

# EDUCATION TOURISM: INTERNATIONALISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

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**M**alta is highly dependent on Tourism. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2019 Travel and Tourism accounted for 15.8% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and contributed Euro1887 million in visitor spend, comprising 9.6% of total national exports (WTTC, 2020). With such growth comes more responsibility in ensuring effective destination management that minimizes any adverse effect of tourism (Pololikashvili, 2019).

This paper presents the case for Malta to further develop its touristic product by becoming a destination of choice for Education Tourism.

Education (or Educational) Tourism may be defined as a type of tourism undertaken for the scope of learning or attaining an academic qualification. This may be seen as a broad concept and will be discussed later in this paper; however, it will also be argued that this type of tourism does deliver a high level of sustainability through the economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits it generates.

## **RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY**

From the mid-1990s through to the mid-2000s, the number of visitors to the Maltese Islands had reached a plateau. With the creation of the Malta Tourism Authority in 1999, the plan was to transition from a '3S' (Sand,

Sun and Sea) destination to a more segmented and diversified product offering. In 2004, the author was involved in training and she embarked on a research study which focused on Licensed Training Providers which were family owned and managed. The author identified the Education Tourism segment as worthy of further study as she felt that it had substantial potential for growth.

Five Education providers were chosen, based on their geographical distribution on the Island of Malta. The researcher worked with three of the organisations, one of which was solely an English Language Teaching (ELT) School, another was solely a Training Provider (TP), and the third was licensed as both an ELT school as well as a TP. The other 2 informant organisations took part by allowing the researcher to visit the school as well as by participating in open-ended, in depth interviews. The researcher was also involved in industry meetings and discussions with students, host families and other stakeholders which provided more primary data for the research study.

The initial research was carried out in 2004, when there were 46 licensed schools of English (Avellino, 2015). Of these, 70% were family owned and managed. Three of the education providers who participated in the research were licensed Schools of English and therefore represented 10% of the EFL schools, however the research did not in any way attempt to be representative of the ELT Industry as qualitative research aims to reveal the specificities of each case studied, the socio-cultural context in which actors operate and which influences their choices (Scott, 2001, pp. 87-107).

In 2009, the researcher re-visited the informants and 3 of these organisations accepted to participate in updated open-ended interviews. One informant also allowed the researcher to stay at the school and interview and observe teachers, students and other employees.

In 2019, the researcher re-visited the organisations who had been part of the 2004 and 2009 study. A qualitative research approach was chosen as this is especially appropriate when dealing with key human issues of agency, subjectivity, choice and representation, whilst also revealing conflicts that ensue as agents seek to promote their own interests or of those they seek to represent. In addition to this desk research was carried out and in this

later round of research other higher-level education organisations which were targeting foreign students to Malta were included. This meant that the research was not restricted to training providers but also included vocational and non-vocational tertiary level education providers.

## **TRAVELLING FOR EDUCATION PURPOSES**

Travelling for education is not a new concept. Travel as a means of education has been going on for thousands of years; however, as a rule it is the British who are credited with instituting “travel as a means of education” (Brodsky–Porges, E., 1981, p. 177). The term Grand Tour was introduced by Richard Lessels in his 1670 book *Voyage to Italy*. This highly specialized type of travel began in the sixteenth century and gained popularity during the seventeenth century. Young English elites, who were wealthy and able to afford multiple years abroad, often spent two to four years travelling around Europe in an effort to broaden their horizons and learn about language, architecture, geography, and culture in an experience known as the Grand Tour.

As demand for this type of travel developed and grew guidebooks, tour guides, and other ancillary needs were developed to meet the needs of the young adult male and female travellers as well as their tutors who travelled across the European continent. While the goal of the Grand Tour was educational, a great deal of time was spent in more frivolous pursuits such as extensive drinking, gambling, and intimate encounters. The journals and sketches that were supposed to be completed during the Tour were often left quite blank. Upon their return to England, the young Tourists were supposedly ready to bear the responsibilities of an aristocrat.

The Grand Tour as an institution was ultimately worthwhile for the Tour has been given credit for a dramatic improvement in British architecture and culture (Black, 1985). The French Revolution in 1789 marked the end of the Grand Tour for in the early nineteenth century, and railroads totally changed the face of tourism and travel across the continent. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century was also extensively researched by Buzard (1993), who argues that an exaggerated perception, first emerging after the Napoleonic Wars, of the Continental tour's sudden radical openness to virtually ‘every’ level of society, took firm hold on the British and American travelling imagination: this hold was strengthened, over the years, by the visible labours of travel

popularisers such as Thomas Cook and professional guidebook publishers such as Murray and Baedeker. One consequence – traceable in such sources as *Punch* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, and writings by Wordsworth, Dickens, Frances Trollope, Ruskin, Anna Jameson, Henry James and Forster – was a new set of formulations of what constitutes 'authentic' culture (in a given place) and 'genuine' cultural experience (in a given person). Accounts of the modern European tour evolved a symbolic economy of practices aimed at distinguishing the true 'traveller' from the 'vulgar tourist' – mainly on the basis of imputed personal merits, not explicit social privileges. Its various forms of 'anti-tourism' helped to make the European tour an exemplary cultural practice of modern liberal democracies, appearing at once popularly accessible and exclusive.

Across the Atlantic, the modern-day 'learning vacation' concept originally surfaces in New York at Chautauqua, a residential institution, where in 1874 a Methodist minister and an Ohio businessman blended the concepts of an outdoor setting with social activities and learning opportunities (Eisenberg, 1989, p. ix).

The further expansion of Educational travel coincided with the adult education movement that swept North America in the late twentieth century which result from a large sector of the population who were entering their late 50's and who – thanks to affluence, time and motivation – now had the propensity for travel. A major player in this expansion was the part played by the Elderhostel movement of the late 70's.

The Elderhostel Network, an educational and travel initiative for adults 55 and over, was founded as a not-for-profit organization in 1975. This organisation soon expanded and today nearly 10,000 programs are offered each year in about 100 countries. So, in effect we see that educational travel has developed across to world and now includes not only the 'baby boomers', but also younger and older people across the globe.

### **WHAT IS EDUCATION TOURISM?**

The concept of ET is very broad: it can take in all forms of travel as every travel event is a learning experience. Education is not just 'learning' but can be defined as "the organised, systematic effort to foster learning, to establish the conditions and to provide the activities through which learning can occur" (Smith, 1982, p. 37). For the purposes of this paper, educational travel will be defined as an organised learning opportunity

delivered to persons not normally resident in Malta and who travel to the Islands of Malta for the sole purpose of educational travel, who would stay in Malta for this purpose, for a period exceeding 24 hours and not more than 1 year; and interjected by holidays over Christmas, Easter and summer. The education would have to take place within a licensed centre (school, university, college, and institute).

Over thirty years ago, Krippendorf (1987) had argued that the new patterns of tourism consumption which were developing would lead to fundamental changes in the tourism market. He predicted that the market segment which he called 'new unity of everyday life' would lead to a change in the composition of the Western tourist market. It would have the following as travel motivators:

- Broaden one's horizon, learn something
- Introspection and communication with other people
- Come back to simpler things and nature
- Creativity and open-mindedness
- Readiness for experiments

In 1986, the percentage of this new segment had stood at 20% to 30%, whilst changing social patterns would result in a growth of market share ranging from 30% to 50% (*ibid.*). Today, we can confirm that Krippendorf's predictions were correct and the main motivator, which encompasses all the criteria he referred to, are included under the 'tourism experience' umbrella term.

Research conducted to formulate a profile of the special interest tourist, leads one to identify this type of tourist with Plog's allocentric category, a theory which is still used in modern day field of tourism research (Plog, 1974, pp. 55-58). Plog organised personality and travel destination choice along a continuum, with the allocentrics at one end (meaning those seeking variety, self-confident, outgoing and experimental) and the psychocentrics at the other end (meaning all those who tend to be more concerned with themselves and the small problems in life, are often anxious and inclined to seek security). A further dimension of the motivations of the special interest travel was provided in research undertaken by Crompton (1979), Ritchie and Zins (1978), Smith (1989), Hall and Zeppel (1990, 1991) and others. From this research, two primary cultural motives emerged: novelty

and education. Historical motivations were also expressed to a somewhat lesser extent.

## **NATIONAL STRATEGY**

The current National Tourism Policy (2015-2020) (NTP) has been formulated on the basis of a longer-term Tourism Vision 2030. This medium-term Tourism Vision 2030 is based on the principle of sustainable development with a view to safeguarding the positive aspects of the country's attractiveness as a tourism destination for the benefit of visitors and the host population alike (Ministry of Tourism, 2015, p. 5).

Tourism 2030 is based on the concept of controlled growth. This is achievable through the targeting of appropriate markets with the aim of achieving higher rates of economic returns and returns on investment. It is also based on the principle of aiming for high quality delivery at all levels of the tourism value chain with a view to achieving improved competitive positioning in the international tourism market.

The NTP suggested that there needs to be a focus on those markets which would fill the capacity during the shoulder and low season period, would respond most strongly to the local offer and which hold the potential for huge growth. One market segment which was identified is that of 'travel for educational purposes including school trips, nature and religious travel (Ministry of Tourism, 2015, p. 39). It also asked that the 'ageing nature of populations in Malta's established source markets' is kept in mind (ibid.). This indicates that the Education Tourism sector is clearly identified as a market segment and one could consider that the senior market as a potential subset of the sector.

Education 'per se' is a service industry and as we become even more immersed in a knowledge driven global economy it becomes even more of an asset not just for developed countries but even more for developing nations who may need to switch their economies from manufacturing and service to knowledge-based economies so as to be able to develop. The potential market for suppliers of the education service is immeasurable. It is also a renewable source of economic contribution as it is an activity that can be undertaken by the majority of the Maltese population, which in turn leads to greater innovation and creativity. Many knowledge-based industries can be attracted to invest in Malta because of its physical location,

its relative safety, English-speaking and more significantly its investment in national cultural and social capital. When all of this is integrated into the excellent tourism infrastructure gives Malta its competitive edge.

This is not to say that this will be an easy route to take or that it can be done without a strategy. We have to also acknowledge that we have many competitors and that there are pitfalls if we do not have a good policy and strategic plan in place which ropes in all the stakeholders. We can look at the example of Singapore. At the cusp of the new millennium, Singapore envisioned itself as a global education centre. It differentiated itself as a tourism destination through its strategy to become a world-class education hub by collecting “that critical mass of talent, to make it attractive for people to say that Singapore is the place to be” (Singapore Economic Development Board, 2004). Education has become an important service export for Singapore. It did this by building its brand image and also by forming alliances with strategic partners.

### **ACADEMIC TOURISM**

A further subset of Education Tourism is the Academic Tourism segment. There are many definitions of this form of tourism but for the purposes of this paper Academic Tourists are defined as those tourists who travel to take part in courses or programmes at Higher Education centres in order to carry out studies related to an academic career.

According to Forbes, foreign enrolment is slowing at US universities, although they are still hosting over a million foreign learners with China leading the way with just under 370 thousand followed by India at 202 thousand in the academic year 2018/19 (Institute of International Education, 2020). As regards US undergraduate students who studied abroad in 2017/18, from a total of 350,000, just under 40,000 studied in UK, and just under 37,000 studied in Italy.

Singapore Princeton University (SPU) – which, according to Forbes, is the top school for international students – recently announced “a new exciting partnership with National University of Singapore (NUS)” (Global Programs System, 2020). Princeton students are now able to study at SPU at undergraduate level and students which were eligible to receive financial aid at Princeton continue to receive Princeton financial aid for the approved costs of study abroad programs during the academic year. Princeton has similar agreements with other global Universities, in

fact there are 63 European Universities to choose from on their list of study abroad programmes.

### **ACADEMIC TOURISM AT THE ITTC**

The ITTC places a high emphasis on sustainability when it delivers its lectures to students studying tourism, and one way of practicing what we preach is by investing in building up our International visibility so as to attract both students as well as academics who are part of the Academic Tourism segment. This form of tourism is sustainable and highly appropriate for Malta, mainly because it has “a relevant role in de-seasonalisation” (Rodrigues Soares, 2019, p. 234). The majority of the academic tourists would be in Malta during the academic year – that is, between October and May – which are considered as low and shoulder seasons. This also means that students that join the UM courses for one or two semesters generate more economic activity as they have a longer than average stay. Interviews with these visitors reveal that they tend to use public transport or walk, consume less utilities as they are living like locals, purchase their food and other daily needs local shops and try to integrate into the local lifestyle as much as possible. They see their stay as an extension of their learning experience. Moreover, those that have a positive experience are more likely to return and recommend Malta to friends and relatives. The same goes for visiting academics: a good number bring their spouse or a companion when coming to Malta.

One of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. ITTC actively contributes to this by not only teaching this to its students but through its internationalisation network is involved in projects which aim to conserve and valorise the coastal Zones which serve as a vehicle for blue economy entrepreneurship. Other projects involve work on the creation of work and upskilling through the promotion and valorisation of local products and culture utilised by the tourism industry.

ITTC promotes visits by academics and students through various mediums. For example, staff regularly embark in Staff Mobility exchanges, mainly through the ERASMUS programmes as well as through participation and presentations at conferences, overseas engagements during sabbatical leave and other academic fora. We also hosted 3 interns on a long-term basis: one professor and two PhD students during the period this period under review.



During 2018 and 2019, an internal UM Report identified 6 International Collaborative Externally Funded (ICEF) Projects at the ITTC, which compares quite well with the highest-ranking faculty which had 17 Projects (Baldacchino, 2019, pp. 13-4). This report also noted that in 2018/9, the ITTC had the 3rd highest number (22) of incoming international students amongst the University's Institutes and Centres. The percentage of international students over the total student population of ITTC registered during 2018/19 increased by 6.3% over the previous year to nearly one fifth of the total ITTC student population. The ITTC received the highest number of Erasmus+ students between 2016/7 and 2018/9 when compared to other Institutes/Centres/Schools (I/C/S). By itself, the ITTC intake in 2018/9 represents 40% of the international student intake by I/C/S at UM (Baldacchino, 2019, p. 7).

Among the I/C/S at the University of Malta, the Institute for European Studies (EUS) was followed by the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture, in having the highest numbers of outbound Erasmus+ students in 2018/9: 21 and 11 students respectively (Baldacchino, 2019, p. 9).

## CONCLUSION

Promoting and managing year-round tourism growth to the Maltese islands through the dual principles of competitiveness and sustainability is key to success. Maximising the socio-economic contribution of the tourism industry by aiming for higher added value based on quality service and products which will lead to the re-branding of the Maltese Islands as a destination of choice for established and emerging markets and segments worldwide. The education tourism sector and more specifically Academic Tourism is the ideal market to target as not only will it generate foreign currency through its consumption of both touristic and non-tourist consumption of goods and services, but can have a longer lasting effect as alumni will either seek to return in later years, or establish relations with their alma mater. In the case of visiting academics, at ITTC we note that once a relationship is established with our Institute this generates more visits or requests for further collaboration either through joint publications, cooperating on projects and even requests for employment.

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