

# **Assessing the Learning Outcomes of Food-related Educational Tourism Events for University Students: The Case of the International Student Competition of Fermo, Italy**

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## Abstract

This paper examines the International Student Competition on Place Branding and Mediterranean Diet held in Fermo, Italy, in the context of the development of rural areas. This one-week food-related educational programme was organised by the University of Macerata's Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism in collaboration with The Piceno Laboratory on the Mediterranean Diet, a local network of public and private stakeholders committed to the promotion of Fermo area as a touristic destination based on traditional gastronomy. The aim of this study was to understand how and to what extent such food-related educational events may contribute to providing students with the knowledge, expertise and soft skills needed for careers in the food tourism sector. Of interest also was how such events may benefit the development of rural areas.

The ISC was founded in 2016 and continued in 2017, 2018 and 2019. In order to assess students' perceptions about the experience, specifically regarding what they felt they had learned about food tourism, and which soft skills they had acquired or honed, 13 students who participated in the 2017 event were interviewed for a qualitative study. Moreover, the authors drew upon information gleaned from interactions with students and teachers, as well as with several important actors of the local food and tourism sector, including tourism and hospitality entrepreneurs and representatives of government agencies, with whom they collaborated in the context of planning, running and evaluating the events. The findings show that the ISC can provide students with a good general understanding of the territory and practical knowledge about place branding and food tourism. In terms of career preparation, the combination of fieldwork activities with traditional lectures and group activities was particularly fruitful in promoting soft skills such as communication, efficient use of social media, teamwork, problem-solving and decision making.

**Keywords:** educational tourism, food tourism, experiential learning, knowledge, soft skills, employability.

## Introduction

In the *Future of the Job* Report, the World Economic Forum (WEF) argues that in the near future, some behavioural soft skills will replace or be more important than other technical and professional ones. For example, emotional intelligence, creativity and critical thinking are expected to play a fundamental role in enhancing future professional profiles (WEF). In defining the Student Employability Profile (Rees et al. 90–92) related to hospitality, the UK Higher Education Academy listed several skills and kinds of knowledge that a new graduate in this field should develop. Field-related skills include the ability to analyse and implement food, beverage and/or accommodation service systems, supported by ICT, mathematical and organisational skills. Important soft skills include interpersonal acumen as well as skills in communication and presentation, teamwork, critical thinking, and the ability to learn, especially from work experience.

The overall purpose of this study was to explore how and to what extent food-related educational events may contribute to providing students with the knowledge, expertise and soft skills needed for careers in the food tourism sector, thus improving their employability. The subject of this study was the International Student Competition on Place Branding and Mediterranean Diet held in Fermo, Italy, organised by the University of Macerata's Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism in collaboration with The Piceno Laboratory on the Mediterranean Diet, a local network of public and private stakeholders committed to the promotion of Fermo rural area as a touristic destination based on traditional gastronomy.

In Ritchie's description of an educational tourism experience, the learning component is a primary or secondary part of the journey. It can be related to the competencies that students develop during their studies to face the challenges of the world of work. In the food tourism literature and, in particular, in relation to the development of food tourism, various types of competencies have been identified as critically important (Bertella; Johanson et. al.; Rees et al.; Başaran). For example, Bertella identified scientific and local food knowledge, global and local managerial and political knowledge, and tourism knowledge.

The present article reports the results of a specific case study of a one-week educational program developed in line with the main ideas of the experiential learning approach (Dewey; Kolb), the International Student Competition (ISC) on Mediterranean Diet and Place Branding, organised by the University of Macerata (Italy) in the rural area of Fermo in collaboration with an association of government and private actors, The Piceno Lab on the Mediterranean Diet. During such a week, students attend talks, meet with local producers, visit farms, taste local products, participate in cooking lessons, and learn how to use social media to promote agritourism, a restaurant, a farm, a tour operator, or other such enterprises.

In the competition, teams of students work on case studies to formulate sustainable, original and innovative action plans for one of these operators, in the overall context of promoting the rural development of the Marche Region.

The article is structured as follows: the first part provides a review of the background literature on educational tourism, with a specific focus on short-term study abroad programmes, experiential learning and soft skills for employability in relation with food tourism. Next, the background context of the educational event is described, and the applied methodology is explained. Finally, the collected data are analysed and discussed.

Students perceived that the experience of working on real cases in a multicultural context helped them gain useful knowledge and skills that would improve their employability. They pointed to such knowledge as a general understanding of the territory and practical information about place branding and food tourism. They felt that they improved their skills in communication, problem-solving and decision making, which, they said, could be adapted to other situations and workplaces as well.

## Theoretical background

The case study of the International Student Competition of Fermo offers four interesting aspects for contemplation. The event in itself is an *educational tourism experience* that, through a competition, engages students in place and problem-specific *experiential learning* activities, in order to provide them with *employability-related skills* useful for their future; furthermore, it is a *food tourism experience* featuring the Mediterranean Diet, and involved students in promotion of the local food culture and lifestyle, and thus of the value of the area.

The following sections present a quick overview of the literature on Educational Tourism, Experiential learning, Food Tourism and Soft Skills for employability.

### Educational tourism

Ritchie defines Educational Tourism as a “tourist activity undertaken by those who are undertaking an overnight vacation and those who are undertaking an excursion for whom education and learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip” (18), and indicates that it has several potential segments. In this study we consider the “education first” or purposeful segments which primarily serve to promote education and learning, for example, school excursions and exchange programmes, stays-abroad at language schools, and tourism related to university students. Stone and Petrick define study-abroad programs, including short-period programs,

as touristic experiences perceived by the students as challenging and potentially enriching opportunities to travel, live and learn about another culture and language. Kalinowski and Weiler write that educational travel is motivated by curiosity to learn about other people, their language and culture, and by interest in stimulating cultural and naturalistic topics. For them, educational tourism goes “beyond a curiosity, interest or fascination for a particular topic. It involves a travel experience in which there is organised learning, whether that be formal or experimental” (Kalinowski and Weiler 17).

Educational tourism abroad offers a number of benefits: it provides students with an opportunity to learn about the political and social issues, the people, geography, history and culture of another country (Chieffo). It also can push them to improve their organisational, communication and problem-solving skills, and thus foster their personal growth (Gmelch).

## **Experiential learning in tourism and hospitality degree programs**

Experiential activities, as described by Dewey, Boydell and Kolb, can play an important role in students’ education, above all if set within specific learning programmes (Stone and Petrick). As Bauer and Bennett explain, field research projects are an important part of a degree program in tourism management because students can learn more about tourism in this setting than by attending lectures and seminars or reading textbooks and articles. Bauer and Bennett describe tourism as a multifaceted, multidisciplinary field, and argue that “hands-on” training that combines both theory and practice best prepares students for work in this complex arena. Similarly, Goh affirms that field trips in tourism education pique the interest of students, give them a better understanding of the specific subjects addressed in their program, and provide them with insights into future career pathways.

In this context, a well-rounded education is important: “tourism-related educational organizations should build a curriculum that combines culinary culture and tourism, enhances the cooperation between academia and industry, and deepens the knowledge and learning of culinary culture” (Horng and Tsai 812). In particular, gastronomic studies are multi-disciplinary, as they include history, sociology, literature, languages, nutrition, philosophy, hospitality and cooking, and may give direction in the planning process of communities and businesses (Scarpato). A well-rounded education is also facilitated by the combination of learning modalities. Travel and discovery provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their experiences, and this reflection is a vital part of learning (Mouton). In his research about experiential learning in tourism education in North Cyprus, Bařaran (33) follows Kolb’s theoretical framework and asserts that during work or training in the hospitality sector, students profit from their direct contact with stakeholders; reflective observation (RO) on the ideas they hear and situations they experience opens

them to new perspectives. The opportunity to hear guest speakers such as business representatives and researchers, and engage in group discussions with them, enriches the learning experience as well. Of course, attending lectures and studying textbooks are important for the abstract conceptualisation (AC) of the subject. In addition, active experimentation (AE) through presentations, simulation games, role play, and practical workshops can be used effectively to support experiential learning.

Other modalities, such as location-based learning (Croy) and especially problem-based learning (Vygotsky; Paris) can be applied to business competitions, to help students enhance their employability by expanding their business knowledge, gaining work experience, and improving their abilities in problem-solving and teamwork; students also may find that these experiences boost their motivation and build up their self-esteem, and encourage them to engage in life-long learning. And, not unimportantly, these experiences can be fun (Shah et al.).

## **Knowledge in food tourism**

Food is often an important aspect of rural tourism, as it allows the destination to express its own identity and allows tourists the opportunity to enjoy meaningful experiences, gaining in-depth knowledge about the local culture and cuisine (Bessière; Hjalager). Knowledge about food tourism is important for both tourists and tourism operators.

## **Knowledge in food tourism from the tourists' perspective**

For tourists, food is a multifaceted cultural artefact to be enjoyed in many locations and through many activities such as food trails, events, festivals and visitor attractions (Everett and Aitchison). Hall and Sharples define food tourism as “visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations” in order to experience a particular type of food or product of a specific region (10). Hall et al. consider food tourism as part of the local culture, “consumed” by tourists, an element of regional tourism promotion, a component of local agricultural and economic development, a key element to competitive destination marketing, an indicator of globalisation and localisation, and a product and service consumed by tourists with specific preferences and consumption patterns.

As Rinaldi argues, “food culture involves many different branding elements, including products (food and beverages), practices (eating and meals), the art and customs of preparing and eating (gastronomy), sensory elements (taste, smell, touch, visual), origins (organic food, ethical cuisine, locally produced food, etc.), preparation (ways of cooking), serving (fast food, slow food, street food, etc.) and the context in which food is served and consumed (restaurants, bars, markets, food

quarters, streets, etc.)” (7). According to Horng and Tsai, in order to create a culinary tourism destination, it is necessary to identify the core resources and combine internal and external policies to support marketing strategies and to design products suitable to the target market, by creating a brand identity able to communicate the features and values of culinary tourism products. According to Richards, tourists want to increase their cultural capital and consider gastronomy as a creative experience rather than just consumption. In this sense, food tourism belongs to the creative tourism sector, and, therefore, specific knowledge and expertise are needed. Tourists are eager to learn about the ingredients used, the way they are grown, and how to cook them; they appreciate learning how culinary traditions have developed over time.

## **Knowledge in food tourism from the perspectives of tourism operators and students**

Food tourism can influence the success of a destination in a competitive and rapidly changing tourism market. Local government assessors for tourism or rural development, tourism operators, local restaurants and hotels, as well as producers and sellers of local specialities must have the necessary food-related knowledge if they are to develop food tourism in their area. In addition, key elements for successful innovation and competition in this field are talent, knowledge retention and management skills (Hall et al.). Bertella analyses the role of knowledge in food tourism in agricultural and/or fishery areas and investigates several types of knowledge important for the development of food tourism in rural areas. These are:

- local food knowledge;
- scientific food knowledge;
- tourism knowledge;
- local managerial and political knowledge.

Food tourism can be boosted by the creation of networks among actors who detain different types of food knowledge in order to brand the destination.

In this context, education, training and research programmes may play an important role in regional development through food and tourism (Hall et al.). Specifically, hospitality education should include the study of gastronomy, in addition to management courses, to provide students with an understanding of the history, culture and traditions of the products and dishes of their own region or country (Santich). Furthermore, students should develop practical management skills, but also gain a general understanding of various social science disciplines, and become equipped to manage the economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism on the residents of the host region.

## Soft skills for employability in the tourism sector

The most accepted and shared definition of employability was articulated by Yorke and Knight who described it as “a set of achievements and skills, understandings and personal attributes helpful for graduates to gain employment and work successfully with a benefit for themselves, for the workforce, the community and the economy” (3). Soft skills are “desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude.”<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, soft skills are understood here as personality-specific skills related to one’s character, attitudes and behaviour; they are intangible, non-technical and their application is not limited to one’s profession. In addition, they are constantly developed in everyday life and the workplace. Soft skills can be transferred from one context to another (UNESCO-IBE), but can be also technical, as is the case, for example, with fluency in languages or expertise with computers.

Even if a universal set of transferrable and soft skills has not been agreed upon (Caballero et al.), some helpful reference frameworks have been developed: the European Union identified 8 key competences for lifelong learning and several relevant soft skills, as have some other international government agencies (Crawford et al.; the U.S. Department of Education<sup>2</sup>; the Australian Department of Education; Bacigalupo et al.). These are summarized in Table 1.

Regarding employability in the hospitality sector, Baum called for curricula that develop skills in learning, communication, mathematics and IT, and teamwork, as well as competences in foods and beverages, and management. Similarly, Johanson et al. indicated as important competences the basic functional areas of management, such as the ability to recruit, train, and motivate; financial skills, communication skills, and customer care, computer-related skills, and knowledge about workplace security and safety. They also included specific knowledge related to food preparation, such as ingredients, sauces and stocks, and basic culinary production processes.

As Ruhanen’s case study showed, experiential approaches are useful learning tools for improving the employability of tourism and hospitality students. They can contribute to bridging the gap between academic knowledge and the required practical knowledge and skills those in the workforce should have. They promote learning, interest and enthusiasm for the subject, work experience and industry practice. Lee reports that industry-based experiential learning enhanced the learning outcomes of hospitality students: it increased their understanding of how organisations work, helped them view their career expectations more realistically,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/soft-skills> (Accessed 30 Sep 2019)

<sup>2</sup> <https://cte.ed.gov/initiatives/employability-skills-framework> (Accessed 30 Sep 2019)



**Table 1.** Key competences and soft skills: a comparison among international frameworks (our own summary)

<p><b>European Union 8 Key competences for lifelong learning</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication in the mother tongue</li> <li>2. Communication in foreign languages</li> <li>3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology</li> <li>4. Digital competence</li> <li>5. Learning to learn</li> <li>6. Social and civic competences</li> <li>7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship</li> <li>8. Cultural awareness and expression</li> </ol> <p><b>Relevant soft skills:</b> communication; interpersonal and intercultural skills; problem-solving; organisational skills; active participation; sense of initiative; creativity; emotional skills.</p>
<p><b>Crawford et al. 7 Soft Skills Clusters for employability</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication</li> <li>2. Decision making/Problem-solving</li> <li>3. Self-management</li> <li>4. Teamwork</li> <li>5. Professionalism</li> <li>6. Experiences</li> <li>7. Leadership</li> </ol>

**Table 1.** (continue)

<p><b>ENTRECOMP</b> (Bacigalupo et al.) <b>15 competences for entrepreneurship</b></p>	<p><b>Area 1 Ideas and Opportunities</b> 1. Spotting opportunities 2. Creativity 3. Vision 4. Valuing ideas 5. Ethical and sustainable thinking</p>	<p><b>Area 2 Resources</b> 6. Self-awareness and self-efficacy 7. Motivation and perseverance 8. Mobilising resources 9. Financial and economic literacy 10. Mobilising others</p>	<p><b>Area 3 Into action</b> 11. Taking the initiative 12. Planning and management 13. Coping with uncertainty, ambiguity and risk 14. Working with others 15. Learning through experience</p>
<p><b>US Employability Skills Framework (US-ESF website)</b></p>	<p><b>APPLIED KNOWLEDGE</b></p>	<p><b>Applied Academic Skills</b> Reading Writing Math strategies/procedures Scientific principles/procedures</p>	<p><b>Critical Thinking Skills</b> Think creatively Think critically Make sound decisions Solve problems Reasons Plan/organise</p>

	<p><b>EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS</b></p>	<p><i>Interpersonal Skills</i> Understand teamwork and work with others Respond to customer needs Exercise leadership Negotiate to resolve conflict Respect individual differences</p>	<p><i>Personal Qualities</i> Demonstrate responsibility and self-discipline Adapt and show flexibility Work independently Demonstrate a willingness to learn Demonstrate professionalism Take initiative Display a positive attitude and sense of self-worth Take responsibility for professional growth</p>
<p><b>WORKPLACE SKILLS</b></p>	<p><i>Resource Management</i> Manage time Manage money Manage resources Manage personnel</p>	<p><i>Information Use</i> Locate Organise Use Analyse Communicate</p>	<p><i>Communication Skills</i> Communicate verbally Listen actively Comprehend written material Convey information in writing Observe carefully</p> <p><i>Systems Thinking</i> Understand and use systems Monitor systems Improve systems</p> <p><i>Technology Use</i> Understand and use technology</p>
<p><b>Australian Employability Skills Framework (Employability for the future)</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication</li> <li>2. Teamwork</li> <li>3. Problem Solving</li> <li>4. Initiative and Enterprise</li> <li>5. Planning and Organising</li> <li>6. Self-Management</li> <li>7. Technology</li> <li>8. Learning</li> </ol>		

developed their network of professional contacts, spurred their ability to take initiative, increased their ability to adapt to change, honed their leadership skills, and boosted their financial management skills. According to García-Rosell, in order to work in and improve the tourism industry, tourism students should develop knowledge and competencies through problem-based learning (PBL) activities that stimulate critical approaches and reflexivity. Students should live and experience tourism and hospitality work rather than simply acquiring knowledge about it. Problem-based learning in tourism education allows students to develop skills like teamwork, creativity, problem-solving and leadership and helps them in developing the flexibility and adaptability needed to respond to the socio-technological changes affecting the tourism and hospitality industry.

## **Background context: The International Student Competition on Place Branding and the Mediterranean Diet**

The week-long International Student Competition of Fermo (ISC) is a study-abroad programme based on the Mediterranean Diet brand. Established in 2016 by the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the University of Macerata, in collaboration with The Piceno Laboratory on the Mediterranean Diet, a local network of public and private stakeholders committed to promoting the Fermo area as a touristic destination based on traditional gastronomy, it has attracted students from Italy and abroad every year since 2016 (<http://www.laboratoriodietamediterranea.it/it/international-student-competition-2019>).

The small rural hill town of Montegiorgio, near Fermo, 30 kilometres from the Adriatic Sea, was chosen to host the ISC because of its particular importance as a representative of the traditional Mediterranean diet and its link to longevity. In fact, since the town was marked by a high number of centenarians, and its traditional cuisine typical of the Mediterranean diet, a cohort of men from Montegiorgio was one of the sixteen enrolled in the long-term Seven Countries Study, conducted from 1958 to 1999, which compared data on heart and vascular disease with information on traditional eating patterns and lifestyles in the seven participating countries (USA, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Japan).<sup>3</sup> Exploiting this claim to fame, local leaders chose to brand the Fermo area as the land of Mediterranean Diet in efforts to promote food tourism here. The Piceno Laboratory of the Mediterranean Diet played an important intermediary role among the local actors, linking the touristic offer to food, health and wellness, and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sevencountriesstudy.com/> (Accessed 30 Sep 2019)

engaging the support of the University of Macerata. One of the outcomes of this collaboration was the ISC, with the following objectives:

- for students: discovering connections 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 Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for place branding activities; discovering Italian culture, lifestyle and gastronomy,
- for stakeholders and local actors: elaborating innovation and development paths to increase the international reputation of the destination, through an ICT-based real-time marketing of the territory (Cavicchi et al.).

The participants came from universities in Italy, Norway, Belgium, Poland, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, belonged to different nationalities, and had diverse educational backgrounds (Tourism and Hospitality Management, Economics and Business Management, Agricultural Studies). They attended seminars about Food & Wine Tourism led by researchers from Italy and abroad, set in ancient theatres and locations symbolic of the local cultural heritage. In addition, they attended cooking classes, visited local farms and had field trips, met local producers and gained insights into food processes, local gastronomy traditions and culture. Participants were hosted in rural B&Bs and farmhouses, to offer them the opportunity to learn about local hospitality and become familiar with the landscape and its attractions.

The students worked in groups in close collaboration with local stakeholders to give them the opportunity to engage in real case studies. The participants in the first ISC in 2016 were asked to come up with an innovative idea to help the Piceno Laboratory of Mediterranean Diet elaborate a promotional strategy for the Fermo area using the Mediterranean Diet as a brand. The next year, participants were given two different assignments: 1) the application of the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur) to two local firms, in order to implement promotional strategies based on their distinctive resources; and 2) the integration of the identified strategies within a sustainable tourism development plan for the area. In 2018, again, participants worked to elaborate a promotional strategy for the Fermo area using the Mediterranean Diet as a brand and in 2019, participants were asked to provide local stakeholders with a promotional video representing the characteristics of a gastronomic tourism experience in Fermo area.

Each year, students also helped promote the Fermo area by acting as “ambassadors,” in a daily social media competition, sharing pictures and contents using official hashtags, the impact of which was then analysed by staff at the Polytechnic University of the Marche in Ancona. Each day, the participant who had the greatest social media impact won a prize consisting of local products. In doing all these activities, students “translated” theoretical ideas and tools into concrete plans for

the local destination. Local students supported international students in the activities with local stakeholders. “Translation” also took a literal form, with Italian participants helping foreign participants communicate with local stakeholders.

## Methodology

In order to investigate the learning outcomes of the ISC and, more specifically, what kind of knowledge and skills students might have developed through this experience, this study relied on the three data sources: first, a general questionnaire about motivation for participating, expectations for the event, and level of satisfaction with the event, administered to all the 2016 participants and some of the 2017 participants; second, follow up interviews with 13 of the 2017 students about knowledge gained and skills improved through the event; and third, information gleaned by the authors in the context of their various roles in planning, organising and running the ISC, during numerous informal conversations with students, teachers, tourism and hospitality entrepreneurs, and representatives of government agencies.

### A preliminary assessment of the ISC experience

The goal of the first phase was to assess the motivations, expectations, and level of satisfaction of the students who participated in the ISC. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire organised on a 5-point Likert-type scale, by assigning values to affirmations such as “I wanted to meet other students interested in tourism,” “I expected excellent lectures,” “I feel that I have gained a good understanding of the job of local entrepreneurs/producers,” “My participation in this competition is an important part of my total university experience,” and “My satisfaction as a learning experience.” Comparison among the means revealed that the Italian students appeared to be more interested in and satisfied with the learning experience related to food tourism, local traditions and culture than their colleagues from universities abroad. In fact, the majority of the respondents were students of the University of Macerata’s Master’s Program in International Tourism Destination Management, which includes the ISC as part of the second year of studies. They were familiar with the subjects addressed during the event, which were relevant to their education and preparation for future employment. On the basis of the questionnaire results, it was decided that a second phase should be undertaken, specifically with the University of Macerata students who had participated in the 2017 ISC, to gain more information about the outcomes in terms of knowledge and skills development.

## **Semi-structured interviews on learning outcomes of the ISC**

The second phase employed a qualitative approach in which 13 open-ended questions were asked of 7 young women and 6 young men, five from abroad (2 from India, 2 from Ghana, 1 from Russia), and the rest from Italy (3 from the Marche Region, 1 from Latium, 2 from Campania, 1 from Apulia, 1 from Sicily). Most of the 30-minute interviews were conducted via Skype. Since the interviewer had participated in the ISC and knew the respondents personally, the interviews had an open and friendly tone and were marked by mutual trust. The students who could not Skype submitted their answers by email. The contents of the interview were elaborated following the frameworks of Bertella; and Crawford et al. because they allow synthesising the characteristics of the other frameworks. Table 2 shows the soft skills clusters and related characteristics according to Crawford et al.

As mentioned in the literature review section, Bertella identified important kinds of knowledge in food tourism in agricultural and/or fishery areas: local and scientific food knowledge, tourism knowledge, and local and global managerial and political knowledge. Many scholars (Horng and Tsai; Baum; Johanson et al.; Lee; Scarpato; Richards; Hjalager; Hall et al.; Santich) confirmed the importance of these competences, seen as essential in the perspective of regional branding and development of sustainable food tourism strategies.

The interview was divided into different sections, as in the following Table 3.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and content analysis based on theoretically derived codes was conducted.

## **Action research**

Following an action research approach (Gilmore and Carson) the authors involved in different roles in the planning, organisation and training at the ISC, through their direct experience and conversations with the students and local stakeholders had the opportunity to collect data. A participant observation approach (Jorgensen) was applied, to note and interpret the physical and social context and the interactions among the participants.

## **Findings**

The data collected showed that most of the students had little previous knowledge about the Fermo area and its local gastronomy and food tourism. Only those who had an educational background related to tourism management were more aware of these topics, mainly students from the Marche Region, who also had a broader knowledge of the area and the local gastronomy.

**Table 2.** Soft skills clusters and descriptive characteristics (elaboration from Crawford et al.)

Cluster	Descriptive characteristics	Relationship with other literature/frameworks
<b>Communication skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Listen effectively</li> <li>- Communicate accurately and concisely</li> <li>- Effective oral communication</li> <li>- Communicate pleasantly and professionally</li> <li>- Effective written communication</li> <li>- Ask good questions</li> <li>- Communicate appropriately and professionally using social media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Baum, 2002</li> <li>- Johanson et al., 2010</li> <li>- Ruhanen, 2006</li> </ul>
<b>Decision making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify and analyse problems</li> <li>- Take effective and appropriate action</li> <li>- Realise the effect of decisions</li> <li>- Creative and innovative solutions</li> <li>- Transfer knowledge from one situation to another</li> <li>- Engage in lifelong learning</li> <li>- Think abstractly about problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- García-Rosell, 2014</li> <li>- European Union, 2006</li> <li>- U.S. Department of Education</li> </ul>
<b>Self-management skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Efficient and effective work habits</li> <li>- Self-starting</li> <li>- Well-developed ethic, integrity and sense of loyalty</li> <li>- Sense of urgency to address and complete tasks</li> <li>- Work well under pressure</li> <li>- Adapt and apply appropriate technology</li> <li>- Dedication to continued professional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Australian Department of Education, 2002</li> <li>- Bacigalupo et al., 2016</li> </ul>



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<b>Teamwork skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Productive as a team-member</li><li>- Positive and encouraging attitude</li><li>- Punctual and meets deadlines</li><li>- Maintains accountability to the team</li><li>- Work with multiple approaches</li><li>- Aware and sensitive to diversity</li><li>- Share ideas to multiple audiences</li></ul>
<b>Professionalism skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Effective relationships with customers, business and the public</li><li>- Accept and apply critique and direction in the work place</li><li>- Trustworthy with sensitive information</li><li>- Understand the role and realistic career expectations</li><li>- Deal effectively with ambiguity</li><li>- Maintain appropriate décor and demeanour</li><li>- Select appropriate mentor and acceptance of advice</li></ul>
<b>Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Related work or internship experiences</li><li>- Teamwork experiences</li><li>- Leadership experiences</li><li>- Project management experiences</li><li>- Cross-disciplinary experiences</li><li>- Community engagement experiences</li><li>- International experiences</li></ul>
<b>Leadership skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- See the “big picture” and think strategically</li><li>- Recognise when to lead and when to follow</li><li>- Respect and acknowledge contribution from others</li><li>- Recognise and deal constructively with conflict</li><li>- Build professional relationships</li><li>- Motivate and lead others</li><li>- Recognise change is needed and lead the change effort</li></ul>

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**Table 3.** Contents of the interview, developed on the basis of models in the literature (Bertella, 2010; Crawford et al. 2011)

<b>SECTION ABOUT LOCAL FOOD &amp; WINE CULTURE</b>	
1)	Which was your preliminary knowledge about food & wine tourism and about the territory visited, before the ISC?
2)	Do you think you learned something new during this experience? What?
3)	How do you think this kind of experiences related to local food culture (meeting producers and entrepreneurs, attending cooking classes and tasting sessions, seminars about food production processes, history and traditions related to food, etc.), you had the opportunity to attend to during the ISC, helped you in developing some knowledge about the territory and local food traditions?
4)	Do you think that this experience is useful for your future job in this context? Explain your answer?
<b>SECTION ABOUT LOCAL MANAGERIAL AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE</b>	
5)	During the ISC you met a lot of local public and private stakeholders and you had the opportunity to study specific case studies. Do you think it helped you in developing knowledge about socio-cultural aspects related to the territory and specifically about collaborative realities and networks?
6)	Do you think that after this experience you would be able to work with these realities for local development related to food & wine tourism? Explain your answer.
<b>SECTION ABOUT FOOD &amp; WINE TOURISM KNOWLEDGE</b>	
7)	Do you think that the seminars about food & wine tourism you had the opportunity to attend to helped you in developing knowledge and perspectives in conceiving tourism as an experience that aims to give value and promote a destination and its local resources? If yes, in your opinion which are the most useful aspects that can be useful for getting a job in this context?
<b>SECTION ABOUT COMMUNICATION SKILLS</b>	
8)	Do you think that the ISC experience contributed to the development of communication skills (listen effectively, communicate accurately, concisely and professionally, effective oral communication, communicate appropriately and professionally using social media) that can be useful for your future job, specifically in food & wine tourism context? If yes, how do you think it happened and which skills do you think you have gained?

<b>SECTION ABOUT PROBLEM SOLVING/DECISION MAKING SKILLS</b>
<p>9) During the ISC, divided into groups, you had to work to solve a specific case study. In which way, this working method based on a specific problem related to a local reality helped you in developing skills like: identifying and analysing problems, elaborating decision processes, identifying creative and innovative solutions, applying decisions to reality? What did you learn?</p> <p>Do you think that the knowledge you gained in this context could be adapted to another situation or to a similar case? Explain your answer.</p>
<b>SECTION ABOUT TEAMWORK/LEADERSHIP</b>
<p>10) Which role did you play inside your team during the ISC? While answering take into consideration these aspects: leadership, level of involvement and productivity as a team member, positive and encouraging behaviour, openness to sharing ideas, multiple working methods.</p> <p>11) In which way did you interact with other group members belonging to different cultures?</p>
<b>SECTION ABOUT SELF-MANAGEMENT</b>
<p>12) The team had to provide a final presentation with an original proposal that you had to prepare in a short time. How did you face the fact of working under pressure?</p>
<b>SECTION ABOUT EXPERIENCE</b>
<p>13) How can an experience like the ISC (a group experience that is transdisciplinary and involves local communities) contribute to developing knowledge and skills useful to a future job in the food &amp; wine tourism context?</p>

## Knowledge and soft skills acquired during the ISC experience

Respondents deemed that the ISC experience had helped them gain knowledge and develop soft skills through direct contact with the local context and dialogue with local stakeholders, as well as through the seminars and the experiential learning activities held. Some themes emerged from the interviews.

### Understanding of the area

More generally, students affirmed that during the ISC they learned about local food & wine, local management and politics, and food tourism.

The most evident aspect was the acquisition of a general understanding of the area in terms of:

- in-depth knowledge about local food production and local, small food-related firms,
- awareness about the relationship between the land and food authenticity,
- the importance of considering food as a resource for local development (above all, after the 2016 earthquakes which hit the area),
- potential future work opportunities for students in the food tourism field in that area.

Two indicative statements were:

“I had the opportunity to meet large and small local businesses, to learn first-hand about their potential, their weaknesses and their unique features”.

“The ISC allowed me to explore the untouched beauty of the Fermo territory and to taste the local food, and experience the richness of the Mediterranean Diet.”

By achieving a more complete understanding of the area, participants could understand the specific context, analyse problems and needs, gain awareness about the objectives of the Piceno Laboratory on Mediterranean Diet, get closer to local businesses and understand how to plan promotional initiatives to brand them. The respondents could observe the commitment of local producers to guarantee quality products, see their passion for their jobs, and recognise the importance of local food for tourism.

The seminars on food tourism held by professors from different countries and the experiential learning activities (meetings with producers and entrepreneurs, cooking classes and tasting sessions, seminars about food production processes, history and traditions related to food, etc.), supported students in improving their

knowledge of the local context. However, they need to pursue further knowledge about the fundamentals of food tourism, to be better equipped to promote local development through food tourism.

## **The dialogue with local stakeholders as a means for knowledge acquisition**

Most respondents said they developed their knowledge about the territory and local food traditions through direct connection with local stakeholders. Through meetings and farm visits, they gained awareness of the context in which people work, the issues they face, the way they try to market themselves, and the processes implemented to create quality products, whether they were small family-owned firms or SMEs that also worked as “ambassadors” of area. One of the respondents said that he understood why local people were passionate about and proud of their traditions and felt they should express these sentiments in their promotional activities.

Students also highlighted how this experience supported them in acquiring knowledge about the local socio-cultural structure and networking:

It was a great experience to meet the stakeholders; it helped us understand how the tourism industry works, especially throughout the territory. It gave me a clear picture of the practical network of the significant stakeholders.

## **Experiential learning as a means for knowledge acquisition**

The acquisition of knowledge about the territory and local food traditions was also related to the learning methods proposed during the ISC, such as experiential learning and problem-based learning, including field visits, cooking lessons, workshops, and teamwork activities.

Seminars were helpful, but experiential learning activities appeared to be more effective in the students’ learning, as they provided first-hand experiences involving all the participants’ senses, as indicated in these observations:

[...] talking to producers, taking part in cooking classes and tasting the delicious local cuisine got me to live Le Marche region as I could have never done otherwise...;

Apparently, the best way to learn something is to experience it, see, touch and taste it. It’s a much more effective way of learning than reading theory, so ISC gave me a very profound and practical insight about local food and wine culture and cooking and sharing food traditions.

## **Seminars as a means for learning about food tourism and developing soft skills**

Respondents indicated that the seminars held by international professors helped them gain technical knowledge about place branding and food tourism. Just like a puzzle, some said, this kind of activity provided all the pieces to have a complete overview of the food tourism topic related to the territory investigated. In their opinion, the main competition was a useful way to build upon the theoretical foundation through a hands-on approach; they also valued the aspect of working in teams to develop a real case study for the local area. Marketing, the use of social media as a promotional tool, and gastronomy as a brand and a tourism driver were considered the most interesting topics.

Yes, the Place Branding, Cultural Heritage Management courses and the International Seminars gave me a quite comprehensive overview of what a tourist product should be. It was certainly useful because it helped me gain a new perspective and made me learn about innovative and unusual approaches, mainly presented during the seminars that week.

Students felt that they improved their ability to listen as well as their skills in public speaking during the seminars. Some of them appreciated the technical knowledge gained and the food tourism-related terminology learned throughout the event, which they could later use in their final presentations. The seminar about the use of social media for promotional aims was particularly appreciated. It helped hone the participants' communication skills in terms of effective and professional communication.

## **Networking as a means for soft skills acquisition**

During the week, the students had the opportunity for networking with local stakeholders, their team members, the other participants, and their professors. They perceived to have gained several soft skills, especially through the dialogue with local stakeholders and through teamwork. An overview of these skills is provided in Table 4.

**Table 4.** The role of networking for soft-skills development

NETWORKING WITH LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS		NETWORKING THROUGH TEAMWORKING	
Perceived skill acquisition		Perceived skill acquisition	
Communication skills	Related quotes	Problem analysis/ Decision-making process	Related quotes
interpersonal communication	<p>“Sure, it gave us a practical insight into the real life and problems faced by entrepreneurs; how the situation could be improved. It helped us understand the roots of those problems and gain an overall impression of the SMEs’ activity in the region, their advantages and what they lack.”</p> <p>“We learned the inner workings of the private and public stakeholders that helped us analyse them in the most practical way. It can absolutely be adapted to a similar territory; ideas and situations were learned, and the positive points can definitely be shared and developed.”</p>	brain-storming	<p>“It’s an adventure: you have to match the need to find something meaningful for your final work and meet the deadline at the same time. Brain-storming happens very fast.”</p> <p>“It allows you to have direct contact with reality. It opens your mind because it gives you the opportunity to work in a multicultural context with people who have different backgrounds and compare your approach to the same experience with that of others. It is an opportunity to work on real case studies with a multidisciplinary knowledge you need to apply to the context. It’s useful, from a future career point of view, thanks to the contact with several stakeholders and to the international and multicultural context in which participants are involved.”</p>
effective listening		sharing of ideas	
technical language development		problem-solving	
communication in English		collaborative and supportive approach	
public speaking		work in a multicultural context	
<b>Problem-solving/ Decision-making skills</b>		<b>Working under pressure and to meet a deadline</b>	
analysis of real issues affecting the territory		Need for more time to work on the assignment	
proposal of suitable solutions			

## Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that educational tourism experiences based on experiential learning and problem-based learning approaches (Dewey; Boydell; Kolb; Vygotsky; Paris) enable students to gain employability skills, business knowledge and work experience (Shah et al.). During the ISC, students learned about critical approaches and the reflexivity useful in the tourism industry, through the application of problem-based learning (García-Rosell). In line with Stone and Petrick, the ISC can be therefore defined as a short study-abroad programme as well as an educational touristic experience. Students had opportunities for personal and professional growth through travel, experience, learning about the gastronomic culture of the Fermo area and its efforts to promote food tourism, and also enhanced their fluency in English, the official language of the event.

With regard to employability, students perceived to have gained:

1. Understanding of the territory: the dialogue with local stakeholders and the experiential learning activities offered students an overview of the socio-cultural and economic processes regulating the territory. Local networks embody local managerial and political knowledge and play a role in providing quality and coherence to the services and products offered (Bertella). These experiences may help students to start working at a local level for local development and place branding by identifying challenges and needs and by finding innovative and feasible solutions. However, they also acknowledged they might need to improve their knowledge about place branding and food tourism management.
2. Practical knowledge about local food, place branding and food tourism: according to Bertella, food-related knowledge is one of the most important assets to promote and give value to a destination, and food tourism is a key element for destination development, local promotion and the valorisation of local resources. Technical knowledge about place branding and food tourism is essential to regional development in the food and tourism area, according to Hall et al. One of the main characteristics of the ISC is to link theoretical knowledge about place branding and food tourism to the practical experience gained through the experiential learning activities proposed. Participants gained practical insight into the field by attending seminars, visiting farms, sharing information with local stakeholders, and taking part in cooking classes and tasting sessions. This was also highlighted by the students during the conversations with the authors. During the presentations of the final projects on the last day of the competition, the authors observed that the teams of students applied the knowledge acquired to a suitable proposal for the firms involved through the use of the tools provided (business model canvas).
3. Soft skills for employability. Students gave particular importance to the following soft skills:



- a) communication skills; the students noted that during the ISC experience, they improved their skills in listening and speaking effectively, formulating good questions and communicating appropriately and professionally using social media. In particular, all week the students communicated and interacted with people to whom they may not usually relate, such as students and professors from other countries, local farmers and business people, and government functionaries, for example. Similarly, the teams presented their final project to a heterogeneous audience.
- b) problem-solving and decision-making skills: the dialogue with local stakeholders and the brainstorming with the other members of the team helped the students develop some of the abilities involved in decision-making (Crawford), namely, identifying and analysing problems; transferring knowledge from one situation to another; proposing creative and innovative solutions; taking effective and appropriate action; and assessing the effect of a solution. The multicultural context of the mixed teams contributed to the development of several points of view useful for interpreting different situations and increasing the shared knowledge. Furthermore, all respondents said that it was possible to adapt the solutions they found to other contexts by applying several tools presented during the ISC. The problem-based learning approach showed them specific issues affecting the Fermo area. Rural areas often share similar problems and need similar solutions, which nonetheless need to be adjusted to each case.
- c) self-management and teamwork skills: students noted that working well under pressure (self-management) was a challenge but also a limitation and felt they would have benefitted from more time to do the final project (Crawford et al.). Self-management also has to do with efficient and effective work habits and a sense of urgency to complete tasks. These aspects had to be extended to the whole team, as the competition was based on teamwork. Regarding the characteristics of teamwork skills (Crawford et al.), students particularly highlighted their positive and encouraging attitudes and their productive approaches as well as the sensitivity to diversity, as the teams were multicultural.

Even if the respondents did not explicitly name them, some other skills related to the experience (Crawford et al.) emerged from the interviews: project management experiences; cross-disciplinary experiences; community engagement experiences; international experiences. Similarly, students highlighted some of the leadership and professionalism skills outlined by the author. During the teamwork activity they practised skills related to respect for others and acknowledgement of their contributions, as well as dealing constructively with conflicts, a key aspect of leadership. The authors present at the event observed that student networking with local stakeholders and professors led to effective relationships with “customers, business and the public.” Similarly, students practised behaviour appropriate

to the settings, accepted advice, gained greater understanding of their own role and refined their career expectations to be more realistic, all of which are professionalism skills.

While the ISC seems to have contributed to the students' knowledge and soft skills development, the findings showed the need for follow-up activities that can bring together local stakeholders and students in order to expand the knowledge and experience gained during the ISC.

## Conclusions

This study explored how and to what extent food-related educational events may contribute to providing students with the knowledge, expertise and soft skills needed for employability in the food tourism careers. It focused on student experiences at the week-long ISC event, arranged by the University of Macerata (Italy), an educational programme that facilitated the co-creation of food tourism knowledge by bringing together local stakeholders and students. Students worked at a local level to accomplish their competition assignment and learn about the reality of the Fermo area, gaining an understanding of the context in which they would have to intervene. They perceived to have developed useful skills and knowledge for employability through their work on real cases in a multicultural context. Locals benefitted from the students' competition projects, which offered creative contributions for promotional activities and place branding that could be implemented to promote tourism in the area.

Having participated in all the planned activities, the students felt they had gained a general understanding of the territory and practical knowledge about place branding and food tourism; in addition, they thought they had improved their soft skills in communication, problem-solving and decision-making, all of which are useful for enhancing their employability. They valued the opportunity to exchange knowledge, share ideas and work in a multicultural environment. All these learning outcomes can be adapted to other situations and can be useful in the workplace.

On the basis of student questionnaires and interviews, as well as conversations with local stakeholders, it emerged that the ISC event offers students a good opportunity to gain sector-related knowledge and skills. More in general, this kind of event linking academics and local stakeholders, education and tourism, and experiential and formal learning has potential for both students and people working for local development.

Even so, a need was noted for further follow-up events, to provide more experience and theoretical knowledge. More opportunities could be created to work at the local level, strengthening the connection between students and local

stakeholders, perhaps through internships and students-led initiatives at the local level.

Some limitations also emerged from the study. First, the interviews were conducted only with 13 University of Macerata students of the 2017 ISC. Further research including the students from the other universities abroad could provide a broader perspective. Moreover, while the authors gleaned interesting input from the stakeholders during informal conversations, future, more structured work to encompass their perspective could prove useful. Finally, further research could be conducted to assess what or how much the local stakeholders learned, and whether the ISC provides a beneficial setting for knowledge exchange that can foster successful place branding and enhance the development of local food tourism.

## Conflict of interest statement

Even though three of the authors work for one of the institutions that manages the event presented in this case study (one University of Macerata professors and two UNIMC doctoral students), they declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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