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The Erasmus Mundus Project Her.cul.es - Strengthening the attractiveness of European higher education in Heritage and Cultural Tourism. Activities and Results

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ABSTRACT

The opening presentation gives an overview of the project *Her.cul.es- Strengthening the attractiveness of European higher education in Heritage and Cultural Tourism*. It briefly describes its main objectives, the activities that were carried out during its two years of life and the main results achieved.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Education, Europe

Her.cul.es- Strengthening the attractiveness of European higher education in Heritage

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and Cultural Tourism is a project financed by the European Union under the Erasmus Mundus program, a cooperation and mobility program in the field of higher education that aims at promoting dialogue and cooperation between Europe and Third-Countries and at enhancing worldwide attractiveness, visibility and accessibility of European higher education.

More specifically, the main purpose of Her.cul.es project was to establish collaborative relationship between Europe and Maghreb and to promote European higher education in heritage and cultural tourism in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

The Maghreb countries have great potentials in the field of cultural tourism: they have some of the world's best-preserved ancient ruins, wonderful mosaics, fascinating medinas, a rich handicraft production and an appreciated culinary tradition. This area is also the part of Africa where the largest number of UNESCO World Heritage cultural sites is concentrated: 7 sites in Algeria and in Tunisia and 9 in Morocco. The Maghreb should, therefore, be a prime destination for international cultural tourists but, despite having so much to offer, it does not take full advantage of its potential.

A basic condition for this to happen is that the countries in this region have at their disposal qualified professionals, properly trained and who possess the necessary skills the many tasks that an effective and sustainable tourism management of cultural heritage requires.

For this very reason, the Her.cul.es project has set itself the goal of encouraging students of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco to integrate their first level university training by attending higher education courses not only in their own countries, but also in Europe.

Specifically, the project contribution has been the implementation and provision of information tools to make this choice easy and to help young people wishing to specialize in the field of tourism management of cultural heritage to orient themselves within the vast panorama of European university offer, supporting them in identifying courses best suited to their preferences and expectations.

The main task of the project was, therefore, an intensive activity of mapping and analysis of the post-graduated university courses on heritage and cultural tourism available in the four European countries involved in the project: France, Germany, Italy and United Kingdom. Information was gathered on the most relevant educational aspects and on the support services provided.

This remarkable job of collecting information has been the basis for the implementation of the two main outputs of the project: the *Student Guide* and the *Database*.

Both of them are user friendly consultation tools, available on-line, that contain detailed information on the higher education offer – Master degrees and Doctoral programs - present in the four European countries, giving a complete overview of the

training supply on the issues of cultural tourism and tourism management of cultural heritage. The information collected in the Guide and Database are those that most interest students wishing to specialize in universities and countries other than those where they have completed their first cycle of studies: educational/academic aspects, financial aspects (tuition fees, scholarships, accommodation and living costs) and the support services provided.

Another important aim of Her.cul.es project was to create opportunities for discussion and debate on the issues of heritage and cultural tourism among academics, scholars, tour operators from Europe and Maghreb. To achieve this goal, national conferences on issues of tourism management of cultural heritage were organized in the Maghreb countries with the joint participation of Europe and North African universities partner in the project.

The first conference, titled “Heritage and Cultural Tourism in Higher Education”, was organized in Sousse in Tunisia. During its three sessions many interesting topics have been addressed, from tourism management to natural and cultural heritage protection and valorisation, but a prevailing attention was given to the relationship between cultural tourism and higher education. Maghrebian and European university teachers and researchers have discussed, as a group, curricula design, on-line learning and research activities in the field of heritage tourism.

A second conference, titled “Knowledge Management applied to Cultural Heritage”, was organized in Morocco, in Fez. Its objective was to examine the status and trends in communications applied to cultural heritage, taking into account the improvements made possible by the Information Technology and Communication. The participants shared their thoughts and insights from a selection of case studies, exploring how and why communication strategies are essential for the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage.

The third and last public event in the Maghreb took place in Algeria, in Constantine. Since the city is going to be the Capital of Arab Culture in 2015, an operational seminar was organized in which aspects related to the organization and management of this important event were discussed and activities and initiatives aiming at enhancing the cultural heritage of the city were proposed.

The participation in two student’s fairs in Casablanca – Morocco – was another main project activity during which dissemination materials (brochures, newsletters) were distributed, and direct information on the project main outputs, the Guide and Database, were offered to students and other stakeholders visiting the exhibition stand of the project.

But the most successful activity of Her.cul.es project was definitely the realization of a “Summer Seminar on Tourism Management of World Heritage Cultural Sites”, that was held in Assisi – Italy - with the joint participation of the teachers and students of the universities included in the partnership.

The seminar, which was attended by 22 students from the partner countries involved in the project and from other countries outside Europe, was structured as a practical, hands-on study project on heritage tourism management in the world heritage sites and has used Assisi, a UNESCO site since 2000, as a significant "case study".

In the morning the students attended lectures given by professors and PhD students of the partner universities on various topics related to tourism at world heritage sites; in the afternoon they attended a workshop and were divided into four working groups who had the task of examining the reality of Assisi through fieldwork and interviews with local stakeholders. The results obtained during the workshop by the students were, then, presented in a plenary session at the end of the seminar.

The summer seminar was a very good and interesting experience that produced in a short a week, so long lasted the seminar, significant results and a strong involvement among students who participated in it.

Further details about Her.cul.es project and all its outputs (Student Guide and Database, Conferences Proceedings and Reports, Summer Seminar lectures and students workshop results, etc.) can be found and analysed in the project web-site: <http://www.herculesproject.eu/>.

Her.cul.es project has certainly been successful. The work carried out during two years of activities of the project has achieved important results: new and user-friendly tools for the dissemination of information about European higher education and fruitful exchanges of experience and knowledge on the issues of cultural tourism, setting the foundations for student mobility flows and for profitable and for lasting professional ties between most EU-institutions and partner institutions in the chosen Maghreb countries.