



Research Article

Educational Tourism: Erasmus Case Study

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Abstract

Tourism is no longer just an activity for leisure, as the evolution and integration of niche forms of tourism into the mainstream industry is now a dynamic process that brings many new tourism forms into this sector. By intertwining tourism with education, we are now able to expand tourism activities in the sphere of learning and skill acquisition. Therefore, a most prolific form of tourism in our current global society is educational tourism. This form encompasses many diverse and complex activities that can enrich the knowledge of the participants and also serve as an instrument for direct and indirect economic development through what we can now categorize as a modern type tourism activity. This paper analyses the general characteristics of educational tourism and underlines the importance and the impact of this type of tourism. We present a case study on the Erasmus program, an education/tourism hybrid that has demonstrated that student and teacher mobility is a viable and profitable activity, benefiting both the participants and the higher learning institutions that collaborate in these endeavors. The resounding success of the Erasmus program can serve as a benchmark in future educational tourism projects because educational tourism represents a huge potential sector that will undeniably further expand in the future. Educational tourism works because its nature is perfectly representative of our current global society, in which mobility and ease of access are defining characteristics.

Keywords: Tourism, Education, Erasmus, Mobility

Introduction

Tourism has been a key factor in the education of the population, being assigned this role since the moment it began to appear and later to develop. All forms of tourism have developed from the desire for knowledge and education manifested over time by various civilizations. Tourism did

not appear out of pleasure but was more of a business endeavor, initially quite rudimentary, or a religious one, due to pilgrims, or one based on health reasons. Afterwards, the current form of "trip with multiple interests" of self-compensation for work done appeared, having multiple goals, like cultural, intellectual and sporting reasons. Thus, tourism encompasses

several forms (educational, cultural, religious, adventure), but all have emerged as a result of the desire for knowledge and education, desires that have manifested in different peoples over time.

The contemporary form of tourism matured into its current state as cultures began to develop more and more, discovering new technologies. This in turn led to an ever-growing desire to continuously acquire concepts and different strategies and folding them into the environment from which they come. This desire for self-education would lead to the establishment and development of various international educational programs, such as camps or workshops, which facilitate the learning process and help us understand other cultures much more easily.

The research data provided in this paper have been obtained through secondary sources. It is an overview of the current educational tourism sector with an emphasis on the Erasmus Program, presented as a case study. The obtained data can serve as a starting point in the development of further direct qualitative and quantitative research studies. It is a useful analysis of present-day practices prevalent in this tourism niche and a perfect example of the ever-growing tourism industry, with its many direct and indirect benefits on the global economy.

Educational tourism - general characteristics

Educational tourism is classified as a youth type of tourism that attracts a certain market niche. Therefore, educational tourism is defined as a niche type of tourism. In this type of tourism, the main motivation of tourists is the desire and need to learn and educate (Voleva-Petrova, 2020). Educational tourism is an efficient type of tourism, an activity that aims at learning, expanding knowledge in multiple areas for tourists who practice this type of tourism. Thus, educational tourism is found in other forms of tourism such as religious, business, rural, cultural and ecotourism, because, by practicing these forms of tourism, the tourist learns new things,

learns new skills and exchanges experience with other tourists, thus enriching their knowledge horizon.

The primary motivation of educational tourism derives from learning and education, while tourism activities like travelling, leisure activities and visiting cultural sites are only secondary motivations, usually done during free time. (Lam, Ahmad, & Azhar, 2011) Nevertheless, experiencing new cultures and social norms is an important aspect that educational tourists seek, apart from formally acquiring knowledge (Abubakar, Belal, & Akile, 2014).

Thus, more and more tourists practice educational tourism for several reasons, including: visiting countries and discovering new places in order to learn something new; participation in various international meetings, forums, conferences, round tables; the opportunity to learn abroad, which is an advantage for tourists who decide to travel; the opportunity to increase job qualification in a certain field; the opportunity to benefit from trainings, role-playing games and focus groups undertaken abroad.

Therefore, we can say that educational tourism is a very widespread form of tourism, which aims to improve education processes and experiences resulting from them by offering scholarships outside the country of origin. Usually, the offers are wide-ranging and include programs for children, teenagers and young people, but also for their parents or grandparents, who, if they do not want to leave them by themselves on such a trip abroad, can accompany them.

International camps are very good experiences for children and young people because, by participating, they assimilate new information in a game-like fashion, facilitating the learning process, through resemblance, imitation and repetition.

Participants in such programs are provided with accommodation on university campuses, at families selected by the school, student apartments or hotels, depending on age, preference and type of program. The

programs include educational, social, cultural, sports activities and excursions and can be done through intercultural exchanges; the host country will in turn organize such programs in the country of origin of the participants.

Many Romanian students annually go to England, Germany, Spain, France, China or Russia, and attend programs that last at least two weeks, during which time they can study the local language, but also carry out recreational activities, games, contests and trips or visit museums, theaters, historical sites and amusement parks. Alongside studying foreign languages programs, camps with special programs are requested, such as: leadership courses, acting, oratory, history, globalization and courses with topics aimed at shaping the children's future, or even summer courses of academic training for preparing the start of a new school year in another country.

Prices for summer camps or courses are set according to the duration of the programs and their complexity, the type of accommodation chosen and the place itself and the offered conditions. Parents who send their children to participate in such programs are those with above average incomes. The main activity undertaken by students and high school students participating in summer camps is the study of foreign languages and / or the preparation needed in order to be admitted at a renowned university. The summer programs taking place in renowned schools and universities give them the opportunity of experiencing the life of a student in that particular country and learning institution.

Countries with a developed market for educational tourism include Spain, Italy, China and the countries of the former Soviet Union. In fact, Spain and Italy benefit from a government program supporting this type of activities.

In general, these tourism packages programs include preparation for admission within a University, integrating participants in a different superior environment, the graduated studies being recognized immediately. These programs

also offer the option to spend free time, being able to take part in different activities and being exposed to multiculturalism, by encouraging the participation of children and adolescents from all over the world.

Although in the past, in Romania, this form of tourism was not very well known, it gradually started to develop a lot here as well, taking into account the imposed need of today's global society to be able to identify yourself as a speaker of at least two foreign languages (in general, one of them being English), the exposure to the international media or the cultural borrowings that take place (words or expressions, holidays, etc.), things that arouse our curiosity and spark our desire to visit countries that have a great impact on us. We are increasingly aware of these requirements as we go through various stages of our educational training and then also when building a career in a particular field of interest.

Educational tourism can be realized in the longer term or in the short term and refers to any program in which participants travel in an organized manner to a location, having the main purpose of engaging in a learning / study experience, whether related directly to the respective location or related to specialization on certain fields of study (medical, tourism, management, business) or categories of interest (theater, film, design, plastic arts, fashion, sports).

Through camps and summer schools, language courses in educational institutions, or scholarships to study in other countries, young and older people alike have the opportunity to consolidate their knowledge and relate directly to their peers, experiencing special cultures and traditions and participating in various activities that aim at developing practical skills and a positive attitude.

The notion of traveling for educational purposes is not new and its popularity in the tourism market is constantly growing, given the fact that educational tourism is an alternative strategy of mass tourism.

Educational tourism involves a trip to an educational institution (pre-university or higher), in order to accustom the participants to that institution in order for them to access that institution or similar educational facilities in the future, or a trip in which the participants engage in courses of personal interest (cooking courses with a famous chef, courses to learn crafts – glass painting, jewelry making, candle carving, etc.).

It includes tourism activities organized for educational purposes, generally for young people, who are at the age intended for personal education. However, educational tourism permeates various categories of tourists, people that are eager to learn, regardless of their age.

Educational tourism aims at improving the education process and enriching the overall educational experiences through offering university scholarships abroad.

Researching the specialty literature on the subject matter, it can be noticed that several ways of approaching educational tourism have crystallized.

Thus, a first level of approaching educational tourism is the participation of children in children's camps, which is an incipient level of practicing educational tourism. In this context, children who are brought by their parents to the camps participate in learning, education and disciplinary actions, which are manifested by increasing knowledge in several fields.

Another way of practicing educational tourism is to study the languages of international circulation by participating in training courses. Most often these courses have a different duration, usually lasting at least 2 weeks, and are organized, most often, during the summer holidays.

Another way to practice educational tourism is to participate in long-term courses that aim at acquiring knowledge in a certain field. This could include students that attend the courses of a higher educational institution abroad, for one

semester, in order to learn a language of international circulation.

Another level, the deepest one, is the practice of student and academic mobility, where students as well as teachers have the opportunity to study or teach abroad, at institutions and universities in other countries. This form of educational tourism best captures the essence of this tourism category because those involved travel to other countries and participate in pre-established training programs in certain fields. These departures are planned, documented and regulated by special laws on mobility between institutions.

In addition to studying a field abroad, the tourist can also use other methods, such as experience exchanges in which the tourist can gain new skills in a particular field and benefit from new ideas obtained from his/her partners abroad. Also, the tourist can attend a training institution abroad and benefit from the opportunity of learning a profession through which he/she also broadens his/her knowledge horizon. But, in addition to these methods, the tourist can resort to another method that is very useful, through which the tourist acquires knowledge and skills, such as the practice of academic mobility. This method helps young people but also teachers by giving them the opportunity of spending a certain period of time abroad or by being able to exchange experience with colleagues from abroad. Therefore, students have the opportunity to learn something new and teachers can participate in various round tables, focus groups and also teach in higher education institutions abroad.

Educational tourism combines these elements: the practice of pure tourism and the practice of stimulating activities for the brain (Gidson, 1998). It is focused on the constant renewal of the individual and of society in the economy of experiences, encapsulating features of post-modern tourism (Featherstone, 1995). Educational tourism is based upon expectations and experience - "the basic term in the rhetoric of modernity" (MacCannell, 1999) - as each individual seeks to satisfy both intrinsic and extrinsic needs.

Erasmus Program Analysis

The program is named after the Dutch travelling scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam (1465-1536) who worked and lived in many European countries to expand his knowledge and broaden his horizon with different experiences. At the same time, the term Erasmus is an acronym which means European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (European-Commission, 2003).

Launched in 1987, Erasmus is the most important education and vocational training program in the European Union, in terms of mobility and cooperation in higher education in Europe. Its various initiatives are addressed both to students wishing to study and do internships in the European space, and to teachers and other categories of university staff who intend to teach or take training courses abroad. The program supports higher education institutions in EU countries that want to cooperate through intensive programs, academic networks and multilateral projects and, also, the creation of links with the business environment. Erasmus was launched in 1987 as a program that would support students in order to complete a study period in another European country, with formal recognition of the period spent in the partner institution.

Erasmus currently provides mobility grants to thousands of students annually, with an emphasis on delivering quality academic knowledge in partner institutions. In this regard, it is worth noting that in October 2002 the European Commission celebrated the achievement of 1 000 000 Erasmus students at European level. Then, in 2009, the threshold of 2 000 000 mobile students was reached. And in 2013, the number exceeded the threshold of 3,000,000 Erasmus students. The program also aims at stimulating the mobility of teachers and focuses on activities aimed at improving university programs and developing new, innovative courses through international collaboration. The ERASMUS program has been operating in Romania since 1998,

based on Decision no. 2 of the EU - Romania Association Council of September 1997.

The 2008-2009 global economic crisis has severely impacted international tourism causing a decline of 4% in international tourist arrivals and a decrease in international tourism revenues by 6% in 2009. Since tourism has become a major economic driver at a global level, this deterioration has had an important impact on various countries, and in particular in developing countries, where the sector has become an increasingly relevant source of income and employment (WTO & ILO, 2013). Globalization and its impact on the cultural sphere allow for a wide universal diffusion of cultural democratization, with opportunities for all. The Erasmus student motivations echo this background (Monteiro & Matos-Pereira, 2016). Although globalization and internationalization are inextricably linked, both have different meanings. To some extent, globalization can be seen as the process of international integration arising from the interchange of world views, products, ideas and mutual sharing, and other aspects of culture (Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann, 2006). Internationalization, on the other hand, relates to the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions, and even individuals, to cope with the global academic environment. The motivations for internationalization include commercial advantage, knowledge and language acquisition, enhancing the curriculum with international content, and many others. Universities have been adopting, as part of internationalization, various initiatives, particularly cross-border programs of student mobility. Their motivation is not financial but rather to enhance research and knowledge capacity and to increase cultural understanding. Academic internationalization is then a part of the scope of European regional integration which the Bologna process (see below) helped to harmonize. European internationalization mainly focuses on the countries in the EU - students are still encouraged to study abroad within the EU - though several non-EU member states have joined the Bologna process (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Erasmus+ is the latest program of the European Union in the fields of education, training, youth and sports. The program continued the activities of the previous program (Lifelong Learning, conducted between 2007 - 2013) and integrated a number of distinct programs and actions developed in the past: Gruntvig, Erasmus, Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, Youth in Action, Erasmus Mundus, Alfa, Edulink, Jean Monnet, and sports programs. The program aims to reach the following quantitative targets by the end of the academic year 2020/2021: 2 000 000 students participating in mobility studies or placements abroad, 650 000 students/apprentices from vocational schools participating in internships abroad, 200 000 master students benefiting from the new study loan scheme and over 25 000 scholarships for jointly organized master's programs, 500 000 young people participating in volunteer programs and youth exchanges, 800 000 teachers and trainers in teaching or training internships abroad, 25 000 strategic partnerships, involving 125 000 institutions/organizations in the implementation of projects targeting experience exchanges, know-how and the link between education and the professional environment, 300 knowledge alliances and sectoral alliances, involving 3500 educational institutions and enterprises, and over 200 000 teachers participating in eTwinning projects involving over 100 000 schools.

The specific objectives of ERASMUS in the field of higher education are the following: developing skills and increasing employment opportunities for students in order to contribute to increasing the competitiveness of the European economy; improving the quality of education and learning in the European space; implementation of strategies for modernizing higher education in member countries and harmonization of education systems in partner countries; promoting the international dimension of the Erasmus+ Program; supporting the implementation of the Bologna Process and encouraging structural dialogue with partner countries.

Starting from 2018, Erasmus+ also supports the initiative to make the European Education Area a reality by 2025. The European Universities Initiative helps higher education institutions to create strong new alliances.

According to the annual report for 2018 on Erasmus+ published at the beginning of 2020, almost 30,000 young Romanians that participated in 575 Romanian projects benefited from mobility study opportunities or education and training programs in 2018, within the Erasmus+ program. The total value of EU grants was 58.88 million euros.

Merging with tourism studies, this international students' trip has been classified as "educational travel" (Van't-Klooster, Van-Wijk, Go, & Van-Rekom, 2008) or "academic tourism" (Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget, & Pawlowska, 2012) indicating that their everyday life is determined by tourist and leisure criteria (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008).

When choosing their host university, students act in a similar fashion to tourists who choose their travel destination. They need to make a choice considering various criteria, such as: attractiveness of studies, university location, ease of access, transport costs, accommodation options available, cost of living, etc. (Marinescu, Trends in European tourism: The case of educational, 2017) Insights from the last 15 years of the Erasmus program show shifting trends, considering the most popular destinations chosen by students for their mobility studies abroad. During this period, the reasons for choosing a certain destination as well as the manner in which the choice was made have changed (Marinescu, 2017).

International students do not choose a destination because of the higher education institutions, but because of the perceived image and attractions of the country or city they will be visiting (Mészáros, 2011). In terms of international tourism, youth travel has long been seen as a subsidiary sector, but the growing desire for travel and the increase in spending power of young people

has recently been creating more interest in this market (Richards & Wilson, 2006).

Erasmus students begin their travels as a matter of their own choice or at least so they believe. They leave to break away from daily routines because home seems boring or insufficiently attractive, too routine, and offering few new stimuli. They need a change, so the main hope for these new tourists is to find a more exciting adventure and more intense sensations in a new location. The decision to leave home to explore foreign lands is easy to make, as there is comfort in the knowledge that one can always return home if need be (Monteiro & Matos-Pereira, 2016).

The purposes of the journey and the characteristics of the destinations are the result of psychological, cultural or professional factors, intrinsic to the individual, which define different typologies in tourism (Sousa & Simões, 2010).

The quality of education and the specific language spoken, together with recommendations, are still important reasons for the choice of destination. However, personal desires and financial reasons gained importance over time, as the variety of available destinations increased. Besides the costs and the climate, social activities and customized trips organized by the host institution are also aspects cherished by students. The website of the specific university has gradually transformed itself into a gateway that encourages or deters potential students (Marinescu, 2017).

International student mobility not only contributes to the internationalization of institutions but also impacts on the outlooks and subsequent careers and lifestyles of the students themselves (Li & Bray, 2007). International students can be considered as educational tourists, and their stay can benefit them and the destination. In this context, the university can actively facilitate relationships between tourists and local stakeholders to foster learning at the destination and improve the sustainability of the local economy. The tourism component should be considered

by any institution organizing or managing educational programs, in order to exploit the opportunities offered by the destination for the achievement of learning goals (Tomasi, Paviotti, & Cavicchi, 2020).

Unlike full-time international students, Erasmus students do not contribute to the host university by paying fees. They still, however, have the potential to make a significant contribution to the local economy through spending on accommodation, food, travel and leisure, which can be maximized by the multiple opportunities to travel while staying in the host country, causing not only direct economic effects, but also indirect and induced ones (García-Rodríguez & Mendoza-Jiménez, 2015).

Socio-demographic characteristics and expectations of this tourism niche are different from the traditional largescale tourism segment, but it is essential that national tourism policy-makers and higher education host institutions' decision-makers develop collaborative strategies when defining and communicating products targeted at this emerging segment. (Arcodia, Abreu-Novais, Cavlek, & Humpe, 2020) Cooperation should exist in different stages of the product marketing process in order to incorporate local academic information within a broader offering of a national destination.

Tourism literature shows that students participating in the Erasmus program seek both professional and personal growth as well as the possibility to travel and to experience adventure (González, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011) (Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap, & Podovšovnik-Axelsson, 2015). Also, The Erasmus Impact Study shows that reasons for studying in other countries range from the opportunity to live abroad and meet new people to develop language and soft skills, and to improve and widen career prospects, both in the home country and internationally (European Commission, 2016). Furthermore, the characteristics of the host country influence the students' decisions of where to complete the program. These characteristics include living costs, climate, leisure opportunities

and language. The Erasmus program, with students being educational tourists, also contributes to a large extent to the tourism industry within Europe. (Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap, & Podovšovnik-Axelsson, 2015).

The tourism sector has been affected lately by the global pandemic situation and that has influenced the educational tourism niche as well, especially during the lockdown periods. Many students had to return to their home countries and finish their studies through online courses, thus diminishing the tourism aspect of this type of educational activity and its impact on the economy. The number of participants in these mobility studies is slightly lower at present because many students are reluctant to join the Erasmus Program due to the uncertainty and volatility in the near future regarding the evolution of the pandemic. Even so, there are signs of improvement in the educational tourism sector and we can expect a full resurgence once the current situation will eventually normalize.

Conclusions

Finally, we must assert that educational tourism is the tourism of the 21st century because this type of tourism is found in most forms of tourism, as 21st century tourists are active tourists. They are people who want to participate in discovering new horizons, people who want to learn something new, becoming better, more competitive and more competent, and, upon returning to their country, people that also have the opportunity of applying their newly acquired knowledge, obtained through educational tourism, in their lives and careers.

Educational tourism is a complex process that involves the accumulation of knowledge, particular skills and experience exchanges by tourists, during their trips. Thus, educational tourism is useful for the tourists because, in addition to traveling, it offers the opportunity of learning useful things that will expand their area of knowledge and skills. A very important element for the successful development of

educational tourism is the motivation of the tourist to accumulate new knowledge.

Educational tourism has the potential for hybridization with other segments of tourism and non-tourism sectors and to contribute towards global peace (McGladdery & A., 2017). The decision-making process in choosing an academic mobility program is not confined to one main reason, but is influenced by a combination of factors. Another important feature that stands out is that the decision-making is personal, and the cultural and social context in which a student lives is a prominent and influential factor in the decision. (Monteiro & Matos-Pereira, 2016). Any form of mobility outside the natural habitat (tourism defined in the strict sense) simultaneously has both an educational and a cultural aspect. What differentiates the educational tourism segment from tourism as a whole is the reason that drove the mobility (Henriques, 2003).

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