
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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Objective/Background

Nowadays, to face an emerging growing competition, destinations, above all if set in internal rural areas, need to enhance their attractiveness through a clear positioning, trying to build a strategy that focuses on their distinctive resources by involving all local actors (higher education institutions, public bodies, industry and local communities).

To this aim, the relationship between education and gastronomy could play an important role, also because, as Richards (2015) asserts, food can influence and brand a destination, giving a sense of place that allows tourists to get in contact with local culture and make them learn about it, also revealing the strong linkage with the landscape at the origin of that specific food.

This paper focuses on educational tourism (Ritchie, 2003) understood as a niche tourism addressed, in this case, to undergraduate students, and its role in helping rural destinations to increase their appeal. Can educational programmes represent an opportunity of development for these places, combining higher education experiential learning activities and touristic promotion of places based on local gastronomy?

This research explores an Italian case study: the experiential educational project of the International Student Competition (ISC) of Fermo on Mediterranean Diet, which first took place in May 2016 (Cavicchi et al., in press) and had a second edition in May 2017.

Theoretical Framework/Literature Review

The research design starts from a general overview of the literature about educational tourism and the more specific education first approach (Ritchie, 2003; Paige et al., 2009; Stone & Petrick, 2013) which focuses on the need of the tourist to consider education and learning as primary aspects of the trip. The research tries to define the importance of experiential activities (Dewey, 1938; Boydell, 1976; Kolb, 1984) in learning programmes (Stone & Petrick, 2013) also considering the students' motivation to join such programmes (Abubakar, Shneikat, Oday, 2014; Jason et al., 2011; Lee & Tan, 1984; Brown and Lehto, 2005; Rehberg, 2005) and the potential benefits (Stone & Petrick, 2013; Lai, 1999).

Stone & Petrick (2013) in their literature review about Education and Travel define study abroad programs (including short period programs) as touristic experiences felt by students as a good opportunity to travel, live and learn about another culture and language by facing new challenges.

The pedagogical approach of ISC is based on the concepts of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Location-Based Learning (LBL). PBL has its conceptual roots in constructionism: knowledge acquisition is socially defined and the student is active and guides himself in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978; Paris, 2011). LBL is also student-centred and advocates for “more experiential, authentic, flexible and situated learning opportunities for knowledge construction” (Croy, 2009, p. 17). In this approach, higher education institutions play a fundamental role in facilitating co-creation (Rinaldi, Cavicchi, 2016), and providing best practice exchanges useful for local stakeholders. The latter is highlighted in the tourism gastronomy literature as an important factor for tourism development as well as for local identity construction (Hall, 2005; Bessière, 1998; Williams et al 2014). This kind of learning approach is also in line with the perspective by Wenger, Trayner,
de Laat (2011) according to which communities and networks learn and advance through interactions, engagement, and social exchanges.

The Italian case study of the International Student Competition has its base on an idea set up by the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the University of Macerata in collaboration with local stakeholders and especially with a public-private association, the Piceno Laboratory on Mediterranean Diet. This association aims to promote the Fermo area exploiting the Mediterranean Diet lifestyle as a brand. This is possible because the city of Montegiorgio, near Fermo, was included in a medical study (the Seven Countries Study: www.sevencountriesstudy.com) ran from 50’s to 80’s by Ancel Keys with the objective to investigate the benefits of Mediterranean Diet for health, also considering the beneficial role of conviviality and social engagement.

With such a focus on the possibility to brand the Fermo area using the Mediterranean Diet, the Piceno Laboratory of Mediterranean Diet had an important role in bringing together the different instances of local actors, linking the touristic offer to food, health and wellbeing. This is also in line with its participation to the Local Action Plan (LAP), a strategic policy document related to Fermo territory that emerged as the result of a EU URBACT Project, Gastronomic Cities (2013). The objectives of the ISC (Cavicchi et al., in press) concerned then both students and local communities, more specifically the objectives were:

- For students: to discovering linkages between gastronomy, events and place branding; understanding the potential of food and gastronomy for sustainable development; developing skills for destination management challenges; understanding the potential of ICT for place branding activities; discovering Italian culture, lifestyle and gastronomy.
- For stakeholders and local actors: to elaborating innovation and development paths to increase the international reputation of the destination, through an ICT-based real time advertising and promotion of the territory.”

The role of students in enhancing the attractiveness of the area could be better explained by discussing the workload and assignments they were asked to do during the competition. By working as learning communities, divided into mixed groups, in direct connection with local stakeholders, students had the opportunity to explore real case studies. The tasks, among the two editions, were different. During the first year, participants had to come up with an innovative idea to help the Piceno Laboratory of Mediterranean Diet to elaborate a promotional strategy to make Fermo Province standing out from a touristic perspective, exploiting Mediterranean Diet as a brand. During the second edition students had two different assignments. By working on the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder, Pigneur, 2010) they had to take care of two different firms, thinking about efficient strategies for helping them in distinguishing themselves, starting by their distinctive resources. Then, they were asked to integrate such strategies into a more general plan for the sustainable development of the area from a touristic perspective.

While doing this, they helped in promoting the area by sharing pictures and contents on Social Media, becoming, in this way, special “ambassadors”. By using and monitoring specific hashtags it has been possible to assess the impact of such activities.

**Method**

This study starts from a theoretical background with a review of the literature about educational tourism, some contributions on food tourism and experiential learning processes in rural areas. Then, it tries to put in evidence the role of students during the International Student Competition, considering their point of view revealed by the answers participants gave to a quantitative survey focused on motivation, experience and
satisfaction, by highlighting the main reasons that encourage students to take part in such kind of experience.

In order to investigate students’ motivation and experience, a questionnaire has been set up, according to Chen & Chen (2010), who investigate the experience quality, the perceived value, the satisfaction and behavioural intentions of tourists. It is divided into 4 sections: Personal information (without revealing the student’s identity), Motivations/Expectations, Experience, Satisfaction. Respondents were asked to fill all items of the four parts using 5-point Likert-type scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, from “very low” to “very high” satisfaction, from “completely dissatisfied” to “completely satisfied”. At the end of the survey, one question was about the time spent in various activities. Respondents had to choose a percentage from 10% to 100% for each activity with a total sum of 100%.

At the end, there was a space for write-in comments. The questions about Experience were formulated considering the theory about value creation in communities of practice (Wenger, Trayner, de Laat, 2011). For the Motivational items the focus was on the touristic and learning experience, then, the Satisfaction section included all the aspects (social, touristic, educational).

The survey was performed by sending an invitation to all the students taking part to the International Student Competition in 2016 and 2017. Overall, among the 2 editions, a total of n. 45 questionnaires has been collected (over a total of about 80 participants, only considering students).

**Results and implications**

Fermo Province can count on many distinctive resources but has some difficulties in standing out and distinguish itself, also because of its internal position. This study tries to offer a real contribute to such a specific context by analysing students’ motivation in choosing to take part to the International Student Competition.

In 2016 students came from different Universities: Norway, Poland, Czech Republic, Belgium, Rome and Macerata. For the second edition (2017), there were students from Poland, Belgium (2 Universities), Rome, Bologna and Macerata.

Among the 2 edition students also had different scientific backgrounds: Tourism, Economics, Nutritional studies, Agricultural studies. For this reason, students had the opportunity to sharing knowledge and this can have positive consequences on the contribute they could give to the territory.

Preliminary results were obtained by analysing the responses to the motivational section of the quantitative survey submitted by participants. Which were the reasons that influenced their decision? From an educative point of view, students were interested in joining alternative learning experiences focused on food and tourism. They showed to be excited about the idea to meet other students interested in tourism with whom sharing knowledge and new ideas. They were also interested in attending to relevant scholars’ lectures about tourism.

From a touristic perspective, motivational factors that influenced students’ decision were about the choice of the destination. The idea of visiting Italy was very important for decisional reasons but it is interesting to notice that most of the students wanted to visit “hidden” places instead of well-known destinations.

By considering data collected from through interviews with students, and by a triangulation with other data from a stakeholder perspective (Bertella, Santini, Cavicchi, in press) it is possible to better analyse the role of the ISC in the tourism offer and the possible impacts this kind of event could have on the territory.

Preliminary results about the first edition indicate that entrepreneurs, representatives of public institutions and Piceno Laboratory members had positive expectations about the potential contribution of this event for territorial strategies also by gaining new insights about the perception of the territory.
by outsiders, in both strengths and weaknesses. The expectations were confirmed after the event, adding that the ISC also helped for the reinforcement of the relationships and sense of belonging among stakeholders, with a general sense of empowerment related to the pride of hosting such an event in a rural area traditionally characterised by limited touristic flows: hosting interested and committed visitors from several EU countries, made local people proud of their tradition and lifestyle.

The role recognised to students was that of “translating” theoretical ideas and tools into concrete plans for the local destination. Students from abroad were helped by some local engaged students. They played a key role in promoting the area particularly during the daily ICT-related competitions.

Further analysis will be carried out, also considering local stakeholders and students in-depth interviews.

According to the “Smart Specialisation Strategy” (Cavicchi and Stancova, 2016) it could be interesting to investigate the role of students in creating innovation for the area dealing with all local stakeholders, combining different skills and knowledge inputs related to food and tourism.

Another purpose of the research is to investigate how this “stand-alone” event can become a structured educational touristic offer to be offered in the area. The Piceno Laboratory on Mediterranean Diet is considering the opportunity to create a stable Destination Management Company for educational tourism, fostered by a team of scholars and practitioners, to be included in the tourism offer of the area, also in line with the National Strategy for Internal Areas.

This could represent an important choice: it could improve the results already obtained of a stronger connection among stakeholders in a local development perspective; it could strengthen the relationship between University and the territory; the rural area could count on an systematic working system performed by learning communities, from which obtaining constant support for developing new strategies.

Instead, organising the event every year starting from the very beginning, without considering the achievements and learning outputs emerged during the previous edition, could have negative impacts, stressing too much the efforts and losing the evidence of rewarding for the local community.

References
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