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Traditional Villages and Smart cities: Planning Rural Greece's Revival through Potential Erasmus+ Training Courses¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the potential of Greece to accommodate more training courses that could be funded by Erasmus+. Its limitation is that it suggests potential training courses mostly on the topics of preserving local culture and developing smart city technologies. Scarcity in Erasmus+ training courses and hosting cities highlights the need for a more creative approach to the subject. Traditional villages and smart-cities are located in the center of the creation of new training courses. This, in turn, would create job opportunities and help transmit knowledge from the hosts of the courses to the incoming trainees and vice-versa. A variety of training courses is proposed to take place in rural areas and attract specific categories of trainees.

Keywords: Erasmus+, rural Greece, smart cities, village revival.

Introduction

Greek rural population has been relying upon subsidizations from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and the European Agricultural Fund for rural development (EAFRD) for ages. The funding aims at developing sustainably the rural areas, supporting and advancing agricultural practices, such as farming, husbandry, forestry and beekeeping. Taking advantage of European and national funding, as well as engaging in programs such as “Leader”, has been the corner stone of rural development in Greece (European Commission, n.d.). But, what about utilizing other programs, which are not inherently relevant to rural development, such as Erasmus+?

Since Greece has participated in Erasmus in 1987, students in secondary and, especially, higher education have exploited the opportunities it creates to study abroad and explore new places and cultures. Erasmus+ funded vocational training, through one- or two-week programs, is becoming more and more popular to Greek students and youth in general. Greek trainees in Erasmus+ programs in 2019 and 2020 were 2,253 and 2,101 respectively (European Commission, 2020, 2021). The ever-growing role these programs play in younger generations' lives call for a more entertaining approach to the potential Greece has to offer in terms of training youth from countries across the European Union, through the creation of training courses, and for the examination of the potential benefits such programs would have in our local communities, should they be implemented.

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Problem Analysis

Although the statistical data show that the incoming trainees in Greece for 2019 and 2020 were 2,846 and 2,913, respectively, numbers larger than that of the outgoing trainees, the number of the cities that host these programs is meagre. The majority of training courses take place in Corfu and Athens (Erasmus+ in Greece, 2020). Kalamata, Thessaloniki, Crete, Nafpaktos, Nafplio and Patras follow with a small number of training courses per year. The absence of other Greek cities and small towns, bearing interesting culture, history or pioneering in technology, are missing from the map of Erasmus+ training courses. What Europe, and especially Greece, needs during the times its rural depopulation is taking place (Sanchez-Colomer, 2020; World Bank, 2022) is the engagement of its rural areas, people and knowledge in building a stronger Europe. Hosting Erasmus+ training courses in rural Greece would create new job opportunities, an answer to the above 14.2% unemployment rates in Greece (Eurostat, 2021), and space for further development through the transmission of knowledge. People need to, among others, train the trainees, organize, coordinate, manage the funding.

Moreover, the lack of diversity in the topics of the available courses, and those having already taken place, must be noted. The majority of them pertain mostly to train teachers, while the second most common subject these courses treat is that of sustainable development and environmental sensitization in general (Erasmus+ Greece, n.d.). As much important as these courses appear to be, taking into account the challenges new generations are facing due to the pandemic, globalization and climate change and their repercussions, namely digitalization of education, multiculturalism and extreme natural phenomena, people should not be unilaterally developed. Greece has a lot more to offer. An interesting and attractive variety of vocational courses is much needed, especially in rural Greece, where funding is attracted more by inherently agricultural activities (European Commission, n.d.).

More importantly, the value of Erasmus+ training courses should not be underrated. Their duration is limited to a number of certain days, making them not time-consuming, so that even hard-working employees could leave their hometowns for one or two weeks in order to attend training to enhance their work competence. Training courses appear as an opportunity for everyone, not just youth students and workers, in order to gain new skills, interact with different cultures and, thus, enhance their cultural competence. Besides, taking into account that Erasmus+ programs for universities or internships usually require certain qualifications, training courses emerge as the ideal option for people who are not eligible for other Erasmus+ programs. Producing more training courses would

boost mobility, and therefore tourism, and overall the external picture our country is showing, through cultural diplomacy (Kapsaskis, n.d.)

Suggestions

The scarcity in Erasmus+ training courses in Greece and the hosting cities can be of our advantage, should we exploit some of the available funding of €26.2 billion (European Commission, Erasmus+, 2021). Following, a short list of potential training courses in certain places in Greece, other than those already hosting training courses, is provided, in order to make a good understanding of its endless potential. As it is impossible to cover geographically all of the country, only some places and few of the courses they could offer are illustrated below.

Traditional Arts

Cyclades are well-known for their marbles. Bearing large quantities of white marble, these islands have developed an ancient tradition of marble-sculpting. Tinos, among others, flourished into an artistic island, in the 19th century, and contributes to Greek arts ever since (Sigalas, n.d.). In cooperation with local workshops, training courses in marble sculpting with the guidance of experienced artists and workers would provide the inhabitants of Tinos with a chance to share their work and knowledge, as well as the trainees with a unique experience to learn an art that is doomed to vanish if the younger generations do not delve into it and leave the island in the quest of employment elsewhere. Other islands in the Cyclades, such as Paros and Naxos, traditionally related to marble-sculpting, could offer such courses as well.

Arts are not only flourishing in the islands. In mainland Greece, arts are predominantly affiliated with wood. Karditsa's contribution to arts has been gradually augmenting, with the academic work implemented at the Department of Wood and Furniture Design and Technology. The Department is innovative in its domain and emphasizes creation in accordance to the environment, with respect to affordability and social acceptance and utility (Department of Wood and Furniture Design and Technology, n.d.). Such training courses would be addressed not only to artists, marble sculptors or wood and furniture designers, but also to those who wish to cultivate their artistic skills. Vocational training in arts and local culture would aid in the transmission of Greek culture abroad, therefore functioning as a cultural diplomacy tool (Kapsaskis, n.d.).

Smart city technologies and active citizenship

In the prefecture of Thessaly, other than Karditsa, Trikala's potential for training courses are quite transparent. Trikala is considered Greece's first smart-city (The Guardian, 2018), having developed smart technologies to facilitate everyday commute in the city and improve its citizens' quality of life. Citizens through a mobile phone application have access to data such as the availability of parking spaces in the city center and can communicate their complaints or requests to the city hall digitally (Trikala City Hall, n.d.). The status of traffic lights, road lights, water pipes, rubbish trucks and the environmental conditions, such as the air quality, are also monitored remotely (The Guardian, 2018). Training courses could be organized by Trikala's City Hall and cooperative organizations as well as entrepreneurs with emphasis on smart city technologies and digital innovation. Such programs would be addressed to city hall employees and people who wish to acquire smart-technologies related skills and enhance the implementation of digital technology and sustainable development Erasmus+ guidelines (Erasmus+ Greece, 2021).

Larisa is another smart city, in terms more of governance and citizens' participation, rather than in effective monitoring of its public services. The Municipality of Larisa has created a Board of the Youth. This initiative aims to familiarize young citizens, aged 17 to 30, with the decision-making process, include them in the designation of youth-related strategies and the organization of social events (Kolovou, n.d.). Active participation in one's community contributes in shaping a multidimensional personality and setting the ground for future development. Training courses on active participation in decision-making could be different than MUN models. They could educate trainees from the starting point, not require eloquence, skills in debating, but rather they could function as a workshop in which city counsellors share their own advice on public speaking and taking a part in the community's events, thus promoting the civic engagement and participation guidelines of Erasmus+ (Erasmus+ Greece, 2021).

Village revival

A small group of friends in Sparta, Peloponnese, are currently battling against the rural depopulation that has been taking place in the district. Five young people from the village of Vamvakou, in cooperation with Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), began in 2018 a project aiming at the revival of their village. Vamvakou Revival is a Social Cooperative Enterprise funded by SNF whose purpose is to attract new residents back to the village, through the creation of job opportunities, such as the opening of restaurants, cafes, small hotels. In order to increase the number of tourists in the area, Vamvakou Revival has been organizing weekend activities at the village's school, which hosts the

V.Lab (Vamvakou Technology Lab), and promoting its journey on social media (SNF, Vamvakou Revival, n.d.). This model could attract not only new residents and tourists, but also trainees, who would be taught how they could fund such projects, create new jobs as well as draw the interest of tourists and potential residents. Such a program could be the basis of the revival of other Greek and, further, European villages and small towns.

Conclusions

Bearing in mind that these suggestions for potential Erasmus+ training courses are just an inadequate representation of Greece's potential, one can only imagine the depth of our people's ability in creating programs that reflect on its traditions, skills, experience, but also cater to its needs and make space for further advancement. As teaching methods change so as to adapt to new challenges, that should be the case with Erasmus+ as well. European Union has provided us with a gift, that we sure take care of and cherish, but we should also look forward now not only in protecting the environment and success in business, but also protect the past, benefit from it and include it in training courses. The possibilities Erasmus+ offers must be exploited at people's own benefit: reviving rural Greece. Traditional villages and smart cities may be the new norm in the country, and should the Greek countryside become alive again, smart villages will not be a utopian dream, but a feasible plan, a future reality.

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