

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR TOUR LEADER CANDIDATES IN TOURISM AND RECREATION STUDIES: THE CASE OF ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY IN POZNAŃ

Grzegorz Borkowski^a , Krzysztof Piotrowski^b , Ilona Potocka^{c,*} , Mateusz Rogowski^d 

^a Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland), Faculty of Geographical and Geological Sciences, Chair of Tourism and Recreation; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3567-9941>; e-mail: grzegorz.borkowski@amu.edu.pl

^b Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland), Faculty of Geographical and Geological Sciences, Chair of Tourism and Recreation; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5345-2401>; e-mail: krzysztof.piotrowski@amu.edu.pl

^c Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland), Faculty of Geographical and Geological Sciences, Chair of Tourism and Recreation; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0606-8113>; e-mail: ilona.potocka@amu.edu.pl

^d Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland), Faculty of Geographical and Geological Sciences, Chair of Tourism and Recreation; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0875-8820>; e-mail: mateusz.rogowski@amu.edu.pl

* Corresponding author.

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the practical aspects and challenges in preparing students of tourism and recreation at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań for the profession of tour leader. The findings are based on an analysis of the literature on the subject, documentation concerning the organisation of field exercises, experiences of the staff conducting these classes, and information from the economic environment. Additionally, spatial analysis of exercise routes from the years 2011–2024 was carried out. Key conclusions highlight the need to adapt educational programs to technological advancements, such as generative AI and modern navigation systems, while addressing associated risks. The study emphasizes the importance of developing narrative skills and adaptability to tourism industry changes, including deregulation and geopolitical shifts. The importance of a comprehensive approach was emphasized, combining theoretical knowledge with field practice while preparing students for the expectations of the tourism market. The authors recommend continuously improving training programs by integrating innovative teaching tools alongside traditional methods to enhance graduates' competitiveness.

KEYWORDS

tour leading, tour guiding, professional competence, sightseeing narrative, quality of tourism service

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1. INTRODUCTION

Until 2013, the profession of tour leader in Poland was regulated – in order to practice it, one had to complete a training course based on a program defined in a ministerial regulation and pass a state examination before a commission appointed by the regional marshal. The regulation specified both the content of the training and the number of hours, covering theoretical as well as practical classes.

In 2013, this requirement was abolished, officially to facilitate access to the profession and increase competitiveness, although it also sparked debate about the quality of services and tourist safety. In fact, the responsibility for training tour leaders and verifying their competences was (informally) transferred to the tour operators employing them. Since 2018, opportunities to obtain qualifications as a tour leader or tour guide have been provided by the Integrated Qualifications System – the Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Tourism Sector, "Tourist event guiding" (*Obwieszczenie Ministra Sportu i Turystyki*, 2018), which facilitates the preparation of qualification descriptions in this area that meet nationwide needs and take into account international requirements. According to many authors, the Framework can be used to set out qualifications in the field of tour leading and guiding (Bukowska, 2023; Kruczek, 2018; Zawistowska, 2020). As a result, institutions that continue to provide training and assess qualifications remain on the market, including professional organizations, universities and travel agencies. An analysis of the learning outcomes included in the Tourism and Recreation program at Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) shows that they are consistent with the learning outcomes described in the Sectoral Qualifications Framework.

Until the 1990s, training for the profession of tour leader in Poland was conducted outside of higher education institutions but with the political transformations of the early 1990s, changes were introduced to the course curricula, which continued until 2004. During this period, new entities were allowed to provide training (Stasiak & Wiluś, 2010).

At the same time, degree programs in Tourism and Recreation were launched at AMU in Poznań. From the very first academic year (2000/2001), the full ministerial training program for tour leaders was incorporated into the compulsory study curriculum, with a significantly extended number of hours (for example, practical training lasting six days instead of the standard three). The last internal exam before deregulation, which took place as part of the course in 2013, covered the tourism industry in Poland and globally, tourism management, the tourism geography of Poland and Europe, the history of culture and art, legal regulations in tourism,

tourist safety, and relations between the guide and the group. A necessary element, the condition for admission to the exam, was participation in practical exercises, i.e. the part required by the program of state training for tour leader candidates.

Interested students, after completing all the subjects included in this training and passing an internal exam, could take the tour leader exam as candidates before a commission appointed by the voivode; from 2006 by the Marshal of the Wielkopolska Region. In the years 2003–2013, 280 students passed the internal exam, and just below 25% of them took the state exam. The passing rate was 53%, compared to the average in the region of 42% (Potocka, 2016).

The practical aspect had been implemented in the form of field exercises from the beginning, i.e. since 2000. The first were exercises in leading and guiding (firstly, after the third year of master's degree studies, and later after the second year of bachelor degree studies), described as "leading and guiding exercises for facilities, resorts and tourist routes" (in the following parts of the article, domestic exercises with cross-border elements or just in-country exercises). These were compulsory classes.

After the division into two-cycle studies in 2011, in order to transfer these skills to those who started studying tourism and recreation within the second cycle, the program also introduced exercises in leading and guiding in selected European countries, which in 2018 were replaced by field exercises in tourism management (after the first year of the second cycle). The change of name was connected with additional aspects that went beyond the scope of leader and guide training so that they would not be a repetition for students continuing their education. Generally, the exercises carried out during the second cycle are also referred to as 'foreign' in this article. They were optional classes.

These exercises cover not only preparation for the profession of leader as, among other things, they are related to tour guiding, but methodologically, without knowledge of the selected area. They do not directly concern mountain guiding, although they include the methodology of leading a group in the field to the extent that it is carried out by tour leaders.

The research issue concerns the key educational and organisational challenges in preparing university students of tourism and recreation for the profession of tour leader.

The aim of the article is to investigate practical aspects and challenges based on a case study of AMU in Poznań from 2000 to 2024. The article adopts temporal and spatial perspectives, offering insights that may support reflection and curriculum development at other universities and tour leader training centres.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of tour leading and guiding has been analyzed in the academic literature from multiple perspectives, with particular emphasis on labour market conditions, professional competencies, training, and the role of the profession in shaping tourist experience.

The most frequently examined factors shaping the labour market for tour leaders include employment conditions, remuneration, and the strengths and weaknesses of the profession (Gryszel, 2007; Gryszel & Kruczek, 2007; Kaźmierkiewicz & Seweryn, 2024; Kruczek, 2006, 2008; Kruczek et al., 2020). Its deregulation in Poland in 2014 has been discussed by Sidor et al. (2014) and Magiera and Bakota (2022), who highlight both the positive and negative consequences of this process. Dahiya (2022), examining the analogous profession of tour guides, pointed to challenges such as lack of support from tour operators, low remuneration, poor regulation, emotional exhaustion and low social status – issues that also affect tour leaders. These findings underscore the need for structured, competency-based and nationally contextualized training programs.

A recurring theme in the literature is the importance of the competencies and qualifications of tour leaders for the quality of tourist services (Gołembksi, 2009; Winiarski & Zdebski, 2008). The service quality has been linked directly to tourist satisfaction (Geva & Goldman, 1991; Gryszel, 2020; Mossberg, 1995) and to customer loyalty toward travel agencies, particularly through attributes such as 'tangibles', empathy, reliability, responsiveness and assurance (Cariena et al., 2015).

The scope of a tour leader's professional responsibilities is broad. Weiler and Davis (1993), adapting Cohen's (1985) typology, identified six core roles: organizer, entertainer, group leader, teacher, motivator and environmental interpreter. Fulfilling these roles requires not only extensive knowledge but also a diverse set of skills and attitudes. The roles of tour leaders often overlap with those of tour guides, which means that many insights about guiding are transferable to leading. Mason and Christie (2003) emphasize that a tour guide training course should lead to change not only in knowledge and skills but also in the way they think and act. They argue that if trainee guides learn to critique their own knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, they can offer clients experiences that go beyond a superficial introduction to a destination's environment and culture.

The education and training of tour leaders has been discussed both in historical and practical contexts. Stasiak and Wiluś (2010) analyzed the evolution of tour leader training in Poland up to 2006, noting the introduction of mandatory practical training in 2004 as a major improvement. They also recommended that future programs integrate more psychological

and sociological content, training for working with tourists with special needs, more active learning methods, and the use of new technologies. Black and Ham (2005) proposed a tour guide training program leading to certification in Australia, while Corpuz et al. (2025) recommend integrating decision-making, crisis management, problem-solving and strategic planning skills into training programs while linking these directly to leadership development.

Studies focusing on the tourism and recreation program at AMU describe the training process between 2000 and 2013 (Potocka, 2016) and emphasize the importance of practical student placements (Borkowski et al., 2016). Carmody (2013) stressed the value of both pre-employment and on-the-job training, advocating high educational standards, interpretive skills and leadership development. In the same vein, Stasiak (2020) provided practical guidelines for consciously designing memorable tourist experiences, suggesting that tour leaders play a central role in ensuring a satisfying final product for participants.

Tour leaders have a direct influence on the quality of the tourist experience, which in turn affects tourist satisfaction and repeat travel intentions (Geva & Goldman, 1991; Mossberg, 1995; Rabotić, 2011). In the context of cultural tourism, Mikos von Rohrscheidt (2014) emphasized their role as intermediaries between cultures; a function particularly critical in international tourism. Stasiak (2020) expanded on this by outlining tools and principles for creating exceptional trips that meet participants' expectations.

The profession also plays a role in promoting sustainable tourism. Carmody (2013) noted that tour leader training should incorporate the transmission of sustainable tourism concepts to participants.

The personal qualities of tour leaders can also influence their career outcomes. Gorenak et al. (2024) found that perseverance, rather than passion, has a stronger link to job satisfaction, suggesting that determined individuals benefit most from well-prepared training programs. At the same time, work-related stress is prevalent in the profession (Akkuş & Arslan, 2023), making comprehensive preparation crucial. Proper training can help tour leaders manage stress factors better and maintain service quality.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to achieve the objective of the study, the following were analysed: (a) programs of 60 completed trips; (b) a training program for tour leading and guiding in terms of its transformations; (c) experiences accrued by those conducting these exercises; (d) information from the economic environment.

The research presented in this article is based primarily on the analysis of all field exercise programs from the years 2012–2024 for domestic exercises with cross-border elements, and 2011–2024 for foreign exercises. When analysing the trip programs, destinations were taken into account (here, a cartographic method was used), as well as the distance travelled in Poland and abroad, also the attractions included in the programs and their types.

The second source of data were training programs from the period 2000–2024 in leading and guiding obtained from internal AMU documents, such as study programs or guidelines for the implementation of field exercises. The focus was on their transformations over the years, especially in the practical dimension.

The third source was the more than twenty years of experience of the staff conducting these exercises, who are also the authors of this article. Only seven of the analysed programs had no participation from any of the co-authors, and all of these programs were implemented before 2014. It should be added that the authors also organise and conduct the process of preparing and selecting programs for implementation.

Another source of information is the analysis of selected evaluation documents, especially those from recent years, completed by students on the last day of their field exercises.

In the part concerning prospects and challenges, further sources of information were used, namely, opinions from the economic environment along with interviews with owners and employees of travel agencies where graduates of the study program work as tour leaders.

4. RESULTS

4.1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE TRAINING PROCESS

The process of training students for the professions of tour guide and tour leader involves a series of classes carried out during three, and later, two years of study.

Leading and guiding exercises are complementary to lectures and classroom exercises. As part of classroom training, students acquire the skills to prepare a program for a tourist event and learn the theoretical aspects of the work of a tour leader and a tour guide, in urban, countryside and mountain settings. Trip programs developed during the exercises provide the basis for preparing field exercise programs.

The situation was similar in the second cycle, during which students prepared programs for a tourist event

abroad as part of their classroom training. Among the developed projects, trip programs were selected for implementation during foreign field exercises. It should be noted that trip programs implemented during such exercises constitute the original works of students, prepared under supervision of the staff conducting those exercises. This solution requires students to develop a complete, detailed and feasible program for a tourist event. It also means that during each field exercise new trip programs are implemented, differing from the previous ones.

Programs that are best prepared in terms of content and most feasible in terms of organisation are selected for implementation by students through a vote which may be preceded by marketing activities related to those trips. In this way, the organisers, simulating the tourist market, encourage the selection of their products.

Then, authors of the selected programs proceed with preparation for implementation, playing the role of the tour organiser (for example, they book accommodation, meals, entries, prepare a cost estimate, organise currency exchange, financial and correspondence with the participants). The other participants of the field exercises prepare to work as a tour leader and a tour guide.

For the prepared programs to enable the achievement of the objectives of field exercises, including tour leading and tour guiding, students receive detailed guidelines for their development. For domestic exercises with cross-border elements, the main recommendations include the following elements: the exercises should last six days, they should be carried out in Poland with one day abroad, the program must include natural and cultural attractions, transport by coach over a distance of about 1500 km, and the price should include a minimum of five meals.

The guidelines for developing foreign exercise programs are similar. The key difference is its implementation abroad, with the first and last day allowed in Poland, and a larger recommended distance (about 2000 km). A distinction that has also become apparent over time is that these exercises cover not only leading and guiding, but also a broader spectrum related to tourism management.

Taking into account the specificity of the work of the tour leader, students who are not organisers during the field exercises receive tasks that approximate to real conditions of being a leader. To this end, as part of the preparation for participation, students develop allocated fragments of the planned route. Their task is to verify the selection of categories of roads for travelling by coach (in terms of the coach's size, including height and permissible total weight), parking lots and the compliance of the program with the regulations governing the driving and working time of the driver.

The next stage is the preparation of the tour leader's commentary on the assigned part of the route.

While leading a trip from the leader's seat in the coach, students were required to use analogue maps: tourist maps and/or road atlases, but the use of digital maps and applications was also gradually increasing (see "Challenges in training"). Using tourist maps and atlases to help the driver navigate is on the decrease, but they remain an important source of information about the region.

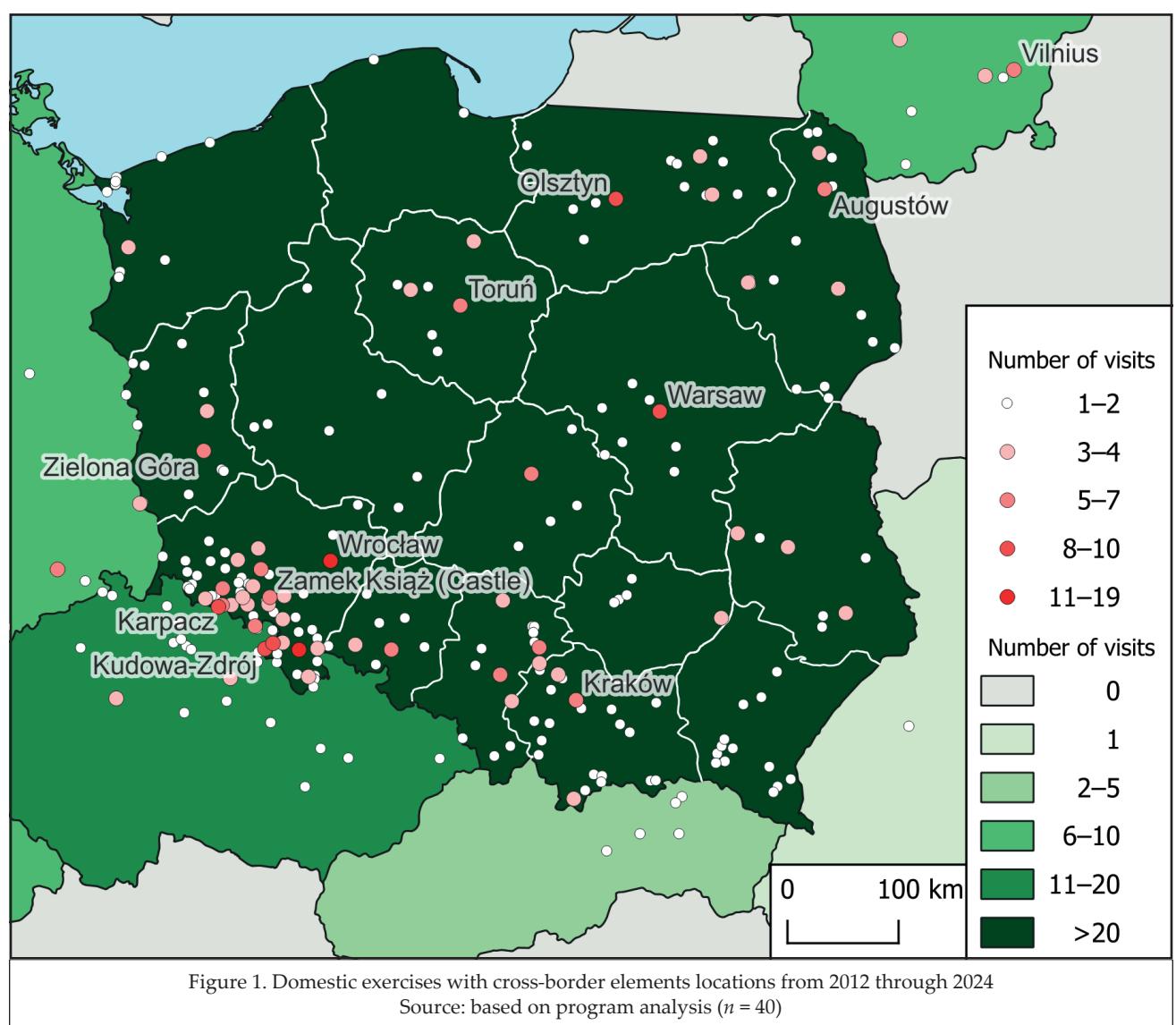
Comprehensive preparation to work as a tour leader is complemented by organisational activities carried out during field exercises. The tasks of students who are organisers include contacting partners, registering the group at a hotel, making sure that the trip program is implemented correctly, and solving problems. All these activities are carried out under the supervision and with the help of supervisors, the university teachers.

In addition to the aspects related to tour leading, an important part of field exercises is the practical training

of their participants in tour guiding. Depending on the scope of the prepared program for a tourist event, each student has the opportunity to prove him/ herself as an urban, countryside or mountain guide.

To do this, students develop a guide commentary on their allocated part of the tourist event. The commentary is prepared individually, however, those presenting the relevant parts must act in agreement so as not to repeat the general content. In addition to discussing the assigned parts of the leading activities, the student must assume the role of a local guide and create a narrative about the presented place, its history, specificity and tourism.

In addition, the specificity of countryside and mountain leading includes not only a sightseeing commentary, but also the safety aspects for the group participants related to the terrain, weather and necessary tourist equipment. This element is particularly important, as the guide is legally responsible for the safety of the group.



4.2. SPATIAL DIVERSITY OF TRAVEL ROUTES

Routes for in-country trips were analysed from 2012 through to 2024, and of foreign trips, from 2011 to 2024. The data for 2003–2011 in-country exercises is incomplete. A list of trips made from 2011 through 2016 was presented in a previous article by Borkowski et al. (2016).

4.2.1. DOMESTIC EXERCISES WITH CROSS-BORDER ELEMENTS

Of the 40 programs carried out in the period 2012–2024, the most often visited places included (see Figure 1, p. 107): Wrocław (19 times out of 40 trips), Kłodzko (13), Stołowe Mts National Park (10), Kudowa-Zdrój (9), Olsztyń, Warsaw, Karkonosze Mts National Park (8), Jelenia Góra, Kraków, Książ Castle, Karpacz and Toruń (7 each).

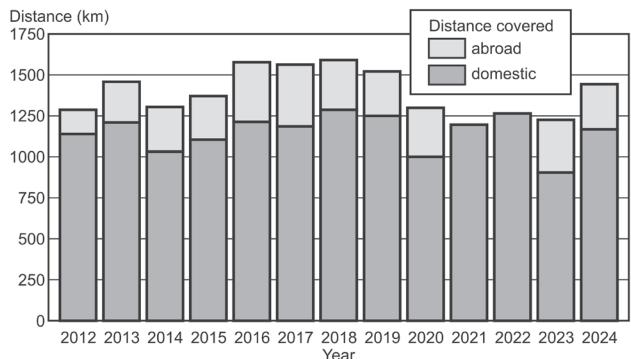


Figure 2. Average distance for domestic exercises with cross-border elements

Source: based on program analysis

In the foreign part, the most visited country was Czechia (15 times), followed by Germany and

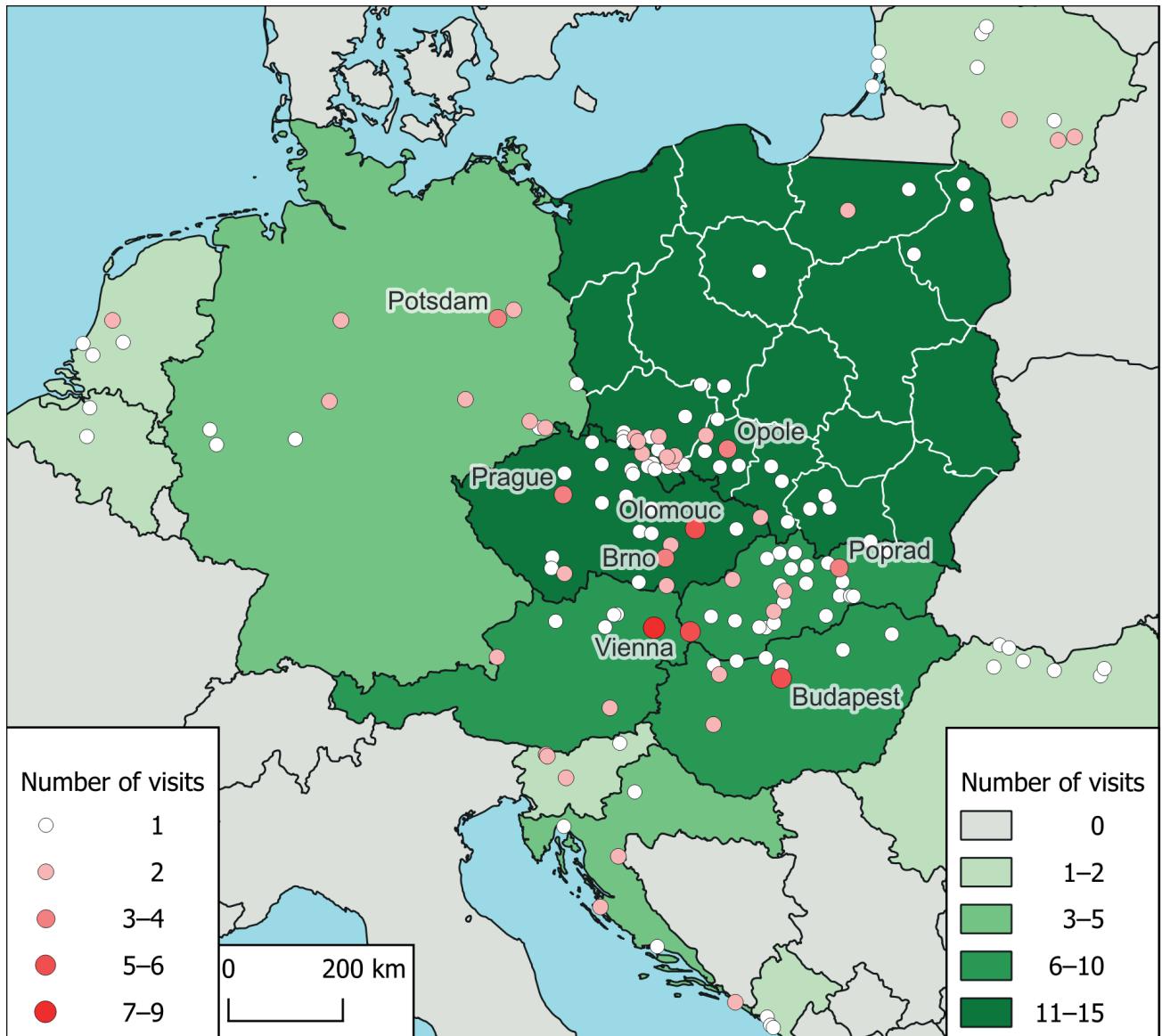


Figure 3. Foreign exercise locations from 2011 through 2024

Source: based on program analysis

Lithuania (8), and Slovakia (5). The route of one trip led through Ukraine. However, in the vast majority of countries neighbouring Poland, the trips visited attractions located close to the border. Those most often included in the exercise programs are Adršpach 'Rock City' and Vilnius (7 times), Dresden (5) and Prague (4). Travel directions were stable over time.

Each year, one of the trips had more elements of countryside and mountain leading than the others. This corresponds to the need to train leaders of active groups in protected natural areas.

Leader training takes place during the travel time, and the distances covered are between 1000 km and 1750 km (Figure 2). There is no clear trend over time but the trips that took place in 2016–2019 were slightly longer. This means that the distance for exercises per student is approximately 40 km (in a range from 25 to 60 km). The distance being reduced in recent years may have been due to the increasing use of newly constructed expressways, the gradual abandonment of more distant regions and longer travel in favour of a more detailed exploration of the qualities and specificity of regions located closer. The increase in transport costs, as an important component of the tourist event price, was also not insignificant. Apart from the limitations from the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, these trips had an element abroad, which accounted for 6% to 27% of the trip, and in extreme cases about 50%. Usually, it was 15–25%. The foreign element mostly covers one day and return to Poland for the night. In about one third of the trips, one of the nights was spent abroad while in two cases, it was two nights.

4.2.2. FOREIGN EXERCISES

For foreign exercises, namely 20 trips, there are no big differences between the four countries most often selected by students. Czechia appeared 11 times, Slovakia 10, Austria 9 and Hungary 8 (Figure 3). Germany appeared somewhat less frequently (5). The countries visited occasionally during the exercises included Croatia (3), Slovenia, Montenegro, the Netherlands and Lithuania (2), with Belgium and Romania (1 each). Six trips included no attractions in Poland. As for cities, the most common were Vienna (9 visits), Olomouc and Budapest (6 each), Bratislava (5) and Brno (4). As for the capitals of frequently visited countries, in Austria it was Vienna in each instance, and in Hungary there was usually a visit to Budapest. Bratislava was visited on half of the stays in Slovakia, while Prague was visited only three times (out of 11 trips to Czechia). This may be due to the fact that Prague is visited as part of domestic exercises with cross-border elements trips.

During foreign exercises, the distances covered decreased over time (Figure 4). In 2011 and 2012, trips reaching nearly 4,000 kilometres to Montenegro were

organised. Apart from these, the distance covered by trips ranged from 1950 km to 2550 km (until 2021). Due to the limitations related to the pandemic, the trip in 2022 was just slightly over 1000 km, however, after that time they have not exceeded 1800 km. This was due to the need to keep to financial restrictions with a decreasing number of participants. From these distances an average of 60 km per student can be derived when being trained as a leader (in a range of 40 to 100 km). This is also in line with the trend of changing the mode of transport in commercial programs over longer distances from coach to air.

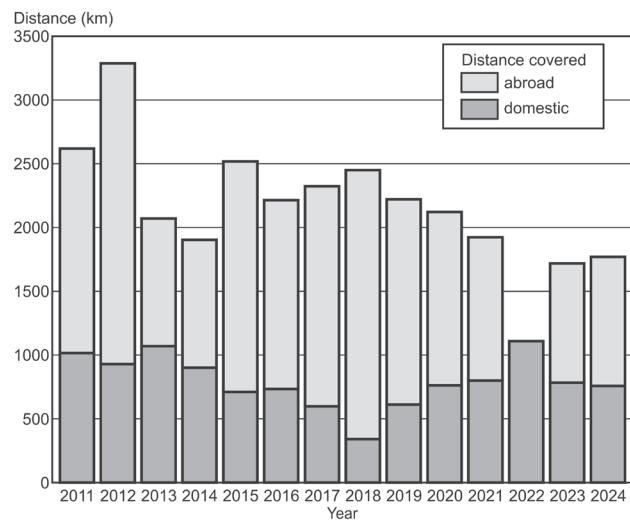


Figure 4. Average distance for foreign field exercises
Source: based on program analysis

The analysed programs can be treated as a reflection of the interests of students of tourism and recreation, as they are the authors, and they choose which ones to implement.

4.3. CHALLENGES IN TRAINING

The experience of the staff supervising the preparation of and conducting field exercises together with the analysis of the evaluations provided by students allowed challenges of an educational and organisational nature to be distinguished.

4.3.1. EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

The first of the educational challenges is the scope for the application of modern technologies, which on the one hand facilitate the work of the tour leader (and are used by leaders), but on the other, using them may reduce the educational value of the task.

They are significant while helping the driver navigate (here, the role of the tour leader is becoming less important with the development of navigation systems),

as well as when preparing and presenting sightseeing content, and in the assessment of the leader's actions by the trip participants.

From the point of view of the changes that have taken place in the work of a modern tour leader, an important issue is the use of cutting-edge technologies in navigation. The ability to use a map is an indispensable part of the work, however using digital maps and global satellite navigation systems is also important in this respect. These are very useful for an analysis or assessment of the route, as well as in the selection of an alternative emergency route in the event of a road accident. Satellite navigation helps to react to such events on an ongoing basis to avoid delays. In terms of educational preparation, both methods should be taught: analogue maps teach spatial orientation, the sense of scale, and build a coherent vision of the topography of a region, while digital maps usually rotate in the direction of travel, while their scale changes, even without user interaction. However, with digital technology currently prevalent in this respect, it is important to teach students how to use it effectively, including pointing out the drawbacks (e.g. the requirement to be within the range of the service, possible device failures, battery exhaustion, failure to take into account the specifications of the coach in terms of its dimensions, weight or maximum speed).

However, it has been observed that it is becoming increasingly difficult for students to use traditional analogue maps and also have less and less understanding that this technology is not useless or obsolete. This raises an educational dilemma: whether and to what extent to allow/require the use of satellite navigation or analogue maps. Using new technologies shows their strengths and weaknesses which should help to apply them better in practice. However, this is done at the cost of the ability to work with an analogue map, to orient oneself in space, and to behave in a situation where there is no service or the satellite signal is corrupted.

The second challenge is to teach how to prepare the sightseeing narrative as its preparation requires general knowledge and the ability to use existing specialist knowledge. When choosing to work as a heritage interpreter, it is necessary to continually educate oneself, often in narrow fields (e.g. cuisine), to expand one's knowledge of the destination, to self-improve one's abilities, and to be prepared for unforeseen situations. While there are many ways to use generative artificial intelligence (large language models) in preparing narrative content and finding sources that are optimally suited to the audience, this type of tool cannot be used in conducting the narrative and interpreting the observed landscape. Each guide story is special and unique, being a result of the guide's knowledge, the context of the particular situation, and the features of the group. These factors determine the

nature of the work, and future tour leaders should be prepared for such situations.

The leader's and guide's narrative should interpret the surroundings experienced in real time and not be a memorised statement. In this regard, every tour leader and guide should be aware of the strengths, capabilities and expertise that they can use in a given situation. In the context of the view outside the window, the problem often arises when travelling on highways and expressways, which usually run from towns and cities (a potential topic to be discussed), and such views are limited by noise baffles. The educational task here is to indicate to students the potential general topics that they can discuss in the coach, not directly related to what the group sees outside the window.

As regards storytelling, the use of generative artificial intelligence offers help, but is also a threat. The advantages are associated with better possibilities for searching for information, composing messages to selected groups with its help, and identifying links between threads. On the other hand, its disadvantages include 'hallucinations', namely the ability to create false information. In this case, the educational challenge seems to be to teach students to use these tools carefully. This includes an indication of how to create prompts, i.e. how to formulate precise commands to initiate the expected response, which tool to use in a given situation, and finally how to verify a text generated by artificial intelligence.

The third challenge is the growing percentage of trips using air transport compared to those using coach. The training conducted in a coach gives the opportunity to approach each student individually. The group has its own means of transport, which becomes a "classroom" where training can take place continuously and contact with students can be maintained. By incorporating air transport into the exercise program, it is possible to combine the advantages of coach training with the ability to handle groups travelling by air.

4.3.2. ORGANISATIONAL CHALLENGES

One of the most important organisational challenges is the fact that field exercises during first-cycle studies are mandatory, and not every student wants to be a leader in the future. It is not only about professional plans, but also about physical and mental capabilities. With low motivation for a student to participate in such field activities, they should be made aware that such training is a form of self-assessment, as it allows more about the area in question to be learned, and how to act in an emergency situation and cooperate with other people. It improves a number of the soft skills that are currently desirable in the labour market.

Expectations of travel agencies are also one of the organisational challenges. In order to meet these

expectations and prepare students for the challenges of the labour market, regular meetings with the industry are conducted in order to determine the optimal directions and forms of practical education, including the role of tour leader. This has become more important, in particular after the introduction of deregulation abolishing the state examinations which required mastering specific material and obtaining the appropriate level of knowledge and skills specified in the regulations.

Another organisational challenge is the need to ensure a balance between the intensity of the exercise program and time for recovery and rest. The idea behind the programs created by students is that they should be in the form of training so that each participant has a chance to practice. Sometimes, especially with larger groups, programs are very intense, causing classes to run until late hours every day.

Among the many organisational challenges, university formalities are also important and these impose restrictions to some extent and mean that, although generally students prepare the program of the training trip themselves and carry it out only under the eye of supervisors, a number of additional conditions must be taken into account, for example, the requirement to use only the coach offered by the university as part of the tender.

The world geopolitical situation is one of the challenges that are independent of university regulations, and also unpredictable and uncontrollable. Due to the migration crisis, it became necessary to plan additional time for crossing a border, including with countries in the Schengen area. Due to the political situation in Ukraine, it was necessary to eliminate this destination from the training tour programs. For example, at the beginning of February 2022, a trip covering Lviv was being planned, but the war broke out two weeks later so it was necessary to modify the trip. Moreover, foreign students, especially those from war zones, were personally affected by this (fearing for their relatives remaining in Ukraine, pressure on male students to return and fight, difficulty in obtaining a residence permit, etc.). Another challenge is the differently formulated visa and passport requirements which may limit or even prevent a foreigner from leaving the country, forcing them to miss out on the classes conducted abroad.

The situation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a number of modifications in the education of students. This started with the most drastic change with the introduction of remote learning in 2020, as well as abandoning border crossing and conducting in-country exercises only in 2021, or the introduction of a number of restrictions in hotel facilities (breakfast individually in rooms rather than together in a restaurant), or in tourist attractions, such

as the requirement to visit them in small groups and the inclusion of extra time for visiting.

Present organisational challenges also include the increasing costs of travel and there are many factors involved. On the one hand, these are internal factors related to students, i.e. their decreasing number resulting in a lower number of groups, which causes increases in the costs of trip organisation (e.g. the cost of a coach shared by fewer people), or the increasing expectations of students regarding the standard of accommodation (separate bathrooms, Wi-Fi) which translates into a higher price of accommodation. External cost-affecting factors, independent of students, include inflation and a constant increase in prices of accommodation and transport.

The final organisational challenge is students' working activity. Many work, including full-time students, and they must ask for time off for the duration of 6-day field exercises. Therefore, these are organized on different dates, including weekends, which in the case of several trips a year (for exercises in the first-cycle studies) gives the student the opportunity to choose the most preferable date.

5. DISCUSSION

The training-related challenges presented above are largely connected to professional circumstances in the subsequent work of a tour leader. The use of satellite navigation replacing analogue maps, the scope of preparation and thematic specialisation related to the requirements of specific thematic groups, or non-standard trips (e.g. cuisine-related events), require modification of the training program for a tour leader and adaptation to current market requirements. This is due to the competitive advantage of graduates from this department, which within the framework of the training creates quasi-natural and realistic leading situations, enabling them to prove themselves as a tour leader. Such factors have a significant impact on the quality and comprehensiveness of the training which must meet criteria of high quality in terms of knowledge and skills. This issue is crucial in the current situation of the deregulation of the professions of tour leader and tour guide. As Kruczak et al. (2020) point out in their research, this deregulation was negatively assessed by the industry due to a decrease in the competence of tour leaders and tour guides. Therefore, attention to the quality of these services is a key issue in terms of current training. It is important to update training programs, taking into account the quality of service, modern trends in the use of technology, and responsibility for entrusted tasks.

In the context of these challenges, it is worth considering the inclusion of elements in the educational process that would enable certification within the Integrated Qualifications System, in particular the market qualification "Tourist Event Guiding". Currently, there are no expectations from the socio-economic environment, including travel agencies, to implement such solutions, nor are there signals from students who, after graduation, take up work as tour leaders. Additionally, the university faces formal and legal obstacles in implementing this type of certification. Nevertheless, in the longer term, obtaining the status of a certifying institution could bring tangible benefits both to students and to the tourism industry, enhancing graduates' competitiveness in the labour market and raising the standard of services provided.

Describing the situation of tour operators in the market, in the light of the deregulation of the profession, Sidor et al. (2014) pointed out that the benefit is being compelled to enhance one's skills in order to remain on the market and the possibility to use one's own knowledge without having to prove this with an exam result. This shows that it is a potential tour leader that decides whether and how to develop their skills to be competitive on the market by providing high-quality services that are tailored to the type and specificity of groups. In this respect, the above-mentioned awareness of the need for self-improvement of skills and continuous further training is an essential feature of a tour leader operating in the market today.

In addition, depending on the direction or profile of the tour organiser, according to Szafranowicz-Małozięć (2014), the program, content and duration of a tour leader course can be established individually, educating those interested in improving the quality of services provided in a specific area and issue. The leader can participate in the planning and organisation of tourist events in specific destinations, using their knowledge of the area and potential partners. By contributing to the trip, participants are also more likely to assess it favourably as co-creation of a tourist event gives confidence that the tour leader concerned will implement it.

Deregulation has led to a reduction in the quality of services and economic difficulties in the profession; the number of jobs has decreased, competition has increased, and the shadow economy has expanded. As a result, many guides are forced to take up seasonal or contract work and this destabilises their professional situation and limits the possibility of a permanent income. Research also shows that deregulation has caused an increase in the employment of foreigners which affects the local market, as well as the quality of historical or cultural information transmitted (Janczak, 2015; Kruczek et al., 2020). In addition, Sidor et al. (2014) identified that deregulation offered an opportunity

for a better adapted, more varied and more effective program of tour leader training and corresponding trip quality. This allows profiling of a particular tour leader in terms of a specific topic, type of event or destination which is an opportunity to specialise in a selected area.

The quality aspect of customer service is indicated by tourists as the most important in the assessment of a tour leader's work (Gryszel, 2020). This factor also determines the overall assessment of the entire tourist event (Mossberg, 1995), as well as the further use of the services offered by a tour operator (Geva & Goldman, 1991). The crucial aspect in the assessment of a tour leader is the level of general and specialist knowledge which, as indicated by Gryszel (2020), needs to be high. However, we should note that this was the case for tour leaders who had former, state-owned licenses. In this respect, the current leader training is expected to match the previous training that has been completed by those with state qualifications. The decision to cooperate with tour leaders is significantly influenced by the quality of the services provided, the possession of a license, as well as recommendations of friends, which is confirmed by searching for potential leaders through their own contact database resources (Kruczek et al., 2020).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In the process of training for the profession of tour guide, a crucial issue is the evaluation of this process, especially by employers and training participants who have already started working. The training organiser should be willing to modify and be open to signals coming from the tourism industry. This perspective allows for the formation of competencies that are important from the point of view of the labour market, and the training should take into account the adaptation of the tour leader to modern trends. They are expected to know the specifics and uniqueness of the visited area, act as a kind ambassador for the region, and at the same time have broad horizons and interests.

Among today's challenges, the skilful use of modern technology comes to the fore, including generative artificial intelligence in guiding tours and preparing sightseeing narratives, as well as taking into account the growing role of air transport in tourism.

Paying attention to the quality level of training, the possible introduction of an internal exam and perhaps issuing a certificate, could open the way to the profession for those completing such training at university. It is worth considering the possibility of linking the study program with certification, within the Integrated Qualifications System, which could strengthen graduates' position on the labour market.

It is important to balance the use of technology and the loss of educational value. This means that it is necessary to use these technologies in the training process, as it allows advantages to be discovered, but also disadvantages.

It is important to understand that training in university settings is not a substitute for professional practice. In most cases, after completing the training, the participant is not fully ready to take up work without an internship.

Also, such training will not develop a set of soft skills useful in the work of a tour leader. However, it can emphasize their importance and indicate ways of developing them to interested students. What seems particularly important is the awareness of the need for continuous education, taking responsibility for the implemented tourist event and the role of a high standard of customer service.

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