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## **NETOUR: A EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR EXCELLENCE IN TOURISM THROUGH ORGANIZATIONS AND UNIVERSITIES IN RUSSIA.**

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***Abstract***

*Russia is one of the fastest growing tourism markets (+8% growth in 2011) with many resources that are yet untapped. This paper presents NETOUR, a project of European and Russian universities that aims at boosting Russia's competitiveness as a tourism destination. The purpose of this project, funded by the European Commission through a TEMPUS grant, is to propose a model for cooperation between universities and the main stakeholders in the tourism sector, in order to favour its sustainable development. Following a situation analysis of tourism in Russia, both from a supply and demand side, the researchers conduct an analysis of the gaps that exist between what Russian universities propose in tourism management education and what tourism professionals expect from higher education training and the competences they need to succeed. The results lead to university curriculum revisions on the one hand, and continuing education proposals on the other hand. The pillars that support NETOUR are: (1) Knowledge transference between Universities and society: facilitating the adoption of innovations by tourism firms, as well as reinforcing students' employability; (2) Lifelong learning: identifying tourism professionals' knowledge, updating needs, and proposing specialized training according to their requests; (3) Open dialogue between the various stakeholders in the sector (i.e., policy makers, entrepreneurs, local population, alumni, students, professors,*

*professional associations, etc.); (4) Design of new tourism management curricula according to the real educational needs of the sector. This ambitious three-year project should yield benefits for all tourism sector stakeholders and lead to improving the competitiveness of Russia as a tourism destination.*

**Keywords: tourism, competitiveness, network, higher education**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The network for excellence in tourism through organizations and universities in Russia (NETOUR) is a TEMPUS project aimed at fostering positive sustainable change in Russian universities involved in teaching and research in the area of tourism management as a key activity for social and economic development. TEMPUS is a European Union programme that supports the modernisation of higher education in the area surrounding the EU. This programme promotes institutional cooperation that involves the European Union and partner countries and focuses on the reform and modernisation of higher education systems in the partner countries of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean region. TEMPUS provides support to consortia of institutions composed of universities, university associations and other stakeholders, such as organizations and public institutions that should be useful in achieving the objectives set by the consortia (EACEA, 2013). Specifically, the programme looks forward to fulfil the following objectives: To enhance the quality and relevance of higher education in the partner countries; to build up the capacity of higher education institutions in the partner countries and the EU, in particular for international cooperation and for a permanent modernisation process, and to assist them in opening themselves up to society at large; to foster the reciprocal development of human resources; to enhance networking among higher education institutions and research institutions across the partner countries and EU Member States; and to enhance mutual understanding between peoples and cultures of the EU and of the partner countries.

In the case of the NETOUR consortium, it brings together under the University of Extremadura's leadership 15 recognized European and Russian institutions, such as SKEMA Business School (France), the French Institute for Tourism (IFT), Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom), the Dublin Institute of Technology (Ireland) or the University of Lapland (Finland). Other Spanish universities involved in the project are the Polytechnic University of Cartagena and the University of Jaen. On the Russian side, the Russian State University of Tourism and Services in Moscow, the St. Petersburg Interregional Resource Center, St. Petersburg State Polytechnic University, St Petersburg State

University of Service and Economics, Volga State University of Technology, the Natural Park of Chavash Varmane in Mari El Republic, Sochi State University for Tourism and Recreation, and Kuban State University of Physical Education, Sport and Tourism are partners in this Project as well.

Figure 1. NETOUR consortium representatives during the kickoff meeting in Spain, February 2013.



*Source: www.netour.eu*

NETOUR was designed upon the idea that tourism serves society in contributing to its prosperity and well-being, increasing standards of living, generating wealth for the territory (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer et al., 2004; Mazanec & Ring, 2011; Dimanche & Andrades, 2012) and in promoting a region or country, enhancing its image and even favouring its exports (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Elliot, 2011). Certainly, tourism's economic significance is now well recognized for less developed countries (e.g., Thailand, Tunisia, or Caribbean island states), as well as for developed countries (e.g., France, Spain, Canada or the USA). Both the World Travel and Tourism Council and the United Nations World Tourism Organization publish reports highlighting the economic significance of tourism, its continued growth over the past decades, and prospects for overall ongoing future growth. In the case of Russia, the "Targeted Programme Development of Incoming and Domestic Tourism in the Russian Federation, 2011-2018," approved by the Government of the Russian Federation, Order N644 2/8/2011, defines Tourism as a strategic sector, a priority for the socioeconomic development of the country. It is aimed at fostering Russian competitiveness as a tourism destination.

Tourism Destination Competitiveness (TDC) has been a topic of interest for many policy makers and tourism researchers around the world over the past two decades. Nonetheless, as more countries / destinations emerge on the map

and attempt to boost tourism, the competition for international visitors and their dollars/euros is increasing. As a result, destinations engage in increasingly sophisticated management and marketing strategies to become more competitive and all academic researchers tend to agree about the strategic importance of destination competitiveness (Dimanche & Andrades, 2012), if a destination wants tourism to be a major avenue for development.

Addressing this fact and Russian priorities in the field, the resolution of NETOUR is to work with Russian universities, institutions and businesses in order to develop and sustain the tourism sector in Russia, and ultimately to enhance its competitiveness. To achieve this goal the role of university networks becomes crucial. The project was designed with a 3-year horizon, October 2012 - October 2015, although it has been conceived to last beyond the project implementation period.

With a very competitive TEMPUS funding scheme, only 8 of the 200 proposals targeting Russia as a partner country were awarded. It can be suggested that the sustainable development model which inspired NETOUR has been validated by the European experts who assessed the proposal together with the representatives of Russia's governing bodies. This is why we believe in the usefulness of presenting the NETOUR development model to the academic community, even at an early time when there are only intermediary results available.

In the next section, NETOUR's rationale and main objectives are described. After that, its methodology, defined to boost a sustainable change in Russian tourism sector, is presented in section two. Finally, interim conclusions about the experience derived from NETOUR implementation are presented, mainly concerning the coordination and management of the consortium, as well as the international cooperation, which is essential to afford successfully the challenges addressed by NETOUR.

### **1.1. The rationale for NETOUR and its objectives.**

NETOUR is an initiative that arises from the firm belief that the sustainable tourism development of a country, encouraged by universities, can foster significant social, economic, and environmental benefits to that country. NETOUR authors believe that a well planned and sustainably managed tourism development in Russia, a country with a growing economy but with tangible social problems, could lead to further growth, and would contribute to impose Russia's international image through democratic values and its existing resources: History, heritage, nature, culture, etc. However, even as it may seem impossible for tourism to revitalise directly or indirectly an economy and a society, it has to be emphasized that tourism remains a strategic sector because of the many impacts it has on a country. It is of such significance that, as it was already mentioned, the Russian Federation (Order 644 of the Government, August 2,

2011) defines it as a strategic sector in its “Targeted Programme Development of Incoming and Domestic Tourism in the Russian Federation (2011-2018).”

Furthermore, universities are institutions where knowledge is created, managed, and disseminated; it is where the human resources who lead a country are trained and developed. University-level students are those people upon which the future of society depends.

NETOUR works with the following two premises: First, the relevance of tourism as a socio-economic development driving force and, second, the role of universities as stakeholders of social progress through knowledge. Subsequently, NETOUR aims at promoting social development in Russia with universities and through the tourism sector. To attain this goal, and based on the consortium partners’ tourism expertise, the project started with analysing the current situation of the tourism sector, both at higher education and professional levels. It aims at developing specific actions to promote significant and sustainable changes to be led by universities in the Russian tourism sector.

As society needs flexibility to adapt to on-going change, it needs knowledge-updating processes and new skill acquisitions to allow people to be effective actors of their environment. Consequently, universities must educate and also have a social mission and responsibility: They should meet the demands of the labour market. Thus, the universities’ capacity to propose education and training suitable to the needs of the labour market becomes a cornerstone for the welfare of a country. This is where NETOUR provides its main contribution. More specifically, the general objectives pursued by NETOUR may be described as follows:

1. To diagnose Russian university curricula in the fields of tourism management, as an engine of progress and development, in order to identify weaknesses and strengths.
2. To implement revised curricula under the principles of the EHEA, the EU Strategy 2020, focused on market and industry needs.
3. To improve skills and therefore, the employability of Russian tourism students.
4. To enhance dialogue between universities and companies that will ensure continuous curriculum and human resources updating.
5. To increase the level of commitment of Russian governing bodies to ensure the implementation of changes beyond the project’s timeline.
6. To build up stable education and academic networks between EU leading Institutions in the fields of tourism management and Russian institutions that have potential influence on their geographic area, therefore creating a multiplying effect.

Thus, NETOUR aims at offering guidelines to improve tourism management syllabi in Russian universities. These syllabi are intended to favour interaction among university students and tourism companies and to further promote employability and to show to businesses how university graduates can help increase their competitiveness.

In order for tourism management syllabi to be efficient and to provide competitive advantages to businesses for hiring university graduates, they must include innovations in the field. Therefore, the syllabi will offer real advantages and add differential elements to the students' professional skills. Moreover, NETOUR was designed to favour innovation and knowledge transfer between universities, tourism firms and tourism policy makers. Suitably, the knowledge generated by research projects conducted by European members of the NETOUR consortium is to be used in order to update curriculum contents for students through seminars and for business people, promoting the development of lifelong learning in society at large.

In addition, NETOUR addresses the necessity of involving policy-makers in planning every curricular reform. This is due to the fact that reforms have a position in the social, economic, and legal contexts. This situation establishes the framework in which tourist businesses operate and determines the training needs that should be met by universities. Thus, NETOUR plans to channel with the universities the dialogue between policy makers and business people. The intention is to provide policy makers with training courses that enable them learn about the tourism sector and its problems in depth. As a result, they will be able to formulate laws responding to the reality of tourism issues or to university educational matters in tourism.

Finally, NETOUR bets on better preparing students so that they will be able to improve the sector and as a result have an impact on society as a whole. So, it plans to put forward a real and effective curricular reform that will contribute to Russian society. It proposes the following: to analyse in order to understand, to design in order to execute, to learn by executing, to reflect upon experience and to suggest the changes to be introduced to improve the sector. In the end, NETOUR's philosophy starts by working together with the Russian partners in order for them to lead the development of this model, and then to follow it in the future, extending its benefits to other Russian universities and to the country as a whole.

## **2. NETOUR METHODOLOGY**

Since the general purpose of NETOUR is to work with Russian universities and businesses to help improve (1) university products (curricula and student expertise), and therefore the employability of Russian tourism students, and (2) tourism organizations' efficiency through a qualified workforce, in order to develop and sustain the tourism sector in Russia, tourism professionals and

academics will work together to respond to the growing needs of the Russian tourism sector.

As already described, this ambitious objective has been approached through a number of specific objectives. To materialize them, a series of specific actions have been planned for the three years of the project horizon, and 21 deliverables –reports, handbooks, international conferences or a national data centre to monitor tourism in Russia- will be provided.

Two lines of action were defined to improve Russian university curricula. The first line of action, consisting of a review of the tourism curricula being currently delivered by Russian university partners, identifies their adequacy to EHEA standards and the principles of the Strategy 2020. The second consists in reviewing the relevance of the curricula delivered to industry and markets needs. For the first analysis, a checklist will be produced including specific standards promoted within the EHEA, in the course of the Bologna Process, and the Strategy 2020. The results of this study will allow the consortium to identify the weaknesses to be compensated. The second analysis is a more complex one, as it requires a previous detection of needs on the tourism sector. For this purpose, an analysis of the tourism sector in the areas of influence of the Russian partner universities (current demand and supply, main competitors at destination level) was planned. This analysis will be based on secondary information, plus additional data collected by Russian partners. Tourism sector analysis will focus on the three main tourism products considered as strategic for the Russian Federation: cultural, nature-based and business tourism. Additionally, the tourism sector analysis will be broadened with information gathered through tourism management alumni from Russian university partners. For this purpose, an online survey will be conducted to learn about their current position in the sector and in the companies they work for; their knowledge needs will also be assessed. Each Russian partner will develop 200 online interviews, among the last 10-year graduates, randomly selected. A sample of 20 interviews for each of the last 10-year graduated classes will be searched. This will produce a database containing data for 1200 alumni, 120 per year within the past decade. Alumni are involved in the detection of the sector needs because they can offer first-hand information on both the knowledge gained at college which has proven to be more useful, and the potential knowledge they consider they lack. Furthermore, this first contact with alumni will be used to develop a number of deliverables, which are planned to be offered during NETOUR implementation. Specifically, contacting university alumni during the project's first year will be used to develop a mentoring programme in the second year.

After curricular revision, which is being developed during the first year of the project, the specific NETOUR objectives aim at implementing several strategies to improve the present situation of tourism sector, as well as to foster a positive change and to increase international cooperation between universities for the long term, during the second and third year of the project implementation.

Additionally, in order to improve skills and, consequently, the employability of Russian tourism students, a number of actions will be developed which will enhance students theoretical education and practical skills. Thereby, concerning theory, updated teaching materials will be produced such a handbook about tourism management, which will include case studies with data gathered by students. Additionally, concerning training, NETOUR proposes a mentoring programme promoting links between former alumni and the university. That is a way of fostering the creation of university community where a university learns what is relevant from professionals who were their former students, while students return to the university to update their knowledge.

As a result of all the designed actions, NETOUR proposes an alternative university community model, in which the relation between alumni and university remains life-long to co-create joint value. So for instance, the mentoring programme within NETOUR goes beyond traditional internships, as in this case, student supervisors are not exclusively academic; furthermore, each fellow will have a mentor in the host company who will help throughout the internship. Mentors will be outstanding professionals in the field of tourism, picked among the alumni corps and recruited during the phase of diagnosis. Students' assignment will consist in analysing a problem, previously defined by the company, and elaborating a technical report on how to solve the deficit. Consequently, this programme is expected to improve college-industry relations and increase student skills and employability. On the other hand, continuous curriculum and human resources development is guaranteed under this university community model.

As part of the above-described actions, an updating course for tourism professionals is also been foreseen for the second year of the project horizon (meeting lifelong learning principles). This course will count on internationally renowned experts in the field of tourism who are members of the teaching boards of the universities participating in NETOUR. The course is also aiming at recognizing mentor contributions across the mentoring programme.

While NETOUR's broad objective is to improve curricula through exhaustive analysis based on reality and experience, the efforts might vanish after the project lifetime unless an institutional frame is established in which the proposed reforms find a future projection. In this sense, NETOUR is supported by the Russian State University of Tourism and Service (RSUTS), the main methodological centre of service and tourism curriculum design of the Russian Federation. RSUTS leads and unites over 460 educational institutions of the Russian Federation specializing in tourism and service training. Furthermore, NETOUR foresees future sustainability of the mission by attempting at increasing the level of commitment of Russian governing bodies; this will ensure implementation of changes beyond the project's lifetime. Therefore, NETOUR planned the organization of workshops where decision-makers in the fields of tourism and education, plus other stakeholders (tourism managers, both public and private, as well as tourism entrepreneurs, museum managers, natural park



managers, etc.) are invited, in order to enhance cooperation between university and society within the realm of tourism. The diagnosis carried out about the tourism situation from both academic and professional perspectives, will also be presented at these workshops.

Since NETOUR, as a consortium, will attempt to last beyond the project lifetime, a second broad objective of this project is to build up stable education and academic networks between EU leading institutions in tourism management and Russian institutions that have potential influence on their geographic area, therefore creating a multiplying effect. With this purpose, two main actions were planned: (1) Organizing an international conference in Sochi to reinforce networking within NETOUR and to open this network to other universities within the Russian territory and beyond. (2) Establishing a data centre to continue the data collection process initiated by NETOUR, about the tourism sector analysis, to help universities respond to society's changing needs. This data centre will be located in RSUTS, with branches in other partner universities, so collection data points are spread all over the project's action territory.

Last but not least, in order to achieve NETOUR's goals, an action plan was designed, involving all parties interested both in university product improvement (curricula and student expertise) and in the growth of tourism organizations' efficiency through a qualified workforce. This plan of action has been designed on the basis of a pedagogic philosophy agreed upon and shared by all NETOUR members. The underlying principle is that all people, be they teachers, students, entrepreneurs or policy makers, who are motivated for learning, are the basis for social progress.

NETOUR suggests a number of actions to awaken people's motivation for learning while offering training programmes so that target audiences, either academic, students, employers or decision makers, can gain the necessary skills to successfully face learning challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Furthermore, NETOUR expects to offer, on a regular basis, the necessary feedback for individuals to track their own progress while developing their tasks. In that way, motivation remains in the course of the learning process as learners feel rewarded by their own achievements and, accordingly, will be keen on repeating the experience of personal growth through learning. According to this approach, the question is how to challenge stakeholders to motivate their learning? NETOUR considers that in terms of motivating lifelong learning, there are two key aspects to take into account: contents and methodology. For this reason, NETOUR suggests to operate on tourism curricula to make them more challenging, and to produce a better learning experience for students. Concerning contents, practical utility and adequacy to the sector needs must be ensured, for which a previous diagnosis proves necessary. Moreover, contents should be original and innovative, capable to catch target audiences' attention and interest. This will be achieved by bringing University research closer to industry needs.

Finally, in terms of the processes intended to ensure quality, the pedagogical approach adopted is not confined to the purely academic project, but also affects the basis of the monitoring carried out by UEx during the project implementation. For UEx, the biggest challenge is coordinating a large group to work on diverse and interrelated tasks, so that the delay of a task-force would not endanger the rest of the team. To meet this contingency, a continuous monitoring of the evolution of the work teams, which will be reflected in a calendar that will be visible to all partners in the virtual workspace at [www.netour.eu](http://www.netour.eu), has been implemented. When a team is not meeting its objectives, the cause of the delay will be identified and the necessary assistance will be offered to get back on schedule. The assistance will consist in providing the necessary skills to carry out the potential tasks delaying the project, the necessary equipment to go forward, or, even the necessary qualified staff.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

As discussed throughout this paper, NETOUR is a complex and challenging project which promotes a university community model aimed at working with universities and institutions to ensure that universities serve society, providing a qualified labour source, adapted to the real needs of the tourism sector, and able to guarantee lifelong learning.

Since the project is still under way, final results cannot be presented yet. However, from the project's early phases, some practical issues or difficulties can be identified:

- Language barriers. Outside European Union borders, in the partner country, it may sometimes be difficult to find representatives of the various stakeholders who can speak English fluently.
- The need to deal with various legislations even within the European Union. Each institution has its own rules and often these rules and procedures do not match the legal framework established by TEMPUS. However, although this means extra work, the TEMPUS programme is quite flexible and can be adapted to the specific situation of any of the partners in the consortium.
- The difficulty of meeting deadlines when the work teams integrate many members from very different countries. This demands extra work to monitor very closely the teams' progress. Thereby, it is highly advisable to divide the tasks into smaller ones and spread the responsibility among the team members.

Despite difficulties, there is no doubt that NETOUR proposes an innovative and ambitious model to contribute to a country's economic and sustainable development through a particular sector, tourism. At the very least, it responds to the call of this conference to "stimulate discussions of ideas and models for competitiveness and sustainable development in a turbulent environment."

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