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EXPLORE ARCHIPELAGO

– setting the course for internationalization

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The global travel industry has undergone drastic changes, not least because of fast-advancing digitalization. It has challenged especially the traditional tour operator landscape, since independent travelers are increasingly using digital platforms for both planning and booking their travels. The areal travel organizations have formerly targeted their activities and offering mainly to tour operators, but are now adapting their services to individual customers used to 24/7 service via digital channels.

Areal travel organizations as well as tourism businesses are developing their business models to answer to the new customer needs and expectations. In an attempt to solve some of the challenges related to digital presence and at the same time strengthen the attractiveness and brand of the Finnish archipelago in the international travel markets a new, digital travel platform has been launched.

The platform, Explore Archipelago, is part of a two-year project Archipelago Access, realized in cooperation with the city of Turku and Stockholm Archipelago Foundation, with additional funding from Interreg Central Baltic program. This thesis project looks into the requirements which individual travel businesses in the Finnish archipelago, more specifically Turku, Naantali, Parainen and Kemiönsaari, should fulfill in order to be portrayed on the platform. The main focus is on their readiness for catering to independent, international tourists.

The study has two research questions. First, what kind of participation criteria both supports the strategic goals and strengthens the international brand of a travel destination? And second, how can the criteria be presented so that they are accessible and updatable?

The concrete outcome of the project is area specific participation criteria for small and medium sized travel businesses looking to enter the international market, congruent with national and areal tourism strategies. To achieve these goals, a service design approach is used, which means that participation of different stakeholders in both research and design process is elementary.

KEYWORDS:

tourism, archipelago, internationalization, digitalization, service design

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– kurssi kohti kansainvälistymistä

Globaali matkailuala on kokenut suuria muutoksia erityisesti nopeasti etenevän digitalisaation myötä. Matkanjärjestäjien rooli on pienentynyt, kun itsenäiset matkailijat käyttävät online-kanavia yhä enenevässä määrin sekä matkan suunnitteluun että varaamiseen. Aiemmin erityisesti ryhmämatkanjärjestäjille palveluitaan tarjonneiden alueellisten matkailuorganisaatioiden täytyy nyt ottaa 24/7-palveluun tottuneet yksittäiset asiakkaat entistä paremmin huomioon.

Sekä matkailuorganisaatiot että matkailuyritykset kehittävät jatkuvasti liiketoimintaansa vastatakseen asiakkaiden tarpeisiin ja odotuksiin. Turun kaupunki sekä Stockholm Archipelago Foundation ovat käynnistäneet Interreg Central Baltic -ohjelman tuella kaksivuotisen Archipelago Access -hankkeen edistääkseen tätä kehitystyötä. Hankkeeseen kuuluu online-matkailualusta Explore Archipelago, joka hyödyntää digitalisaation luomia mahdollisuuksia ja pyrkii lisäämään Suomen ja Ruotsin saariston houkuttelevuutta sekä vahvistamaan alueen matkailubrändiä kansainvälisillä markkinoilla.

Alusta on matkailuyrityksille ilmainen, mutta markkinoitavien palveluiden tulee olla kansainvälisille asiakkaille soveltuvia. Tämä opinnäytetyö kartoittaa kriteeristöä, jonka perusteella alueen matkailuyritykset voivat päästä osaksi alustalla esitettyä tarjontaa. Projektin kohdealue on Suomen saaristo ja tarkemmin Turku, Naantali, Parainen ja Kemiönsaari. Pääfokus on yritysten valmiudessa palvella kansainvälisiä, itsenäisiä matkailijoita, joille Explore Archipelago -alusta on suunnattu.

Tutkimuskysymyksiä on kaksi. Ensinnä, millainen kriteeristö tukee saaristomatkailun strategisia tavoitteita ja vahvistaa koko matkailukohteen kansainvälistä brändiä? Toiseksi, miten esittää kehitetty kriteeristö helppokäyttöisessä ja päivitettävässä muodossa? Projektin konkreettinen tulos on alueen matkailuyrityksille suunnattu, kansainvälistymistä tukeva kriteeristö, joka on linjassa kansallisten ja alueellisten matkailustrategioiden kanssa.

Tutkimuskysymyksiä lähestytään palvelumuotoilun näkökulmasta, sille ominaisin menetelmin. Koska palvelumuotoilu on luonteeltaan ennen kaikkea osallistavaa, sidosryhmät ovat tässäkin työssä tärkeä osa sekä taustatutkimusta että käytännön suunnittelutyötä.

ASIASANAT:

turismi, saaristo, kansainvälistyminen, digitalisaatio, palvelumuotoilu

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DMO   Destination Management Organization (DMO) is an organization responsible for developing the travel sector, promoting the destination and coordinating tourism related activities and cooperation between actors in its area (Björk 2017, 142 – 143).

FIT   Free Independent Travelers (FITs) make travel plans and bookings independently and travel individually as opposed to booking ready-made holiday packages and travelling in groups. There has been a clear shift from group travel to independent travel since the late 2010s. (Business Finland 2020.)

OECD   Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has 36 member countries, Finland being one of them (OECD 2020).

OTA   Online Travel Agents (OTAs) are similar to traditional travel agencies, but operate online. OTAs, such as Booking.com, act as intermediaries between travel industry suppliers, such as hotels and transportation, and the consumer. The customer can compare prices and reviews as well as complete a booking directly via an OTA channel. (Visit Finland Kansainvälistymisopas 2019.)

SEM (SEO + SEA) Search Engine Marketing (SEM) contains both paid and organic, un-paid visibility on search engines, such as Google. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the organic optimizing of the content of a website to attract more traffic and rise high in search results, whereas Search Engine Advertising (SEA) means paid visibility targeting users of search engines, where a high ranking in the search results has been paid for. SEO and SEA together form SEM. (Soininen 2019.)

SME   Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) have fewer than 250 employees, and have either an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million, or an annual balance-sheet total not exceeding EUR 43 million. They are independent enterprises, which are not

owned as to 25 per cent or more of the capital or the voting rights by one enterprise, or jointly by several enterprises. (Tilastokeskus n.d.)

USP   Unique Selling Proposition (USP) is what differentiates a product or service from its competitors, giving it an advantageous market position compared to others. Ultimately it is about making the product stand out using unique product characteristics, pricing, placement strategies or promotions, for example. (Entrepreneur Europe n.d.)

1 INTRODUCTION

The global travel industry has recently undergone drastic changes, not least because of the fast-advancing digitalization. It has challenged especially the traditional tour operator landscape, since travelers are increasingly using digital platforms for both planning and booking their travels. The areal travel organizations have formerly targeted their activities and offering mainly to tour operators, but now they have to adapt to individual customers who can be reached 24/7 via digital channels. However, the processes related to digital purchasing have not developed sufficiently to answer to the customers' needs and expectations. Thus, areal travel organizations as well as tourism businesses have been forced to change their business model.

Digitalization brings with it great opportunities. Utilizing the new tools even small travel businesses can reach out to international travelers and maintain contact to them throughout their journey from planning to collecting feedback. Cooperation with international travel operators, online travel agents and other digital matchmaker platforms is easier than ever. This also means, that competition is fierce. It is hard for an individual operator to stand out from the masses, and the gap between forerunners and those who are only just getting started becomes wide, fast.

The abovementioned developments in the travel sector have not been left unnoticed in the Finnish coast and archipelago area. Adding challenge to the situation is the vast number of micro businesses and municipal operators, inadequately coordinated marketing and scattered information, which limit the destinations' and services' accessibility especially from international tourists' point of view (Archipelago Access n.d.).

To tackle these challenges the city of Turku, together with Stockholm Archipelago Foundation and supported by Interreg Central Baltic program, have launched a two-year project called Archipelago Access. The aim of the project is to develop a digital platform, Explore Archipelago, showcasing the Finnish and Swedish archipelago for tourists. The idea is to provide the independent travelers easy access to information about the destinations and services in the area before, during and after their visit. (Archipelago Access n.d.)

The attractiveness and success of the platform depends on the quantity and quality of information provided by tourism businesses and destinations in the area. The core idea of a digital market place is that no one actor has the necessary resources to succeed alone. A group of actors and service providers cooperating and combining their appeal, knowhow and products is what ultimately makes a destination attractive. (Hämäläinen et al. 2016, 37.)

The readiness to enter international markets and cater to international travelers varies considerably from business to business. Thus, certain criteria for participation on the Explore Archipelago platform need to be set, including, for example, providing web pages in English and having digital sales channels available. In addition, defining and working on common goals together guides the overall strategic development of the travel destination. Ultimately, attaining those goals strengthens the brand and competitiveness of the whole archipelago area.

1.1 Commissioner

The commissioner of the thesis work is the city of Turku in cooperation with Visit Turku, Southwest Finland Tourist & Convention Bureau. Visit Turku is responsible for the coordination of the Archipelago Access project in Finland. Visit Turku will also manage the selection and onboarding of the individual small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) on the platform. The project runs from April 2019 to June 2021 with a budget of 1,46 million euros, 75% of which comes from the Interreg Central Baltic program. Other financiers are the City of Turku and the project partner Stockholm Archipelago Foundation. (Archipelago Access n.d.)

The general framework for the Archipelago Access project is the ongoing development of Turku as a seaside city and the capital of the most beautiful archipelago in the world, as stated in the Vision for the City Center 2050 (Keskustavisio 2016). The idea behind the Archipelago Access project is that improved visibility and accessibility will attract new visitors and increase the use of the services offered in the whole area.

The project has two goals, both aiming to promote the archipelago area, its different destinations, sights, and services. The first goal is to create two interactive exhibitions, one for Forum Marinum in Turku and one for the Swedish Utö island during the year 2021. The second goal is to develop and launch a digital platform, Explore Archipelago,

to make information more easily available to international tourists and to improve the attractiveness of the whole region.

The thesis project will focus on the second goal, the Explore Archipelago platform, which aims to serve travelers before, during and after their visit in the Finnish and Swedish archipelago area. The platform will be based on a map application, which contains information on different services and places to visit in the area. Special attention is given to mobile user experience. (Archipelago Access n.d.)

The platform has two target groups: the travel businesses, mainly SMEs in the Finnish and Swedish archipelago, which will be given the opportunity to promote their services and products on the platform for free. In the first phase, the main actors involved are Visit Turku, Visit Parainen, Visit Naantali and Visit Kemiönsaari. The corresponding cities are shown in the maps below (figure 1 and 2). The other target group is the users, meaning the Free Independent Travelers (FITs), albeit domestic tourists will undoubtedly benefit from the service as well.
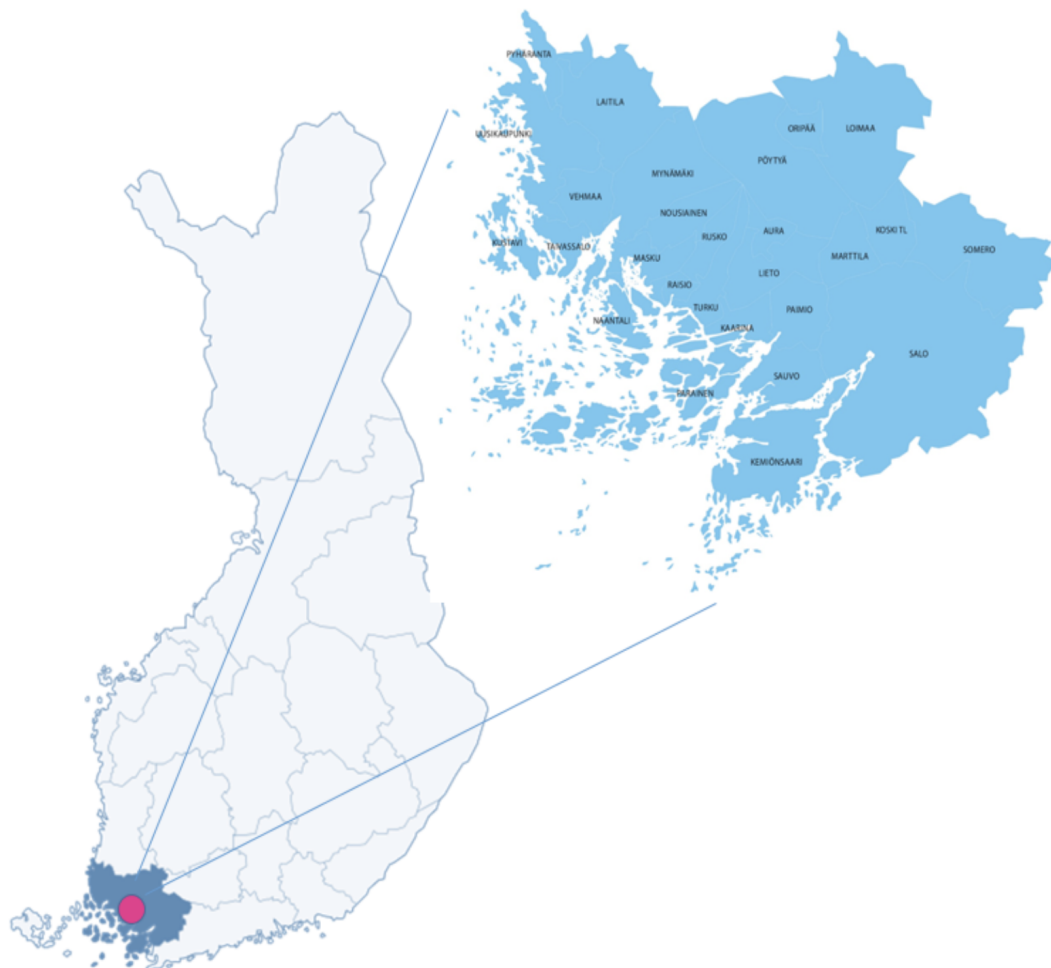

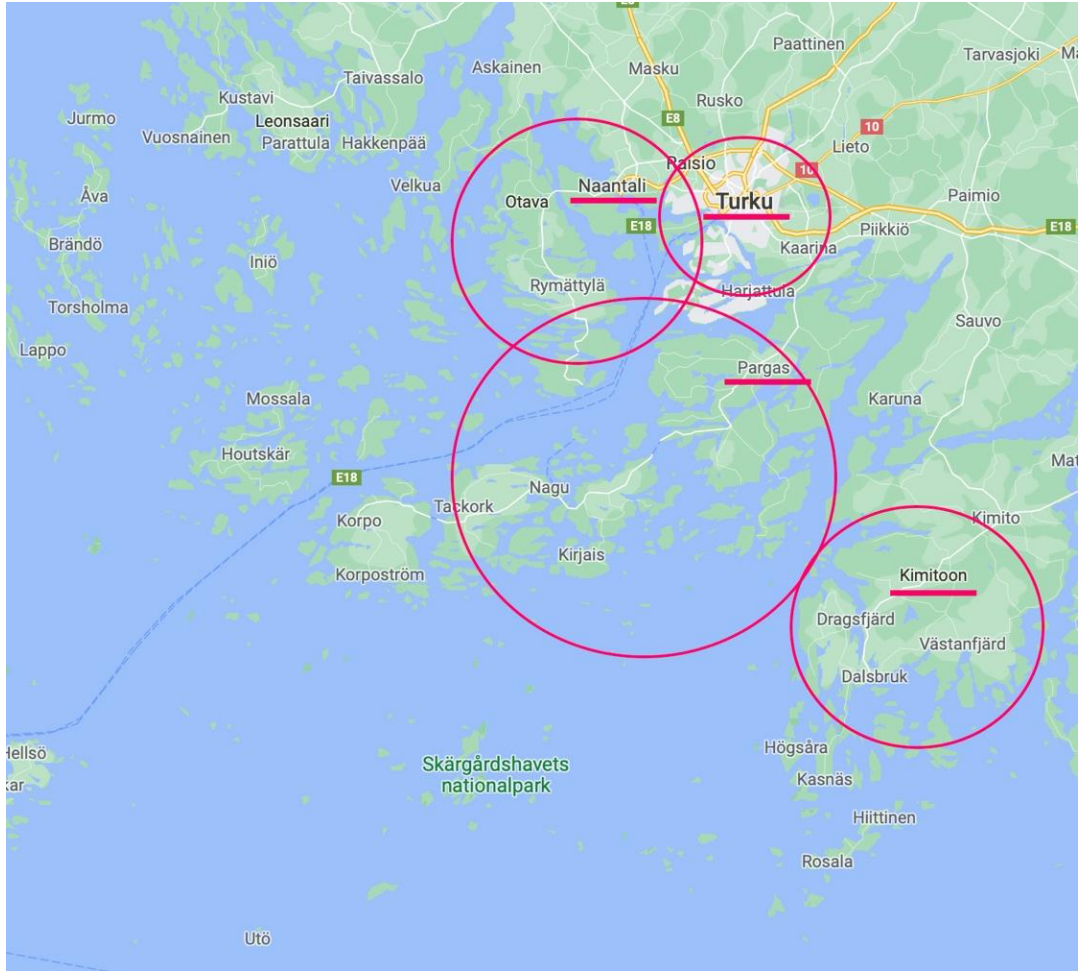*Figure 1. Southwest Finland (Turku-Southwest Finland EU Office n.d.).*

Figure 2. Turku, Naantali, Parainen and Kemiönsaari (Google Maps n.d.).

1.2 Project scope and research questions

At the beginning of this thesis study, the Archipelago Access project had reached its final quarter and the Explore Archipelago platform was about to be published. However, most of the content was yet to be created. The platform is only as attractive and relevant to the target audience as are the businesses and destinations displayed on it. This is why certain criteria regarding the participating SMEs' readiness to do international business need to be set, which is the core of this thesis project.

In the center of the research are individual travel industry businesses, which wish to promote their offering on the platform with the objective of gaining more visibility and, eventually, sales. To secure effectiveness and sustainability, the criteria for their participation on the platform ought to be in line with the strategic goals outlined by the areal and national travel organizations in Finland. It is important for the whole area brand, that the Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) can stand behind the common criteria. Thus, they are the other focus of this study.

The research questions are:

- What kind of participation criteria both supports the strategic goals and strengthens the international brand of a travel destination?
- How can the criteria be presented so that they are accessible and updatable?

As a concrete product of the project the following outcomes are expected:

- Area specific participation criteria for SMEs in line with national and areal strategic goals.
- Concrete presentation of the criteria, for example in the form of a checklist, which can be delivered to the SMEs.

In order to achieve these outcomes and for them to be relevant now and in the future, global and local tourism trends shall be taken into consideration along with the current strategies for the tourism industry development in Finland.

The geographical area to be considered is the Finnish archipelago but as stated in the introduction, many area organizations struggle with the same challenges. Thus, the expectation is, that the process of aligning strategies and creating common standards

and the solution designed could also, with slight area specific alterations, be applied for a more general, location independent purpose.

Since the platform is a work in progress and the SMEs will be added on it along the development process, the effectiveness of the criteria or their presentation cannot be fully evaluated by the end of this project. However, feedback will be gathered from the commissioner and SME representatives at the end of the project.

The frame of reference (figure 3) illustrates the core topics mentioned above. DMOs and SMEs are the main target groups of the project. The different national, regional and local tourism strategies guide the criteria work and will be discussed more closely in chapter 4. The premises for the Archipelago Access project and thus the Explore Archipelago platform are global trends in travel business, digitalization being the main driver, and their effect on the local tourism in the Finnish archipelago, which will be discussed in chapter 3.
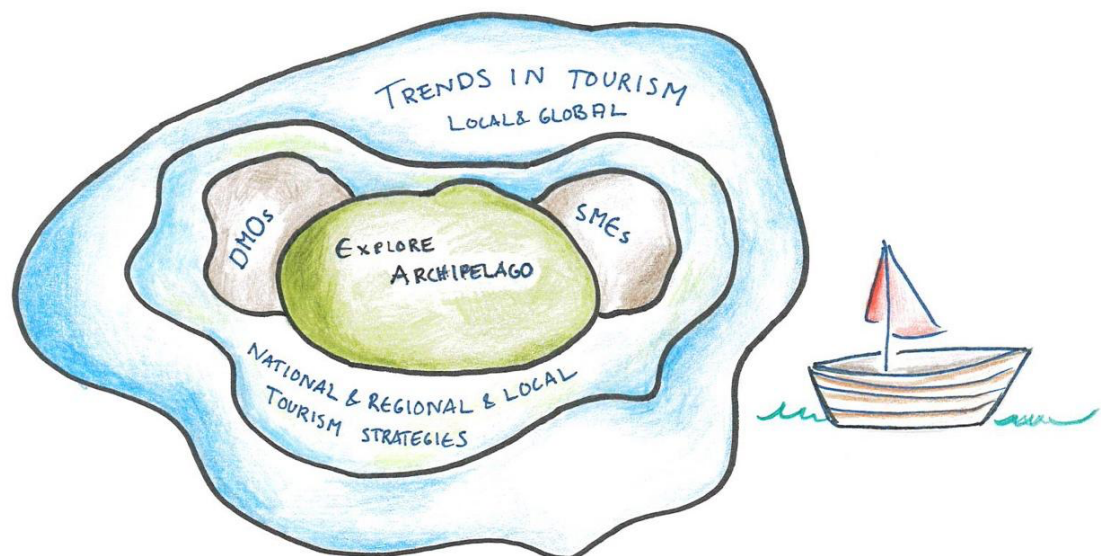

Figure 3. Frame of reference.

2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 General research approach

The overall research paradigm adopted is *constructivism*. Constructivism emphasizes the way knowledge is being created, or constructed, during the research process through the researcher's own experiences as well as those of the research participants. In constructivist research, knowledge has no objective or absolute values, and reality is dependent on the individual perspectives of research participants. Knowledge is constructed by each individual through his/her interactions with the environment, which concerns both the researcher and the researched. This emphasizes the interrelation between the researcher and participant(s) as they co-construct meaning. (Adom et al. 2016, 5.)

The aforementioned notions have two important implications for the study at hand. First, the researcher's beliefs, values and previous knowledge of the subject must be acknowledged as an inevitable part of the outcome, no matter how objective an observer she/he strives to be. In this case, the researcher has a background in the travel industry and has previous knowledge of the issues discussed, which will provide the raw material for the new knowledge created. Second, a research which uses co-design and participatory research tools benefits from the constructivist approach, where participants' realities having an effect on the results is both welcomed and inevitable.

The research methodology adopted is *action research.* While generating new knowledge, action research also aims to improve a situation in a particular setting not doing research on people, but to work with them. Participation is an integral part of action research, which involves the surrounding community in the research process. (Dawson 2009, 17.)

Burns (2000, 443) describes action research as both an approach to problem-solving and a problem solving process. The basic characteristics of such research are that it is situational, bound to a certain context, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative, modifications being continuously evaluated for improvement (ibid., 444). This type of research involves a continuous spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, and the process is usually repeated several times (Dawson 2009, 17).

Such participatory, spiralling process is well-matched to the selected research approach, *service design*. It is known, among other things, for its user centricity, co-creative methods, and iterative nature, as discussed in the next chapter. (Stickdorn & Schneider 2011, 34.)

2.2 Service design and user-centricity

Service design is the guiding approach for the development of the solution based on the research done, as it offers practical approaches for developing service businesses based on customer insight (Ojasalo & Ojasalo 2015). Stickdorn and Schneider (2011, 34) describe service design as:

1. User centered: services should be experienced through the customer's eyes.
2. Co-creative: all stakeholders should be included in the service design process.
3. Evidencing: intangible services should be visualized in terms of physical artefacts.
4. Holistic: the entire environment of services should be considered.
5. Systematic and iterative: process that integrates user-oriented, team-based and interdisciplinary approaches and methods.

Elementary to a service design process is the involvement of relevant users and stakeholders into the development during different phases of the process, from gaining information and knowledge about the topic to the development and validation of the solutions. In participatory design the stakeholders can be anything from experts to ordinary people who are influencing, involved in or likely to benefit from the service developed. (NSW Council of Social Services n.d.)

When potential and/or actual users can take part in coming up and validating the development suggestions designed for the commissioner, the customer interaction has the potential to shorten the development cycle and improve the quality of innovations. User experience of a service can be improved by involving the end users in the service development. Users' input is especially useful in cases such as the one at hand, where the service development process is at its piloting stage and, consequently, high in uncertainty and low in formalisation. (Kaasinen et al. 2010.)

In user-centered design it is common to use a plethora of methods and tools to develop an understanding of user needs. These methods can be investigative, such as surveys

and interviews, and generative, such as user testing. (IDFa n.d.) This iterative process can be divided into four phases as shown in figure 4 below. The cyclical nature of the process is illustrated by arrows, emphasizing that different steps might be revisited several times during a project.
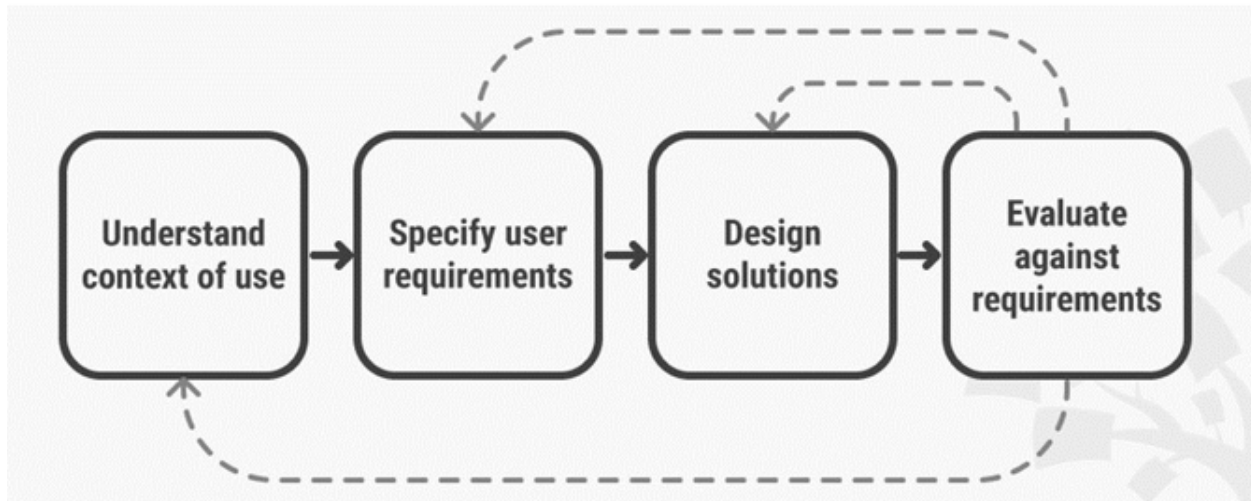
Figure 4. User-centered design process (IDFa n.d.).

The main focus is on understanding the users and their context at all stages of the development process. First, the focus is on *understanding* the *context* in which the users may use the product or service. Second, the designer should try and *specify* the users' *requirements*, for which *solutions* are then *designed*. In the last phase, the performance of a design is *evaluated* against the users' context and requirements. After the first round, further iterations of the four phases follow until a satisfactory result is reached. (IDFa n.d.) The above described process will be the guiding framework for the study at hand.

2.3 Research process

The methodological framework illustrated below in figure 5 includes both the theoretic background explained in the previous chapter and the service design process with the tools and methods used in each phase from understanding to evaluating.

Figure 5. Methodological framework.

Figuratively speaking, the islands of constructivist research, action research and service design approach are the basis on which the process lighthouse is built, level by level, from understanding the research topic to evaluating the results. The boats depict the different tools and methods used during each level of the design journey. The research methods to collect insights and understand the research problems at hand as well as tools to create solutions for them are described more closely below and presented in the process chart (figure 6) completed with a process timeline.
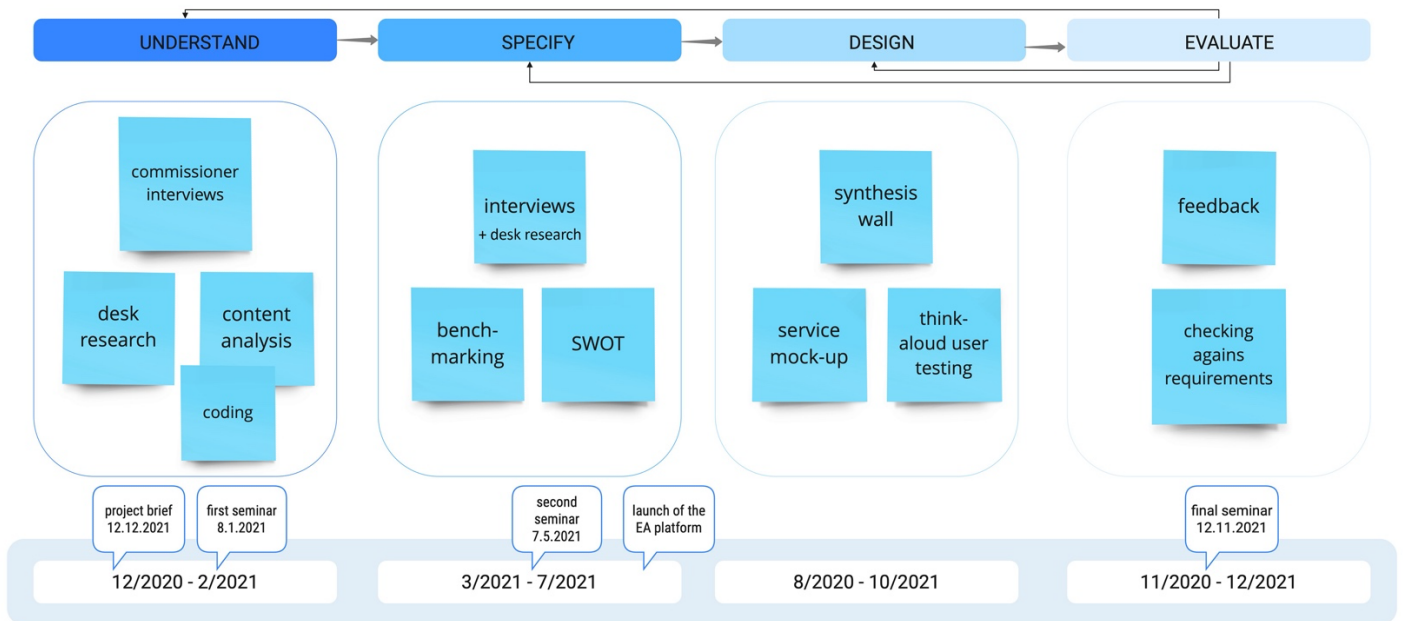
Figure 6. Process chart.

The whole project will take circa 12 months. The individual research tools and methods have been grouped under each stage. Especially specifying the criteria and designing their presentation to the SMEs are overlapping processes, each cumulating information which helps improve both outcomes. Desk research is also conducted throughout the process whenever new issues arise and require further background research to be better understood. The process should therefore not be seen as a strictly chronological one. As any service design case, this too will be iterative, going back and forth, which is illustrated by the arrows between the four stages: understand, specify, design, and evaluate.

Understand

In the first phase, a researcher is to define the commissioner's goals and objectives for the project. This was done in informal *interviews* which also contained the brief at the very beginning of the project.

Essential is also to understand to whom the concept or service is targeted and in what environment. A genuine understanding of the users' practices, needs and expectations in relation to the service is needed. *Desk research* is preparatory research conducted before the actual research begins (Stickdorn et al. 2018, 118). It helps in finding the right questions to ask during the service design process. Here the preliminary conception is based on a review of various publications and studies concerning the tourism industry

and its current trends. A primary source of information is also the various Finnish tourism strategies on national and local level.

The literary review of the areal and national tourism strategies is substantiated with a *content analysis.* In this method of analysis each document is worked through assigning *codes*, that is, classifying the material into themes or topics, using labels of usually of one to two words (Dawson 2009, 122; Burns 2000, 432). These can be grouped further into categories, which can be set beforehand or they can emerge from the data (Dawson 2009, 122). The elements can be counted in numerical terms as well as examined for meaning (Burns 2000, 432). This form of classifying content allows the researcher to condense the meaning of the material step by step, until only the key results remain. The coding system needs to relate to the theoretical framework or research question (ibid., 434). In this case, as the research is seeking to find a common ground for setting criteria and working towards the same vision, the coding is based on the core elements - mission, vision, and goals - of different tourism strategies.

Specify

The content analysis serves as a starting point for gaining more in-depth insights from the target groups via *interviews*. Interviews are apt for exploring complex issues. An interview reveals, among other things, attitudes, beliefs and understanding, and is a suitable qualitative research method when aiming to understand lived experience. (Bullock 2016.)

The common goals based on the content analysis serve as basis for discussion in the in-depth interviews with tourism industry professionals. The aim is to determine the order of priority for the goals - how would the DMOs rate the goals, are their priorities aligned, and would they add something? Intention is also to find out what the DMOs expect of the companies - how should they work towards these goals? The result of the interviews will be refined into the criteria or participation.

The interviews follow a semi-structured approach, in which a conversational style is adopted, supported by a memory-aiding list of important questions to be touched upon. This allows a flexible approach, whereby the wording and order of the questions can be altered, and important themes further elaborated on. (Bullock 2016.) The approach is expected to shed light to issues which have maybe not been taken into consideration in the strategies but can affect the design of the criteria.

The interviews are conducted individually, and approximately 60 minutes is allocated to each of them. The interviews are done with Visit Turku, Visit Parainen and Visit Naantali. Unfortunately, during summer 2021, there was a change in the staffing at Visit Kemiönsaari, and nobody available for an interview.

To facilitate the interviews, an online cooperation platform, Miro, is used. Prior to the interview the platform and set of tasks are tested with two users to avoid technical issues during the actual interview. Each participant is sent the link and instructions to participate on the platform before the interview. Images of the online environment (starting view, information page and close-ups of the tasks) can be seen in appendix 3.

Next, *benchmarking* is conducted. It is a method used to develop products, services or other operations by comparing them against similar, better (or best) functioning operations of other organizations, trying to find improvement ideas and best practices which could then be implemented (Innokylä n.d.). In this study benchmarking is done to find ideas and best practices for creating functional criteria for participation and internationalization for tourism industry SMEs. Inspiration is searched from tourism industry organizations who have already implemented such criteria for tourism businesses operating in international markets. Three different criteria are benchmarked, one from a Finnish organization, one from an Irish organization and one from a global company originating from the United States of America.

At the end of this phase, a *SWOT analysis* is conducted. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. SWOT analysis is commonly used to assess internal and external environments of an organization and supports strategic planning processes. A SWOT analysis can also be done for a product, situation, industry or person, for example. It also facilitates decision-making, as it provides a look into the future and generates strategic opportunities and alternatives. (Corporate Finance Institute Education Inc 2020.) When interviewing travel industry professionals working for the DMOs, concerns and ideas how to further develop the concept are expected to arise. A SWOT analysis concerning the whole concept of criteria setting aims to reveal possible problems and opportunities before the design work begins.

Design

This phase starts with drawing together all the insights, categorizing each one of them under a specific criterion. The method called *synthesis wall*, or insight mapping, supports debriefing and analysis of research outcomes. All the relevant insights from the research

are written on separate post-it notes and placed on the wall, in this case on an online white board, to start identifying informative factors to be used in the design process. The wall should be set in a structured way before starting the analysis. (SDT n.d.) In this case the criteria serve as such pre-set labels.

After this, a first version of the criteria will be visualized in the form of a *service mock-up*. Mock-ups are used to gain feedback about designs and design ideas at an early stage in the design process. Thus, mock-ups can be seen as very early prototypes, often paper-based or made of other low-fidelity, inexpensive materials. There are many advantages to this design tool. First, mock-ups incite criticism because they are low-cost, and therefore the ones criticizing know, that it is a work in process, the stakes are not very high, and the criticism is very welcome. They also serve as a discussion medium between the designer, the design team and users. It is also much easier to simply change the mock-up rather than the actual final product. (IDFb n.d.)

In this case, the mock-up takes a digital form. The intention is to incorporate improvement ideas and suggestions from the interviews and benchmarking in a digital presentation of the criteria. It also makes the suggestions easier to explain to and discuss with the commissioner and the users.

With the help of the mock-up, feedback will be collected by means of a *user test*, which is a simple method of delivering useful information about how usable a solution is. In this study *think-aloud method* will be used to test the solution. Testers will perform pre-planned tasks and think out loud while doing so. This provides qualitative data to help understand why users are behaving the way they are. The participants should be from the target group that is to use the service and cover a range of demographics within that group, which in this case means the archipelago area SMEs. (Magain 2012.)

Evaluate

The final step is to evaluate both the outcomes of the project and the process itself. Due to the Archipelago Access project timing, the criteria cannot be fully implemented and tested in use, since the platform will only be launched in its beta stage before the end of the thesis project. Also, marketing of the platform to areal SMEs will only start later.

However, a concluding discussion with the commissioner will be held for *feedback*. The intention is to evaluate whether the expectations for the project are met and if the suggested solution is usable in its intended context. At this point, any final changes can

still be made before hand-over of the materials. The results of the project will also be *checked against the initial research questions* - what kind of criteria are set in the end and in what kind of form they are presented. As for the research process, the final conclusions will contain reflections on the process, how it proceeded, what was learned and how the learnings can be used in the future.

3 TOURISM AND ITS TRENDS

In this study tourism is understood to comprise the activities of people travelling to and staying in destinations outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year. The reason of travel can be leisure, business or other purposes and also activities such as trips taken by same-day visitors outside their place of residence or employment are counted as tourism. (Finland's Tourism Strategy 2019 - 2028 and Action Plan 2019 - 2023, 59.)

Tourism has a great social, cultural and economic importance globally. The sector directly contributes 4.4% of gross domestic product, 6.9% of employment and 21.5% of service exports in the 38 member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD in short. Despite the current uncertainties and economic shocks, the tourism economy is likely to continue expanding. In 2019 the tourism sector hit the record of 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors). (OECD 2020.)

The tourism landscape is more global than ever. The Finnish archipelago is definitely not an island in this respect - tourism in Finland is equally impacted by global phenomena and trends. In the following chapters these global trends and how they are reflected in tourism in Finland are discussed. The main focus is on international travel, which is the focus of the Explore Archipelago platform.

3.1 Global trends in tourism

Trend describes a certain development during a longer period of time, omitting the effects of possible short term variations (Tilastokeskus n.d.). Significant social, economic, political, environmental and technological trends continue to impact the tourism sector. Recent trends shaping the future of tourism have been illustrated below in figure 7.
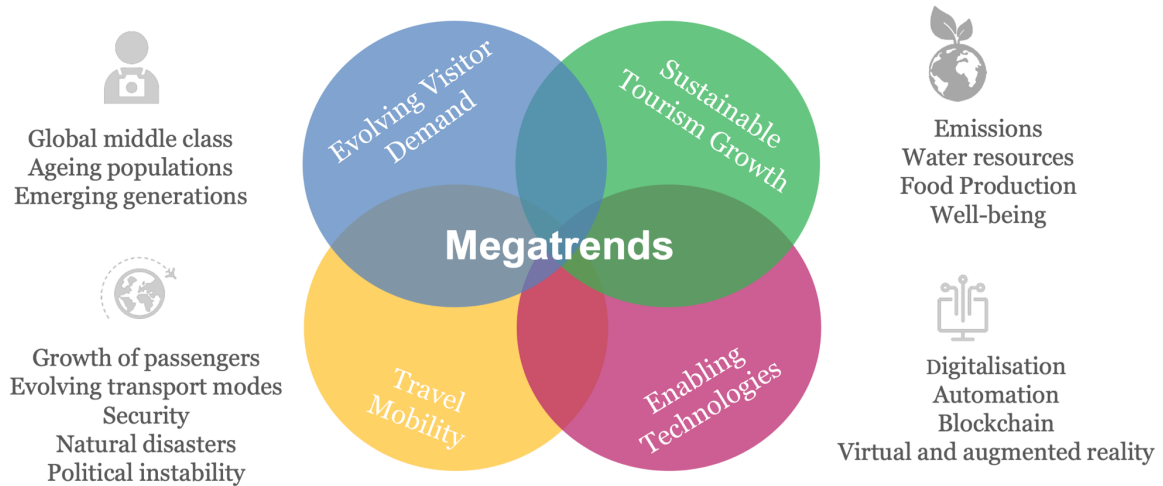
Figure 7. Megatrends shaping the future of tourism (Stacey 2019).

There are four megatrends, related to technological advancements, changing visitor demand and travel trends as well as sustainability. The relevance of the trends to this project will be discussed next, first on the global level and then from the archipelago perspective.

Digital technology changing tourism

Technological advancements have enabled fast digitalization, which is one of the factors most profoundly affecting the way people travel and provide tourism related services (OECD 2020). Firstly, it has transformed the marketing of services and communication with tourists. The process of a vacation begins and ends with the Internet, which has changed the way tourists search, explore, book and experience travel. Travelers provide feedback about their experience in the same social networks and distribution channels where they look for inspiration and information before the trip. (Tutek et al. 2015.) Customers trust and even base their purchase decisions on other visitors' recommendations found in different digital channels such as Instagram and Tripadvisor (Kansainvälistysmisopas 2019).

Another phenomenon expedited by digital technology is sharing economy. Travel industry has been a pioneer in taking advantage of the new business models it enables, famous examples being the online marketplace for homestays AirBnB and mobility as a service provider Uber. The core idea is to make use of resources otherwise underutilized. At the same time, the solutions enable new peer-to-peer markets, which change the tourism landscape. (Kansainvälistymisopas 2019.)

Technology can also offer solutions to enhance the visitor experience. The rapid development of mobile payment systems, virtual and augmented reality applications, blockchain technologies and artificial intelligence all change the way travel is experienced, even remotely from one's own home. This is likely to influence tourism products, business models, services, and visitor choices. (OECD 2020.)

Digitalization is disrupting the whole business environment, where innovation, customer centricity and new uses of technology are the core change makers (Hämäläinen et al. 2016, 21). The tourism industry too has to adopt new technology trends, rethink strategies and reshape the way services are provided (Tutek et al. 2015). For an individual business, this does not only mean a shift in sales and marketing channels but a whole new way of doing business (Hämäläinen et al. 2016, 21).

Those who fail to invest in digitalization will struggle to survive, especially when the digital natives become the bulk of tourists by 2040 (OECD 2020). However, it is the SMEs that are lagging in digital transformation, not taking advantage of the new opportunities and the benefits they bring. They are also less likely to have the skills for managing their digitalization and rarely provide ICT training for their employees. (OECD 2019.) For the development of the tourism industry, supporting the SMEs in taking the digital leap is more important than ever.

Global consumer travel trends

Consumer travel trends, what people expect from their journeys and how they like to travel, are in flux. There is, for example, more demand for authentic experiences and living like a local. Yet, instagrammable moments and experiences have not lost their appeal - the need to travel to show is not disappearing. Wellness and healthy living as well as culinary experiences have become reasons to travel. People are also interested in combining their holidays with work, taking so called workations. Both solo travel and multigenerational travel have gained in popularity, as group travel is no longer the most appealing option for many. Value of privacy, cleanliness and less crowded destinations has risen especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Safety issues in general are affecting travel planning. Consumers are also more conscious about their choices, wishing to support local communities and brands that prioritize inclusion, diversity and sustainability. (UNWTO 2019; American Express 2021.)

As for Scandinavia, the same trends prevail. In addition, luxury experiences in nature and unique travel and accommodation options, even glamorous camping, known as

glamping, gain popularity. This can also be seen as a form of slow travel, which has been a prevailing trend in Scandinavia for some time. Slow travel focuses on connecting to the place, its people and culture, and staying in one destination for longer periods, rather than rushing around from one attraction to another. (Nikel 2021; Palmer 2021.)

Finland as a destination can fulfill many of these trendy desires. In a study done in 2017, Visit Finland identified six main segments of travelers who are interested in visiting Finland. The groups (figure 8) were *nature wonder hunters*, who travel hectically after once-in-a-lifetime experiences, *nature explorers*, who want to enjoy the pure nature in peace, *activity enthusiasts*, who look for an active, energetic vacation testing new sports, *comfort seekers*, who want to nourish both body and soul no matter the expenses, *city breakers* who look to explore the city and its lifestyle from a touristic perspective and *authentic lifestyle seekers*, who wish to blend in with the locals and avoid touristic destinations. (Suomen vetovoimatekijät 2017.)
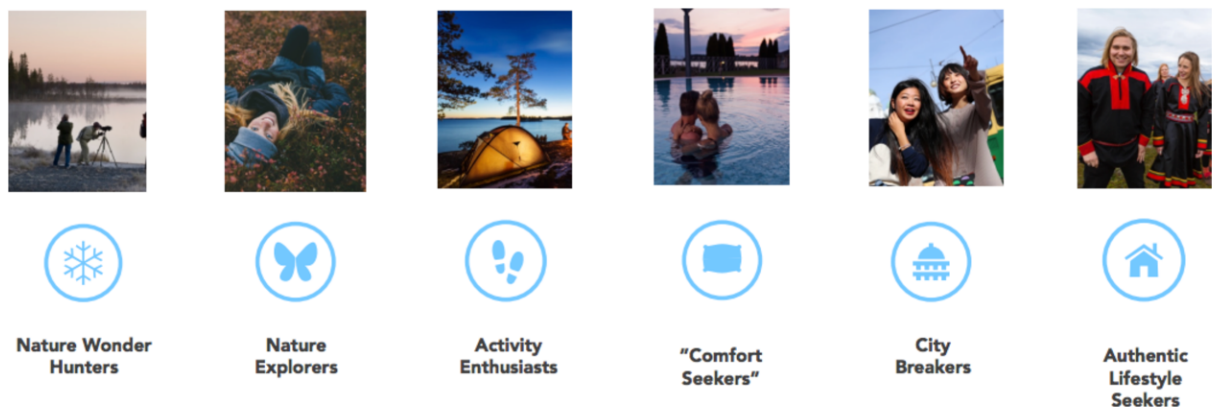
Figure 8. Traveler segments interested in Finland (Suomen vetovoimatekijät 2017).

Common denominators between these segments, and therefore assets in the global tourism market, are untouched, pure nature, quality of life, space in less crowded destinations, authenticity, and responsibility (Suomen vetovoimatekijät 2017). However, a trendy offering alone is not enough. Travelers need to be able to find and book these experiences. According to Nikel (2021), especially in the case of FITs there is a need for guidance and support to be able to provide packaged and safe nature adventures and authentic experiences around the country. Therefore, a focused internationalization strategy and visibility of Finland's brand are key elements when attracting travelers to Finland.

Sustainability as necessity

Sustainability in general is now and in the future one of the most important values when developing international tourism (Kansainvälistymisopas 2019). It is a fact, that the growth in the tourism sector can have negative consequences. There is more pressure on infrastructure, environment, local communities and other economic sectors, causing overcrowding, degradation of natural and historical sites, increased carbon emissions and so on (OECD 2020).

Sustainability is not regarded as a niche sector of travel business anymore, it has become a necessity. According to the 2021 Sustainable Travel Report by Booking.com, 83% of global travelers think sustainable travel is vital and 61% say the COVID-19 pandemic has made them want to travel more sustainably in the future. 79% would like to use more environmentally friendly transport on site as opposed to cars, 73% wish to interact with and support local communities and 69% are planning to avoid popular destinations to mitigate overcrowding challenges. This shows that tourism businesses cannot overlook sustainability issues and those who communicate actively to potential guests about their efforts, could gain an advantage in the market. (Booking.com 2021.)

3.2 Archipelago tourism and travel trends

In 2019, the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists in Finland reached a record high with 7,1 million stays, tourists from Russia, Germany and Great Britain forming the biggest incoming groups. Revenue generated by tourism amounted to over EUR 16 billion in 2019, foreign tourists' spending contributing EUR 5,6 billion to the overall number. It is safe to say, that tourism has become more and more important to Finland in recent years. (TEM n.d.)

The archipelago has become a focus area in the national, regional and local tourism strategy and in 2015 the Finnish Maritime Archipelago project became one of the Visit Finland tourism growth programmes including extensive international marketing. Finland is one of the richest archipelago countries in Europe in terms of the number of islands. The islands (76 000) and sea areas (52 500 km2) and the long coast line (314 000 km) are strong tourism assets. With the help of skillful productization and marketing, Finland has all the makings for becoming one of Europe's top countries of island and water-based tourism in Europe. (MMM 2017, 11 - 13.)

The main tourism related services in Southwest Finland include restaurants, accommodation, transport, culture and recreational activities. In the region, 5,7% of its employed citizens were working in the tourism sector. (TEM 2021a, 19 - 21.)

Tourism also creates revenue to a wider sphere of businesses, as it uses services related to food production and processing, construction, communications, cleaning, office services and so on. Consequently, changes in touristic demand affect the local economy in general. The importance of the sector for the whole area is especially highlighted in tourism intense areas, in the country side and in the archipelago. Therefore, positive and sustainable development of the tourism industry in the archipelago area is in the interest of the whole community. (TEM 2021b, 11.)

Digitalization affecting archipelago tourism

Digitalization has meant new potential especially in the area of marketing and online findability also in the archipelago. However, the area is fragmented both geographically and in terms of marketing, each company promoting themselves separately. There has not been a single portal gathering all the services in the area. Instead, the information is scattered, and online booking systems are not fully developed or do not exist. (Munkki 2018.)

These issues have been recognized and addressed in areal and national levels, resulting in projects suchs as Roadmap for Digitalization (OECD 2020) and the digital inventory of tourism assets, DataHub by Visit Finland (TEM 2021b, 60 - 61). E-learning and Visit Finland Academy's digital training has been made available to the travel trade (OECD 2020). The aim is to advance the digital knowhow and online presence of tourism businesses. The Explore Archipelago project is a prime example of a digital marketing solution which gathers the scattered information in one place and tries to create a unified brand for the whole travel area.

Taking advantage of consumer travel trends

The changing tourism demand favours the archipelago as a destination in many ways. It can offer space, cleanliness, safe environment, and sustainable traveling. Already before the pandemic, Finland's competitive edge as luxury travel destination relied on authentic and local experiences and the independent and unique SMEs in the archipelago have much to offer to the demanding post-pandemic traveler. (TEM 2021b, 65 - 66; Business Finland 2020.)

FIT tourism will continue to increase, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (TEM 2021b, 65 - 66; Business Finland 2020). In the scattered archipelago area packaging is important especially in the case of FITs. A well planned itinerary gives inspiration and above all the certainty, that everything works on the way to and at the destination. (Munkki 2018.) The key to to achieve this is cooperation between service providers both in marketing the area as a whole and in productizing the offering (Alm 2021).

In an area comprised of islands and where most places cannot be reached during the winter season travel mobility becomes a crucial factor. Previous studies have pointed out, that the season is short and accessibility is weak in many destinations in the archipelago (Leppäkoski & Salmivaara 2019, 39; Lahovuo & Räikkönen 2018, 57 - 58).

A worrying results is, that more than half of the international visitors initially interested in the archipelago do not visit the area. This may be because visitors are not aware of how to reach the area or that getting there is too difficult and time consuming. (Visit Finland Visitor Survey 2015.)

Moving around the archipelago is not without challenges, but digital tools are being used to create uninterrupted travel chains from land to the sea, improving the archipelago's accessibility for both tourists and locals (Alm 2021). Similarly, new bike routes in Southwest Finland have been inserted on a digital platform used by 10 million registered users (Turku Business Region 2021).

For the archipelago's vitality, ferry connections are indispensable both for residents, workforce, and tourists. The Finnish Island Development Act, however, has been drafted to cater to the people living in the archipelago, not to ensure accessibility from a touristic point of view. Rising numbers of travelers mean crowded ferries and the risk of not being able to catch the right ferry connection to reach a pre-booked accommodation. In this sense, the development of the archipelago tourism is dependent on legislature. (Turku Business Region 2021.)

Sustainability in the archipelago

Environmental awareness is affecting travellers' choices and taking sustainability into consideration has become a necessity rather than option in travel business (TEM 2021b, 67). It has even said to be the leading principle of tourism development (Business Finland 2020). This sustainability trend is well compatible with Finland's reputation as a safe,

stable country and the goal of becoming the most sustainably growing travel destination in the Nordics (TEM 2021b, 71).

Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland project both helps the marketing of Finland as a sustainable destination and supports the companies and travel areas in taking steps towards sustainability (TEM 2021b, 56). In Turku region the goal is to involve at least 51% of the regional travel businesses in the programme (Visit Turku 2020). Sustainability can therefore become a great advantage when competing for tourists' attention.

However, Finland's remoteness makes its tourism business dependent on air travel. Restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions and possible gasoline and kerosine price fluctuations may make flying to Finland very expensive and environmentally-aware travelers may avoid flying altogether. (TEM 2021b, 67.) On the upside, cooler summers in the north can become an attractive option for people suffering from extreme warm weather, and the archipelago is possible to reach via water ways from the nearby countries, which could bode well for Southwest Finland.

4 MAPPING THE CRITERIA

For setting the criteria for internationalization and participation on the Explore Archipelago platform, there are two different issues to consider. First, the participating SMEs should respond to the overall strategic goals set for the service array in the area - the trends, customer expectations and unique selling propositions. These have been documented in different tourism strategies, which will be mapped to create a basis for the criteria.

Second, the SMEs need to have a certain level of readiness to do international business in order to be able to cater for the international customers. Existing internationalization criteria in other areas will be benchmarked in chapter 5 and used as inspiration in the design process.

4.1 Strategy review

The criteria for being promoted on the Explore Archipelago platform should be in line and inspired by the overall goals of the tourism industry on the national and local level. This ensures that everyone is striving for the same goals and also benefits from the cooperation and synergies it creates.

SMEs are not always able to see their connection to the overall business and DMOs. They need to be involved in the development work early on and their different characteristics and motives taken into account. It is vital that the DMOs expectations are in line with the SMEs providing the services, because only those SMEs whose development objectives are aligned to the development objectives of the whole travel destination will participate actively in common projects. (Jones and Haven 2005, 352 – 356.)

Cooperation is also recognized as the cross-sectional theme of the national tourism strategy, seen as indispensable in order to achieve sustainable growth and renewal. The strategy is to serve as a common guide of development for every actor in the industry. Therefore, the first step in setting criteria is to start at the strategy level, making sure, that the different actors are on the same page. (Finland's Tourism Strategy 2019 - 2028 and Action Plan 2019 - 2023.)

There are various tourism bodies working on different levels as seen in figure 9. They can be categorized geographically, based on the area they administer. They might have authority over the whole nation like Visit Finland, over one region like the Regional Council of Southwest Finland, or over a single municipality, like Kemiönsaari. On the other hand, the bodies can also be divided into public authorities, like a state ministry or into private companies, like Visit Naantali DMO.

Finland: Organisational chart of tourism bodies

Public Authorities		Tourism Organisations

National level
- Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment - Department of Innovations and Enterprise Financing — Visit Finland/ Business Finland
- Inter-Ministerial Working Group on Tourism — Tourism Industry, Trade and Labour Market Associations

Regional level
- Regional State Administrative Agencies (6) — Regional Tourism and Destination Management Organisations
- Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (15)
- Regional Councils (18)

Local level
- Municipalities (311) — Local Tourist Information Offices Tourism Destinations and Offices

Source: OECD, adapted from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020.

Figure 9. Organisational chart of Finnish tourism bodies (OECD 2020).

Similarly, there are strategies and road-maps on each of these levels, all aiming to develop the tourism industry from their perspective. Visit Finland, part of Business Finland, is a government organisation responsible for promoting travel from abroad to Finland. Visit Finland is in charge of the national tourism strategy, which does not assign separate measures for different areas such as the coast, Lapland, urban or rural areas. Visit Finland's greater regions cooperation model, however, aims to create attractive sub-brands for the country. The greater regions are Helsinki Metropolitan Area, Lapland, Finnish Lakeland and Coast and Archipelago, which each have their own vision. (Finland's Tourism Strategy 2019 - 2028 and Action Plan 2019 - 2023, 16.)

Finland is divided into 19 administrative regions and inside the greater region of coast and archipelago is the administrative region of Southwest Finland, with Turku as its biggest city (Varsinais-Suomen liitto n.d.). The Regional Council of Southwest Finland has created its own roadmap for travel business development, which aims to be a common guideline and tool for all the tourism actors, both public and private, in the region (Road Map for Travel Business in Southwest Finland 2021 - 2027).

Southwest Finland is further divided into smaller areas with their own regional tourism organizations. Finland has around 70 regional organizations whose operating methods and geographical coverage vary, but they all play an important role as developers of tourism in their respective regions. They provide sparring for digitalization, monitor the quality of services and implement regional development strategies. (Finland's Tourism Strategy 2019 - 2028 and Action Plan 2019 - 2023, 34.) Southwest Finland consists of 6 travel areas - Uusikaupunki, Loimaa region, Naantali, Turku, Turunmaa, including Kemiönsaari and Parainen, and Salo region (Road Map for Travel Business in Southwest Finland 2021 - 2027). Three of these, namely Naantali, Turku and Turunmaa, are involved in the Archipelago Access project.

Based on this organizational structure and a discussion with the commissioner representative from Visit Turku (Olli Ylioja, personal discussion, March 17th 2021), the most relevant strategies for this study were defined. The following strategies of different regional coverage, available at the time and including the areas involved in the Archipelago Access project, were chosen for review and to form the basis for the criteria work:

1. Finland's Tourism Strategy 2019 - 2028 and Action Plan 2019 - 2023
2. The Coast and Archipelago Greater Region Vision 2019 and
   The Coast and Archipelago Greater Region Vision 2020
3. Road Map for Travel Business in Southwest Finland 2021 - 2027
4. Masterplan for Travel Business in Turku Region 2020 - 2029
5. Masterplan for Travel Business in Naantali 2018 - 2030
6. Tourism Strategy for the Archipelago City Parainen 2021 - 2025
7. Action Plan for Travel Business in Kemiönsaari 2014 - 2020

The relation of these strategies to each other, with Finland's Tourism Strategy and Action Plan as the overall umbrella strategy, is illustrated below (figure 10).

Figure 10. Tourism strategies from national to local level.

4.2 Content analysis

In order to find the common denominators of the tourism strategies, main focus has been placed on the components of a strategy, which are *vision, mission, goals* as well as *values*. The mission is the organization's reason for existence, vision is the desired future state. The goals are more specific and measurable, stating what must be done to attain the mission and vision. Values state how people are to work to achieve those goals. The different documents analyzed here do not follow any specific form or guidelines, but most of them contain the first three elements, as illustrated in appendix 1. (Hill & Jones 2012, 9 - 33.)

The content analysis started by reading all the strategies to gain a sense of the whole. Next, the texts were divided into smaller units, focusing on the vision, mission and concrete actions. Rather than predetermining the categories, all mentions were listed after which similar goals with only slight differences in the wording were grouped under one descriptive category, and the number of its occurrence in the textual material was noted down (appendix 2).

A first set of most important elements (4 or more occurrences in the material) was then listed. The list with short descriptions of each goal is illustrated in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of content analysis.

	Goal	Description	Mentions
1	Season all year round	High season is summer - goal is to attract tourists all year round	10
2	Accessibility (physical)	Destinations should be easy to reach and transport organized when needed	9
3	Sustainability	Taking issues such as nature, local community and cultural environment into consideration	9
4	Attractiveness	Interesting, intriguing and sought-after destination	8
5	Increased tourism receipts	Growing industry and increased profitability	7
6	Buyability	Products available via multiple channels, digital presence, bookability	5
7	Cooperation	Regionally between all stakeholders as well as between tourism businesses	5
8	Recognizability	Well-known destination	5
9	Responsiveness to digital change	Use and active development of new and enabling digital solutions	4
10	Originality	Original and unique destination	4
11	Strong brand	Influential, lasting brand image	4

As can be seen in the table 1, goals 4, 8 and 10 are rather subjective and related to the perceived image of the destination. These were therefore grouped under *strong brand*. The final list to serve as basis for discussion in the interviews is shown in table 2. At this point the goals in the strategies can be called the initial set of criteria, and each criterion is next described more in detail.

Table 2. Final list of goals for criteria setting.

	Goal
1	Strong brand (attractive, recognizable, original)
2	Season all year round
3	Accessibility (physical)
4	Sustainability
5	Increased tourism receipts
6	Buyability
7	Cooperation
8	Responsiveness to digital change

1. *Brand* is more than the sum of its elements. According to Pohjola (2019, 81), a brand is comprised of many encounters and impressions received via different channels over a long period of time. Pohjola (ibid.) describes brand as a mental shorthand, since it frees the consumers from the task of searching for and comparing different options.

As regards a tourist destination in particular, brand means the combination of the inner identity and outer image of the destination, co-created in interaction with different stakeholders, also in social media. At the same time, the brand also needs to be managed and kept coherent to ensure a clear marketing message. This requires cooperation between local service providers, networking and commitment to a common umbrella brand. (Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017, 137 - 139.)

2. *Seasons* in tourism describe the changes in visitor numbers. Usually the time span examined is months or quarters of a year. There are peak, shoulder and off-peak seasons. The destination can have just one peak, two peaks or a steady stream of customers throughout the year. (Honkanen 2017, 115 - 116.) The Finnish archipelago is currently a one peak region, but the goal is to extend the season to cover as many months as possible, ideally even 12 months a year.

3. *Accessibility* relates to the routes between the place of departure and the destination as well as inside the destination and can be one of the most deciding factors in developing tourism in a certain area (Saarinen 2017, 45). When talking about accessibility, usually physical aspects are meant. However, the term also comprises cultural, social, political, economical and communicational accessibility. (Jutila & Harju-Myllyaho 2017, 223.) The focus in the tourism strategies analyzed was on physical accessibility.

4. *Sustainability* aims to diminish the negative environmental impact of traveling and increase acceptability of the travel industry locally and globally (Tyrväinen 2017, 95). The World Tourism Organization states that when aiming for sustainable tourism development, a balance between environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects must be established, while maintaining a high level of tourism satisfaction and raising awareness about sustainable tourism practices (UNWTO, n.d.).

5. *Tourism receipts* are the expenditure of inbound visitors. In the case of international travellers, they also include payments to national carriers for international transport. (Tilastokeskus, n.d.) The receipts are not just money spent on hotels or other travel services, but tourism has a significant multiplier effect on other sectors, such as

construction, transport, and commerce, not to mention the jobs created in the sector. Therefore, if the destination is attracting tourists, it benefits the community in a larger scale as well. In 2019, the tourism cluster provided employment for 154 000 people and revenue generated by tourism amounted to over EUR 16 billion, foreign tourists spending about EUR 5,3 billion in Finland. (TEM, n.d.)

6. *Buyability* is tightly linked to digital findability and purchasing online. It means, for example, using international market places and digital cross-marketing, utilizing digital sales tools and making products available online. (Masterplan for Travel Business in Turku region 2020 - 2029.) The delivery of travel industry services happens now in digital channels, Online Travel Agents (OTA) being of great importance, and purchasing is no more bound to time, place or device (Kansaivälistymisopas 2019). In an online environment it is easier to compare services and products, which results in companies needing to productize their offering in a form which is easy to buy and use (Hämäläinen et al. 2016, 28). Mobile usability cannot be overlooked; in 2013 time spent on smartphones exceeded time spent on a computer, which is bound to show in purchasing habits as well (Tutek et al. 2015).

7. *Cooperation* is required to be able to provide tourists the all-encompassing experiences they are looking for. Only few businesses can offer all the services a traveller may need, such as accommodation, activities, restaurants, culture and transport. Cooperation also makes bigger marketing resources, more varied customer experiences and new innovations available. A business alone is often not appealing enough, instead, the competitiveness of a business is built on the competitiveness of the whole travel destination. (Pesonen 2017, 128.)

8. *Responsiveness to digital change* is required due to the fast technological and digital evolution. Information exchange and buying commodities is not time or place bound anymore. Comparing products, prices and quality is easy and transparent, social media making customer references and feedback open to all. People are constantly connected to the digital world some way or another. (Tutek et al. 2015.)

Tourism is one of the industries most strongly affected by digitalization. Tourism sector has been an early adopter of new digital technologies and processes, which are transforming the way people travel, but the scale and speed of these changes is creating challenges. SMEs are the backbone of the tourism sector and need support in digital transformation if sustainable growth is to be achieved. (Stacey 2019.)

Communications Olli Ylioja and Project Manager Ira Lahovuo. During this interview the platform was further tested and a few additions to the instructions and notes were made according to the wishes of the commissioner. The interview was conducted with both representatives at the same time and took 1,5 hours.

In this interview, the nature of the criteria was often mentioned - how to define the right challenge level without making unrealistic demands. For example, when discussing the criterion of offering services all year round, the interviewees mentioned, that lengthening the season would be more realistic. In addition, the SMEs and their businesses are varied, so the criteria will need to find a balance between very specific and too broad.

From the project coordinator's view, the continuity and possible need of quality checks on the companies displayed on the platform was also a concern. The idea of a common code of ethics or rewarding exemplary SMEs with more visibility were discussed. In general, the interviewees were very interested in knowing how their views might differ form other DMOs' and, on the other hand, whether the SMEs would have a completely different take on the matter. It was seen as a challenge to balance between different stakeholders, especially between the DMOs' and the SMEs' viewpoints and expectations.

Visit Naantali

The one hour long interview was conducted on the 11th of June 2021. The interviewee was the CEO of Visit Naantali, Tarja Rautiainen. During this interview, branding and the importance of a unified image and collaboration in the area were given high priority. Rautiainen stressed that a strong brand cannot be built alone but the image of the whole travel destination is created together. First, the international visitors need to find the whole area attractive to even consider visiting. Only after the destination has been chosen, starts the comparison between the individual companies.

As for marketing, Rautiainen mentioned the importance of referral marketing, since customers do not blindly believe traditional marketing messages anymore. Also, internal marketing and recommending others was mentioned. According to Rautiainen, the main focus should always be a satisfied customer, even when it means recommending somebody else's services.

When the criterion of sustainability was discussed, Rautiainen mentioned the growing importance of health security, which understandably was not a high priority in the

strategies, which were made before the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus not mentioned in them.

Visit Parainen

The one hour long interview was conducted on the 30th of June 2021. The interviewee was the Tourism Manager of the city of Parainen, Niina Aitamurto. Whereas Tarja Rautiainen from Visit Naantali saw the all-year-round season as a result of branding and buyability, Aitamurto lifted this aim at the top of the list, as a leverage for everything else. She also mentioned the importance of a strong, unified brand for the whole area, and that everyone should repeat the same story and message, such a "the most beautiful archipelago in the world".

As for the criteria, Aitamurto hoped that the differences of the SMEs, their size and location on the island or in the cities especially, would be taken into consideration. The possibility of a classification or different levels in the criteria was discussed, separating for example entry level and advanced level with different requirements. Also, she pointed out, that not everyone is interested in aggressive growth or investment, or even entering the international market. Therefore, rather than trying to involve everyone, only SMEs ready and willing for internationalization should be included on the platform.

Explore Archipelago project workers

The interview was conducted on the 19th of July 2021. The interviewees were Archipelago Access project worker Kathleen Cusack and Visit Turku marketing trainee Sini Lakanen. As with the two representatives of Visit Turku, also this interview took 1,5 hours.

At the beginning of the project, Cusack had familiarized herself extensively with the SMEs in the area. She went through hundreds of companies who could be showcased on the platform. As the content production phase begun, both Cusack and Lakanen had browsed through the SMEs' webpages and checked their online presence such as Google ID and Facebook pages. Therefore, the interview focused on their idea of how the digital requirements were achieved at the moment, and which were the most challenging issues for the SMEs when attracting international tourists from the marketing point of view.

As a technical requirement for the platform, the participating companies need to have a website, a Google ID, some images and a description. In general, both interviewees felt

that the SMEs in the area are doing well as regards social media presence, websites and their content.

Major challenge was the availability of information in English. Some SMEs miss it altogether, and in some cases the information is not congruent with the Finnish content. Whereas the Finnish page gives an attractive image of the destination, the English has been stripped down to the bare minimum. Also, it is not only a question of missing translations, but also the viewpoint. Cultural differences are not always considered, meaning, the content has not been localized to give relevant information to a non Finnish visitor, for example showing where Turku is located on a map or explaining how the ferry connections work.

Another issue was the vast offering in the area. There is great potential, but the message is not very unified and all the different options can seem overwhelming to a tourist. This makes it hard to take a purchase decision. A strong area brand is needed, as the strategies suggest. As regards cooperation between SMEs, both interviewees stated that the most successful companies tend to have a good network and already work together with other businesses.

Lastly, engagement was mentioned to be a potential challenge. SMEs are being approached from different directions: DMOs, Visit Finland, other destination marketing campaigns, and so on. How to convince them that there is real value in this particular platform, even when it is free of charge? This same issue rose in the other interviews too - the companies showcased have to be active themselves and willing to enter international markets.

Summary of findings

The first task was to place the criteria in an order of preference or importance. According to this order, points were given (1st priority = 1 point, 2nd priority = 2 points, and so on). The better the ranking, the smaller the final point sum is. So, for example, "strong brand" was ranked first, second and seventh, giving it 10 points. In the final ranking (table 3), the criteria with least points are closer to the top, the ones with more points at the bottom.

Table 3. Final ranking order of the criteria.

Goal	Point sum	Median	Final ranking
Strong brand	1+2+7=10	2	1
Increased tourism receipts	1+4+5=10	4	2
Responsiveness to digital change	3+4+5=12	4	3
Cooperation	2+3+8=13	3	4
Buyability	4+5+6=15	5	5
Accessibility	2+6+8=16	6	6
Sustainability	3+6+7=16	6	7
Season all year round	1+7+8=16	7	8

When the sum of points was equal, the median was used to determine the ranking order. When both the sum of points and median were the same, the criterion with the highest ranking was given priority, like in the case of accessibility and sustainability.

As can be seen in the final ranking (table 3), the differences are small. It should be noted, that during the interviews all of the criteria were deemed important, and the interviewees sometimes had difficulties placing them in an order of importance. Therefore, the first main outcome from the interviews was not just the ranking, but confirming that the criteria discussed are the strategically important ones, and could be used as the final criteria. Only Visit Naantali's representative wished to add health security among them, which was done, resulting in altogether nine criteria.

The second task was related to the concrete actions needed from SMEs to attain the criteria. All the suggestions mentioned by the DMO representatives or project workers are listed below criterion by criterion. To support the findings, recent studies and other resources related to tourism, especially in the archipelago area, were consulted.

Strong brand

Branding the archipelago area has proven to be a challenging task. Visit Finland's greater area division promotes the coastline as a whole, and an international visitor might not even understand what the term archipelago entails. Also, the areal archipelago brand is known to be weak. (Lahovuo & Räikkönen 2018, 57). Thus, it was not surprising, that also the DMOs stressed the importance of a strong area brand, as well as the need for

everyone's participation in strengthening it. When promoting a travel destination this is of crucial importance, since a traveler sees the destination as a whole, where each individual service makes up the whole experience, making destination brand management a challenge (Tuulaniemi 2011, 260 - 261).

At the same time, the need to balance between being unique and unified was recognized; how to promote each destination's specialties without exposing the visitors to a confusing buffet problem. Quality was also a concern; how to maintain high service quality throughout the season, ensure a good quality-price ratio and avoid any reputation damages which might affect the whole area.

Concrete actions suggested by the interviewees:

- ensuring that the services and quality promised on the webpage reflect reality
- taking care of customer feedback
- participating in joint marketing campaigns, such as using common hashtags in social media
- being visible in OTA channels
- aligning company brand with the unified area brand and strategy, repeating the same story and message, for example "world's most beautiful archipelago".

Increased tourism receipts

The main idea of any industry is ultimately to make profit. However, the SMEs in the area are very varied in size and aspirations. In general, most tourism businesses in Finland are small or medium sized and their business is based on the entrepreneur's own skills and motivation. For many, the aim is to provide a livelihood for the family, not to grow. This means less investments and lower competitiveness and profitability for the whole travel area. (Pesonen 2017, 129.)

No matter the size of the business, certain goal orientedness and active measuring of one's finances were expected as well as readiness to invest in the business.

Concrete actions suggested by interviewees:

- setting goals
- monitoring one's business and how its profits and profitability are developing

- following trends and seizing new opportunities (for example new target groups)
- having interest in growth and investment
- taking initiative and participating in areal and national training/growth/investment programmes
- taking care of one's own wellbeing.

Responsiveness to digital change

The interviewees all stated that the minimum requirement for the SMEs is to provide up-to-date information online at least via one channel. Among the archipelago area SMEs this is well taken care of. They do have a website and at least a Facebook page.

Yet, having an up-to-date website is not the most important thing. According to a travel study in Turku area from 2019, digital platforms have become the most important sources of information for both local and international tourists. Individual websites fall clearly behind Google and OTAs. Especially international tourists hardly use service providers' own websites, but rely on web searches, Visit Finland's web page, word of mouth, and Tripadvisor. Web pages come on the 12th place, falling even behind Instagram. (Leppäkoski & Salmivaara 2019, 23 - 27.)

Issues mentioned in the interviews included lack of information in English, weak Google presence and problems with the attractiveness of the online channels in general. Like DMOs, also the SMEs are aware of the needs and possibilities digitalization brings. According to a survey from spring 2019, SMEs in Southwest Finland reported as their biggest challenge the development of digital marketing and sales. In the same survey, they stated that their most important sales channels were still email, phone or walk-in customers. (Turun seudun matkailuyritysten kehittämistarpeet 2019.)

An earlier study from 2018 already concluded that in Southwest Finland special attention and support need to be given to travel business SMEs' digitalization, and especially their online bookability (Lahovuo & Räikkönen 2018, 57). However, the SMEs' attitudes towards OTA channels are divided. OTAs do provide year round visibility, online buyability and accessibility 24/7, but they also charge a commission (Kansainvälistymisopas 2019, 56 - 59). As long as there is a steady stream of customers, it is tempting to overlook OTAs.

Other challenges stated by the interviewees were lack of time and knowhow. These two, as well as lack of financial resources and difficulties with content production pertain in Finnish travel businesses in general (TEM 2015, 14).

Concrete actions suggested by interviewees:

- providing an up-to date website, which is responsive and suited for mobile use
- continuously maintaining the online channels in use
- paying attention to Google presence (search engine marketing and company's Google ID)
- providing an online booking system and developing readiness to enter OTA platforms
- using basic social media channels (Facebook, Google My Business, Tripadvisor)
- providing information in English and paying attention to localized content which caters to FITs and not just local customers.

Cooperation

Everyone's contribution is needed to attract FITs to Finland and the archipelago in the first place. Only then the individual businesses start competing for attention among each other. And even then, the most successful SMEs are the ones working together, because they can provide an uninterrupted supply chain of services and comprehensive travel packages. Tuulaniemi (2011, 260) presents that the success of a travel area is based on a strong network and the ability of individual actors to cooperate - to build, develop, maintain, and lead different networks. The most developed travel areas have a long history of tight cooperation and trust (ibid.).

This, as well as the need to shift from competition to ecosystem thinking based on regional goals were stressed during the interviews. Ready-made packages and integrative travel modules are also what foreign travel agencies and FITs are most interested in (Merellinen saaristo - yhteenvetoraportti 2015; Munkki 2018). These are best developed in cooperation with different service providers.

Concrete actions suggested by interviewees:

- networking with nearby service providers
- being open to cooperation and developing joint products (for example accommodation services combined with an activity)

- recommending each other to customers and internal marketing in the community
- actively participating in joint projects.

Buyability

Buyability was seen to be interlinked with digitalization already discussed above. If a business cannot be found on Google, does not have a website and the product is not available in any web shop or online booking platform, that business does not exist to the consumers. Print materials only matter when the customer is already on site. The importance of online buyability was stressed. Only using phone or email was seen insufficient, especially in the case of FITs. Language issues were again mentioned.

Concrete actions suggested by interviewees:

- ensuring online buyability on company website or via OTAs or similar platform
- offering easy and safe payment options
- having product information available in English
- describing services and their content clearly.

Accessibility

In the travel study of Turku region (Leppäkoski & Salmivaara 2019) 16% of the respondents said they found moving around in the area difficult and confusing. Schedules, ticket sales and signage were hard to understand (ibid.). Similarly, in a study from 2015 (Merellinen saaristo - yhteenvetoraportti 2015) physical accessibility was reported to be the major hindrance for tourism business growth.

Yet, physical accessibility was not seen as a big issue in the interviews, although it was mentioned that the DMOs can hardly exert influence over major infrastructural developments, such as train connections or airline routes. The archipelago area already has harbours, airports and good train and bus connections but many visitors still come by car, own or rented, so information about ferry connections is crucial. Also, SMEs could look into the possibility of organizing transport or pick-up services of their own. These services could be included in the package fees, since especially FITs appreciate a complete door-to-door service.

In addition to travelling to the destination, moving around and accessing all facilities easily while on site were mentioned. Accessibility related to physical disabilities was expected to gain in importance in the coming years.

Concrete actions suggested by interviewees:

- providing instructions for reaching the destination with both public and private transport
- planning the customer journey all the way to the front door, not just the nearest big city or station
- taking care of the destination's own infrastructure (roads, paths, guest harbours, signage, and so on)
- providing pick up services if possible
- making plans to become a fully accessible destination.

Sustainability

Sustainability should be strongly connected with the whole area brand as well as destination brands, but certifications or participation in Visit Finland's sustainable travel programme were not deemed obligatory. Similarly, in the 2018 report on sustainable travel commissioned by Visit Finland (Kestävän matkailun nykytila, haasteet ja kehittämistarpeet 2018, 16) it was stated, that small travel businesses do not usually see the need for certifications, because sustainability and responsibility are already integrated in their everyday operations. The ratio between effort and results was not seen feasible, especially when sales were not negatively affected by not having a certificate (ibid.). However, SMEs should start making preparations for a certification when it is still voluntary. Especially in the B2B sector certifications have in some cases already become a requirement for cooperation and a relevant factor in competitive tendering (Hietasaari 2021b).

What SMEs could do right away is emphasize the sustainable measures they have already implemented. Archipelago area SMEs are not alone in this - the latest Sustainable Travel Report by Booking.com (2021) states that although 3 out of 4 accommodation partners say they have taken sustainability measures, only one third actively communicate about their efforts. At the same time, 49% of travelers still believed that in 2021 there are not enough sustainable travel options available (Booking.com 2021). More communication at the early stages of travel planning is needed.

Similarly, the interviewees mentioned that SMEs could benefit from promoting Finland's high focus on sustainability matters in general. Finland has a clear asset in the market: in the most recent Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report by World Economic Forum (2019), Finland was ranked fourth together with Luxembourg in environmental sustainability. Finland also has a lot to offer to today's travelers. According to the Sustainable Travel Report by Booking.com (2021) 73% of global travelers want to have authentic experiences reflecting the local culture, 69% would avoid popular destinations and attractions to minimize overcrowding challenges and 53% admitted that they get annoyed if their destination prevents them from being sustainable, for example by not offering recycling facilities.

Concrete actions suggested by interviewees:

- having a positive attitude towards sustainability and responsibility
- considering also economic and cultural aspects, for example by favouring local products and services and offering traditional, authentic experiences
- making sustainability visible in all communications and materials and emphasizing the measures already taken
- starting the process for obtaining a sustainability certification (such as Green Key or EU Ecolabel).

Season all year round

In the archipelago, tourism is almost entirely focused on the summer months. Visitors should be encouraged to come outside peak season so that business could be viable all year round, but as long as there is nothing to offer to visitors outside peak season, the destination is not attractive. Individual SMEs cannot be required to keep their doors open 12 months a year, but until there are enough service providers doing just that, the area as a whole cannot become an all year round destination. The unwillingness of SMEs to invest time and resources in shoulder and off-peak seasons came up as challenge in the interviews. Some of the entrepreneurs return to their other work or businesses after summer and are not interested in expanding their summer operations.

Not all depends solely on the service providers. The weather conditions are part of the nature's cycle and conventions and traditions create so called institutional seasonality, in which public administration and legislation play a part. It should also be noted, that destinations with a steady stream of visitors hardly exist in Finland, so this is not a simple

task. (Honkanen 2017, 116 – 119.) In the interviews the timing of the holiday season in Finland and the difficulty to find staff after summer workers return to their studies already mid August were mentioned as root problems.

On the other hand, from FITs' point of view, off-peak would be easier on the pocket - prices in Finland are generally higher than in most European holiday destinations, and during peak season prices, too, peak. This notion is also supported by a study from 2015, which stated that especially 25 to 35 year olds were willing to travel around the archipelago outside peak season and as many as 26% of them would consider travelling to Finland between December and March, 40% between April and May and 18% between September and November (Merellinen saaristo - yhteenvetoraportti 2015).

Admittedly, natural cycles are a deciding factor in travel planning (Honkanen 2017, 116). However, in the archipelago, there is potential even outside the summer months. Products could be modified or created to suit autumn and spring, even winter. Spreading the tourist streams over a longer period of time would also be more sustainable. The general consensus among the interviewees was, that the goal for now should be lengthening the season from both ends, spring and autumn, rather than aiming for "season all year round" at once.

Concrete actions suggested by interviewees:

- improving predictability - deciding opening times as early as possible, sticking to them and communicating them clearly
- focusing on branding the service and products for each season, creating new or modifying existing offering
- knowing one's target group(s) - different groups for different seasons
- cooperating with nearby service providers
- adding season specific images in online channels.

Health security

Safety has become a megatrend in tourism. As an industry, tourism is very sensitive to crises and consumers are very aware of safety related issues, which also greatly affect the choice of destination (Iivari 2017, 189). In general, Finland can boast with good rankings in this respect - it is the most stable (Fragile State Index 2021) and safest (The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019) country in the world, with the cleanest air (Finnish Meteorological Institute 2018). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made

health security a pressing matter, which was not left unnoticed by the interviewees. Since the strategies on which the strategic goals were based on have all been written before the pandemic outbreak, it is understandable that health security did not appear on them. However, in light of the current developments, it is justifiable to insert one more criterion to the list.

In the interviews it was mentioned that Finland's reputation as a pure and safe country is an asset, but it was uncertain whether SMEs utilize this information to their benefit. Since the criterion was added to the list only after it was pointed out in the interviews, there are no concrete suggestions as regards it, but guidance can be found from other sources. During spring 2021 Visit Finland has added an extra chapter about health safety in their sustainable travel guide and created an extra web page for advice on how to communicate safety matters to travelers (Hietasaari 2021a). In addition to communications, focus should be placed on safety planning, staff training and continuous practicing (Iivari 2017, 190). Travel and hospitality businesses have been in the forefront of investing in health security, and concrete actions have focused on minimizing human contact - keeping safe distances and making all transactions from ordering to queuing and paying as flowing as possible (TEM 2021b, 73).

Platform specific criteria

In the interview conducted with the project workers special attention was given to the criteria which depend on the technical functionalities of the Explore Archipelago platform. In addition to a webpage and images to be added to the company description on the platform, a Google ID is needed, because the basic information about the companies - address, contact details and opening hours - will be automatically imported from the company's Google My Business page. Therefore, each participating SME has to have a Google ID and their own page updated.

Later on, the idea is to integrate the platform with Visit Finland's own DataHub which is a nation wide database for travel companies. Companies can register for free and insert data of their travel services and products. It provides different publishers, like DMOs, the opportunity to retrieve and publish travel data easily through an application programming interface. (Visit Finland DataHub n.d.) In the future, the Explore Archipelago platform aims to become a market place with products buyable online, possibly directing the customer to a webshop or using the DataHub. Thus, it is beneficial if the SME is already using the DataHub and has a webshop for easy integration.

Main attractions

The last task of the interviews was related to the main attractions of the area. Here the individual peculiarities of each area came up, for example, the importance of Moomins for Naantali, which is the official home town of the Moominworld. Yet the main themes - wellness, nature, and the sea - were similar. Only a few themes which did not appear in the strategies were mentioned, such as camping, glamping and hiking. The same themes ranked high also in the Turku area travel survey from 2019 where 26% of international travellers reported that nature and archipelago were the main pull factors (Leppäkoski & Salmivaara 2019).

These results are congruent with the USPs mapped by Visit Finland. When looking at internet searches about Finland, more than a third of touristic activities searches are about natural wonders, northern lights being the most popular, followed by lakes and forests. 16% of searches are about wellbeing, 85% of which mean saunas. For the coast and archipelago, the top three USPs according to internet searches are towns, coastline, and islands (table 4). (D2 Digital Demand 2019.)

Table 4. USPs of the coast and archipelago (D2 Digital Demand 2019).

USP's in searches	No. of searches	Change % 2018/2019
Towns	56 173	+22 %
Coastline	40 141	+7 %
Islands	38 613	+32 %
Cruises	25 370	+22 %
Beaches	19 844	+66 %
Cycling	10 647	+19 %
Wood Houses	9 555	+5 %
Villages	8 150	+32 %

The main outcome of this part of the interviews was, that SMEs should think about the products from the international customers' point of view. What would interest them? What do they know and expect from Finland? How to promote something which is not known abroad or invokes a different connotation? For example, old ironworks villages are not tourist attractions abroad and must be more precisely described. Many of the attractions can be quite ordinary from a Finn's point of view, like the starry sky in the archipelago unspoiled by light pollution or sauna as a wellness experience. It is a matter of describing and packaging these products in a way which attracts the international audience.

5 REFINING THE CRITERIA

The content analysis gave an idea of the goals towards which the SMEs are expected to work and the interviews confirmed the rough idea to be accurate. At this point, the strategic goals have been condensed into nine criteria, supplemented with platform specific, functional requirements. This set of criteria still needed refining and more detail to serve as a supporting tool for the SMEs. To inspire the refining process, three relevant criteria from the international travel industry were looked at. In conclusion, a SWOT analysis was conducted, focusing on issues related to the creation and use of criteria for internationalization and participation.

5.1 Benchmarking

To gain more insight into the elements of possible criteria for SMEs' readiness for internationalization and to define which of them are prepared to be promoted on the platform, three different standards were benchmarked. The standards were chosen to represent a public organization in Finland, a similar organization in Ireland and a commercial set of criteria from a global corporation.

Visit Finland Criteria for Internationalization

The newly updated criteria aim to ensure, that the Finnish travel products and packages targeted at international markets have a sufficient quality to allow better competitiveness and international growth for the businesses (Kansainvälistymiskriteerit 2021). The criteria have seven elements:

1. *Quality* - monitor customer satisfaction and improve the service quality based on customer feedback, target group in mind. Special attention should be given to cleanliness, aesthetics and details.
2. *Service* - offer a seamless service experience. Staff knowns the target group, has good knowledge of languages, and is committed and professional.
3. *Sustainability* - follow the principles of sustainable travel. In all operations the wellbeing and needs of the local community and environment are taken into account. Choices support the local economy and all customers are treated equally.

4. *Safety* - safety of both guests and staff is ensured and official recommendations followed. The local community must not be exposed to any risks.

5. *Capacity and networks* - form a strong network with local travel service providers and (together) ensure that a comprehensive and attractive service to both independent and group travellers can be offered.

6. *Accessibility* - there are good traffic connections to reach the service or transport from the nearest stations is provided.

7. *Availability and buyability* - services with descriptions and prices, in different languages, are available on the website. They can be found and bought via multiple channels.

8. *Authenticity and attractiveness* - use authentic Finnish experiences and ingredients in the product development and marketing, showcasing regional traditions, culture and lifestyle.

9. *Goal-oriented business* - operate professionally, profitability in mind, know the laws related to the business and have a strategy and budget for internationalization. (Kansainvälistymiskriteerit 2021.)

All elements resonate with the strategic goals discussed earlier. However, if applied directly, these national level criteria would restrict the number of participating SMEs, especially for the lack of English language usage, online sales channels and accessibility of the islands. This was also one of the reasons the commissioner did not want to implement Visit Finland's criteria directly but preferred having a personalized solution better suited to the area.

Even when the criteria do not provide a list of concrete actions and requirements they serve as a good direction to work towards. Also, it is important to ensure that the areal criteria created now do not contradict the national ambitions for the development of the tourism industry in general.

Fáilte Ireland Welcome Standard

Fáilte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority of Ireland, supporting the long-term sustainable growth in the economic, social, cultural and environmental contribution of tourism to the country. They operate similar to Visit Finland, working in partnership with government, state agencies, local authorities, representative groups and industry, to develop tourism. Similar to the Visit Finland greater sub-areas, Fáilte

Ireland has divided the country into four regional experience brands: Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and Dublin. (Fáilte Ireland n.d.)

During the briefing discussion with the commissioner, it was mentioned that the Wild Atlantic Way, which encompasses 2,500km of coastline stretching from the Inishowen Peninsula to Kinsale in Cork (Fáilte Ireland n.d.), was used as a benchmark when designing the Explore Archipelago platform (personal discussion, Olli Ylioja and Ira Lahovuo, Visit Turku, January 20th 2021). This was also a reason to choose the welcome standard as a benchmark for the Explore Archipelago participation criteria.

The Welcome Standard identifies the strengths of the business and allows for greater innovation, individuality, and authenticity. The standards should be implemented without taking away any of the character and style of the individual property, which makes them applicable to unique destinations, such as lighthouses or tree houses. If a company is committed to operating a serious tourism business contributing to growth in Irish tourism, they should be able to meet the standards. This indicates, that no matter the size or business idea of a company, the standards should be realistic if they are fully invested in their business. (Fáilte Ireland n.d.) The same kind of flexibility is needed for the Explore Archipelago participation criteria, which is intended for a very varied selection of SMEs.

Fálite Ireland has chosen to focus on qualitative and behavioural standards and on identifying the essential aspects of the customer journey and experience. The customer thinking is clearly visible in the way the standards are presented, from pre-arrival to departure, which is a completely different approach as compared to Visit Finland. The main points are listed below, and a full list of standards is available on the organization's web page. (Fáilte Ireland n.d.)

The steps are:

1. General Business Processes - statutory obligations, safety, code of ethics etc.

2. Pre-arrival - clear and accurate information given in a timely manner etc.

3. Arrival - staff on duty, welcoming

4. During the visit - friendly service, availability, complaints dealt with etc.

5. Facilities - first impression, maintenance, heating and ventilation, cleanliness etc.

6. Exit/departure - staff on duty, exit process in place, guest satisfaction check, farewell etc. (Fáilte Ireland n.d.)

The standards are not as demanding as Visit Finland's. For example, no webpage is required as long as the business can be reached by phone, and no accessibility or online availability issues are touched upon.

However, if a business wishes to attain the official Welcome Standard Classification, the requirements become considerably stricter. Based on the Welcome Standard Framework, the classification rewards businesses that are going the extra mile (Fáilte Ireland n.d.). Each of the six points above is further divided to anything from 12 to 30 sub-points. Even so, the requirements are simple and reasonable, and concrete examples of how to tackle them are given, taking into consideration different size businesses (figure 11).

Guidelines – Section 1 – Star Rating Classification
OPERATOR GUIDELINES

General Business Processes

	General Business Processes
1.1	Business planning process showing evidence of plans for growth over a minimum 3-year period.
	For example. These are for guidance and not requirements but examples of best practice. • *Evidence of business plan (may only be one page) demonstrating an understanding of the current business environment and a plan for the future. This may be described verbally without the document being presented.* • *The plan may be an outline of activity only for very small businesses, as a guideline, usually those with around three or fewer staff.* • *Sit with your staff to discuss what your business and service goals are, how they can contribute and what the likely benefits are to all concerned for trying to be better at what you do.*
1.2	Marketing planning process demonstrating an understanding of Ireland's, and the business's, main markets.
	For example. These are for guidance and not requirements but examples of best practice. • *Evidence of a marketing plan (may only be one page) demonstrating an understanding of the current and future markets, trends and their potential for the future. This may be described verbally without the document being presented.* • *The plan may be a combined business and marketing plan.* • *Support provided by local programmes, such as Wild Atlantic Way may help with this area.* • *Keeping information updated on Discover Ireland is part of the businesses' overall marketing activity.*

Figure 11. Example of the classification criteria under General Business Processes (Fáilte Ireland n.d.).

All in all, these criteria focus on the behaviour of the staff and service quality, giving very detailed instructions on how to make the guest experience as smooth as possible, which is illustrated in the example below (figure 12).

3.6	Genuine, warm welcome.
	For example: • *This addresses the welcome provided by the owner and/or staff.* • *Welcoming the guest demonstrating pleasure at their arrival. A smile and a greeting is expected.* • *When welcoming and checking in, a basic 'Yes' or 'Can I help you?' with no 'Hello', 'How are you?' could score No.* • *An unacceptable delay in being acknowledged, e.g. if staff are on the phone or completing a task on a computer, with no indication of a welcome or apology, could score No.*
3.7	Guest asked if they had stayed before, or this recognised and acknowledged if appropriate, with the guest welcomed back.
	For example: • *Adding a few positive comments or questions about, for example, the caller's home town or country, or asking if it is their first visit to the region or Ireland can build a relationship.*
3.8	Offer of refreshment and/or welcome pack on arrival, where appropriate to style of business.
	For example: • *This may be as simple as a glass of water or soft drink, or tea and a scone, a basic supply pack in self-catering or similar, as appropriate for the style of business. A welcome pack with key, map, opening hours, comment card etc. may also be appropriate here.* • *If not offered where expected and easily provided, a score of No.* • *If not expected by guests in, e.g. self-check-in motorhome area, a camping only park, then N/A.*

Figure 12. Example of the classification criteria under Arrival (Fáilte Ireland n.d.).

The premises for these and Visit Finland's standards are different, since the latter aim at sustainable growth of tourism business, without giving much attention to quality, at least not explicitly. Visit Finland's criteria is not used for audit visits, unlike Fáilte Ireland's, which could explain the different level of detail. Fáilte Ireland's guidelines are more concrete, but there is also a separate code of ethics in place, which covers some of the elements mentioned in Visit Finland's more abstract criteria, such as "all activities should be conducted with respect for the artistic, historic and cultural heritage of Ireland" (Fáilte Ireland n.d.). Thus, separating the ethical questions and concrete actions in the case of Explore Archipelago criteria is an option to consider.

Viator product standard

Viator, an online marketplace for high-quality experiences offers yet another, commercial way of looking at tourism businesses' quality standards and inclusion to a platform or certification programme (Viator n.d.). Viator is a Tripadvisor company, which is the world's largest travel guidance platform with hundreds of millions of monthly users (Tripadvisor n.d.). Whereas anyone can enter their business or give a review on

Tripadvisor, Viator could be described as Tripadvisor with entry standards. Viator's customer promise is "quality you can trust", and their product quality standards focus especially on online presence, accessibility and buyability, factors which also gained importance in the strategy overview. The standards have the same goal as the criteria for the Explore Archipelago platform, introducing product quality standards to improve the quality of the whole marketplace. (Viator n.d.)

The standards follow a similar customer journey approach as Fáilte Ireland, but they focus on the purchase journey online, from the discovery and planning stage, the booking process, and all the way through to post-experience review (Viator n.d). They use two levels, the "good" and "excellent", as shown below in figure 13.

	Good*	Excellent
Has future availability	✔	✔
Has complete product details	✔	✔
Number of quality photos	2+	6+
Supplier-driven cancellation rate	Lower than 15%	Lower than 5%
Average Star Rating	3.0+	4.5+
Number of product reviews	Any	15+
Is instantly confirm-able	--	✔
Accepts mobile ticket	--	✔
Has Standard Cancellation Policy	--	✔
Is connected to a reservation system or has a booking cut-off of less than 4 hours	--	✔

Figure 13. Viator platform entry standards (Viator n.d.).

Under the "complete product details" (row 2 in figure 13), things such as itinerary of a tour, inclusions and exclusions from the price, information regarding accessibility and health restrictions and schedules and prices should be mentioned. Booking cut-off means how many hours before delivery a service becomes unbookable. (Viator n.d.)

In addition to these requirements, product integrity, meaning that the product content should factually represent what is included in the price and what type of experience travelers will have, is demanded. In the post-sale operational standards cancellations and changes of bookings as well as disrespectful communication or conduct are warned against. Also major incidents such as unsafe or illegal operation and discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or marital status may result in removing the product from the platform. (Viator n.d.)

Viator's standards focus on the do's and don'ts of businesses wishing to be promoted on the platform, and warn against undesired behaviour. This is understandable, since Viator's reputation as a marketplace depends on the quality of the products available. This raises the question, should similar rules be implemented for the Explore Archipelago platform and should there be a possibility to remove service providers, if they broke those rules.

Conclusions of benchmarking

All three benchmarked sets of criteria are different - it becomes clear that standards can be drafted based on different needs and goals and follow a different level of abstraction. Already from the interviews with the DMO representatives it could be concluded that regional characteristics and differences between companies, such as location, size, business field and model, need to be accounted for, and thus certain flexibility in the criteria is required, no matter the form they ultimately take.

An abstract listing, like that of Visit Finland, can give good guidelines for the future, but lack concrete solutions. An operationally oriented, detailed listing, such as the one by Fáilte Ireland, ensures quality here and now, but does not help with goal setting and can be difficult to apply in varied situations. A list of restrictions, like Viator's criteria, might serve as a good quality control tool, but hardly as a motivational one.

To draw together the insights, concerns and ideas from the interviews and benchmarking before moving on to the creation of the criteria, a SWOT analysis was done, which is discussed in the following chapter.

5.2 SWOT

To have a closer look at the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of implementing a criteria in the first place, a SWOT analysis was done (figure 14). The SWOT summarizes the insights, concerns and ideas from the interviews and benchmarking.

STRENGHTS
- gives a common direction for creating a strong brand
- ensures transparency
- ensures equal opportunities
- guides the SMEs' focus on the strategically important factors

WEAKNESSES
- can be too rigid to serve different types of businesses
- can be overwhelming
- needs to be updated regularly
- does not ensure quality, as it is not an audit tool

OPPORTUNITIES
- could be used as basis for regional quality standards
- could be used as basis for a rewarding system
- can enhance service quality in the region
- can engage to further improvements
- can be applied to other travel areas with slight modifications

THREATS
- is partial or favours certain type of businesses
- is left unused after the project ends
- is too demanding or unrealistic
- is too abstract
- is too specific
- creates resistance or resentment in SMEs if perceived as criticism

Figure 14. SWOT for criteria setting.

Positive factors of creating a joint set of standards for a travel destination include having a common aim to work towards, directing focus according to strategy and treating everyone equally. The criteria provide a tool which is transparent. The requirements are stated clearly, are same for everyone and available for everyone to see and evaluate.

Several opportunities could also be defined. In the future, if used consistently, the criteria could serve as basis for quality work in the area or be used as a rewards system, where well performing SMEs could be rewarded with more visibility, for instance. It could also motivate the SMEs in their efforts to continuously develop their services. Furthermore, the archipelago area could serve as an example and inspire criteria work in other travel areas, providing a process and model to follow.

A weakness is, that in their comprehensiveness, the criteria are rather overwhelming and might not inspire action. Another negative aspect is that it is difficult to account for all types of businesses, such as those with their own physical premises and those providing tours only. Relevance is also an issue. There is a possibility that the criteria are left unused when they stop reflecting the current situation or needs due to lack of updates. Lastly, the criteria have little power over any SME, because their use is voluntary, and as such, they cannot serve as an audit tool.

The threats are that if all stakeholders are not heard and the differences of the businesses and their particular areas are not taken into consideration, the criteria might end up being unrealistic, too abstract to be of real use or too specific to be suitable for all SMEs. This could also result in unfair treatment or create resentment in SMEs who feel the requirements are unsuited or too demanding for their particular situation. A threat is of course too, that the criteria are left unused altogether after the project ends.

6 IMPLEMENTING THE CRITERIA

Rather than being just a list of demands, the criteria are to serve as a supportive tool for the SMEs who wish to join the Explore Archipelago platform and become truly international. For the SMEs to be able to test easily whether they are eligible and what issues they might have to focus more on, a simple, accessible presentation of the criteria is needed. In the following chapters the development of a solution is described, starting from gathering all the insights gained during desk research, interviews, benchmarking, and SWOT analysis and continuing with the condensing of all this information into a service mock-up of the criteria.

6.1 Creating a solution

The commissioner's wish was, that the criteria should be as comprehensive as possible to serve as basis for different uses and versions. In order to take all aspects into consideration, every insight gained during the process was written down on an online synthesis wall, using the criteria as categories (figure 15, bigger figure in appendix 4). The suggestions made during the interviews of DMO representatives and Explore Archipelago project workers, already presented in chapter 4.3., have been compiled in the green notes.
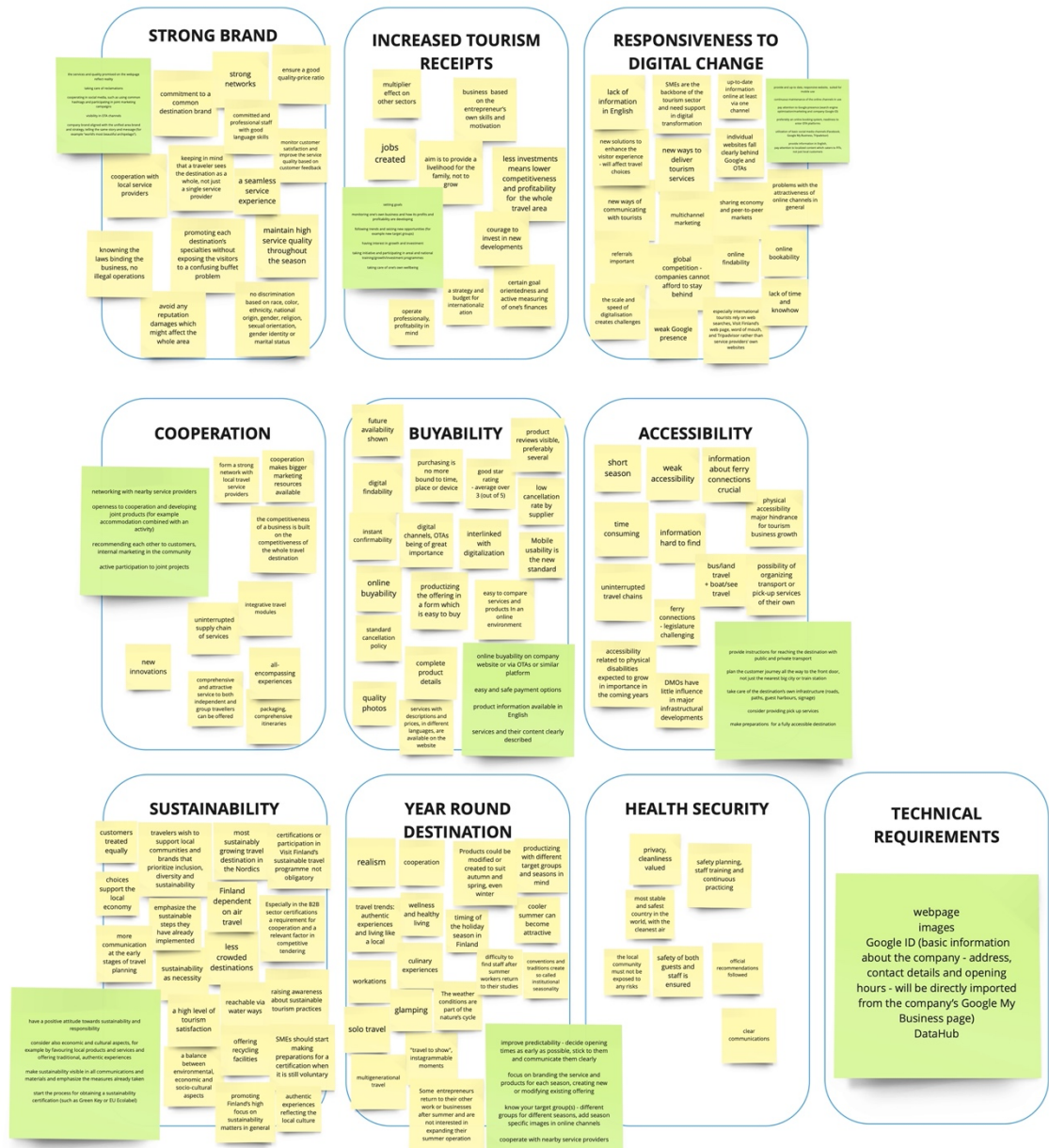
Figure 15. Synthesis wall.

At this point, the nine criteria – strong brand, increased tourism receipts, responsiveness to digital change, cooperation, buyability, accessibility, sustainability, season all year round and health security, complemented by technical requirements related to the platform's functionalities, had been defined. However, the requirements for fulfilling each criterion needed to be added to create a more helpful tool for the SMEs. As discussed in connection to benchmarking, Visit Finland's criteria are an abstract list of requirements whereas Fáilte Ireland's standards are detailed and demanding. Here the idea was to find a solution in between these two approaches. The synthesis of insights served as basis for the work.

To create a solution which could be tested fast, easy and without cost, the service mock-up approach was taken. Using an online tool, involve.me, a first draft of the criteria in the form of a quiz-like score card was created. This tool was chosen because it provided a free and an amendable format which was easy to change even after the score card had been published online. A physical, static version would have to be redesigned, resent and saved every time there was a change, making version management difficult. An online score card can be administered by everyone with access to it and it is also easy to access and available to the SMEs at all times.

To tackle the issues identified in the SWOT, a number of things were considered in the process. Not to make the list too overwhelming, the score card presents one criterion at a time. For the criteria not to bee too rigid but suitable for all SMEs, no pass or fail result was sought after. However, a scoring system gives the possibility to compare results, follow one's own improvement and create a rewarding system based on scores if necessary at some point. The updating issue was tackled by using an easy to amend online tool, which also makes the score card easy to copy and adapt to other regions. In addition, a quiz-like, visual presentation, a friendly, relaxed tone of voice and extra information and tips provided under each criterion were hoped to work as motivational factors.

The score card was delivered in Finnish to the commissioner and can be found under https://ruusunen.involve.me/explore-archipelago-score-card.

An English version of the score card was also made for the sake of the thesis project. Screen shots of the online score card in English can be found in appendix 5 and the online version under https://ruusunen.involve.me/explore-archipelago-score-card-en.

6.2 User testing

User testing was done with think-aloud method. The user, in this case two SME representatives, filled in the online score card while expressing their thoughts aloud. The focus was on the functionality of the score card as well as on any spontaneous thoughts that would come up as regards the criteria. At the end the users were asked how they felt about their final score and whether it was representative of their current situation as regards internationalization. Also, after the two user tests the score card was amended and a final user test with the commissioner representative was conducted. The tests

were done in Finnish, with the Finnish score card, but for clarity, example images of the final version translated into English are used here.

SME 1

The user interviewed was Marianne Hildén, key account manager for international customers at Sunborn Hotels and Restaurants, one of the biggest hospitality businesses in Southwest Finland with two spa hotels, one in Turku and one in Naantali, among other outlets. The company's destinations had already been added to the beta version of the Explore Archipelago platform by Visit Turku project team.

The assumption was, that this company should get a high score, as it is not only preparing for internationalization but is already doing business internationally with a strong focus on international travellers, FITs and groups alike. If it would not score well, the criteria might be too demanding.

The user test took place on the 21st of October 2021 from 9am to 10am at the Sunborn Group company premises. The test session started by introducing the Explore Archipelago platform and the idea behind the criteria. The company's already existing entries on the platform were also briefly looked at.

After this, the test person was given the link to the score card. Her first impression was positive, and on the introduction page she immediately welcomed the information about how long it would take to fill the score card: "10 minutes does not seem too long, even if it turns out to take a bit longer, this gives an idea how much time this will take". The introduction page can be seen below in figure 16, with the information about the duration marked with a red frame.
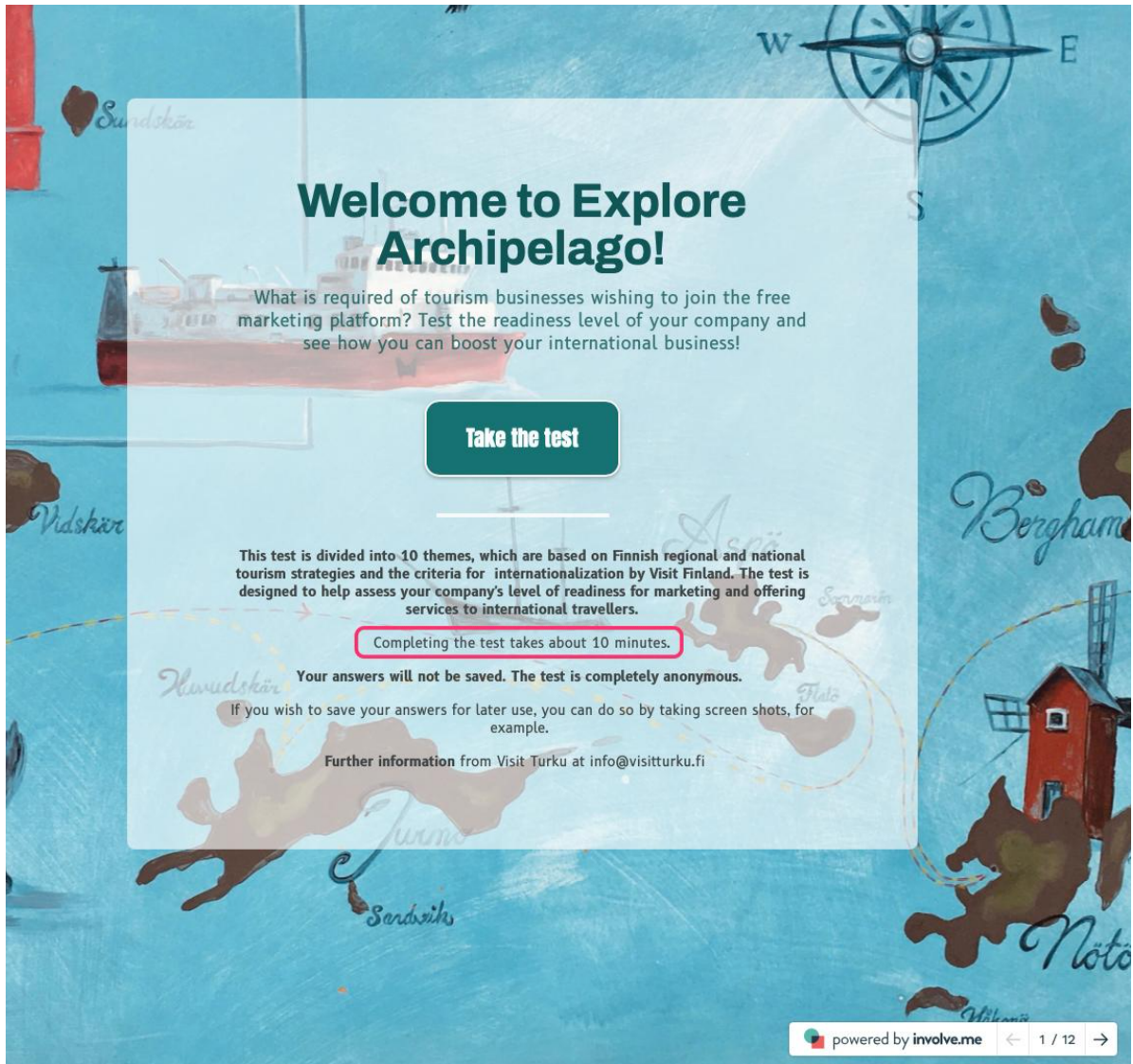
Figure 16. . Introduction page of the score card.

The test person read the introduction and then moved on to the individual criteria. She immediately figured out how to navigate the score card and what to click on each page. After having gone through the first two criteria, she started to ponder about the target audience, and tried to shift her thinking more to international travellers to whom the Explore Archipelago platform is intended. The target group is mentioned on the introduction page, but could be stressed out more.

She also found the answer options sometimes problematic. The user can tick the box if a requirement is met or leave it blank if it is not met (figure 17). Each ticked box equals one point. There is no scale or other answer options. At some points the test person was uncertain, whether she could honestly tick the box, when there were still things to be

done to reach the optimal level, for example in sustainability matters. For other questions, such as legal issues, the answer was a clear yes or no. A sliding scale from 1 to 5 could be added to some questions, especially if the final score is to be used for quality checks or a rewarding system.

Figure 17. Functionality of the score card.

As regards abbreviations, such as OTA, she mentioned that some users might not recognize them. It might be a good idea to give a short explanation, although it could be argued that if the SME representative filling the score card is not familiar with an abbreviation, the related requirement is probably not met.

She did check the extra information at the bottom of each criterion (figure 17, text above the "next" button), but wondered whether it is material made for the score card

specifically, or directs to some other, third party sources. The information is mainly from Visit Finland or other tourism related bodies, which could be added for clarity. Also, there was a technical issue with clicking the information links. If the user clicked the link, she was directed to another page and the test was interrupted, although the page notified the user before opening a new window. The user did not see this as a big problem, and just copied the link to a new browser window. Her suggestion to add instructions to do this was a welcomed improvement.

The test person found the "next" button easily. Answering the questions under the second criterion went already faster. She commented the questions briefly, such as "this is easy, I know we monitor this" and "yes, I think we are doing this".

The third criterion, responsiveness to digital change, prompted more comments, especially about the English language content and localization. She felt that the international customers have been considered, but much of the materials made especially for them are not on the web page, like sauna etiquette, detailed information about the services at the spa directed to Asian customers, and so on. It would bring added value to the customer if this information was available on the hotel web page as well.

Again here, the test person pointed out the abbreviations for search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM) and Google ID. As regards the visual elements of an online channel, she mentioned that their own sites are fine, but the company cannot do anything about OTA channels' appearance, for instance. Attention must be paid to the wording of the questions, since the respondents should be directed to focus on their own company.

On this page the extra links at the bottom of the page did not show on the screen if the user did not scroll down enough, because the list of requirements is so long. She pressed the next button without having noticed the additional information at the bottom of the page. An easy fix is to move the extra information above the "next" button. This is especially important when the site is used on a mobile.

Under the cooperation criterion the test person liked the introduction text particularly, saying that it is important for the smaller players to understand, that their own product is not enough to enter the international market. A strong network allows better visibility for

everyone, since an international visitor does not come to Finland just for one attraction. She felt that the theme makes everyone think about the importance of cooperation.

At this point she noticed that the score card has no "back" button. This could be added, even though there is a back button at the very end of the score card.

With buyability, some of the issues seemed self evident to the test person, because in Finland the law is strict and purchasing online is generally safe. She felt, however, that not every country has this asset, and it is worth highlighting. The same goes for cancellation standards, which follow the general requirements of the industry. As regards availability, she mentioned that the sense of urgency makes one take a purchase decision faster – "if you can show there are only two rooms left, it is likely that the customer is going to book fast".

With accessibility, there was a lengthy discussion about the pick-up services. There is demand especially from Asian group travel agencies, but organizing the service requires a lot of work and is not without problems, such as no-show from customer's side or the driver picking up the wrong customer. At the moment, the prices have been fixed with the service providers, but the customer does the booking.

Seasonality is not a big problem for the company in question, but she pointed out the weather affecting opening hours and also mentioned, that the ferry connections can limit the availability in the archipelago.

With health security, she mentioned the law again, things being generally in order in Finland. However, she did say they expect the Finnish customers to know what to do and whom to contact. With international customers and internal communications there was still room for improvement. She also pointed out, that the big international group travel organizers require yearly safety reports and these requirements have become more and more frequent. This supports the addition of this factor to the criteria.

Technical requirements were all fulfilled and as expected, the end score was very high, 64/69. In general, the test person felt that this is a good wake up call for companies wishing to target the international market. When pointed out, that the responses are anonymous and are not saved, she felt this is worth mentioning already on the introduction page, because it might inspire more truthful answers. The score card would then seem more like a self-assessment with less pressure to get a high score.

SME 2

The test person interviewed was Karoliina Vitikainen, the CEO of a Turku based travel agency MagniMundi, which offers tailor-made tours and travel in Finland, especially in Southwest Finland and along the coast. For the development of the score card, it was interesting to interview an SME which is not dependent on a physical location, unlike a hotel or a restaurant. The user test was to uncover possible challenges in the phrasing of the criteria and requirements in this respect.

The user test took place online on the 1st of November 2021 and took 40 minutes. It started with a short description of the Explore Archipelago platform and to whom it is targeted. The process of the criteria creation and their objective was also discussed. The test person was not familiar with the platform but was interested in having their products added on it.

The test person's first impression was that there was a lot of text. She wanted to read everything on the page before clicking on anything. If possible, the questions could be shortened to make the score card less text intensive.

Most points on the first page were self-evident to the test person. As regards joint campaigns in the travel area she was not sure what would count as such. An example of a campaign could be added, although this will again make the text longer.

The area brand was a complicated question – she felt she had an idea of the overall area brand and its focus on nature but as a cultural tour operator could not completely identify with it. This highlights the challenging task of balancing between uniqueness of operators and unity of an area brand.

The test person skipped the extra information and went straight to the "next" button. The next theme was otherwise easy to answer, but in the last question she noted a discrepancy. Taking care of professional development and one's own wellbeing have been grouped under the same question, but she pointed out that these are two different things and that especially in a business seeking to grow, development often goes before wellbeing. This question should therefore be split in two.

Concerning digitalization, the user ticked the answer boxes again fast. About OTAs she mentioned the same thing which came up during the initial DMO interviews. The commission is very high, and they only have a few products available on these platforms. With SEO/SEM she was not sure about the answer, because she does not handle those

issues in the company. Thus, it might be a good idea for company representatives to answer the questions together with employees or partners responsible for marketing and digital presence of the company.

The test person went through cooperation and buyability without problems. Here an improvement could be a slide scale or different wording of the questions (*most* of our products are available online vs. our products are available online) because she could not answer 100% yes to a question when there were some exceptions, such as a tailor-made tour which is understandably not available online in advance.

With accessibility the nature of the business provided some problems. As a travel agency and tour operator, the company does not have infrastructure to take care of or accessibility issues on its premises. However, the user could tick accessibility plans and arrival instructions as met requirements because the customers have these needs on the tours.

As regards sustainable travel the test person pointed out, that they do not produce waste nor offer recycling facilities. She also mentioned that cooperation is brought up often; "this is at least the third time". Possibly some of the cooperation related questions can be omitted.

The test person had only few comments about health security, stating that there are instructions, but they are not online and there was no need for a general safety plan, but the individual products have been checked for safety. Also, technical requirements created no problems.

The end score was high, 60/69, even when few of the questions were not applicable to this type of business. It would be possible to do separate score cards for different type of businesses, but the differences are so small that this is not absolutely necessary. Rather, adjustments can be done by changing the wording of a few questions.

6.3 Final score card

The user tests revealed a few technical issues, which could be easily fixed. The place of the "next" button and the extra information was interchanged, so that the information links would be more prominent. Also, instructions to copy the link to a new browser window and a "back" button were added (figure 18 shows the changes in the Finnish version which was used for the tests).
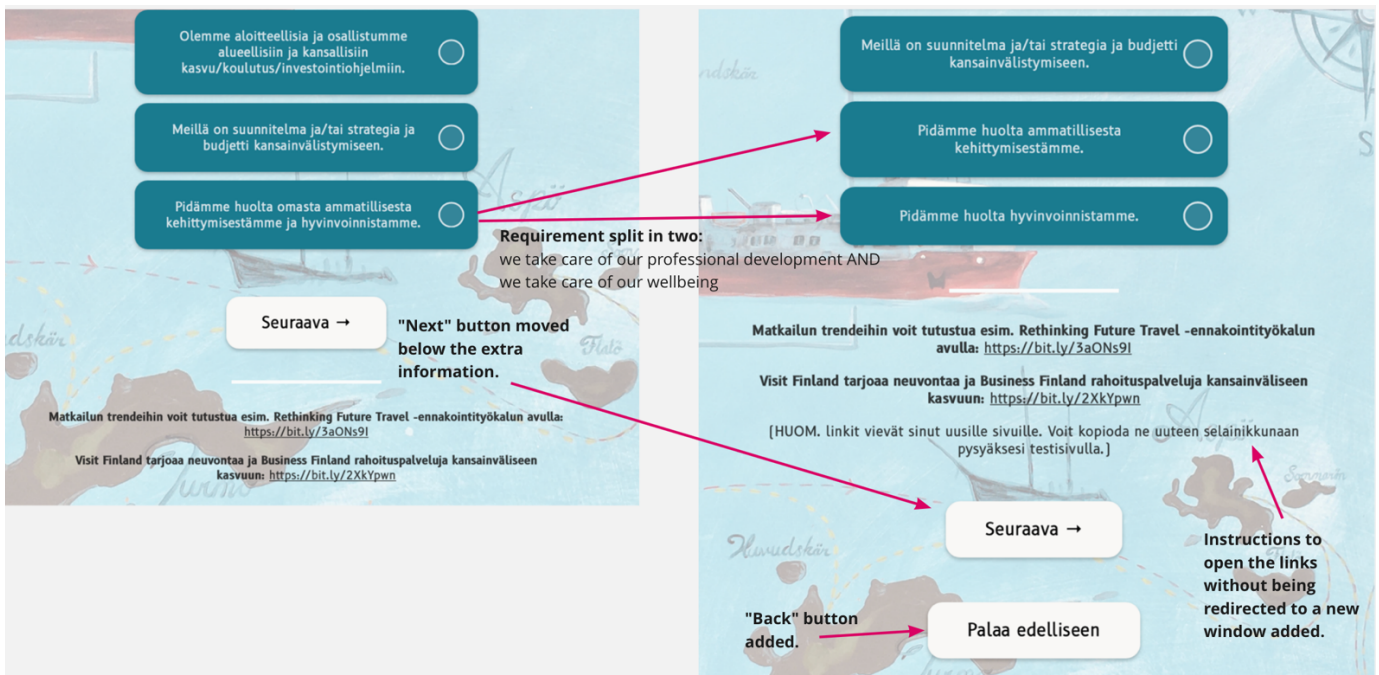
Figure 18. Changes after user test.

Content related issues were solved by adding explanations or examples. The target group was more clearly stated on the introduction page and information regarding anonymity of the test added (figure 19, the additions in red frames).
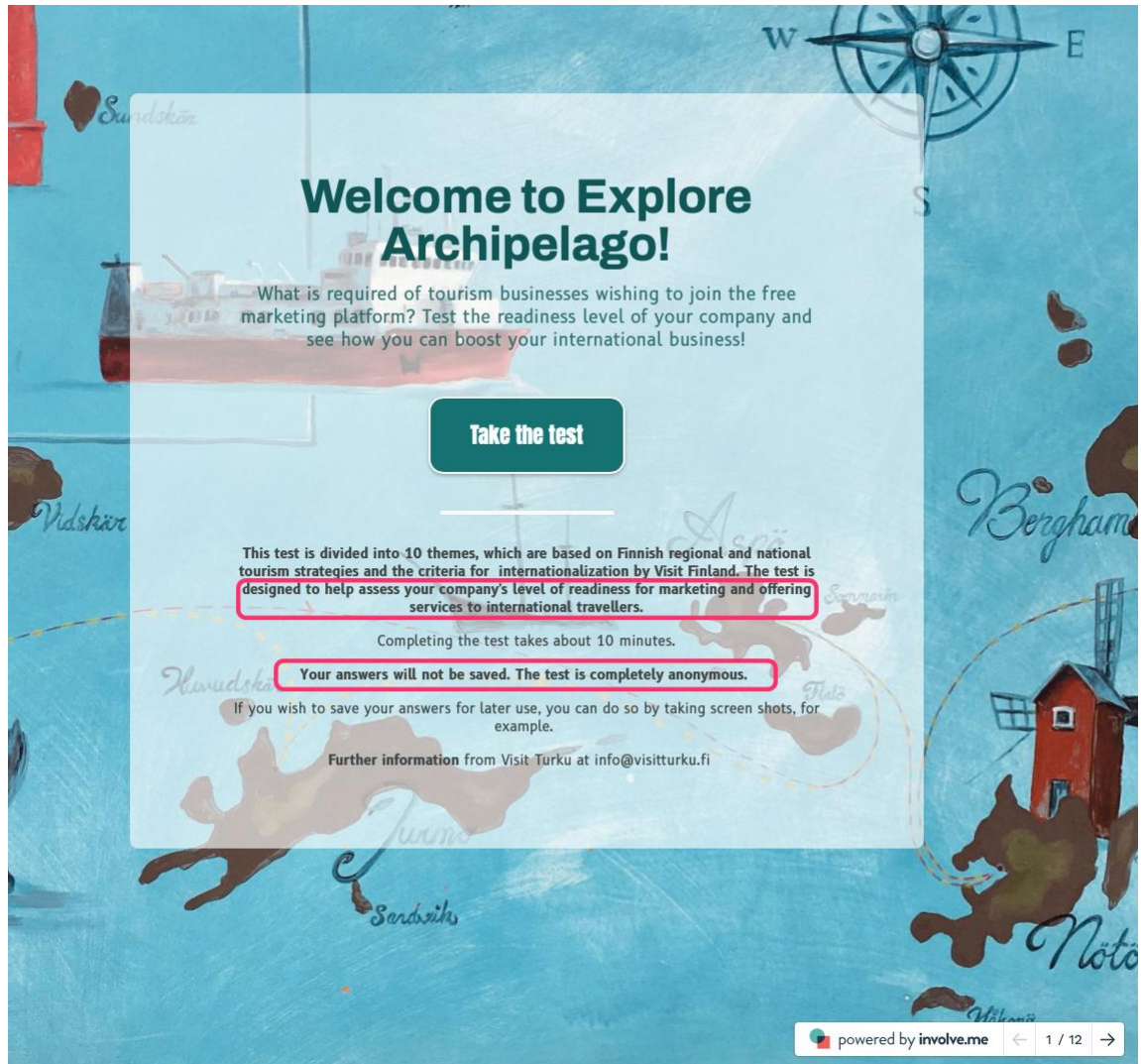
Figure 19. Introduction page after user test.

Similarly, explanations of the abbreviations OTA, SEO, SEM, Google ID and joint marketing campaigns were added in the lists of requirements. Where extra information was given under the criterion, information on the source of the material was included before the link.

Instead of adding a sliding scale or other type of answering option, the wording of the possibly confusing questions was changed to allow for more flexibility. In addition, the requirement combining wellbeing and professional development was split in two, so that each factor got its own box (figure 18).

6.4 Commissioner review

The final feedback discussion with the commissioner was held online on the 5th of November 2021 and took one hour. A similar user test was conducted but this time with the already amended score card. The idea was to exchange thoughts about both the technical solution and the content and receive any final suggestions for changes before handing the score card over for future use. Additionally, the final solution was checked against the initial requirements.

First the scope of the criteria was discussed. At the beginning of the project, it was agreed that it should be all-encompassing and contain every important aspect that could be found during research and development. This way, the criteria would be detailed enough but possible to simplify according to usage and would not run the risk of leaving something important out. The commissioner felt that the result is based on insights from the field and comprehensive, as requested.

The scope of the score card does, however, have a negative effect on its appearance and usability. All the criteria with their requirements to fill make the test somewhat cumbersome to click through, which was also mentioned by the test person from SME 2. However, the commissioner saw the plentitude of options as a strength, which allows further development to go both ways - either making a very simple and general criteria suited for all or an even more detailed and specific audit tool.

It was also pointed out, that it is challenging to create a set of criteria when most factors included cannot be easily measured. At the moment, the score card's result is based purely on self-assessment. As long as it is not meant to be an outside audit tool which will decide the participation of an SME on the Explore Archipelago platform, this is acceptable. If it is to become an audit tool, digitalization related themes will be the focus since they can be verified. One can easily check whether an SME has a website and a Google ID and products available in a web shop or OTA channel.

The differences between the SMEs in the area were also touched upon. How would the criteria cater to all? The possibility of making different score cards for different types of SMEs, such as food and beverage, hospitality, and activity providers, was discussed. Another way would be to divide the SMEs between year-round operators and those who only provide services during the summer season. The SMEs could also be divided into different levels, based on their ability or willingness to do international business. With the

current solution, all options are realizable. The score card is easy to copy and amend for different target groups and with the scoring system classifications are possible to make. Also, the number of points given for each requirement can be amended, which makes it possible to emphasize the importance of a selected number of them. At the moment, each requirement is worth one point.

On the technical side, there were no particular issues detected. The tool used was deemed to be well suited for this sort of solution and the visuality of it gained positive feedback. The commissioner saw it possible for the score card to be used in its current or slightly amended form.

At the beginning the commissioner had expressed a concern related to the ability of the criteria to reflect both the SMEs' and DMOs' viewpoints. In the final discussion the friendly and supportive tone of the score card and the overall motivational approach of the criteria was welcomed. Thus, the customer centricity of the project made it possible to incorporate different aspects to the criteria in a balanced and transparent way.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The final chapter discusses whether the initial research questions were answered, how the project itself advanced and what could be its benefits and implications to the platform and the travel destination in the future.

The thesis project had two research questions:

- What kind of participation criteria both supports the strategic goals and strengthens the international brand of a travel destination?
- How can the criteria be presented so that they are accessible and updatable?

The criteria work started with getting familiar with the commissioner, the tourism sector in general and the archipelago tourism in particular, and current global trends affecting the industry. In order to gain an understanding of the various strategies and road maps directing the development of Finnish tourism industry, it was also essential to take a look at the tourism bodies in Finland, which are divided into different areas and levels, starting from DMOs to the national level organization Visit Finland.

As the relevant stakeholders were recognized, a content analysis to their tourism strategies was made. Altogether eight strategies, visions and road maps were analyzed. Out of this analysis, the first set of strategic goals for archipelago tourism development was drawn, which was further condensed into the criteria for internationalization and participation on the Explore Archipelago platform. At this point, tourism professionals representing the relevant DMOs as well as the Explore Archipelago project workers were interviewed to consolidate the goals and find common grounds for the criteria. The interviews gave ample information and a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential of tourism in the area.

To take advantage of best practices, benchmarking on existing criteria for internationalization of tourism sector organizations was conducted, looking into three different sets of criteria from public and private sector, both from Finland and abroad. Benchmarking was followed by a SWOT analysis. All insights from the content analysis, interviews, benchmarking and SWOT were summarized, supported by theory and recent research findings and gathered with the help of a synthesis wall. At this point, the first research question was answered, since a consensus backed with research was reached and a comprehensive list of criteria created.

The next step was to present the criteria in a way which would be clear and easy to use for the SMEs wishing to enter the platform and international markets. Based on the SWOT, an online tool was chosen to present the criteria in the form of a score card. The tool allowed easy updating and is accessible online at all times. The usability of the score card was also tested with the think-aloud method with two target SMEs and amended accordingly, before testing it with the commissioner with the same method. Hence, the second research question was also answered and a working solution for the commissioner created.

The project took altogether 12 months as planned. The development phase could have gone faster, but both technical and participatory issues were experienced. First, the Explore Archipelago project was prolonged, and the launch of the platform delayed due to technical issues. The platform went live in July 2021, just before the whole Archipelago Access project ended, but its further development and involvement of SMEs was still pending when the thesis project was finalized. The platform is also related to the areal implementation of Visit Finland's DataHub, which is to follow some time in 2022. Therefore, the criteria could not be tested on a wider audience.

Second, there were difficulties in finding the necessary professionals and SMEs to participate in the interviews. This was not a surprise since engagement was mentioned to be a potential challenge already during the first interviews. SMEs are being approached from many directions: DMOs, Visit Finland, other destination marketing campaigns, researchers, and so on. How to convince them that there is real value in this particular platform, even when it is free of charge? Also, the global CODIV-19 pandemic created its own challenges. Travel businesses lived in uncertainty, forced to rethink their strategies in unprecedented conditions. When domestic tourism finally picked up, the busy summer months required all focus on daily operations. In such a situation, focusing on new, international markets was not the priority, and quite understandably so.

However, the slow progress also meant that all materials could be thoroughly investigated and there was time to amend the criteria during each step. The tools and methods used ensured a wide view of the matter at hand. Not relying too much on single sources of information made the end results objective and enabled a compromise between different views and approaches. Hence, the iterative service design process chosen worked well in this case.

How can the results be used and further developed in the future? As for the score card itself, the current version is general enough both in terms of the type of business it is targeted to and the level of difficulty. A future development could be to make different versions based on the business model, size, location, or level of internationalization of the SME. The scoring would then become more precise. For now, there are three levels (scores from 0-24, 25-48 and 49-69) which give a different answer at the end of the test. It could even be developed further by providing a wider spectrum of possible answers or a numerical sliding scale and more specific instructions depending on the end score.

During the project the need for quality checks on the SMEs displayed on the platform or a possibility to remove service providers who break participation rules was discussed. With the score system quality checks could be done, especially when refined as described above. However, the results would still be based on self-assessment. A third party, independent audit system used in the hospitality industry could be relied upon when it comes to removing incompliant businesses from the platform, but this will be left at the commissioner's discretion.

Another future development could be to separate ethical questions and concrete actions so that the criteria would focus more on the latter and all participating SMEs would sign a common code of ethics, for example. This would support the unity and common branding of the whole travel destination and highlight the aspects which are already well taken care of in Finland in general, such as safety and sustainability.

Lastly, it must be noted that if the criteria is to be used in connection to the Explore Archipelago platform or other internationalization projects, the goals and criteria need to be periodically updated according to the changing trends and possible shifts in strategic focus. Since the process has been carefully described, aims to be as objective as possible and is repeatable as a scientific research should be, updates are not a problem. A new content analysis and trend review can be done following the same iterative steps. This goes also for other travel areas, if they wish to create criteria of their own. To conclude, in addition to creating criteria for internationalization for travel sector SMEs and delivering them in the form of an online solution, a third outcome was achieved - a process that can be used for updating the criteria and adapting it to other areas and uses.

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APPENDICES

STRATEGY REVIEW

Strategy document	Duration	Vision	Mission	Goals
Finland´s Tourism Strategy and Action Plan	2019-2028	Original and intriguing Finland is the most sustainably growing tourism destination in the Nordics.	Tourism is a responsibly growing service business sector that generates wellbeing and employment around the year in Finland.	• Supporting activities that foster sustainable development • Responding to digital change • Improving accessibility to cater to the tourism sector's needs • Ensuring an operating environment that supports competitiveness
The Coast and Archipelago Greater Region Vision	2020-2030	The greater region is a well known and attractive destination for the main target groups in the neighbouring countries and Europe.	The profitability of tourism companies has increased and the growth is sustainable.	• The lead products are available for international customers to purchase via multiple channels. • Knowledge-based management and common goals and indicators used in greater region cooperation. • Distribution strategy in place with committed distribution channel partners • Strengthened product selection • The average length of stay of international travelers min. 3 nights • The tourism season has lengthened to include the spring and autumn seasons • Influential brand • Responsibility and sustainable development made visible • Digital buyability and accessibility in check • Increased readiness to internationalization
Road Map for Travel Business in Southwest Finland	2021–2027	Southwest Finland is the most sustainably growing destination in the Nordics for archipelago, nature and culture travel all year round, with easily accessible and buyable services.	Doubling of the tourism receipts in Southwest Finland, enhancing the economic effectiveness and recognizability of the area according to the principles of sustainable travel, enhancing the quality of life for locals and travellers without harming the nature or cultural environment.	• Originality, which increases attractiveness • Season lasts all year-round • Accessibility • Making use of enabling digitalization • Sustainable travel region
Masterplan for Travel Business in Turku Region	2020-2029	In 2029 archipelago and culture city Turku is the most interesting, sustainable and memorable city in Northern Europe to visit 365 days a year.	Turku and its citizens, actors and businesses offer interesting experiences in an unique culture and archipelago city. a. Turku is a place, where people want to live, study, do business, work and spend holidays.	• Double the number of registered overnight stays to 2 million • Improve employment and double the tourism receipts in Turku and Southwest Finland. • Increased recognizability, memorability and accessibility of Turku
Masterplan for Travel Business in Naantali	2018-2030	In 2030 Naantali, in its size range, is Finland's most well known tourism centre, renowned as a unique and attractive destination. The Moomin spirit, idyllic old town and the 8 seasons in the archipelago have been turned into an unbroken chain of service products. Naantali is a	Moomins, archipelago and Naantali form an internationally interesting, all year round travel brand and destination with a fixed image. Naantali's accessibility will be improved e.g. with new digital services. It is easy to arrive in Naantali in terms of physical traveling as well as booking and	
		forerunner in digital solutions, co-production and internal marketing. In cooperation with regional and national partners, Naantali is turned into a easily accessible, international destination. In Naantali, the needs of travelers, travel businesses, citizens and the environment are aligned. Tourism is seen as an important livelihood in Naantali and different stakeholders invest in it and work together in concrete ways for its development.	purchasing travel products. Naantali's travel ecosystem is a forerunner in terms of cooperation and the use of digital tools and platforms.	
Tourism Strategy for the Archipelago City Parainen	2021-2025		The jointly communicated archipelago travel brand is recognizable and is of interest for the chosen target groups. Parainen is the best manifestation of the archipelago brand. The varied and interesting array of travel services of Parainen is available all year round. By strengthening all seasons in addition to summer, the seasonal fluctuations can be levelled out. Parainen is a travel destination easy to access by different means of transport, also reaching the destinations and service providers inside the area is smooth and information about the offerings in the area is easily available. Seamless travel chains support the experiencing of travel services all year round. The travel area of Parainen and its network of actors participate actively in regional cooperation.	• Developing the brand as part of the archipelago • Developing the activities all year round • Improving accessibility • Developing regional cooperation
Action Plan for Travel Business in Kemiönsaari	2014-2020	Kemiönsaari is a well-known and attractive travel destination for its target groups. We are good hosts, who offer sought after, high quality, and easily accessible activities all year round. The tourism sector is a growing livelihood in Kemiönsaari. Its turnover has increased due to the active renewing of the industry, increase of the number of travellers, new jobs and increase of the number of inhabitants.		

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Strategic goal	Vision	Mission	Goals	In total
Accessibility (physical)	xxx	xx	xxxx	9
Attractiveness (incl. interesting, intriguing)	xxxxx	xx	x	8
Buyability (various channels, digital availability, bookability)	x	xx	xx	5
Cooperation (between companies and regionally)	x	xx	xx	5
Generating employment	x	x	x	3
Generating wellbeing and higher quality of life (incl. locals and tourists)		xx		2
High quality activities	x			1
Improved competitiveness			x	1
Improved/varied product selection		x	x	2
Importance of tourism as a livelihood recognized	xx			2
Increased readiness to do international business			x	1
Increased tourism receipts (incl. growing business sector, profitability)	xxx	xxx	x	7
Increased number of overnight stays by international travellers	x		x	2
Influential, strong brand		xx	xx	4
Internationality	x	x		2
Knowledge-based management			x	1
Longer average length of stay of international travellers			x	1
Memorability (incl. rich in experiments)	x	x	x	3
Originality (incl. uniqueness)	xx	x	x	4
Recognizability (incl. Well-known destination)	xxx	x	x	5
Responsibility		x	x	2
Responsiveness to digital change (use and development of new, enabling digital solutions)	x	x	xx	4
Seamless chains of travel products	x	x		2
Season all year round	xxxx	xxx	xxx	10
Strong distribution strategy and partners			x	1
Sustainability	xxx	xxx	xxx	9

ONLINE PLATFORM FOR INTERVIEWS

Starting view, close-up

Starting view, all tasks in a row

Introduction page to the interview

Explore Archipelago

What is the Explore Archipelago platform?
It is a digital map showcasing tourism businesses in the archipelago, supporting their visibility and accessibility to tourists. The goal is to strengthen the attractiveness and brand of the whole area. Main target group is international tourists, but the platform will benefit domestic travellers alike.

The platform is part of the Archipelago Access (2019-2021) project realised by City of Turku and Stockholm Archipelago Foundation (Skärgårdsstiftelsen i Stockholms Län).

Who can participate?
Any tourism business in the area is welcomed to be showcased on the platform, as long as they are ready to provide services for international tourists and their offering is in line with the national and regional strategic goals and criteria for internationalisation. Participation is free to all companies.

Why this interview?
In order to specify the common goals and standards for equal participation, this thesis study was commissioned. After a review of national and regional tourism strategies, it is now time to hear what the professionals and business owners in the area have to say!

Both regional visit organisations as well as small and medium sized tourism businesses are interviewed to ensure that different viewpoints are taken into consideration and regional characteristics accounted for.

How is the information used?
All interviewees will be briefly introduced in the final thesis (name, type of business, location). All results will be drawn together, so that individual answers cannot be identified. If a statement, suggestion, opinion etc. uttered during the interview is quoted in the thesis with the interviwees name, a permission to do this will be asked from the interviewee before publishing.

What next?
With the help of the interviews and feedback, an initial criteria is drafted for feedback.

The strategies the criteria work is based on:

- Finland´s Tourism Strategy 2019-2028 and Action Plan 2019-2023 (https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/162136)
- The Coast and Archipelago Greater Region vision 2019, 2020 (https://www.businessfinland.fi/48d799/globalassets/julkaisut/visit-finland/tutkimukset/2019/visit-finland-brand-tracking-2019--coast-and-archipelago-region-pack.pdf and https://www.businessfinland.fi/4a5bce/globalassets/julkaisut/visit-finland/tutkimukset/2020/suuralueiden-paivitetyt-visiot-090920.pdf)
- Road Map for Travel Business in Finland Proper 2021 (https://www.varsinais-suomi.fi/images/tiedostot/Aluekehittaminen/2021/Varsinais-Suomen_matkailun_tiekarttaluonnos_tammikuu2021.pdf)
- Masterplan for Travel Business in Turku region 2020 (https://turkubusinessregion.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Turun-seudun-matkailun-masterplan.pdf)
- Masterplan for Travel Business in Naantali 2018 (http://aleksis.naantali.fi/poytakirjat/kokous/20182892-4-1.PDF)
- Travel Strategy for the archipelago city Parainen 2021-2025 (https://www.pargas.fi/dynasty/fi_FI/kokous/20215042-5-1.PDF)
- Action Plan for Travel Business in Kemiönsaari 2014-2020 (https://www.kemionsaari.fi/files/991/Matkailuelinkeinoalan_toimintasuunnitelma_2014-2020_Kemionsaaren_kunta.pdf)

Close-up of first task

	Goal	Description	Mentions
1	Season all year round	High season is summer - goal is to attract tourists all year round	10
2	Accessibility (physical)	Destinations should be easy to reach and transport organized when needed	9
3	Sustainability	Taking issues such as nature, local community and cultural environment into consideration	9
4	Attractiveness	Interesting, intriguing and sought-after destination	8
5	Increased tourism receipts	Growing industry and increased profitability	7
6	Buyability	Products available via multiple channels, digital presence, bookability	5
7	Cooperation	Regionally between all stakeholders as well as between tourism businesses	5
8	Recognizability	Well-known destination	5
9	Responsiveness to digital change	Use and active development of new and enabling digital solutions	4
10	Originality	Original and unique destination	4
11	Strong brand	Influential, lasting brand image	4

Strategic goals

Season all year round
Sustainability
Responsiveness to digital change
Strong brand (attractive, original, recognisable)
Increased tourism receipts
Accessibility (physical)
Cooperation (reagional & between businesses)
Buyability

Place goals in preferred order

Something missing?

Close-up of second task

How can tourism businesses work towards the strategic goals?

NOTE!
Think especially about the international tourists (FITs) to whom the Explore Archipelago Platform is targeted!

Season all year round	
Responsiveness to digital change	
Buyability	
Accessibility (physical)	
Increased tourism receipts	
Cooperation (reagional & between businesses)	
Strong brand (attractive, original, recognisable)	
Sustainability	

Close-up of third task

Main products & themes

NOTE!
Think especially about the international tourists to whom the Explore Archipelago Platform is targeted!

Science tourism
Educational tourism
Family tourism
Wellness tourism
Corporate meetings

Finnish history
Regional cuisine
Lively city culture & events
Culture destinations

Nature
Seasons of the year
Islands and the coast
Island hopping
Cruises (short and long)

Wooden/old towns
Old ironworks towns
Lighthouses
Museums
Churches

SYNTHESIS WALL

STRONG BRAND

- the services and quality promised on the webpage reflect reality
- taking care of reclamations
- cooperating in social media, such as using common hashtags and participating in joint marketing campaigns
- visibility in OTA-channels
- company brand aligned with the unified area brand and strategy, telling the same story and message (for example "world's most beautiful archipelago")
- strong networks
- commitment to a common destination brand
- ensure a good quality-price ratio
- committed and professional staff with good language skills
- keeping in mind that a traveler sees the destination as a whole, not just a single service provider
- monitor customer satisfaction and improve the service quality based on customer feedback
- cooperation with local service providers
- a seamless service experience
- knowning the laws binding the business, no illegal operations
- promoting each destination's specialties without exposing the visitors to a confusing buffet problem
- maintain high service quality throughout the season
- avoid any reputation damages which might affect the whole area
- no discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or marital status

INCREASED TOURISM RECEIPTS

- multiplier effect on other sectors
- business based on the entrepreneur's own skills and motivation
- jobs created
- aim is to provide a livelihood for the family, not to grow
- less investments means lower competitiveness and profitability for the whole travel area
- setting goals
- monitoring one's own business and how its profits and profitability are developing
- following trends and seeing new opportunities (for example new target groups)
- having interest in growth and investment
- taking initiative and participating in area and national training/growth/investment programmes
- taking care of one's own wellbeing
- courage to invest in new developments
- a strategy and budget for internationalization
- certain goal orientedness and active measuring of one's finances
- operate professionally, profitability in mind

RESPONSIVENESS TO DIGITAL CHANGE

- lack of information in English
- SMEs are the backbone of the tourism sector and need support in digital transformation
- up-to-date information online at least via one channel
- provide and up to date, responsive website, suited for mobile use
- continuous maintenance of the online channels in use
- pay attention to Google presence (search engine optimisation/marketing and company Google ID)
- preferably an online booking system, readiness to enter OTA-platforms
- utilisation of basic social media channels (Facebook, Google My Business, Tripadvisor)
- provide information in English, pay attention to localised content which caters to FITs, not just local customers
- new solutions to enhance the visitor experience - will affect travel choices
- new ways to deliver tourism services
- individual websites fall clearly behind Google and OTAs
- new ways of communicating with tourists
- multichannel marketing
- sharing economy and peer-to-peer markets
- problems with the attractiveness of online channels in general
- referrals important
- global competition - companies cannot afford to stay behind
- online findability
- online bookability
- the scale and speed of digitalisation creates challenges
- weak Google presence
- especially international tourists rely on web searches, Visit Finland's web page, word of mouth, and Tripadvisor rather than service providers' own websites
- lack of time and knowhow

COOPERATION

- networking with nearby service providers
- openness to cooperation and developing joint products (for example accommodation combined with an activity)
- recommending each other to customers, internal marketing in the community
- active participation to joint projects
- form a strong network with local travel service providers
- cooperation makes bigger marketing resources available
- the competitiveness of a business is built on the competitiveness of the whole travel destination
- uninterrupted supply chain of services
- integrative travel modules
- new innovations
- comprehensive and attractive service to both independent and group travellers can be offered
- all-encompassing experiences
- packaging, comprehensive itineraries

BUYABILITY

- future availability shown
- product reviews visible, preferably several
- purchasing is no more bound to time, place or device
- good star rating - average over 3 (out of 5)
- digital findability
- low cancellation rate by supplier
- instant confirmability
- digital channels, OTAs being of great importance
- interlinked with digitalization
- Mobile usability is the new standard
- online buyability
- productizing the offering in a form which is easy to buy
- easy to compare services and products in an online environment
- standard cancellation policy
- complete product details
- online buyability on company website or via OTAs or similar platform
- quality photos
- services with descriptions and prices, in different languages, are available on the website
- easy and safe payment options
- product information available in English
- services and their content clearly described

ACCESSIBILITY

- short season
- weak accessibility
- information about ferry connections crucial
- time consuming
- information hard to find
- physical accessibility major hindrance for tourism business growth
- uninterrupted travel chains
- bus/land travel + boat/see travel
- possibility of organizing transport or pick-up services of their own
- ferry connections - legislature challenging
- accessibility related to physical disabilities expected to grow in importance in the coming years
- DMOs have little influence in major infrastructural developments
- provide instructions for reaching the destination with public and private transport
- plan the customer journey all the way to the front door, not just the nearest big city or train station
- take care of the destination's own infrastructure (roads, paths, guest harbours, signage)
- consider providing pick up services
- make preparations for a fully accessible destination

SUSTAINABILITY

- customers treated equally
- travelers wish to support local communities and brands that prioritize inclusion, diversity and sustainability
- most sustainably growing travel destination in the Nordics
- certifications or participation in Visit Finland's sustainable travel programme not obligatory
- choices support the local economy
- Finland dependent on air travel
- Especially in the B2B sector certifications a requirement for cooperation and a relevant factor in competitive tendering
- emphasize the sustainable steps they have already implemented
- more communication at the early stages of travel planning
- less crowded destinations
- sustainability as necessity
- reachable via water ways
- raising awareness about sustainable tourism practices
- have a positive attitude towards sustainability and responsibility
- consider also economic and cultural aspects, for example by favouring local products and services and offering traditional, authentic experiences
- make sustainability visible in all communications and materials and emphasize the measures already taken
- start the process for obtaining a sustainability certification (such as Green Key or EU Ecolabel)
- a high level of tourism satisfaction
- a balance between environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects
- offering recycling facilities
- SMEs should start making preparations for a certification when it is still voluntary
- promoting Finland's high focus on sustainability matters in general
- authentic experiences reflecting the local culture

YEAR ROUND DESTINATION

- realism
- cooperation
- Products could be modified or created to suit autumn and spring, even winter
- productizing with different target groups and seasons in mind
- travel trends: authentic experiences and living like a local
- wellness and healthy living
- timing of the holiday season in Finland
- cooler summer can become attractive
- culinary experiences
- difficulty to find staff after summer workers return to their studies
- conventions and traditions create so called institutional seasonality
- workations
- The weather conditions are part of the nature's cycle
- glamping
- solo travel
- "travel to show", instagrammable moments
- improve predictability - decide opening times as early as possible, stick to them and communicate them clearly
- multigenerational travel
- Some entrepreneurs return to their other work or businesses after summer and are not interested in expanding their summer operation
- focus on branding the service and products for each season, creating new or modifying existing offering
- know your target group(s) - different groups for different seasons, add season specific images in online channels
- cooperate with nearby service providers

HEALTH SECURITY

- privacy, cleanliness valued
- safety planning, staff training and continuous practicing
- most stable and safest country in the world, with the cleanest air
- the local community must not be exposed to any risks
- safety of both guests and staff is ensured
- official recommendations followed
- clear communications

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

- webpage
- images
- Google ID (basic information about the company - address, contact details and opening hours - will be directly imported from the company's Google My Business page)
- DataHub

ONLINE SCORE CARD

The final version is presented here and can also be found online.
Finnish version: https://ruusunen.involve.me/explore-archipelago-score-card
English version: https://ruusunen.involve.me/explore-archipelago-score-card-en

Introduction page

Criterion 1 – Strong brand

STRONG BRAND

A strong brand is attractive, recognizable and unique. A strong area brand benefits from cooperation and commitment among local stakeholders. High quality is at the core of all operations.

Choose the factors which apply to you!

- Our quality commitment and service descriptions reflect the reality.
- Our quality is consistent throughout the season.
- Our price-quality-ratio is good.
- We handle customer feedback systematically and develop our business based on it.
- We are familiar with the laws guiding our business and adhere to them.
- Our staff is professional and equipped with good language skills.
- We treat all our customers equally and respectfully.
- We network with other regional actors and cooperate for example by offering joint service packages.
- We participate in joint regional marketing efforts (such as # campaigns in social media).
- Our offering is available in one or several OTA channels (Online Travel Agency such as booking.com).
- Our brand is in line with the area brand and tourism strategy - we tell the same story.

More tips for creating an international travel brand can be found from the guide for internationalization by Visit Finland: https://bit.ly/3n74ju3

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Criterion 2 – Increased tourism receipts

INCREASED TOURISM RECEIPTS

Tourism is an important livelihood for the region, creating jobs and income for other sectors as well. Increasing tourism receipts concerns business development on both company and travel area level.

Choose the factors which apply to you!

- Our business is professional and goal oriented. ◯
- We measure our profitability and follow its development regularly. ◯
- We follow industry trends and try to predict and take advantage of new opportunities (e.g. new service concepts or target groups). ◯
- Our attitude to growth and investments is positive. ◯
- We take initiative and participate in regional and national growth/training/investment programmes. ◯
- We have a plan and/or strategy and budget for internationalization. ◯
- We take care of our professional development. ◯
- We take care of our own wellbeing. ◯

You can familiarise yourself with current travel trends with the help of Business Finland's *Rethinking Future Travel* prediction tool: https://bit.ly/3aONs9I

Visit Finland's guidance and Business Finland's financing services can help you on your way to international growth: https://bit.ly/2XkYpwn

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Criterion 3 – Responsiveness to digital change

RESPONSIVENESS TO DIGITAL CHANGE

SMEs are the back bone of travel business. It is crucial, that they can benefit from the possibilities brought by digitalization as regards e.g. customer communications, marketing and productization.

Choose the factors which apply to you!

We have an up-to-date website, which is responsive and apt for mobile usage. ◯

We offer information also in English. ◯

Foreign language content has been localized to cater for the international customer specifically (e.g. detailed driving instructions, information regarding ferry connections). ◯

We manage and update our online channels regularly. ◯

We pay attention to the visuality of our online channels. ◯

Our visibility in Google is good (search engine optimisation and marketing, managing Google My Business profile) and information up-to-date. ◯

We use social media channels (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Google My Business, Tripadvisor) and follow them actively. ◯

We have an online booking system. ◯

We offer or have the readiness to offer our services via OTA channels (Online Travel Agencies). ◯

More tips can be found in Visit Finland's ABC Guide for Travel Businesses' Digitalization: https://bit.ly/3n2hqfR

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Criterion 4 – Cooperation

COOPERATION

The attractiveness of an individual travel business is based on the whole travel destination's appeal. Areal cooperation enables e.g. seamless travel chains, comprehensive experiences and joint marketing.

Choose the factors which apply to you!

We form a network with local service providers. ◯

We are open to cooperation and developing joint products and innovations (e.g. accommodation combined with an activity). ◯

We are happy to recommend other service providers in the area, if we cannot provide our customer with a certain service they are looking for. ◯

We take part in joint projects actively. ◯

We combine our forces with others in order to cater for big groups, for example. ◯

We join our resources in order to make bigger things happen. ◯

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Criterion 5 – Buyability

BUYABILITY

Online stores enable purchasing regardless of time and place. Today's customer trusts Google, social media and peer reviews. Online findability and buyability gain more and more impotance.

Choose the factors which apply to you!

- Our services can be purchased regardless of time, place or device, also via mobile. ○
- Our services can be purchased on our own webpages, in OTA channels or on other online platforms. ○
- We offer well functioning and safe payment options. ○
- Our products and their contents are well described and easy to access. ○
- Our product information is available in English. ○
- We use authentic and recent reviews in our customer communications. ○
- In our sales channels we use images which depict our services in a realistic and attractive way. ○
- The availability of our services is visible. ○
- We can confirm a booking/purchase at the time of purchase. ○
- Our cancellation policies follow industry standards. ○

Visit Finland's Guide for Internationalization contains good tips for productization and marketing for international audiences: https://bit.ly/30rQ3nS

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Criterion 6 - Accessibility

ACCESSIBILITY

Reaching destinations and moving around in the archipelago can be challenging and time-consuming for international travellers. Accessibility has a major impact on a destination's development and attractiveness.

Choose the factors which apply to you!

Our customer journey has been planned from door to door, not just to the closest big city or station.

We have instructions for arrival available on our channels, also for those using public transport.

We offer (upon request) pick-up services ourselves or together with other businesses.

We maintain the destination's infrastucture, if it is on our responsibility (roads, paths, signage, parking, guest harbours etc.).

Our destination and services are accessible or we have a plan for enhancing their accessibility.

More information about the accessibility of travel destinations and creating seamless travel chains by Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency: https://bit.ly/3jc3vTm

Visit Finland's criteria for accessibility in the travel sector: https://bit.ly/3vjOcNk
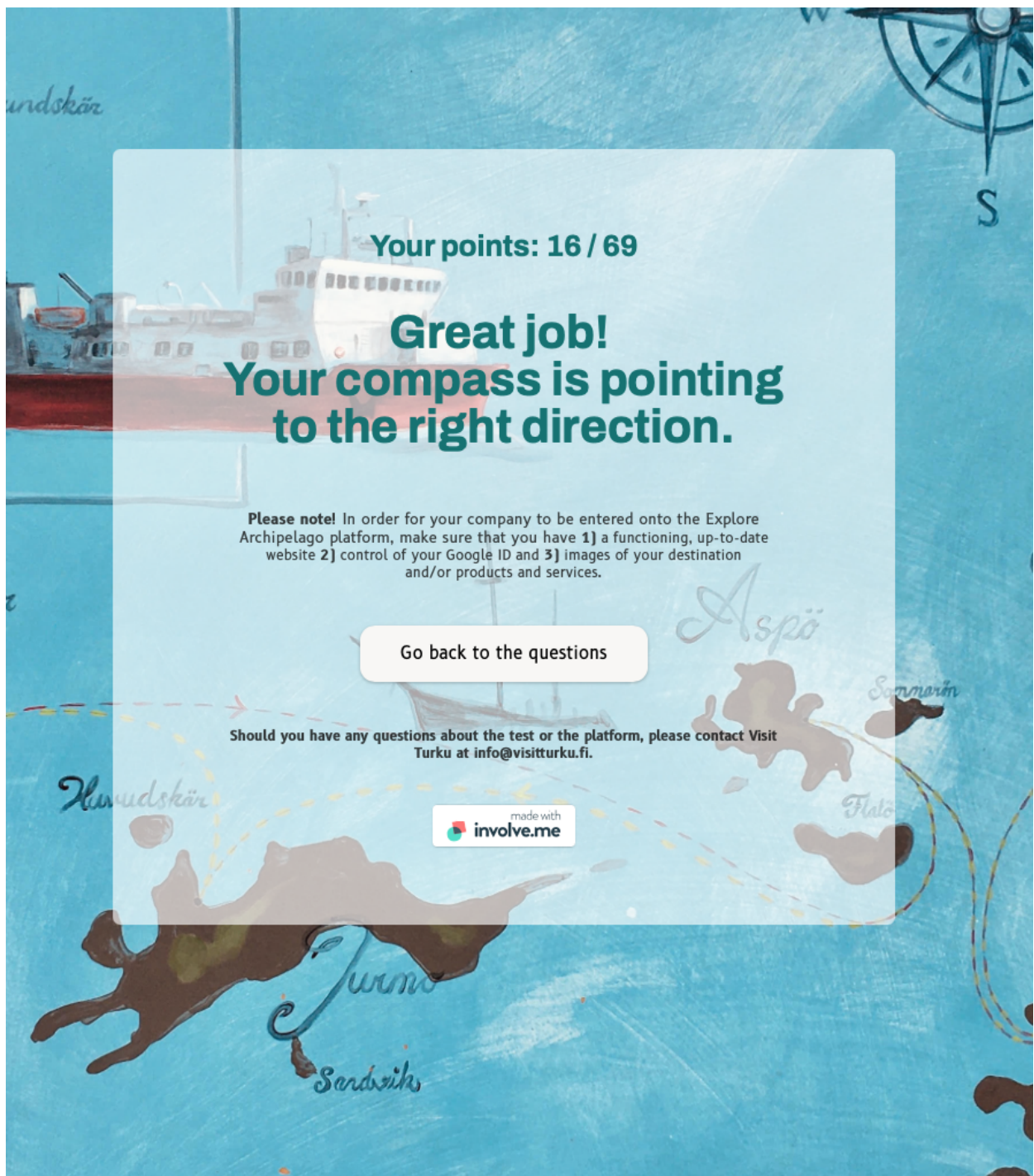
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Criterion 7 - Sustainability

SUSTAINABILITY

In a sustainable travel destination the environmental, economical and socio-cultural impacts of travel have been taken into consideration.

Choose the factors which apply to you!

Our attitude to sustainable development and responsibility is positive.

We tell about the sustainable and responsible measures already taken and increase our customers' awareness about sustainable development.

We treat all our customers equally.

We offer authentic expreriences inspired by local culture.

We try to support local livelihoods with out choices.

We offer our customers the possiblity to recycle their waste or guide them to the closest recycling point.

We are taking part in Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland programme or we already have a certificate for sustainable travel.

Find more information about Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland programme: https://bit.ly/3DKWvES

and tips for communicating sustainability measures to different stakeholders: https://bit.ly/3DS90hU

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Criterion 8 – Season all year round

Criterion 9 – Health security

Criterion 10 – Technical requirements

Final score - Beginner (1-24 points)

Final score - Medium (25-48 points)

Final score – Advanced (49-69 points)