

## **Shaping the Future Education in Tourism (FET): Innovative and Strategic Partnerships in South Eastern Europe**

**FOTIS KILIPIRIS**

Tourism & Hospitality Management, Department of Business Administration, Alexander TEI of Thessaloniki, Greece

**ATHANASIOS DERMETZOPOULOS**

Adjunct Faculty Member, American College of Thessaloniki

### **ABSTRACT**

Tourism plays great importance to the development of national economy to the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. In Greece, for instance, in 2014 the tourism industry directly contributed with € 11,8 bn or 7% of total GDP. On the other hand the total contribution to GDP was € 29,4 bn (17,3% of GDP). In 2014 Travel & Tourism directly supported 340.500 jobs (9,4% of total employment). The situation in Bulgaria is as follows: The direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was BGN 2.998,9 mn (3,7% of total GDP) in 2013. The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was BGN 10.670,6 mn (13,3% of GDP) in 2013. In 2013 Travel & Tourism directly supported 100.100 jobs (3,4% of total employment). In Croatia, the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was HRK 35.876,5 mn (12,5% of total GDP). The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was HRK 80.982,2 mn (28,3% of GDP). In 2014 Travel & Tourism directly supported 139.500 jobs (13,6% of total employment). And, finally, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.) the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was MKD 7,3 bn (1,4% of total GDP) in 2014. The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was MKD 27,4bn (5,2% of GDP), while the Travel & Tourism directly supported 9,000 jobs (1,3% of total employment). Looking at these figures, one can easily understand the role that tourism sector plays in these countries.

In order to maintain and further increase the number of guests, the hosting countries must continuously work on the development of new innovative types of tourism services, exploring needs of their clients and upgrading knowledge of their staff. Higher Educational Institutions

(HEI) plays an important role toward this direction by adopting new innovative trends and elements in tourism education curricula including the incorporation of information and communication technology (ICT).

Under the E.U. *Erasmus plus* initiative a cluster of four higher tourism education institutions from the above mentioned countries cooperate to produce and introduce new innovative tourism products through the application of information technology. The project focuses in creating two separate outputs one in gastronomy/nutrition, and the other in hospitality highlighting among others the common gastronomy elements of the area. For instance facing obesity in general population, students need a tool which will train them in their learning process how to use ICT based technology in creating their guest daily diet (very common while working in facilities who deal with specific clients). On the other hand, latest amendments to the legislation require declaration of nutritional value of the meals they prepare. Not to be neglected is the tourists' trend to seek for national cuisine while abroad. Each project partners will create a list of at 15 national menus (full course) and will determine their nutritional value which will be a part of the "national menu" of the institutions that collaborate with the HEI partners in this project. Once the project finishes and results are to be published, the outcomes will be of a use to all interested enterprises and other HEI. The second output will create a tool which will introduce students to a management practice of accommodation facility (hotel/motel). It will give them unique opportunity to get familiarized of the operational principles of the different departments facilities have, how they are inter-dependent and how they synchronize their activities.

**Keywords:** Innovation, strategic partnership, information and communication technology, gastronomy, national cuisine, nutritional value.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism plays important role to the development of national economy to the countries of the North Eastern Europe (Balkan Peninsula). In Greece, for instance, in 2014 the tourism industry directly contributed with € 11,8 bn or 7% of total GDP. On the other hand, the total contribution to GDP was € 29,4 bn (17,3% of GDP). In 2014 Travel & Tourism directly supported 340.500 jobs (9,4% of total employment). The situation in Bulgaria is as follows: The direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was BGN 2.998,9 mn (3,7% of total GDP) in 2013. The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was BGN 10.670,6 mn (13,3% of GDP) in 2013. In 2013 Travel & Tourism directly supported 100.100 jobs (3,4% of total employment). In Croatia, the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was HRK 35.876,5 mn (12.5% of total GDP). The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was HRK 80.982,2 mn (28,3% of GDP). In 2014 Travel & Tourism directly supported 139.500 jobs (13,6% of total employment). And, finally, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.) the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was MKD 7,3 bn (1,4% of total GDP) in 2014. The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was MKD 27,4bn (5,2% of GDP), while the Travel & Tourism directly supported 9,000 jobs (1,3% of total employment). Looking at these figures, one can easily understand the role that tourism sector plays in these countries.

In order to maintain and further increase the number of guests, the hosting countries must continuously work on the development of new innovative types of tourism services, exploring needs of their clients and upgrading knowledge of their staff. Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) plays an important role toward this direction by adopting new innovative trends and elements in tourism education curricula including the incorporation of information and communication technology (ICT).

## **GASTRONOMY AS A SCIENCE**

Gastronomy is a term that nowadays is used to define everything from fine dining experiences to specific studies of the chemical manipulation of food. While popular use puts the word almost always in the hands of chefs and cooks, gastronomy actually goes beyond cooking to define the food world as a whole. Gastronomy has very big importance around the world, as well as in the countries of the South Eastern Europe. Actually is referred to as a distinct branch of the tourism and hospitality science. National gastronomy, kitchen culture, food and beverage production contains many factors that contribute to visitor's experience when visiting a country as a tourist and not only. In the age of the technological development, industrialization and urbanization revealed a number of social changes that can be easily observed. Simultaneously many changes have happened regarding our gastronomy culture and eating habits (Youssef, 2013). These changes have been reflected to a wide range of our everyday life ranging from taste, food presentation techniques, to the awareness of such elements like calories and food nutritional value in general. At the same time new gastronomy applications has revealed new trends such as the molecular gastronomy movement that is spreading rapidly around the world increasingly (Vega and Ubbink, 2008).

Another important aspect that affects decisively the image of a food operation remains the menu. Menu maintains a dominant position in restaurant business, since remains the "icon" of food and beverage operations. Based on the conceptual and empirical findings of menu literature, the major menu management issues are menu planning, menu pricing, menu designing, menu operating and menu development (Ozdemir, Caliskan, 2014). Additionally, menu acts as a tool that clearly dictates (i) what will be produced, (ii) what type of equipment and ingredients are needed, and (iii) which qualifications employees should have. Menu also functions as a communicating and selling tool. Additionally, it communicates not only what is offered in terms of food, beverage and drinks, but also the image of the firm. Furthermore, menu is a base on which the consumer decides what to eat by making food combinations and decision based on such elements like taste, eating habits based on culture and health reasoning, even calorie energy value. A well designed menu can direct customers' attention to the items the firm wants to sell more (Antun & Gustafson, 2005). Additionally, research has shown that the primary product of restaurant business remains the meal experience that is constituted by various components such as food, drinks and beverages, atmosphere, social factors and management. Also what visitors of a restaurant receive is also memories and overall the so called "meal experience". Consequently, menu cannot be considered as the overall product of a restaurant but remains an important component that promote food, gives information about the food, even contributes to a complementing atmosphere, help to interact between servers and visitors available in a restaurant where a good, memorable meal experience is the main product (Johns & Kivela, 2001; Gustafsson & Johnson, 2004).

## **GASTRONOMY, HEALTH AND HERITAGE**

Gastronomy plays an important role in health issues. For instance, an inappropriate or unhealthy diet is one of the key risk factors for obesity and non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes which in turn generate huge expenditure in health systems (World Health Organization, 2015). In order to avoid health problems and related costs associated with unbalanced food choices it is essential to incorporate learning elements about diet and nutrition value of food consumed. South Eastern Europe is rich in local gastronomy specialties and regional gastronomic traditions, products as well cooking methods. These make up a part of the local identity of European regions and form part of Europe's cultural heritage. The undertaken project aims in highlighting the increasing importance of gastronomy and cooking not only as an artistic and cultural expression that constitute an essential element of tourism but also to present tools and mechanisms that will incorporate health issues. By using information and communication technology (ICT) advocates the development of an appropriate food and gastronomy culture in order to preserve the sociocultural heritage of Balkan region by highlighting both the importance of food and food documentation as an integral part of a region's culture as well as a tool for educational purposes.

## **NETWORKS, CLUSTERS AND INNOVATION IN TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS)**

Knoke and Kuklinski (1983, p. 12 *in* Novelli et. al. 2006) describe networks as 'a specific type of relation linking a set of persons, objects or events'. Also a cluster or network can be defined as 'geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities' (Porter, 1998, p. 78). Finally clusters have a greater chance to be competitive on a national, regional and global basis, when their businesses are competing and collaborating at the same time (Novelli et al, 2006) new services and products are being developed, and sustainable competitive advantage can be achieved. It is important to link the cluster to the market place (nationally and globally) in order to stay competitive, and to make links with Research and Development (R&D) bodies, such as academic institutions. Over the past decades, many attempts were taken place to promote networking and/or clustering in the field of tourism education and especially at the tertiary educational level. Those attempts were supported by E.U. funding targeted to both E.U member countries but also to E.U. ascension countries in the South Eastern Europe and Western Balkans.

## **THE FET (FUTURE EDUCATION IN TOURISM), ERASMUS PLUS PROJECT**

Under the E.U. *Erasmus plus* initiative a cluster of four higher tourism education institutions from four South Eastern European countries formed a cluster in order to cooperate to produce and introduce new innovative tourism products through the application of information technology. The four institutions are: The Goce Delcev University, Shtip, the Former

Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Alexander Technological Educational Institution (TEI) of Thessaloniki, Greece, the Sibenik Polytechnic, Sibenik, Croatia and the Burgas University, Burgas, Bulgaria.

The project focuses in creating two separate outputs: one in gastronomy/nutrition, and the other in hospitality highlighting among others the common gastronomy elements of the area. For instance, facing obesity in general population, tourism schools' students need a tool which will train them in their learning process how to use ICT based technology in creating their guest daily diet (very common while working in facilities who deal with specific clients). On the other hand, latest amendments to the legislation require declaration of nutritional value of the meals they prepare. Not to be neglected is the tourists' trend to seek for national cuisine while abroad.

Each project partners will create a list of at 15 national menus (full course) and will determine their nutritional value which will be a part of the "national menu" of the institutions that collaborate with the HEI partners in this project. Once the project finishes and results are to be published, the outcomes will be of a use to all involved parties (HEI). The second output will create a tool which will introduce students into a practical ICT tool on how to manage an accommodation facility (hotel/motel) within various departments and activities. It will give them unique opportunity to get familiarized of the operational principles of the different departments facilities and specially to practice the inter dependence of various accommodation departments. Also the outcome can be used by private tourism enterprises enhancing in this way the relationship between tourism education and the tourism industry.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a conclusion, is important to highlight the benefits of clustering in the tertiary level tourism education system. Furthermore through the specific FET project the relationship between tourism education and tourism industry will be enhanced. Although historically the relationship between tourism education and tourism industry has been characterized by a lack of trust, however, both education and industry are recognizing the mutual benefits of developing a more co-operative relationship and the importance of narrowing the divide which has traditionally existed between them (Cooper & Shepherd, 1997). There is a long discussion on how tourism's higher education system and especially the suggested curriculum design are effective and meets the needs of the tourism industry. Studies have proven that there is a considerable variance between the respective views of industry professionals and tourism education providers. These are focused on the relative value of tertiary degrees for tourism as well as on the relative merits of the various subjects taught at university (Wang, Ayres & Huyton, 2010). Findings suggest that there is a gap between tourism curriculum and the needs of the tourism industry. Also those involved in curriculum design should continue to work closely with industry stakeholders to ensure a stronger connection between theory and practice.

This project, apart the creation of a strong partnership/cluster among tertiary level educational institutions, as a side effect, will enhance the tourism education and tourism industry

relationship through two ICT applications that will benefit both students and employees in the tourism sector.

## REFERENCES

- Antun, J., Gustafson, C. (2005) Menu analysis: design, merchandising and pricing strategies used by successful restaurants and private clubs, *in J. Nutr. Recipe Menu Dev.*, 3 (3) (2005), pp. 81–101
- Cooper, C. & Shepherd, S. (1997). The Relationship between Tourism Education and the Tourism Industry: Implications for Tourism Education, *Tourism Recreation Research*, Volume 22, 1997 - Issue 1
- Gustafsson, A., Johnson, M. (2004) Determining attribute importance in a service satisfaction model, *Cornell University, School of Hotel Administration*
- Johns, N., Kivela, J. (2001) Perceptions of the first time restaurant customer *in Food service Technology*, Volume 1, Issue 1, March 2001, Pages 5–11, Wiley
- Novelli, M., Schmitz, B. & Spencer, T. (2006) Networks, Clusters and Innovation in Tourism: A UK Experience, *Tourism Management* 27(6):1141-1152 · December
- Ozdemir, B., Caliskan, O (2014) A review of literature on restaurant menus: Specifying the managerial issues *in International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, Volume 2, Issue 1, June 2014, Pages 3–13
- Porter, M. (1998) Clusters and the new economics of competition, *Harvard business review*, in *Harvard Business review* (November-December)
- Vega, C., Ubbink, J. (2008) Molecular gastronomy: a food fad or science supporting innovative cuisine? *in Trends in Food Science & Technology* 19 (2008) 372e382, Elsevier
- Wang, J., Ayres, H., & Huyton, J. (2010). Is Tourism Education Meeting the Needs of the Tourism Industry? An Australian case study, *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, Volume 22, 2010 - Issue 1
- World Health Organization, (2015) World Health Statistics reports on global health goals for 194 countries, Geneva.
- Youssef, J. (2013) *Molecular Gastronomy at Home: Taking Culinary Physics Out of the Lab and Into Your Kitchen*, Amazon.