

THE WINE LAB

The wine sector is one of the key sectors of the European economy and is home to an increasing number of small businesses, some of them family-run and located in more disadvantaged regions. With its project, the Knowledge Alliance (KA) The Wine Lab aimed to broaden the socio-economic development of those regions. Alessio Cavicchi, professor at the University of Macerata (Marche region, Italy) and project coordinator, referring to one of the challenges faced during the project, says:

“At the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017, Central Italy was affected by several earthquakes that compromised the lives of many communities. Probably, this tragedy helped us to become even more committed to being engaged with local communities, their needs and desires”.

The Wine Lab sought to create close links between Universities in Agriculture, Oenology and related fields, and small local wineries to ensure closer relationships and greater knowledge flow. This enhanced collaboration and interaction, and brought students and researchers closer to the practices within the small wineries and the regional communities, as well as contributing to shared learning opportunities and innovative methods. The project was built on real interactions between higher education staff, students and researchers, and the practicing wineries. These interactions were further supported through the development of learning communities via local hubs.

TWL paved the way for a wider and closer collaboration of wineries across European regions, and between many producers and small or micro enterprises. The project provided an opportunity to explore learning and innovation at a local, regional, national and European level that benefited the industry and improved its resilience for the future. The mix of activities and stakeholders, including students, allowed both the wine and the tourism sector to introduce and incorporate new learning practices into their everyday experience.

The Wine Lab focused its action on the development of:

- Hubs and learning communities, involving wine producers, researchers, higher education students, public and private stakeholders in the wine sector
- Opportunities for higher education students to develop entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial mindsets
- Mechanisms for structured sharing of knowledge between research and business
- Innovative methods and tools to exploit knowledge at a regional level, and link regional to national and European levels
- New forms of cooperation between universities and enterprises to increase lifelong learning opportunities
- Review exercises to integrate hubs' knowledge into university curricula
- Policy debates through dialogue between regional hubs and decision-makers.

What are: Erasmus+ Knowledge Alliances?

This initiative of the European Commission supported (2014 – 2020) 158 international collaborations between partners from higher education institutions and businesses. Still, it is open to any sector and involves a wide range of stakeholders at all levels. These consortia bring their particular expertise together, amplifying innovation across their fields through collaboration, by developing new and multi-disciplinary teaching & learning approaches, providing entrepreneurial mindsets and relevant skills to participants, and stimulating knowledge exchange. The fields of action are broad and include current topics such as ICT, (green) economy and sustainable energy, education, life sciences, societal challenges, etc. In the end, the results of KAs strengthen Europe's innovation capacity in the form of novel curricula and study programs, open educational and e-learning resources, accelerators, hubs and start-ups, new products and prototypes.

A SUCCESSFUL MIX AND MATCH

The Wine Lab project brought together a transnational consortium from five EU countries (Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Cyprus), involving 12 experts, including academic institutions with related research activities and specialised centres in the wine sector, wineries in disadvantaged areas and business partners from the fields of communication, entrepreneurship, evaluation, and ICT solutions.

The work of the KA The Wine Lab was centred on the development of wine hubs in order to boost structured interactions between higher education institutions (HEIs) and producers, also with the involvement of students. The opportunity to connect, enhance knowledge and share expertise and experience between academics and practitioners had a very significant impact over both the short and long term. Students also benefited from the opportunity to develop skills requested by the market and useful links with businesses, as well as addressing the challenges faced by producers in different regions.

Another aspect that stands out is the learning mobility potential. Indeed, through the “wine weeks”, TWL brought hubs together in a transnational way and engaged students in learning processes, shared across the consortium.

The project has considerable potential for transferability within the wine sector and beyond, and this has already been used by one of the partners within the framework of supporting small food producers in another region of Italy. Despite the fact that the product is different, the process of interaction and sharing knowledge, as well as the promotion of interactions between academics, policy makers and wine-producers to support small businesses is very similar and compatible.

THE HERITAGE OF TWL: THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COMPETITION

The University of Macerata (Italy), the lead organisation, is now promoting an annual event known as the International Student Competition on “Place branding and the Mediterranean Diet” in the region of Marche. During this week, students engage with local entrepreneurs and work with them addressing specific tasks linked to the promotion of the area and its eno-gastronomic and cultural heritage.

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The competition is organised in collaboration with a local NGO, the Laboratorio Piceno della Dieta Mediterranea, as well as several municipalities, which offer their venues to the initiative. The competition comprises lectures with international speakers, study visits to firms, workshops and interviews with entrepreneurs and group-work. At the end of the programme, students are tasked with providing a proposal to both businesses and municipalities to address the challenges they have been assigned earlier in the week.

This initiative stands out as a collaboration of sectors, disciplines and contents, from both Humanistic and Scientific universities and the private sector. Furthermore, it connects students with the territorial identity, allowing them to develop a relevant set of skills.

For further information on the Alliance, please consult the following links:

The Wine Lab official website: <https://www.thewinelab.eu/en/>

The International Student Competition on Place branding and the Mediterranean Diet: <http://www.laboratoriodietamediterranea.it/it/international-student-competition-2019>

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DIRECT IMPRESSIONS - Q&As with The Wine Lab project coordinator Alessio Cavicchi (Professor at the University of Macerata, Marche region, Italy).

How (and in what moment of your lives) did you develop the idea for TWL?

Since 2006, when I started working in Macerata (Marche Region, Italy) I asked myself how my work with students, with professionals and entrepreneurs could make a real contribution to a wonderful even if marginal and unspoiled area. I had been trying to establish a dialogue with them as part of the courses of "Food Economics and Marketing" and "Place Branding and Rural Development", within the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism at The University of Macerata. In 2016, when we applied, I was having an incredible and fruitful conversation with Dr. Gigliola Paviotti (pedagogue, now post-doc researcher at UNIMC) and with Prof. Santini, associate professor at Università San Raffaele in Rome, experienced scholar in the field of the wine business, about the usefulness and the responsibility of our work, the relationship between research, teaching and the third mission of HEIs, the role of constructivist pedagogical approaches, the opportunity to carry out action research and to publish in good journals, etc.... well, we tried to consider all these aspects in The Wine Lab project proposal.

What was one of the most challenging moments of TWL?

Apart from the common challenge of working with partners who can have different levels of commitment over a timespan of 3 years, probably the most difficult moment has been the earthquake in the Marche region. In fact, at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017, Central Italy was affected by several earthquakes that compromised the lives of many communities. Probably, this tragedy helped us to become even more committed to being engaged with local communities, their needs and desires. The earthquake was useful to rediscover the spark that led us to choose the path of research and teaching years before, diverting our attention from the usual routines that life becomes stuck in sometimes.

From your point of view, how is the project contributing to the beneficiaries' real lives and activities? Could you provide examples?

Well, first of all I could say that a remarkable relationship between local communities and international scholars began and it is still evident through an event called International Student Competition on Place Branding and the Mediterranean diet. For instance, this year, despite the Pandemic, we decided to "virtually" bring international students onto Marche territory in order to provide insights and suggestions to local players by interviewing them and providing some Local Action Plans, which in standard situations, were delivered through presentations in front of local communities living in small villages and internal areas. More generally, international networks, new teaching approaches, stronger linkages with local communities have been a common heritage of our project. Another example is the Siena Food Lab, a sort of spillover project that has been funded by an important Bank Foundation (MPS) in Tuscany, which is connecting local entrepreneurs with the ecosystem of innovation of the whole Region."

Which moment made you laugh a lot?

When we discovered that The Wine Lab was not only an EU project, but also a wine bar... when we promoted our activities on social media, we realised that many followers who put likes were looking for some recipes for their drinks and appetisers!"

What was the most rewarding moment?

Personally, when the United Nations World Tourism Organisation invited me, as a keynote speaker, to their 3rd UNWTO Global Conference on Wine Tourism in Moldova, to illustrate the main findings of The Wine Lab project.

Did you use of HEInnovate? If yes, in which context?

We adopted some dimensions of the tool to understand the contribution that the University could give to local communities of winemakers in the Marche Region during our participatory approaches.