SESSION 6 – EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Moderator: Anna Grazia Laura

Speakers: Rachele Paolucci, Maria Stella Minuti, Themis Havartzi-Stringer, Veroniek Maat joined by Elena Mani

The session "Education and Training" examined how professional education, research, and innovation can strengthen accessibility and inclusion across the tourism sector. Moderated by **Anna Grazia Laura of ENAT, Belgium**, the discussion gathered leading experts representing NGOs, academia, and professional associations, who emphasised that accessibility begins with cultural change and qualified training.

Rachele Paolucci, from the Italian Multiple Sclerosis Society, introduced the organization's comprehensive approach to accessible tourism, combining advocacy, training, and partnerships with municipalities and universities. She highlighted that the most challenging barriers are not physical but cultural—stereotypes, prejudice, and lack of awareness—which can only be dismantled through education. Paolucci presented initiatives such as Accessible You, Easy Go Out, and university workshops where students design tourism services based on real "personas," focusing on people's desires rather than disabilities.

Elena Mani, from the Liguria Region, joined to illustrate the public sector's role in inclusion through the Accessible Liguria Guide, which maps beaches and hotels with the help of trained volunteers. The region has dedicated funds to strengthen sustainable and accessible tourism and sees dialogue among institutions, associations, and citizens as essential to success.

Maria Stella Minuti, from INcipit, showcased the Erasmus+ projects Games Without Barriers and DIGITOUR, which use gamification, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence to teach accessibility in tourism education. The projects train teachers and students to design inclusive travel experiences through interactive digital tools, helping mainstream schools integrate accessibility into curricula.

Themis Havartzi-Stringer, representing the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (FEG), presented T-Guide, a certified training programme that equips professional guides to lead tours for visitors with intellectual disabilities. Developed in

collaboration with ENAT, the course combines online learning, classroom sessions, and practical experience with real groups, fostering empathy and competence. Havartzi-Stringer underlined that inclusive training benefits both guides and travellers, turning accessibility into an ethical, legal, and economic imperative.

Finally, Veroniek Maat, researcher at Holland University of Applied Sciences, described her professional doctorate focusing on integrating accessibility into higher education and the tourism value chain. Through the Imperfect Tourist project and co-design workshops, she engages students, travellers, and industry professionals to co-create practical solutions and embed accessibility in tourism curricula. Maat emphasised the need for systemic change—from government policies to classroom teaching—so that future professionals view inclusion not as an exception but as a fundamental principle.

The session concluded that education is the cornerstone of accessible tourism: training transforms attitudes, empowers professionals, and ensures that accessibility becomes part of tourism quality, not an afterthought.

Watch Session 6 on YouTube. (run time 1:34:30)