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Cooperative development of cycle tourism in Europe – EuBike Project

119 – Tourism in Transition

Abstract

Tourism provides a significant source of economic development in many European areas. New trends in European rural tourism are steering towards environmentally friendly, sustainable tourism development. At the same time, tourism represents an economic sector where informal skills can play a big role. Formal education among the key stakeholders in this field is often lacking, especially in the rural regions. Cycle tourism is recognised to have a key role in EU. However knowledge integration among the tourism providers and end-users is lacking, and the non-formal and informal knowledge skills and competences of the cyclists and cycling associations remain neglected. EuBike is a project, funded by the European Union Lifelong Learning programme, between 2014-2016, which aimed at creating a joint community for cyclists and tourism providers and at bringing these groups together, in order to support the development of cycle tourism. The main approach of EuBike is based on facilitating co-creation and co-management of cycle tourism products by the tourism providers and cyclists – and thus fostering joint destination governance, as well as potentially generation of new job opportunities and self-employment. The project also focused on capacity building of both cyclists and tourism providers. The project partners cooperated with cyclists, cycle tourism associations and tourism providers in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland in order to build a network devoted to promotion of cycle tourism. Together, they achieved the following results: Development of cycling routes in Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland; Creation of an electronic learning and sharing programme for tourism providers and cyclists. The long-term aim of EuBike is to contribute to the following goals: Rendering tourism providers better equipped to create offers appealing to the cycle tourism community by cooperating with cyclists and cycling associations; Facilitating recognition of the informal competences of cycling associations, with potential to become employment qualifications.

Keywords:

Cycle tourism, sustainable tourism, slow tourism, learning resources, tourism providers

Introduction

Tourism provides a significant source of economic development in many European areas. New trends in European rural tourism are steering towards environmentally friendly, sustainable tourism development (Piket et al. 2013). At the same time, tourism represents an economic sector where informal skills can play a big role. Formal education among the key stakeholders in this field is often lacking, especially in the rural regions. Cycle tourism is recognised to have a key role in Europe.

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Theoretical Background

Sustainable Tourism and Slow Travel

The growing awareness of climate change and the need to mitigate its negative effects calls for switching away from resource intensive and polluting forms of tourism and developing new low impact, low carbon tourism products (Lumsdon et al. 2012; Ritchie/Hall 1999). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) define sustainable tourism as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNEP/UNWTO 2005:12). According to UNWTO, all forms of tourism in all types of destinations could become more sustainable if developed and managed accordingly with respect to balancing among its environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects.

Slow travel is an alternative paradigm, with recent origins linked to the slow food movement in the 1980s, which also inspired the slow city (cittaslow) movement. It is based on the main elements of the slow movement: doing things at the right speed, changing attitude towards time, and seeking quality over quantity (Simpson et al. 2008). Slow travel is characterized by slower and shorter distance-travel to destinations (by train, coach, cycle and on foot), minimized impacts on the environment, and a greater emphasis on the travel experience, including a focus on landscape and a closer connection with the other travelers, the host population and the local history and culture. Moreover, in this case the travel itself and engagement with the mode of transport becomes an important part of the tourist experience (European Commission 2010). Travel by bicycle is one of the forms of slow travel.

Cycle tourism

Cycle tourism can be defined in many ways (Lamont 2009), but often understood as tourism where active cycling is the main purpose of the trip, making it a form of slow travel, sustainable in terms of environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects. It has a minimal ecological impact, it provides considerable economic potential for the local communities, and encourages interest in cultural and natural heritage and community life (Tribe 2002).

Cycling gained popularity, both as a means of transport and leisure activity, in the 1980s, as it was accessible to most societal classes. The first cycling associations appeared at that time: the League of American Wheelmen and the Cyclists’ Tourism Club in the UK¹. Cycling remained highly popular until the 1920s but declined by the end of the twentieth century, as the private car ownership increased (Peeters et al. 2006).

¹ Today called The League of American Bicyclists (<http://www.bikeleague.org/content/mission-and-history>)

Today cycling in Europe constitutes a significant source of economic development. In 2012 the economic impact of cycling tourism in Europe was around 44 billion euro, generated by over 2 million trips and 20 million overnight stays (Vujko/Plavsa 2013). However, cycling has high potential for economic development beyond tourism (Cerna et al. 2014). Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland are among the countries who have been successful in developing cycle tourism. Their success is based not only on an extensive cycling route networks, but also on an effective marketing effort that involves key actors in this field. In Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands cycling remains popular as a transport mode.

For the tourism providers, successful tourism product development and management requires a wide range of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Weston et al. 2015) and in which informal skills can play a big role. Formal education among the key stakeholders in this field is sometimes lacking, especially in the rural regions. In this respect, informal learning resources and exchange of tacit knowledge and skills on the local level could play an important role in helping the local communities to adapt to the evolving tourism trends and demands. Tourists themselves can also contribute to tourism development - they are the main “experts” in what they want to experience while travelling - and may be seen as co-creators of new tourism experiences (Blondiau/Zeebroeck 2014) - as they actively participate in shaping and personalizing their travels. However, in case of cycle tourism it remains unclear to what extent the knowledge of cyclists and cycling associations is used in tourism product development. Knowledge integration among the tourism providers and end-users is often lacking, and the non-formal and informal knowledge skills and competences of the cyclists and cycling associations remain neglected. Moreover, tourism providers tend to have low involvement in the development of cycle tourism (The European House - Ambrosetti 2014).

The EuBike Project

EuBike project aimed at complimenting existing cycle tourism initiatives and projects, both on European level, such as EuroVelo (Peeters et al. 2006), and those on national/sub-regional level in the participating countries – Austria, Italy, Germany and Switzerland. The innovative contribution of EuBike was providing a common ground for cooperation between the two key stakeholder groups – tourism providers and cyclists - by testing potentials for co-creation and co-management of cycle tourism products by these groups and thus fostering joint destination governance, as well as potentially supporting new job opportunities and self-employment. The project also aimed at capacity building by providing non-formal learning resources for these groups. This was implemented based on online learning and sharing platforms, which also support marketing of the jointly created cycle tourism products.

The main idea of EuBike is that cyclists can be considered experts when it comes to their needs while travelling. As such, sharing their knowledge and their feedback with tourism providers can be useful in developing and improving cycle tourism offers. EuBike partners initiated cooperation among cyclists, cycle tourism associations and tourism providers in Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland on developing and testing the cycle tourism products. The products consisted of cycling routes and an online platform, which presents these routes and contains information and tips for tourism providers and cyclists. The platform consists of two main parts: 1) eDucational Box contains information and tips for tourism providers on how to enhance their competitiveness and develop attractive tourist offers for cyclists; 2) The Sharing platform presents the cycling routes – results of the cooperation process. The platform enables cyclists to provide feedback on the cycling paths and the Points of Interests. Moreover, it contains tips on how to plan and organize cycling trips.

Eventually, the aim of the project was to contribute to the following long-term goals: 1) Tourism providers become better equipped to create offers appealing to the cycle tourism community by cooperating with cyclists and cycling associations; 2) The informal competences of cycling associations are recognized and used with potential to become employment qualifications. Both the short-term and long-term aims of EuBike are applicable in the context of the rural areas.

Methods – Project Development

A background analysis was conducted, aimed at understanding the preferences and needs of the cyclists, as well as the resources of the tourism providers, their interest and readiness to deal with growing demands of cycle tourism. It consisted of two parts: 1) Identification of the existing cycle tourism situation and needs in the countries, through literature search; 2) An exploratory analysis made through web data collection, which also allowed compiling a list of possible interested stakeholders.

Aiming at the development and enhancement of new skills and competences, the main outcomes of the background analysis highlighted: 1) a set of competences for both cyclists (demand side) and tourism providers (supply side) that could support creation of cycling products and improve communication to the market, as well as 2) possibilities to enhance training opportunities.

Questionnaires have been designed, both for cyclists and tourism providers, and sent out to various identified stakeholders: accommodation providers, food providers (restaurant and bars), travel agencies and tour operators, Destination Management Organizations, association and informal groups of cycle tourists. The background analysis provided the basis for development of all other components of the project.

Focus Groups have taken place in each pilot country, where the local cyclists, administrators, hotel owners, tourism and cycling associations participated to give their feedback on the project, to discuss the current situation, the needs, and their expectations for the cycle tourism in the region, and to provide advice to the project team on how to make EuBike most useful to their region.

The mix methodologies (qualitative and quantitative), including the desk analysis provided a systematic description of the topics, which were used throughout the development of the educational resources content. In order to shape the educational resources, the Competence Framework and Instructional Design were developed.

The Competence Framework and Instructional Design

The Competence Framework aims at determining the useful learning content for cyclists and tourism providers, based on the European Reference Frameworks and qualification systems. It outlines the main competences that cyclists and tourism providers need - to emphasize their expertise - in order to support the development of cycle tourism in Europe.

The Instructional design outlines the learning approach for the two different EuBike target groups: 1) the supply side - tourism providers and cycling communities and 2) the demand side - the actual cyclists. At the same time, it provides a solution of linking the two groups together and enabling their communication and cooperation. It describes the proposed pedagogical approach, explains the difference among Formal, nonformal and Informal Learning, and proposes a model for the developed learning products: the eDucational Box and the eMarketing Social Platform, described in the Results section.

Pilot Testing of the Project

Pilot testing of the developed learning products was conducted in Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. As part of the testing, project partners organized cycling tours and workshops for the demand and supply target groups. Cycling tours and feedback sessions with the cyclists were aimed at testing the developed materials, the app, as well as at collecting cyclists' opinions about the developed bike paths. Workshops were organised for the local tourism providers, in order to present the developed e-learning model and the proposed learning materials to them, and to explain how to present and promote their cycle tourism products via the project. The following tours and workshops have been organised in the four different regions:

- Austria: three piloting cycling tours (using the same route) and three workshops with 79 participants in total;
- Italy: three piloting tours on three different paths and two workshops with 70 participants in total,
- Germany: one piloting tour (due to the bad weather conditions) and two workshops with 32 participants in total,
- Switzerland: three piloting tours and one workshop with 39 participants in total

Recommendations of all participants were used to improve the digital tools and adapt them to the pilot regions.

Results

The project results include the produced online resources, described below, as well as different cycle tourism products developed in the pilot regions.

eEducational Box

The eEducational Box constitutes a more formal learning resource for tourism providers - with a series of case studies, and best practices. This approach is aimed at equipping the providers with theoretical and practical tools for understanding the travelers' needs and for creating, marketing and managing tourism products. The eEducational Box contains online materials which foster: 1) integrated design of cycle tourism products, considering the needs of cyclists as well as cultural and tourism issues, 2) better understanding of hospitality issues related to cycle tourism, and 3) strategy and tactics of online promotion and user-generated contents management. The materials were combined into four different modules, determined by the Background Analysis and the Competence Framework:

1. Information & Communication Technologies
2. Networking
3. Product Management & Development
4. Promotion & Marketing

Each module consists of two case studies, which are aimed at providing inspiration and ideas. The Call for Action section provides more direct tips and advice on each subject area. Users who want to test their knowledge and skills can take a quiz, available in every section. The eEducational box content is available in English, German, Italian and French.

The eMarketing Social Platform

The Social Platform is a multi-purpose tool for cycle tourists: it presents the developed cycling routes and the points of interest, provides a chance for the cyclists to comment on each point of interest and on the route itself, and includes basic information (informal learning resources) useful for the cyclists for planning their trips. The main objectives of this platform include supporting the cyclists in: 1) designing cycling itineraries (i.e. planning cycling holidays), 2) meta reflection (learning to identify key competences) of their cycling and tourism experience through structured review and 3) sharing experience with other cycle tourists and with the tourism providers in order to strengthen the cycle tourism market. These objectives were reflected in four modules:

1. Thinking alternative Experiences - inspiration and rational for sustainable slow tourism.
2. Experience Planning
3. Networking
4. Orientation

The Social platform provides a connection and a communication line between the two target groups of the project: the comments, sent by the cyclists via the platform, are received by the local tourism providers – whether individual providers, or local/regional tourism managers.

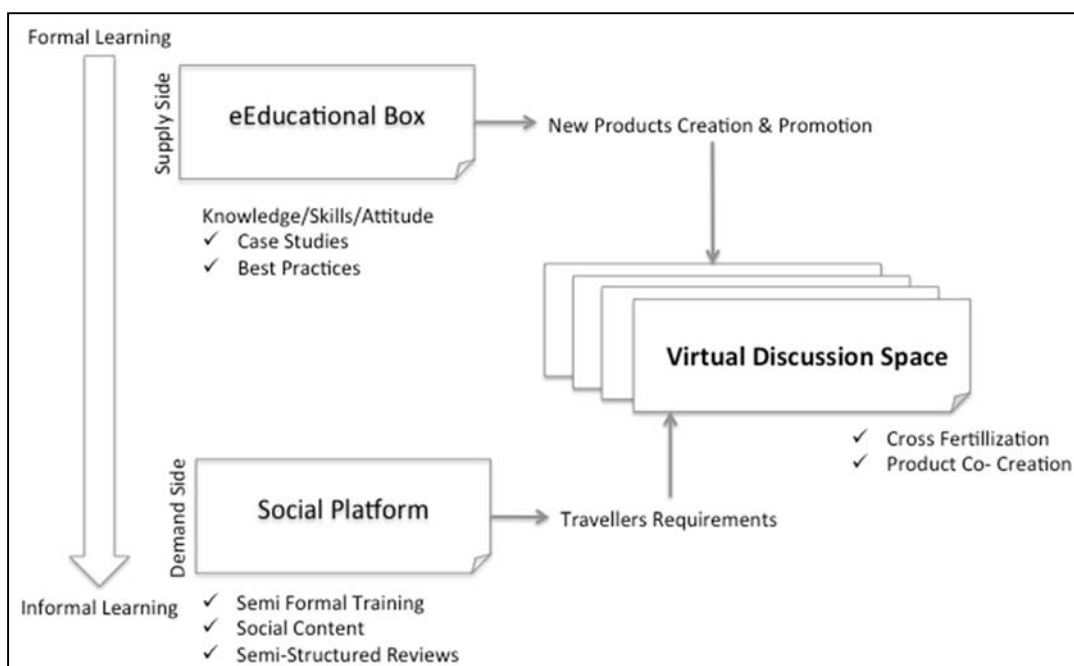


Figure 1: Interaction model of the EuBike digital learning components
Source: EuBike Project

The EuBike App

The app is the mobile version of the social platform. It presents the cycling paths and points of interest, allows cyclists to download all information about the paths to be used offline and allows the users to send comments. The aims of the App are: to promote the destinations which participated in this project, to enhance the communication between cycle tourists and tourism providers, to encourage development, improvement and promotion of new paths in Europe, to promote the improvement of cycle tourism products through collaboration among different users. The app is available on Google Play in

English, German, French and Italian, and can be used on Android devices. Cycle tourism products were also created in each project pilot region as the main outcomes of the project.

Discussion - Applicability of the project results to the EuBike project Pilot regions and beyond.

During the pilot phase, improvements have been suggested to the learning materials, such as the structure of the modules and the translations. A challenge in the project was its brief duration, which did not allow for substantial improvements to the educational resources, and to the cycling paths. Another challenge was the lack of resources, which resulted in the APP developed only for the Android system and not for the IOS system.

Applicability for cyclists

Most cyclists appreciated the developed paths and cycling associations confirmed that the link with the tourism providers is usually missing. The cyclists provided a number of suggestions for the Social platform, including: organising learning materials in subthemes, including more pictures from the cycling paths providing guidelines on how to use the platform and the app, distinguishing among the “points of interest” and “tourism services”, such as accommodations, bike rental etc. Suggestions for the APP were the same in all four pilot testing regions: cyclists would have preferred to have the possibility to post comments without internet connection, to post pictures, reflect on what they was missing along the route, as well as to rank the paths. They also preferred to have non-static maps and to have an IOS version of the App.

Applicability for tourism providers

Only a small number of tourism providers commented on the eEducational Box, because many participants did not have time to read learning materials content in detail. The topics of the modules were considered interesting and important, but the participants suggested that learning materials should be differentiated for different target groups, (e.g for beginners and for experienced tourism providers, based on their level of knowledge and expertise, or for the different types of businesses: for tour operators, for hoteliers etc.). The presented learning materials were considered suitable for people with less cycling-related experience and for beginners in the tourism field, interested to start a business, but they were not viewed as sophisticated enough for the experienced tourism providers (in Austria, Germany and Switzerland). On the other hand, participants with only basic knowledge about tourism development and business considered the texts, written in non-academic style, very understandable. While participants from the Austrian and the Italian pilot regions were interested in using the social platform for promoting their offers, there was a lack of interest from the participants from Germany and Switzerland. This can be explained by the advanced cycle tourism development of the German and the Swiss regions.

Transferability to other regions

The feedback received from the project participants suggests that the developed materials and the EuBike approach can be more useful in the countries and regions where cycling and cycle tourism are less developed, and particularly in the context of the rural areas, where fewer learning resources are available to the tourism providers, as well as resources for promotion of tourism products, including mobile Apps. In the regions where cyclists are less organized among themselves the EuBike results could facilitate their partnership with the tourism providers. It is more likely that tourism providers in these areas will see the benefits of such partnerships, due to the importance of cycle tourism for sustainable development in the rural regions (Tribe 2002).

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