

## **OPINIONS OF BALKAN CONSUMERS ABOUT QUALITY STANDARDS FOR WELLNESS SERVICES AND CERTIFIED SKILLS OF SPECIALIZED STAFF**

*Preliminary communication*

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### **Abstract**

*Given these problems, the aim of the WELVET study was to establish the actual quality of the educational programs in the partner countries (Austria, Bulgaria, England, Estonia and Macedonia) and setting out the requirements for staffing in Bulgarian SPA & Wellness & Thalasso tourism. Object of the study were 243 Bulgarians (from a study of the WELVET project and the Wellness Institute Bulgaria) senior professionals from various SPA & Wellness & Thalasso centres (102 employers, executives, investors, entrepreneurs, managers, company managers, representatives of professional organizations and the executive power), which conducted the WELVET survey in support of the project experts, from the Balkan Cluster for Health, Wellness & SPA tourism, the Federation of sport pedagogues of Republic of Macedonia, the vocational training centre from Sofia. On the basis of the survey we believe that joint action is needed, in collaboration with the professional associations and NGOs for the development and adoption of state regulatory tools: Setting standards for categorization of Wellness & SPAs and quality assessment procedures and services; Provide specialized training of personnel with specialized secondary and higher education (in NSA "Bachelor" and "Master" degree and the "Doctoral degree – PhD");*

**Keywords:** *Wellness culture, SPA & Wellness tourism, quality standards for wellness services, training programs, physical activity, specific skills certification*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last five years, people actively talk about Wellness tourism and Recreation programs (Ignatov, 2012), but it is still developing spontaneous, without a clear concept, unable to compete with even the countries of Central Europe due to lack of specialized personnel. Service standards in the industry have not been introduced, worldwide not given a specific definition, and global tourism defined as the strongest niche - "SPA and Wellness sector" (Dimitrova, (Димитрова), 2011). Significantly increased the proportion of active healthy holidays, as in 2016 Wellness tourism practiced more than 4 million People worldwide. Wellness methodologies and practices can be seen as "... creating polyvalent Wellness & Spa culture" (Dimitrova, (Димитрова), 2009), it is important to "... discuss problems recuperation significance of physical activity in the aquatic environment and the direct link to improving the quality of life and health status of the practitioners ..." (Dimitrova (Димитрова), 2012). *According the Summary Report, of the Global Wellness institute* (Ellis, S., 2013), globally find highly qualified staff for Wellness centres is a major problem. The U.S. economic analysts call this fact a "War for talents". According the research team of the Global Wellness Institute, in the study of the industry, which results are presented in the Economy Report (2014): "... 95% of the leaders of the SPA & Wellness industry said they are facing serious problems in recruiting Wellness & SPA managers / directors with right mix of skills and experience. Over 52% of the owners of the centres stated that the issue of qualification of the staff remains the same or even worse ..." (Dimitrova, 2014). The needs of the

practice grow, and definitely not enough staff (Polimenov (Полименов), 2014). Therefore, a person's particular situation in which the dynamics of the SPA & Wellness tourism on the demand for specialized packages outstrips with great growth rates operation of services with qualified personnel certified through educational programs (Dimitrova, Donev, (Димитрова, Донеv), 2006), fellowships, training seminars or received certified competencies. On international level, according the research team of the Global Wellness Institute, in the study of the industry, which results are presented in the Economy Report (2014) - highlighted the fact that wellness tourism is expanding rapidly, demanding for more staff than existing. The global wellness tourism market is currently worth 425 billion euro and 36% of that spending is generated by Europe (Polimenov, (Полименов), 2014). Six of the top 10 world wellness tourism destinations are in Europe (Treneva, (Тренева), 2013). Growth forecasts suggest opening up the potential of Eastern Europe (Polimenov (Полименов), 2014). The European wellness industry is aware that in order to maintain its leading positions and quality, ensuring relevant training is a critical success factor (Trendafilov, Dimitrova, 2013), both for current and future employees involved in the provision of services to ensure the satisfactory delivery of the tasks assigned to them (Nesheva, 2015).

### **METHODS**

The WELVET project is based on transnational cooperation effort of VET providers and economic actors in the field of wellness tourism. The project's core intellectual output, a VET course for the emerging "wellness instructor"

occupation, is addressing a pressing need of the European wellness tourism industry, namely the lack of trained staff to deliver high quality specialized customer service.

The WELVET project will equip VET providers with new curricula to apply when delivering continuous VET (C-VET) to professionals already holding a vocational qualification in some of the occupations included in the professional field of Tourism and Hospitality. This would lead to filling in the gap for qualified staff to act as wellness instructors, due to this vocation still not being formalized in many countries at secondary education level. Our ambition is to also ensure that the continuous training process to be delivered, adds additional units (learning outcomes) to already acquired qualifications and levels, thus contributing to increasing employability and consistency with the tourist and hospitality sector's current needs. In addition, the WELVET project will propose a unique delivery method by designing, testing and producing a WELVET mobile app., in order to ensure free and open access innovative training embedded in the digital era.

The WELVET project further resonates the main new features and meta priority lines of Erasmus+ such as dissemination and exploitation of results (the project consortium covers 4 main regions of EU - South-Eastern (Bulgaria and Republic of Macedonia), Central (Austria) North (Estonia) and Western Europe (United Kingdom), open access to education products (the WELVET learning app to be developed will be available for free to the target group) and multilingualism (the project will deliver products in 5 languages (EN, BG, EE, MK, DE).

Bulgaria, Republic of Macedonia and Estonia are countries opening up to alternative forms of tourism to attract more clients from the global market (Nesheva, 2015). Wellness tourism is seen also as a source for ensuring sustainable development of rural regions and other regions wanting to develop all season (e.g., Rila Mountains area) touristic attractions (Trendafilov, Dimitrova, 2013). The countries have developed their hotel infrastructure, so to incorporate elements of the wellness tourism, such as healthy food, opportunities for outdoor Wellness activities (Treneva (Тренева), 2013; Nesheva, 2015), linked to natural resources (such as mineral springs) (Trendafilov, Dimitrova, 2013). The key challenge is to ensure that clients are aware of the diverse wellness opportunities offered and receive the appropriate guidance and follow-up by the respective staff (Nesheva, 2015). Austria is a leading global provider of wellness products. Nevertheless, the question on maintaining quality is even more pressing in the light of rising global competitors such as Asia-Pacific countries. In the UK

there is a strategic goal of promoting Wales and Northern Ireland as touristic destinations. Currently around almost two thirds of critical vacancies in the sector are due to skill shortages (Nesheva, 2015), the majority of which are for elementary staff and skilled trade occupations.

## RESULTS

Given these problems, the *aim* of the WELVET study was to establish the actual quality of the educational programs in the partner countries (Austria, Bulgaria, England, Estonia and Macedonia) and setting out the requirements for staffing in Bulgarian SPA & Wellness & Thalasso tourism. Object of the study were 243 Bulgarians (from a study of the WELVET project and the Wellness Institute Bulgaria) senior professionals from various SPA & Wellness & Thalasso centres (102 employers, executives, investors, entrepreneurs, managers, company managers, representatives of professional organizations and the executive power), which conducted the WELVET survey in support of the project experts, from the Balkan Cluster for Health, Wellness & SPA tourism, the Federation of sport pedagogy of Republic of Macedonia, the vocational training centre from Sofia, held in January 2017. Important it is to create "... educational Wellness modules and levels of education in the teaching and training process ..." in the secondary and the higher education (Dimitrova, (Димитрова), 2012).

## DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarized the existing education and training programs worldwide by 2014. This information is considered to be as accurate as possible, from the International SPA & Wellness Institute / by his research team / but the figures are permissible standard error.

Perhaps there are other providers of special education who are not identified and were noted in the study - as is the Bulgarian case. Providers listed in the table are based on data of the research team of SRI, according to information compiled: online, by email, site survey or filed by telephone.

Industry leaders complain that widespread appointments are without specialized skills in Wellness & SPA management. Furthermore, the subjects most closely related to that specific management are relatively new and few in number. Other optional modules available to other disciplines and are not as well connected with SPA & Wellness centre / industry / tourism as they ideally should be appointed for the several elective credit, not the professional field of education. Providers of continuing education

Table 1. Types of educational programs and training for SPA & Wellness worldwide

Summary of Wellness & SPA Management - Education & Training programs on the sector				
	Total number of University / College specific programs	Total number of University / College	Private companies	
			Bachelor / Master / Doctoral Degree	Short courses workshop, seminar Certification
Caribbean region	3	1	1	7
Europe	9	3	8	15
Latin America	4	1	-	3
Middle East	1	1	-	-
North America	16	7	-	9
In the world	41	15	2	24
Balkan Region of Europe				
Bulgaria	7	3	6 + 1 PhD	-
Macedonia	2	-	-	2

Note: Data are the intellectual property of the International SPA & Wellness Institute and published with permission.

Table 2. Matrix of the opinions of surveyed experts for evaluation of the quality of Wellness facilities

Indicators	1/6 un.	2/5 un.	3/4 un.	4/3 un.	5/2 un	6/1un.	Sum	Rang
1. The centre must employ highly qualified and trained personnel, selected according to specific criteria like education, skills and experience.	88 86% 486	12 12% 60	1 1% 4	1 1% 3	– – –	– – –	102 people 553 Units Rang Weight	I
2. The centre must meet standards in the quality of Wellness services and EU standards regarding wellness & spa products.	9 8,5% 54	66 65,5% 330	15 14,5% 60	6 5,5% 18	5 5% 10	1 1% 1	102 100% 473	II
3. The centre must have state-of-the-art facilities and equipment	4 3,5% 24	3 2,5% 15	70 69% 280	6 5,5% 18	10 9% 20	9 8,5% 9	102 100% 366	III
4. The centre needs a detailed investment project plan concerning the areas of wellness & spa business development	1 1% 6	12 12% 60	6 5,5% 24	42 41,5% 126	4 3,5% 8	37 36,5% 37	102 100% 261	IV
5. The centre must have effective structure of governance and procedures for management	– –	4 3,5% 20	6 5,5% 25	20 9% 20	72 71,5% 144	– –	102 100% 209	V
6. The centre must have excellent image and competitiveness.	– –	5 5% 25	4 3,5% 14	27 26,5% 81	11 10% 22	55 54,5% 55	102 100% 197	VI

are also new, fragmented and no "proven" model for effective delivery of training for employees already working in the Wellness sector. At present special problems in management of Wellness business concern (Ellis, 2013):

1. The challenges associated with current / future SPA & Wellness managers and the requirements for a high level of skills acquired in their careers / path of growth; challenges in taking a management position, which requires interdisciplinary knowledge and skills combined with an understanding of the Wellness Culture and people motivation for healthy life style. 2. Criteria on educational and professional competencies of staff for Wellness are not well defined, so most managers / directors / managers / consultants / methodologists have unilateral knowledge: only control or only therapies or finance, or marketing, or motor practices aqueous medium. 3. Analysing the views of experts of the WELVET survey in Bulgaria identified, we find 6 indicators for ranking the Wellness facilities and 6 indicators for the customer expectations for the Wellness staff that they ranked by importance. Bulgaria is absolute Balkan Educational Leader, with 5 accredited Wellness & SPA & Thalasso programs - from "bachelor degree" to "Doctoral" degree in 2 professional fields: 7.6. Sport and 7.5. Health Care. The results of the psychometric experiment are presented in Table 2. ranged / according to their weights rang by importance and significance / main criteria for assessing the quality and competitiveness of Wellness Centres on the ground expertise.

The main factors for high quality and preferences for one Wellness Centre, according to the majority of customers / experts "The centre must employ highly qualified and trained personnel, selected according to specific criteria like education, skills and experience" (grades weight 553 units - 86%) and "The centre must meet standards in the quality of services and EU standards regarding wellness &

spa centres" (Ranks weight 473 units – 65,5%). Third and fourth are classified "The centre must have state-of-the-art facilities and equipment" (Ranks weight 366 units - 69%) and "The centre needs a detailed investment project plan concerning the areas of wellness & spa business development" (rang. weight 261 units – 41,5%). Indicators: "The centre must have effective structure of governance and procedures for management" and "The centre must have excellent image and competitiveness", received (rang. Weight 209 units – 71,5%) and (rang. Weight 197 units – 54,5%). The ranking of the other indicators / 7 to 10 place /, studied by the Wellness Institute Bulgaria, are as follows: a large assortment of Wellness services; optimal pricing strategy; flexible marketing policy; favourable conditions of work and promotion of employees, but for the WELVET study the Consortium makes his preference only for 6 statements. From the data analysis we find, that the first and second place are based on the professional qualifications of the personnel and the effectiveness of the implementation of services. The experts determination of the priority indicators in the WELVET survey, conducted to their ranking, should be considered when uniform standards will be introduced (in accordance with the EU criteria) by all public authorities responsible for the National categorization of Wellness & Spa facilities and the National certification of staff in the wellness sector. A crucial need of training programs is established, during the WELVET survey in the partner countries.

Future professionals in the wellness industry needs a stable knowledge and competencies for effective organizational and methodical (Intellectual and practical knowledge and skills for different procedures and healthy influences, based on the natural resources), with a high level of motivation to offer and perform quality services tailored to the needs of wellness customers and promote their inte-

rests. In this connection it is necessary to activate the professional contacts between academic units, VET course centres, Secondary schools, professional educational bodies, for build a Bridge between the theory and the wellness business and Industry sectors (with real practice in real professional environment). The elaborated, in our Erasmus + WELVET project – Curriculum, Syllabus and Job profile are intellectual outputs with high added value to the EU educational and labour policies, which expect to ensure inclusive smart growth.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, on the basis of the survey we believe that joint action is needed, in collaboration with the professional associations and NGOs for the development and adoption of state regulatory tools:

- Setting standards for categorization of Wellness & SPAs and quality assessment procedures and services;
- Introduction of requirements for qualification of personnel;
- Increasing competitiveness of SPAs in the domestic and international market by expanding the range of activities and services, balanced pricing policy, investment projects, promotional packages and strategic directions of development;
- Provide specialized training of personnel with specialized secondary and higher education (in NSA "Bachelor" and "Master" degree and the "Doctoral degree – PhD");
- Develop regulations harmonized with the European requirements for the activity in the SPA & Wellness & Thalasso facilities and a national strategy for the development of this business in Bulgaria.
- The implementation of these priorities, along with extremely advantageously natural factors will contribute to making Bulgaria a preferred SPA & Wellness & Thalasso destination.

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