



ECONOMIA MARCHE Journal of Applied Economics

Vol. XXXIX, No. 2, December 2020

University's support to the European Cultural Routes and territorial development: An exploratory case study from the University of Macerata

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Abstract

The paper reports about an exploratory case study related to the role of universities in fostering synergies among local actors, for the creation of cultural tourism projects. The main objective of the study is to understand how the 'European Cultural Routes' program can be supported locally by university-business collaboration. To this aim, it is presented the case of the University of Macerata, and the related idea emerged, through multi-stakeholder engagement, to create a wine route project in the area of Le Marche region, where it is located. Conclusions highlight the important role of the universities in supporting the cultural routes initiative and in the whole territorial development.

JEL Classification: *L32, Z32, R58, M31*

Keywords: *Wine tourism, Cultural routes, Multi-stakeholder engagement, University-business collaboration*

Affiliations and acknowledgments

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Suggested citation

Ferrara, A. and Passarini, P., (2020), University's support to the European Cultural Routes and territorial development: an exploratory case study from the University of Macerata, XXXIX(2): 54-71.

1 Introduction

Since last century, cultural routes constitute one of the main trends of cultural tourism (Richards, 2011). They got the attention of different international institutions and, in particular, the one of the Council of Europe. The “European Cultural Routes” program, which especially aims at the development of less known and rural areas, fosters the creation of territorial projects based on collaborative networks among different resources and stakeholders (Berti, 2013). Universities and higher institutions have an active role in supporting researches but also in boosting local synergies for the creation of tourism projects (Khovanova-Rubicondo, 2011). This study explores the role that universities can have, through multi-stakeholder engagement, in the creation of sustainable tourism destinations (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2020). It reports about the University of Macerata, located in a rural area of Italy and the collaboration with the local cultural association Marchigianamente and local businesses to support a tourism project based on the peculiar characteristics of the wine in Le Marche region. Following this introduction, a literature review is provided. Then the methodology applied to assess this exploratory case study is explained. Findings of the case study are reported and discussed. Subsequently, conclusions highlight the role of the university in the whole regional territorial development, while supporting the “European Cultural Routes” initiative.

2 Cultural tourism and rural areas

Nowadays, travel and tourism (T&T) play a vital role for the global economy and generate considerable benefits for local communities (World Economic Forum, 2019): in 2018 alone, the travel and tourism industry has been one of the fastest-growing sectors, supplying around 9 billion dollars and creating about 300 million jobs all over the world (World Travel Tourism Council, 2019). In particular, cultural tourism has widely contributed to the growth of the entire sector (World Tourism Organization, 2018) by playing a peculiar role, especially in Europe (Richards, 1996) thanks to its incomparable cultural heritage (World Tourism Organization, 2018). The UNWTO defines cultural tourism as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination”. The “attractions/products” are the “material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society, encompassing arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions” (World Tourism Organization, 2018, p. 13). As a result of the intensified synergies that cultural tourism has with the culture in all its forms and meanings, this definition reflects the complex extent that it has nowadays (Richards, 2018). In this light, more democratic participation from local communities into their cultural heritage is fundamental (Council of Europe, 2005), to safeguard the natural and cultural environments (Rosenfeld, 2008), to create a harmonic community building (Zhang, 2009) and to provide tourists with authentic cultural products (Rosenfeld, 2008). In rural areas, food and wine productions are among the main tourist attractions, boosting local entrepreneurship and community-based initiatives (Bessière, 2001; Hjalager and Richards, 2003). Creating activities around food and wine can allow their social and economic development (World Tourism Organization, 2012; Hall *et al.*, 2000). When related to rural areas, the interconnections among different sectors become significative to achieve sustainable use of the heritage and to boost innovation capacity (Hall, 2005). Hence,

especially wine routes, are increasing the attention internationally: [Hall *et al.* \(2000\)](#) defines wine routes as designed signposted itineraries which connect vineyards and wineries to natural and cultural sites. Thus, wine routes are a means to link the wine industry with a broad range of other local stakeholders while improving wineries' competitiveness through fostering their networking ([Arfini *et al.*, 2002](#)). [Fuschi and Di Fabio \(2012\)](#) report that they are a “multi-dimensional tool” connecting the territory's ecological, agricultural, and tourism aspects. For their wider extent, they can turn into a tourism strategy for rural areas and boost regional development ([Gatti and Incerti, 1997](#)), where the collective action of local stakeholders gives coherence to the project ([Brunori and Rossi, 2000](#)) and its management ([Festa *et al.*, 2020](#)).

3 The role of cultural routes for cultural tourism development in rural areas

Understanding the benefits that cultural tourism can provide to territories, cultural routes constitute one of the main tourism trends ([Richards, 2011](#)). They are a “new and innovative concept of travel experience” ([Graf and Popesku, 2016, p.25](#)) that “thematically link together different attractions and interesting destination points in a country, or throughout various countries” ([Graf and Popesku, 2016, p.25](#)). For this reason, they become a means to distribute tourism flows and to invest in different destinations for more sustainable development ([Shishmanova, 2015](#)). For the different functions that they can have, cultural routes hold the attention of many international institutions, e.g., ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Nevertheless, the “European Cultural Routes” program launched by the Council of Europe in 1987 wants to make the European cultural heritage an invitation for tourists to discover the European common roots and identity. The program structure allows for constituting different thematics related to material and immaterial heritage, stimulating territorial projects based on collaborative networks among different resources and stakeholders ([Berti, 2013](#)). Nowadays, cultural heritage is not just considered as a product of the past. It has an active role in creating the present ([Graham and Howard, 2008](#)). In this perspective, the program aims to involve the broader civil society, from cultural associations to higher institutions ([CM/Res, 2013, 67](#)) in local projects' constitution. By giving rise to either physical or ideal paths, they simultaneously provide the growth of the well-developed destinations and the less-known ones. In fact, the program pays particular attention to the inclusiveness towards rural and run-down areas, which 'make up half of Europe and represent around 20% of the whole European population ([European Commission, 2020](#)). Here, one of the most recurrent activities concerns food and wine products and local traditions, representing an important part of the European identity for cultural routes. *Iter Vitis - Les Chemins de la Vigne* is an example of a cultural route which particularly enhances the wine production as a pillar of the European identity. It is aimed at safeguarding the wine biodiversity and the winemaking techniques, besides outlining the sustainability of the wine landscape in rural areas ([Dodd, 2020](#)).

4 The role of universities in cultural tourism development in rural areas

Nowadays, the role of the universities is essential to respond to the current challenges of globalisation, known that the availability of knowledge and skills is an asset to strengthen the regional competitiveness (OECD, 2007; Kwiek, 2012). Since the 1980s they became more engaged within the civil society by partnering their teaching and researching functions with a 'third mission' where they transfer and use the knowledge produced, by interacting with businesses and the whole society where they operate (Zomer and Benneworth, 2011; Molas-Gallart *et al.*, 2002). University-business collaboration shows that by engaging themselves into the challenges of the surrounding environment, universities can have a significant impact upon the whole economy and innovation in the region. Subsequent studies on the "triple" (Etzkowitz, 2008) and "quadruple helix" approaches (Ranga and Etzkowitz, 2013) highlight their active role for the whole territorial development by partnering governments, industries and the civil society. In rural areas, whose competitiveness particularly needs creativity and innovation (European Network for Rural Development, 2009), the engagement of the university with local stakeholders can have an important role in defining a clear image of the region, to use for future policies and initiatives (Cavicchi *et al.*, 2013).

4.1 University-business collaboration in tourism

Concerning to tourism, at the very beginning of the new millennium university-business cooperation seemed not to have particular relevance, considering that the tourism industry is characterised by SMEs, particularly reticent about innovation (Hjalager, 2002). Through their work, Molas-Gallart *et al.* (2002, p. 43) stress the importance to create broader social networking in "the communication and application of research ideas and results." So, especially when related to tourism, a collaborative approach among small and medium-sized enterprises is necessary. In this light, Rinaldi and Cavicchi (2016) underline the important role of universities in bringing small operators in multi-stakeholder networking, by creating partnerships between them and the general community. Through multi-stakeholder engagement universities can lead the specific needs of the territory and local actors to emerge, and co-create responsive suitable solutions for the whole territorial development. The studies provided by Rinaldi and Cavicchi (2016) show the different roles that the university can assume in this case: facilitator, innovator, revitaliser, director, and communicator. Studies provided by Hanna and Rowley (2015) highlight, in the same way, that the participation of multiple stakeholders can lead to the co-production of the brand identity of the place. This becomes fundamental for the co-creation of sustainable tourism destinations (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2020).

4.2 University-business collaboration in cultural routes

The 2015 UNWTO report on Cultural Routes stresses that creating a "cohesive small business involvement strategy, by establishing a strong partnership with different authorities and local stakeholders" is fundamental to "ensure more sustainable long-term economic and cultural benefits" in cultural routes (World Tourism Organization, 2015, p. 13). In the specific framework of the "European Cultural Routes", the program wants to "give rise to networks and activities which break down the barriers between professionals and non-professionals"

(CM/Res, 2013, 67). Here, universities and training institutions are one of the main actors involved in the initiatives. In fact, pieces of evidence from universities and higher institutions exist today about the research and didactic activities that they carry on the routes. Despite this, it is clear that universities have a much wider role in regional development through supporting local stakeholders. In this light, the 2011 report on “the impact of cultural routes on SMEs’ innovation and competitiveness” highlights the active role that they can have in local clusters by partnering cultural operators and local authorities, guiding the tourism process within a service-learning environment. However, very few studies are provided on their role in “raising awareness about the Cultural Route’s importance in the local setting, in supporting projects or in building synergies among SMEs and/or technology-driven universities” (Khovanova-Rubicondo, 2011, p. 60).

5 Methodology

This study aims to understand how university-business collaboration can occur in the creation of sustainable tourism projects in rural areas, supporting the “European Cultural Routes” program. To do so, an exploratory case study (Yin, 1994) is presented, by recalling to the contribution of the universities in the co-creation of sustainable tourism destinations (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2020) through multi-stakeholder engagement (Rinaldi and Cavicchi, 2016).

It concerns the University of Macerata, located in Le Marche region and the local cultural association *Marchigianamente* which has partnered the university in several activities over the years, by engaging local stakeholders and the community in a whole.

The action-research has been characterising the case study here presented, since the very beginning of the research design. It has been used in an initial phase because it gives reason to “the researcher’s motivation for choosing a given topic”, especially when author’s closeness to the phenomenon occurs (Santini and Cavicchi, 2014, p. 1148). In this case, the author has been personally investigating the cultural routes initiatives, by taking part to an internship at the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes in Luxembourg, which constitutes the moment where the research question has been formulated: *how to foster the local collaborations through a regional project connected to a European perspective?*

To assess the research, literature was explored on the role that university can have to this aim, in order to build a theoretical framework which guided the research itself.

Thereafter, data were collected from open-ended informal interviews with the cultural association. The interviews were aimed at understanding the nowadays characteristics and extent of the collaboration with local stakeholders, which then gave rise to the idea and features of the project. Thus, the action-research approach in this phase has been implemented because of representing the “interactive cycles of events of gathering data” allowing to subsequent analysis and planning actions (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2002, p. 223).

After providing some insights of the regional context of the research, the case study will be presented by recalling to the step-by-step succession of the events.

6 Case study context

The Italian region of Le Marche is located in the centre of the peninsula. Inland mountains and hilly areas predominantly characterise its territory. Especially inland, scattered and small-sized

urban centres define the whole territorial area, while big city-centres are very few. The economy of the region is mainly characterised by SMEs, which are widespread in the entire regional territory (OECD, 2011).

The study provided by OECD (2011), identifies a great potential of the wine tourism for the region. It stresses the attention on the fact that the suitable strategy for the competitiveness of the territory is to “leverage wine tourism into a broader regional effort, in order to sustain small-scale agricultural operations” while supporting other tourism operators, thus providing both economic and social development, while preserving and enhancing the rural landscape.

Even if no studies on wine tourism are directly provided on the region, researches by Fondazione Symbola in collaboration with Unioncamere (2014) highlight the potential of wines (table wines, sparkling wines and others) as one of the main creative-driven productions in the domain of creative industries. In this scenario, the ONIT (2018) reports that in past years Marche region has particularly interested international tourists for the food and wine gastronomy products which have encouraged the sales of packaged tours for a length of 8 to 10 days. It has to be said that wine production in Le Marche is vast, comprising 20 designations of origin, among D.O.C. (Terre di Offida, Rosso Piceno, Falerio, Pergola, Colli Pesaresi, Bianchello del Metauro, Verdicchio di Matelica, Serrapetrona, San Ginesio, I terreni di San Severino, Colli Maceratesi, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi, Rosso Conero, Lacrima di Morro d’Alba, Esino), D.O.C.G. (Offida, Vernaccia di Serrapetrona, Verdicchio di Matelica Riserva, Castelli di Jesi Verdicchio Riserva, Conero) and the IGT Marche (Città del Vino, 2020).

The University of Macerata and activities related to tourism, food and wine

The OECD (2011) report stresses the attention on the high role of the HEIs in the region in supporting the local development, and especially in sustaining the SMEs characterising the area.

In the regional context, the University of Macerata is the only HEI providing tourism courses. Rinaldi *et al.* (2018), report that, over the years, especially the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism has been organising a broad range of initiatives, particularly related to food and tourism, by promoting the dialogue among academics, local business and a wide range of other local stakeholders.

The starting point of the collaboration between the University of Macerata with the surrounding territory and local actors is particularly related to the implementation of two European projects running from 2017 to 2019:

- *The FOODBIZ - University and business learning for new employability paths for food and gastronomy.* The project was aimed at involving the academic and local community in dialogue with different entrepreneurs working in the local food and wine sectors, through learning activities.
- *The WINE LAB - Generating innovation between practice and research,* specifically had the aim to get closer the university and the local wine businesses for reasoning about the possible solutions to the problems of isolation and lack of opportunities, faced by local producers located in disadvantaged areas.

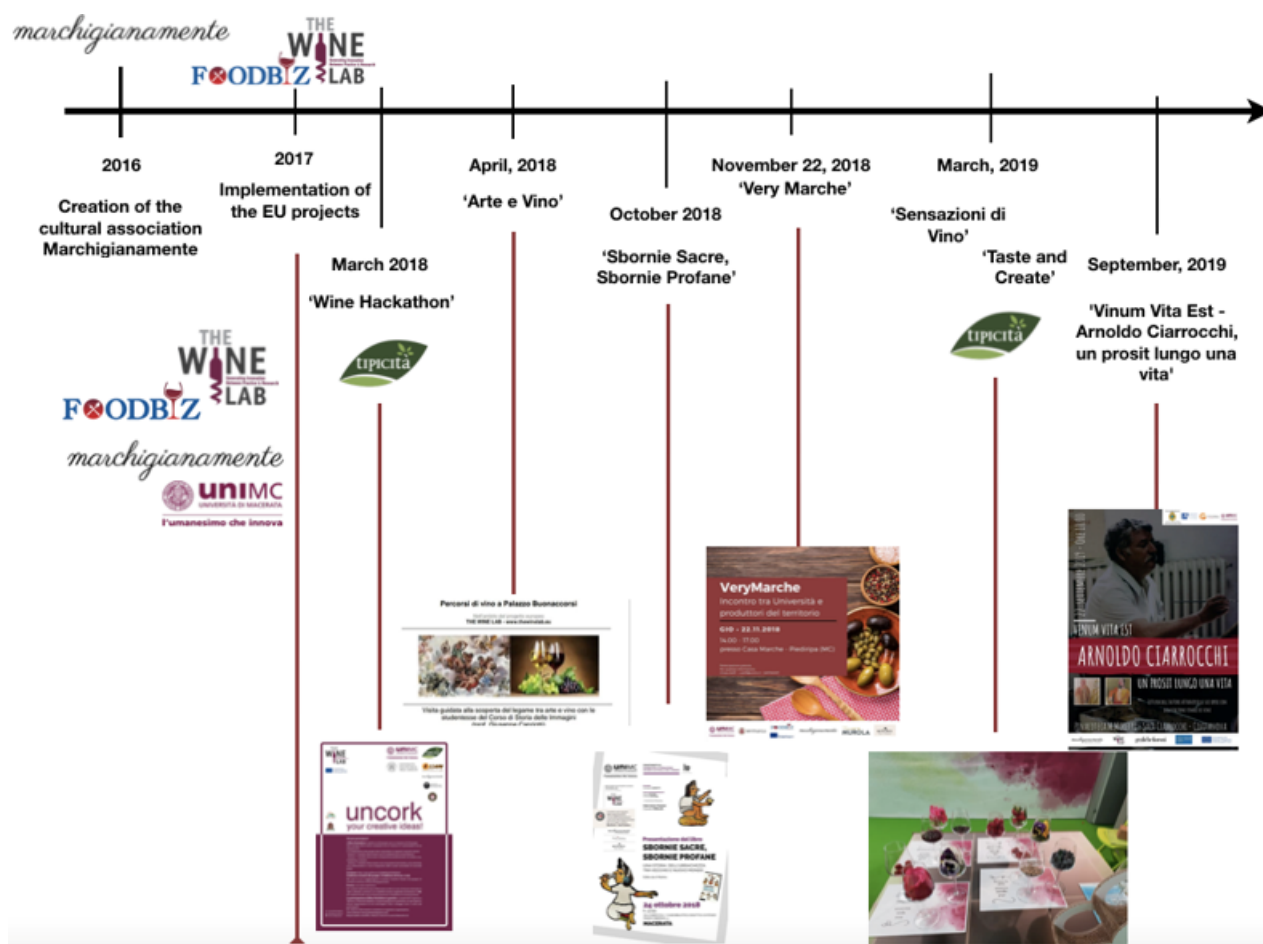
7 Case study findings

1st step of the research: The collaboration with Marchigianamente

In this scenario, of the main actors collaborating with the University of Macerata is the cultural association *Marchigianamente*. It has born from a group of local people sharing the enthusiasm for their homeland, by aiming at enhancing the local products and to promote the territory and all its peculiarities: the cultural heritage, the history, the art and the natural features. The cultural association was born in 2016, after the unfortunate earthquake events affecting the area for a quite long period, which arose the necessity of networking local business and stakeholders in the creation of activities aimed at sustaining the local economy. In this scenario, the cultural association wants to foster the participation of local producers into the activities related to the region, thus promoting the local cultural identity, by rising the local community's sense of belonging.

Figure 1 is a timeline representing the activities that have been implemented over the years, characterising the main steps of the collaboration between the University of Macerata and the cultural association:

Figure 1: Main steps of the collaboration between the University of Macerata and Marchigianamente



Thereafter, Table 1 gives an overview of details concerning the activities resulted from this collaboration:

Table 1: *Details of the activities resulted from the collaboration between the University of Macerata and Marchigianamente*

The important steps of the collaboration between the University of Macerata and the cultural association "Marchigianamente"				
Event	Date	Location	Scope	
(1) Wine Hackathon	March 2018	3/4, Regional "Tipicità"	fair	The main aim of the initiative was to support the sustainable development of the territory, by providing a deep understanding of the challenges faced by local operators and boosting a dialogue among the university, local businesses and public authorities in a Triple-Helix framework. The students, divided into different groups, have been asked to formulate an action plan to promote the territory, based on its gastronomy peculiarities.
(2) "Arte e vino"	April 27, 2018	Palazzo Buonaccorsi (Macerata)		The initiative is about a guided tour at Museo Buonaccorsi. During the event, some students of the course 'Management of the Cultural Heritage' analyzed the paintings exposed in the museums, by particularly exploring the link between art and wine. After the event, some local wineries provided a wine tasting.
(3) "Sbornie Sacre, Sbornie profane"	October 24, 2018	University library		The event took the name of the book 'Sbornie Sacre, Sbornie Profane', presented on this occasion. At the end of the event, a wine tasting has been provided by local wineries.
(4) "Very Marche"	November 22, 2018	Casa Marche (Macerata)		The event had the aim to bring closer the students with the cultural association and the network of wineries that has been constituting after the events of the earthquake. To this purpose, the event firstly held a lesson of "Economy and Agri-food Marketing", giving then space for a wine tasting provided by local wineries.
(5) "Sensazioni di Vino"	March 9, 2019			The participation at the regional fair brought the ideas of some students to provide visitors with an explanatory stand related to the sensory properties of the different regional wines.
(6) Workshop "Taste and Create"	March 10, 2019	Regional fair "Tipicità", held in city of Fermo		The aim was to propose some new marketing strategies to promote, after a wine tasting, the peculiarities of local wines. Results have then been communicated to local wineries participating in the initiative.
(7) "Vinum Vita Est - Arnoldo Ciarrocchi, un prosit lungo una vita"	September 22, 2019	Pinacoteca Moretti (Civitanova Marche)		The conference had the aim to present the works of the artist Arnoldo Ciarrocchi and to bring closer the local population with the cultural association and wineries who provided, at the end, a wine tasting.

Fonte: ISTAT

2nd step of the research: the University of Macerata meets the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe

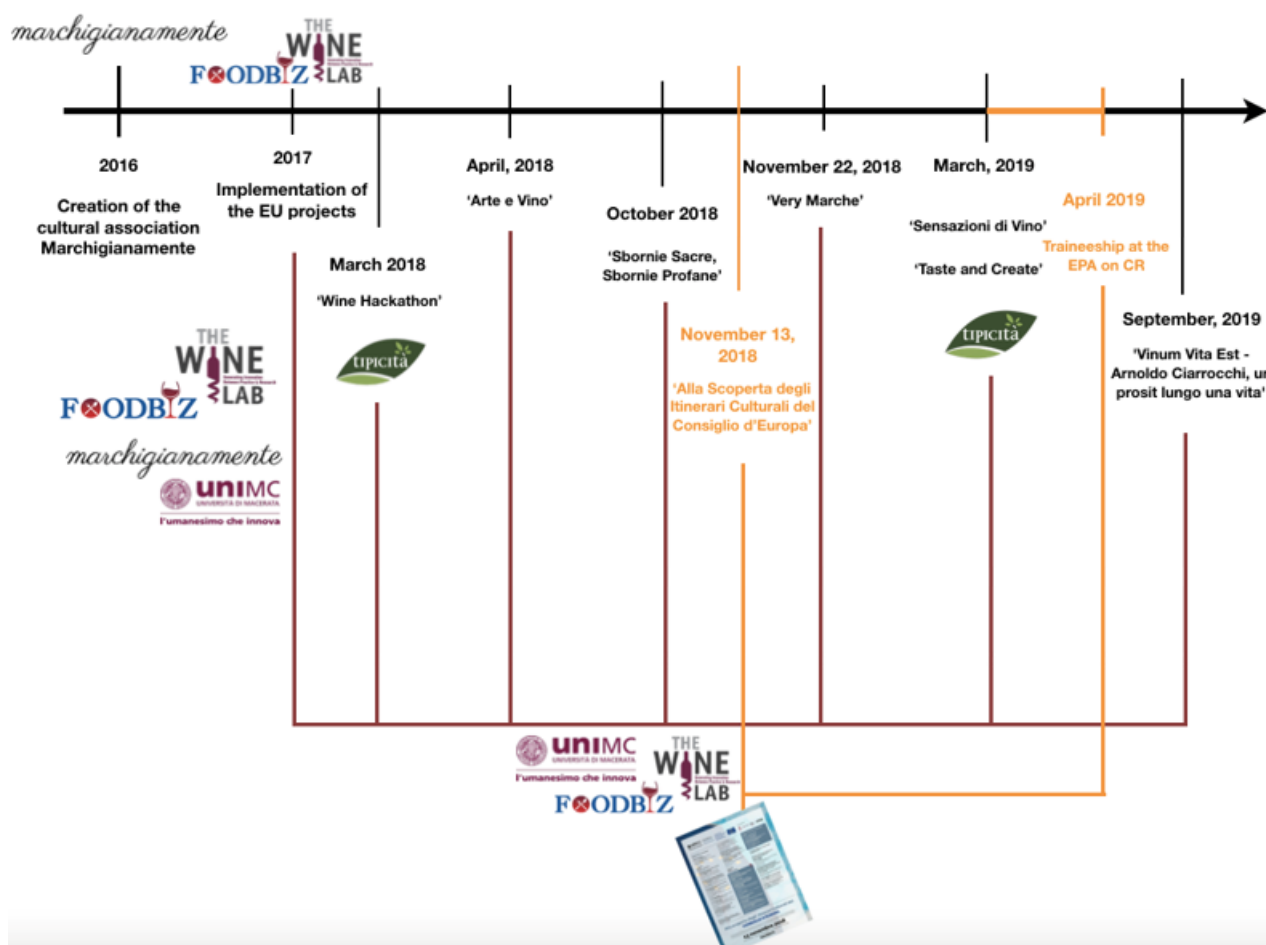
The second step of the research allows understanding the link between the University of Macerata and the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. On November 13th 2018, the University of Macerata hosted an event titled "Alla scoperta degli Itinerari Culturali del Consiglio d'Europa", to bring together the local public authorities and stakeholders as well as the academic world, with the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. The aim was to reflect upon the possibilities offered by the program for the development of the territories, and in particular about the possibilities of Le Marche region to enhance its cultural heritage through the program. The event hosted both the representatives of the Council of Europe bureau and some of the managers of the cultural routes projects. As a follow-up of the event, some studies have been undertaken in the light of future perspective for the region.

In particular, during March and April 2019, the personal experience of the author steps forward further researches, through an internship period at the headquarters of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes, in Luxembourg. Herein, among the then 33 cultural routes projects (which today increased the number to 38) particular attention to *Iter Vitis–Les Chemins de La Vigne* has been given.

In fact, the studies on the initiative showed the interest in the then participation from the Municipality of Matelica (in le Marche region) with its peculiar Verdicchio wine. Understanding the variety and the potential of the wine heritage and production of the region, the idea to create a broaden tourism project to connect the region to a European perspective has then born.

Figure 2 shows the further steps of the studies:

Figure 2: *Integration of the further steps related of the studies on cultural routes*



3rd step of the research: the dialogue with Marchigianamente and the idea of a regional tourism project

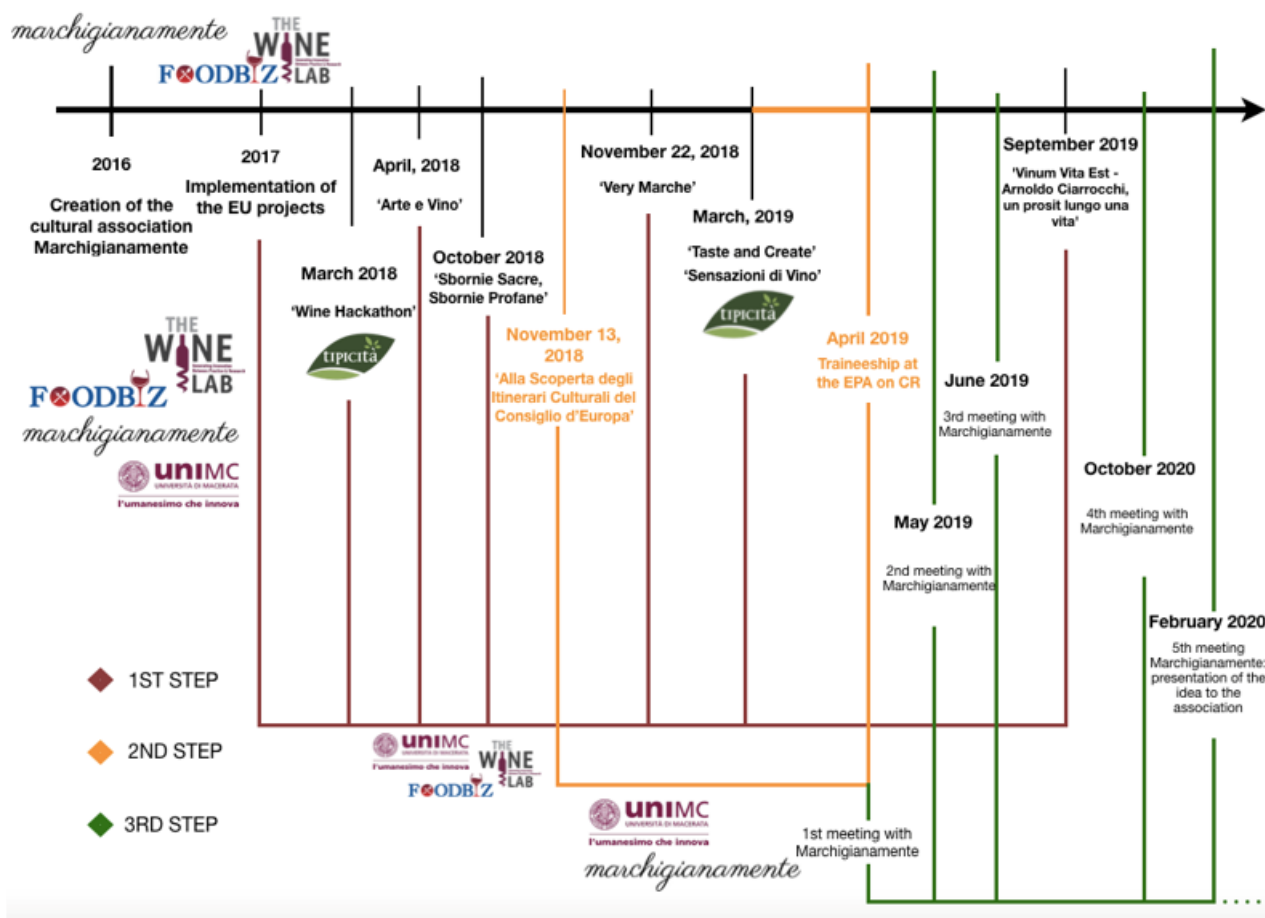
The main findings from the studies undertaken until that period, encouraged further dialogues with the cultural association, to understand to which extent the previous collaboration could lead the creation of territorial projects, involving small and medium-sized wineries and local stakeholders. In particular, the dialogue occurred with one exponent of the cultural association.

- The first meeting dates back to April 2019, through a Skype call. In this occasion, the conversation was mainly based on the exchange of information between the two parts: from her side, the interviewer firstly frames the context of the interview itself, by giving an overview on the current studies on Cultural Routes that was carrying on in that period. Thereafter, she presented the main results of the researches, by particularly stressing the attention on the existence of Iter Vitis and the possibility that this Cultural Route gives to rural territories, in terms of tourism and development. From his side, the interviewee provided an overview of the activities that the cultural association was currently organising, or that was planning for the near future. He particularly stressed the attention on the collaboration with local small and medium-sized wineries and the benefits that the previous activities (mainly addressed to the local community, thus impacting local tourism) brought for them and people taking part to the events. For the interviewer, this first meeting had the major aim to explore the interests of the association in tourism activities and projects. Nonetheless, the conversation was aimed at getting a hit on the interest of the association in supporting further and broader activities according to the studies on cultural routes. Results of the interview show that since the objectives of the cultural association are aimed at creating a cultural development of the region by enhancing its cultural heritage, the interest on broadening tourism activities based on wine has arisen, through which strongly networking local producers.
- A subsequent interview was held in the period of May 2019 through a call. The main aim was to explore the features of the environment where the cultural association operates and its main collaborations with local stakeholders. In this occasion, the interviewee firstly highlighted that in Le Marche region, high-quality wines (designation of origin) are widespread in all the provinces, each one with its own peculiarities, according to the features of the territory. The interviewee also focused the attention on the autochthonous vineyards in the region whose importance is nowadays being rediscovered. Afterwards, the interviewee also provided an overview of the extent of the collaboration with local stakeholders: the great majority of the collaboration with local small and medium-sized enterprises is related to the area of Macerata. This is mainly due to two reasons. One is because of the location of the cultural association. As a consequence, being the interpersonal relationships a major factor for the members of the cultural association, in the organisation of the events, the greatest involvement has been one of the wineries that have been already collaborating, over the years, with Marchigianamente. Nevertheless, even if less than the others, there are some occasions where the cultural association has been involving wineries from other provinces, according to the location and the impact of the event. Lastly, the interviewee highlights the extent of the collaboration to many other local stakeholders other than the wineries, who also play an important role in providing the necessary material/ infrastructure for the event setting.

- The third meeting was held in June 2019, once again through a call. By recalling to the previous information shared by the interviewee, the main focus of the interview was to understand how tourism activities could broaden the extent of the collaborations and to improve the cultural and economic impact on the territory. In this occasion, more than the others, the open-ended questions posed by the interviewer, lead the interviewee to come up with specific ideas concerning projects and/or activities that could be created. In particular, the main idea proposed was the creation of local, thematic itineraries which could connect the visit and wine tasting in local wineries with the surrounding cultural and natural environment. The aim is to foster the economy of local small and medium-sized wineries while enhancing the peculiar features of the landscape and lead the cultural heritage of the region to be better known. A particular focus was also provided on the possible consumers to whom address the offer (e.g. children and schools, wine lovers, and the whole local community).
- The next meeting dates back to October 2019. In this occasion, the meeting was personally held with the exponent of the cultural association, in collaboration with a member of the group of work of the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism, interested in following the initiative and the further steps. The main focus of the meeting was related to deeply understand the peculiarity of the regional wines in terms of historical importance. In this occasion, in fact, the interviewee stressed the attention on some studies provided by scholars on the winemaking techniques, thus promoted by the cultural association itself, to raise the awareness on the important cultural heritage of the region. These studies particularly show that the sparkling process has been implemented in the region since ancient times, accounting to the main pieces of evidence left by two illustrious medics:
 - Andrea Bacci (1524-1600), doctor and philosopher born in the province of Ascoli Piceno (specifically in the city of Sant’Elpido a Mare), in the south of the region. Appointed archiater by Pope Sixtus V, Andrea Bacci was the author of the majestic work titled “*De natural vinorum historia*” where he wrote about the importance of the sparkling wines. The work, considered nowadays as a guide on wines of that period, is divided into seven chapters informative, among others, of the winemaking and storage processes of wines and the peculiarities of the wines of the different Italian regions.
 - Born in Fabriano, a city in the province of Ancona, Francesco Scacchi (1577-1656) was a pioneer nutritionist. Lived in Fabriano where he was nominated Prior, he was the personal doctor of the Cardinal Ottavio Bandini (1558-1629). He wrote an interesting essay titled ‘*De salubrious potu dissertatio*’, then published in Rome in 1622. The main aim of this work was to explore the way of drinking and to recommend the wine good consumption. In particular, throughout the 21st chapter titled, Scacchi described the methods implemented to make the sparkling wines.
- The last meeting dates back to February 2020. At the beginning of the new year, it has been organised a meeting with the exponents of the cultural association to expose the idea of the wine tourism project (itineraries).

Figure 3 reports the steps of the meeting:

Figure 3: Representation of the meetings held with the cultural association Marchigianamente



8 Analysis and discussion: through the idea of a regional wine route on the “Bollicine di Marche”

The main findings provided by this case study highlight the interest in the creation of a regional wine route project which could encourage, in a comprehensive perspective, the three ecological, agricultural and tourism dimensions (Fuschi and Di Fabio, 2012). This idea recalls not only on the willingness to enhance the competitiveness of the small and medium-sized enterprises (Arfini et al., 2002) but also to boost the whole regional and cultural development through wine tourism (Hall and Mitchell, 2000), by creating a shared and long-term tourism perspective, in support to the local strategies (Gatti and Incerti, 1997; Brunori and Rossi, 2000; Festa et al., 2020).

In particular, the willingness to broaden the initiative to the regional context comes from the peculiarities of the different areas, highlighted during the interviews with the cultural association, where the implementation of thematic itineraries could connect local wineries to the surrounding cultural and natural environments (Hall et al., 2000). Wine, as cultural heritage, has a central role in the idea of the project: it is evident how a product of the past, can lead to the creation of the present and future paths (Graham and Howard, 2008), by

stimulating community-based initiatives (Bessièrè, 2001; Hjalager and Richards, 2003). The main idea of the project is to focus the attention on the sparkling wines of the region, besides of the other designations of origins, to emphasise not only the peculiarity of the products but also to bring to the wider audience the evidence left by Francesco Scacchi and Andrea Bacci. Thus, “Bollicine di Marche” (bubbling or sparkling Marche) is the name that currently refers to the project.

Results of the analysis show the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement (Rinaldi and Cavicchi, 2016). From this case study, it is evident the university's role of facilitator in creating a suitable environment to stimulating local tourism initiatives and projects, aimed at an inclusive territorial development. Equally important, is the role of communicator: certainly, the event hosted on November 2018 in Macerata was fundamental to raise awareness on local actors about the international opportunities given to cultural tourism and to stimulate, in this perspective, further academic studies. Nevertheless, it has to be said that, in this case, the multi-stakeholder engagement is strong of many previous collaborations occurred since 2017, thanks to the implementation of the two European projects.

Concerning the cultural association Marchigianamente in the initiative, it has a key role in providing a huge range of information about the features of the territory, the local wines and the peculiar history related to the cultural heritage. Thus, in this perspective, it can be considered a key stakeholder in the co-production of place branding identity of the region (Hanna and Rowley, 2015) and in the co-creation of a sustainable destination (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, by collaborating with a wide range of wineries and other stakeholders, it has a fundamental role in broadening the results of the researches coming from the academic world, thus strengthening the university-business collaboration in tourism.

9 Conclusions

Exploratory case studies provide multiple outcomes (Yin, 1994): the overarching aim was to understand how and to which extent the universities can support the European Cultural Routes, in developing cultural tourism initiatives at a local level. In particular, this study reports, how they can lead local actors to know and to properly understand the benefits of the initiative, by mediating between the European context and the local surrounding environment. Then, this contribution represents evidence not only of their consolidated role in producing researches but also in fostering synergies among SMEs and local stakeholders, stimulating ideas and projects (Khovanova-Rubicondo, 2011).

This study gives an insight on their active role in fostering stakeholder networking (Berti, 2013), and a harmonic community building (Zhang and Cheng, 2008) around the cultural heritage.

Through a tourism perspective, this study highlights their essential role in the engagement with civil society through their third mission (Zomer and Benneworth, 2011; Molas-Gallart *et al.*, 2002) to support the regional competitiveness (Kwiek, 2012) while co-creating, together with local stakeholders, sustainable tourism projects (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2020).

Considering that the project is in its initial phase, limitations of the research concern the impossibility to make a comprehensive analysis of it.

In this perspective, further studies could be provided in future about the development of the initiative and especially its management, considering the existence that, in Italy, wine routes are regulated by a particular law (L. n. 268, 1999). Moreover, the limitations of the

study are also referring to the very place-based features that the project has. Nevertheless, further studies could be provided on similar initiatives in other European regions to give other evidences on the support that universities can have for local development and the European initiative.

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