapy are summarised from the literature. Later on, methodology and results of an empirical research in project partner countries investigating the required areas of competence for 'thermal care agent', which was renamed as '**thermal spa therapist**' after the review of thermal spa therapy related occupations and the literature, are presented. Finally, based on the literature review and empirical research, a competence profile alongside with learning units and their contents for the education and training of thermal spa therapists are suggested.*

#### Introduction

Europe has the biggest market share of international tourism receipts and tourist arrivals. Europe accounted for 36% of worldwide international tourism receipts, and 51% of international tourist arrivals in 2015 (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2016). According to the European Commission, tourism is the third largest socio-economic activity within the European Union (EU) after the trade and distribution, and construction sectors (European Parliament, 2015). Tourism accounts for over 10% of GDP and 5.2% of the total workforce in EU (European Parliament, 2015). However, because of the slow growth rate of tourism compared to other regions of the world, Europe's market share in terms of international tourist arrivals and receipts is decreasing over the past few years (European Parliament, 2015). For this reason, one of the main objectives of EU tourism policy is to maintain the leading position of Europe as an international tourist destination (European Parliament, 2015).

In order to improve competitiveness of European tourism sector and increase demand, reinforcing quality of tourism services, improving professional skills in the tourism sector, overcoming the seasonal nature of demand and diversifying the supply of tourist services, among others, are proposed (European Commission, 2010; European Parliament, 2015). To diversify the supply of tourist services in EU, the development of thematic tourism products such as health and wellness tourism among others are suggested (European Commission, 2010). Indeed, development of health and wellness tourism is one of the ways to help diversify tourism offer, reduce seasonality problem and increase demand and tourism revenues, all of which may contribute to the overall competitiveness of Europe as a destination.

### **Health Tourism and the Need for New Occupational Profiles in Europe**

Health tourism is often used as an umbrella term covering travel for medical treatments and wellness (Smith and Puczko, 2015; Voigt, Brown and Howat, 2011). Put shortly, health tourism is ‘travelling for the maintenance, enhancement and restoration of wellbeing in mind and body’ (Costa, Quintela and Mendes, 2015, p.6). A distinction has often been made between medical tourism (healthcare tourism) and wellness tourism categories of health tourism (Figure 1). Medical tourism is the travel activity of people to ‘a different place to receive treatment for a disease, an ailment, or a condition, or to undergo a cosmetic surgery’ (Global Spa Summit, 2011, p.20). On the other hand, wellness tourism is defined as ‘travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one’s personal wellbeing’ (Global Wellness Institute, 2017, p. 17). Treatments, activities and therapies for the renewal and balance of physical, mental, psychological and social wellness (mind, body, spirit) are emphasised in wellness tourism (ISPA, 2013; Smith and Kelly, 2006; Smith and Puczko, 2013). Wellness tourism is thought to be a proactive approach and preventive while medical tourism is reactive and curative (Hall, 2003, Smith and Puczko, 2015).

Thermal (mineral springs) and spa facilities are in a perfect position to offer treatments and services for both medical and wellness tourism in EU countries and improve the quality of life and wellness of people (Costa, Quintela and Mendes, 2015). Thermal/mineral springs facilities are defined as ‘establishments associated with the wellness, recreational, and therapeutic uses of waters with special properties’ (Global Wellness Institute, 2017, p. 27). The word spa is also used for ‘thermal baths or hot springs where the waters have a medical or healing function’ (Costa, Quintela and Mendes, 2015; Smith and Puczko, 2015, p.207). Within Europe, there is a renewed interest in thermalism and traditional health spas, based on natural mineral springs (Rivero, Rangal and Caldito, 2016). Europe has 5.612 thermal spring establishments and earned 19.7 billion revenues in

2015. Besides, thermal/mineral springs industry revenues worldwide is growing at a rate of around 10% annually (Global Wellness Institute, 2017).

Medical and wellness tourism are integrated within the context of thermal and spa facilities and have future growth potential in EU countries. This requires an extension and renewal of knowledge, skills and competencies of those working in thermal and spa facilities in such areas as medical hydrotherapy and other techniques and treatments as well as treatments and services for the maintenance and promotion of wellness. The megatrend for wellness and health calls for completely new occupational profiles and qualification in order to meet the needs, values and expectations of health and wellness tourists (Ritter, 2005). It seems that there is a lack of qualified personnel for medical and wellness treatments and services in thermal facilities and that these new occupations should be interdisciplinary and include providers of recreation activities, sports, medical, curative and preventative services and treatments (Ritter, 2005). These new occupations combine tasks and responsibilities of several occupations and provide a complex bundle of health, wellness and beauty treatments and services (Beblavy, Akgüc, Fabo and Lenaerts 2016). This project is an attempt to define such a new occupational profile with knowledge, skills and competencies to apply both medical and wellness treatments and services in thermal and spa facilities.

### **Thermal Spa Therapy Related Occupations in Project Partner Countries**

All project partner countries have substantial thermal mineral resources, spa and wellness centres and sectors. No occupation or vocation with the exact title of 'thermal care agent' exist in project partner countries. The occupations that can be associated with 'thermal care agent' are 'Spa and Wellness Caregiver' in Belgium, 'Thermal Procedures Executor' in Bulgaria, 'Thermalism Technician' in Portugal, 'Masseur' in Slovenia and 'Spa Staff' in Turkey (Table 3). Table 4 lists the relevant vocations in partner countries and points out strong and weak points of each vocation in comparative perspective. Bulgaria, Portugal and Turkey have vocational qualifications specifically related to thermal therapy treatments and services. The most comprehensive competency profile is thermalism technician from Portugal that cover steam, sauna, medical hydrotherapy, hydro kinesiotherapy, electro therapy, mud and massage therapy techniques and treatments. Beauty therapy treatments such as manicure, pedicure, facials, waxing, make up etc. are excluded in all of the competency profiles reviewed.

**Table 1: Summary Evaluation of Competence Profiles of Job Titles Related to Thermal Spa Therapy in Project Partner Countries**

Country	Job Title	Summary Evaluation of Competency Profiles
Belgium	Spa and wellness caregiver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No competency profile</li> </ul>
Bulgaria	Thermal Procedures Executor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Steam, sauna, hydrotherapy, body wrapping and mud techniques and treatments are well represented.</li> <li>Massage techniques and beauty treatments are not covered</li> <li>Terms such as spa procedures and unconventional methods of thermal treatments are ambiguous.</li> </ul>
Portugal	Thermalism Technician	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good coverage of steam, sauna, hydrotherapy, hydro kinesiotherapy, electro therapy, mud and massage techniques.</li> <li>No coverage of beauty treatments such as manicure, pedicure, facials, waxing etc.</li> </ul>
Slovenia	Masseur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Massage is well represented.</li> <li>Steam, sauna, hydrotherapy, body wrapping, mud techniques and treatments are not covered.</li> <li>Beauty treatments are not covered.</li> </ul>
Turkey	Spa Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Various massage techniques are well represented.</li> <li>Hydrotherapy techniques (especially medical) and beauty treatments are not represented.</li> <li>Terms such as modern spa and authentic spa treatments are unclear.</li> </ul>

### **A Literature Review of Competency Profiles for Thermal Spa Therapy Related Occupations in General**

A search with major scientific databases for the term used in the project title, ‘thermal care agent’, results in no matches. Presumably, there is no such term, occupation or vocation as thermal care agent in English. The closest occupations that have relevance and are in line with the project objectives in the literature in English are spa therapist (the most used), massage therapist, beauty and spa therapy specialist, medical bath attendants and beauty therapist. After discussing various alternative concepts with the partners it is agreed that *thermal spa therapist* is used for the rest of the project. A number of competence profiles are provided in the literature for massage therapist and spa therapist occupations that are closely related to the description of thermal spa therapist’s knowledge, skills and competencies. Sample competency profiles or vocational qualification standards for spa therapist from Estonia, Spain, Scotland and United Kingdom indicate that there are diverse competencies for spa therapists. Apart from generic competencies like communication or conceptual and theoretical knowledge such as knowledge of anatomy and physiology, work organization and preparation, hygiene, health and safety, four core competence areas for spa therapists are identified in the literature. These areas of competence are:

- Hydrotherapy techniques and treatments,
- Body exfoliation and body wrapping therapy techniques and treatments,
- Massage therapy techniques and treatments,
- Cosmetic beauty therapy techniques and treatments.

These practices should be thought of as a continuum from purely medical to wellness therapy practices.

### **Empirical Study of Competencies for Thermal Spa Therapist in Project Partner Countries**

Methodology and main results of the empirical investigation regarding required competencies for spa therapist and methods of training for the attainment of these competencies are presented below.

#### ***Methodology***

In order to find out the competencies required of thermal spa therapist and the best methods of educating and training them, a descriptive research design is adopted. To measure the competencies, a survey questionnaire with structured, semi structured, open ended questions and a competence scale is prepared with the contribution of all partners and the literature (Appendix 1). The questionnaire contained questions relating to the characteristics of thermal/spa/medical facility, desired competencies of thermal spa therapists and the methods for education and training of thermal spa therapists. Competence scale items are based on the literature review of competencies for spa therapists and the competencies of thermal spa therapy related vocations in partner countries. Target group for data collection include heads of thermal/spa department, spa therapists working in thermal, spa and wellness facilities, and thermal and spa managers. Nonprobability convenience sampling method is used and the questionnaire is administered face to face in 10 thermal and spa facility in each project partner country.

#### ***Results and Discussion***

The facilities surveyed mainly consisted of thermal spas, hotel/resort spas, medical spas and day spas. The respondents of the study consisted of managers of spa or thermal facility, head of thermal, medical or spa department and specialist working in spa, medical, thermal or wellness centre. Respondents indicated that the most often used titles for personnel who applied hydrotherapy techniques, massages, body polish/scrub and body wrapping for medical or wellness purposes as well as skin and beauty treatments and services were massage therapists, spa massage

therapist, masseur and spa therapists. Competencies rated by professionals in the thermal spa industry as very important, important and somewhat important are as follows:

### **Very Important Areas of Competence**

- Effective communication and consultation
- Monitoring and maintenance of health, safety and hygiene
- Knowledge of human anatomy and physiology
- Massage techniques for wellness, relaxation and clinical practice
- Hydrotherapy techniques and treatments for wellness

### **Important Areas of Competence:**

- Serving clients with special needs
- Hydrotherapy techniques for medical conditions
- Sport massage techniques for medical conditions
- Hydrokinetic therapy for medical conditions,
- Electrotherapy techniques and treatments for medical and wellness purposes
- Body exfoliation and wrapping techniques and treatments for medical and wellness purposes

### **Somewhat Important Areas of Competence:**

- Hydrokinetic therapy techniques and treatments for wellness
- Beauty therapy treatments and services

A substantial proportion of respondents (42%) pointed out that current formal and informal education and training for thermal spa therapists were insufficient in some respects to make them competent and to provide quality services in their jobs. A great majority of respondents (82%) believes that thermal spa therapists should be certified after the successful completion of a dedicated formal and informal or non-formal vocational education and training course. The preferred method of training by sector professionals is on the job training at work, followed by lectures and one-on-one training.

### **Conclusions**

Empirical study shows that competence profile of thermal spa therapist identified by professionals in the thermal spa sector are mostly in line with the competencies expressed in the literature and in some of the project partner countries, particularly Portugal. In the light of the findings, thermal spa therapist is defined as a *healthcare personnel who provide hydrotherapy, hydrokinetic therapy, body exfoliation and body wrapping therapy, and massage therapy techniques and treatments under medical supervision that improve health and wellness*. Based on the status of thermal spa related occupations in project partner countries, review of the competence

profile of spa therapist in the literature and empirical study, nine compulsory units of learning (key competencies) are proposed for the education and training of thermal spa therapist. They are:

- Human anatomy and physiology
- Serving clients with special needs
- Client communication and consultation
- Work organization and preparation
- Hydrotherapy techniques and treatments
- Hydrokinetic therapy techniques and treatments
- Body exfoliation and body wrapping therapy techniques and treatments
- Massage therapy techniques and treatments
- Monitoring and maintenance of health and safety

Thermal spa managers and specialist express the concern that current formal and informal education and training for thermal spa therapists are inadequate in some respects and all the thermal spa therapist should be certified by formal or informal vocational education and training. Spa managers and specialists prefer on the job training at work, followed by lectures and one-on-one training as the convenient methods for the education and the training of thermal spa therapist.

### **Recommendations**

Because the occupation of thermal spa therapist is very much related to health issues, education and training of thermal spa therapist should definitely be placed within the context of health education. Thermal spa therapist vocation calls for an ability to gain and apply a range of knowledge, skills, practices and understanding at a detailed level, as well as exercising autonomy and judgement, therefore, level four would seem to be appropriate in terms of educational level descriptors in national vocational qualification systems.

The competency framework for thermal spa therapist consists of various areas of competence and preparing learning outcomes and materials, and providing education and training for all the compulsory modules with all of their detailed content may be unrealistic and beyond the scope and budget of this project. That is why a more streamlined approach for the competence profile of thermal spa therapist in terms of modules and content can be adopted in the second stage of the project (O2). Strategically, the project can selectively focus on the specific modules and content that are in line with the resources and skills or core competencies of the partners concerned within time and budget limits.