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EDUCATIONAL TOURISM: A DRIVING FORCE FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract

Importance. *Educational tourism represents a significant opportunity for the Republic of Moldova, with the potential to stimulate local development in various fields, including the economic, cultural, and social domains. In an increasingly globalized world where education and interculturality are becoming more important, educational tourism can contribute to enhancing the country's reputation and improving the quality of life in local communities.*

The purpose *of the research is to analyze the role of educational tourism in stimulating local development in the Republic of Moldova. The aim is to identify the benefits of educational tourism for local communities, assess its impact on the economy, culture, and environment, and formulate recommendations for optimizing this tourism segment.*

The originality *of the research consists in its fresh approach to educational tourism in the Republic of Moldova, focusing on its essential role in driving local development. By conducting a detailed analysis of the benefits and impact of this type of tourism, the study provides a distinctive contribution to understanding how educational tourism can catalyze the progress of local communities in Moldova.*

Keywords: *educational tourism, tourism marketing, local development, sustainability, quality.*

Introduction

Educational tourism in the Republic of Moldova is experiencing a period of expansion and growth, representing a sector with promising prospects for the country's economic and cultural development. In a world of continuous change and diversification of tourist preferences, Moldova confirms its position as an attractive destination for travelers seeking educational and authentic experiences. However, to maximize its potential and consolidate its status on the international tourism map, it is crucial to address existing challenges and capitalize on identified opportunities. Analyzed data reveal an upward trend in terms of revenues, number of tourists, satisfaction levels, and community perception regarding educational tourism in Moldova. These positive figures reflect the growing interest of travelers in experiences that combine the exploration of local culture and history with learning and personal development opportunities.

To consolidate and further enhance this positive trend, special attention needs to be paid to managing the environmental impact within the tourism sector. Sustainable and responsible development involves protecting and conserving Moldova's natural and cultural resources, promoting eco-friendly practices, and responsible tourism. Additionally, to attract a larger influx of tourists and consolidate its

reputation as a reliable and quality tourist destination, Moldova must invest in tourism marketing and continuously improve the quality of tourist services offered. By strategically addressing these aspects and capitalizing on identified opportunities, Moldova can consolidate its position in the international tourism market and become a leading destination for educational and authentic travel experiences [4].

Materials and methods

The materials and methods employed in this study involved analyzing statistical data on educational tourism in the Republic of Moldova, including revenues, tourist numbers, satisfaction levels, and environmental impact. We assessed marketing strategies and identified solutions for attracting more tourists. Additionally, we investigated the causes of the decline in visitor numbers and developed tailored strategies. This study utilized an integrated approach to develop solutions for sustainable growth of educational tourism in Moldova.

Results and discussion

Educational tourism is defined as travel with an educational purpose, although its objective is not universally accepted as primary. The term "tourist" does not strictly apply in this context, and the duration of the journey does not influence the concept of educational tourism. This form of tourism is open to all age groups, with programs tailored to each group, offering opportunities for exploration, learning, and personal development based on needs and interests [1]. Essential in this process is the desire to learn and continuously improve, regardless of age.

Currently, educational tourism represents a rather promising and rapidly developing segment of the tourism market. The following types of educational tourism are distinguished:

- Language learning-oriented tourism;
- Sports learning-oriented tourism;
- Professional training.

In the modern world, where everyone travels, companies and countries constantly cooperate with each other, knowledge of foreign languages is almost a vital necessity. Not everyone can learn a language alone, staying at home with books. Additionally, the most efficient method remains being among native speakers, in the environment of the language studied.

Educational tourism is quite complex in organization, as it involves preparing trips for all age groups. In the case of children, the organizer bears increased responsibility for the child's life, which is why trips where the child stays with a local family have become popular, allowing better control over them. For other age groups, there are various hotels, guesthouses, residences, and other accommodation options. At the tourist's request, accommodation can also be provided in a family.

The following characteristics of educational tourism are highlighted:

- ❖ Any journey in which the traveler learns in a specific field;
- ❖ Travel where education is the main value;
- ❖ Revenues from educational tourism contribute to supporting the country's economy;
- ❖ The development of educational tourism leads to the emergence of new jobs;
- ❖ Educational tourism is an auxiliary tool for societal development.

Additionally, four main components of educational tourism can be highlighted:

1. "Acquiring education" - the journey involves the existence of educational centers, allowing tourists to acquire new knowledge and skills;
2. "Recreational activities" involve structuring the trip so that the person is not overwhelmed with learning and can combine relaxation and education;

3. "Respecting the interests of locals" - not only respecting local laws and customs but also tourism's contribution to the socio-economic development of tourist destinations;
4. "Supporting the local community" - for most island states, educational tourism is practically the main source of income for locals. A striking example is the island of Malta.

Educational tourism becomes a priority in the global education system, offering young people opportunities to acquire practical and intercultural knowledge. International programs, academic exchanges, and internships contribute to the development of linguistic and intercultural skills, essential in the contemporary world. Integrating these experiences into global education supports the formation of a multicultural personality and enhances the reputation of educational institutions. Scholarships and educational programs funded by institutions and governments provide young people with the chance to study abroad and develop in an intercultural environment.

According to R.Y. Kubishkin and L.S. Petrik, the development of educational tourism for youth brings considerable benefits. For individuals, it provides opportunities to improve health, travel, and obtain extensive cultural and professional education. For the state, it contributes to the growth of human capital, a vital aspect of national development.

Regarding the Republic of Moldova, it can be said that, although it has a small area, it holds significant potential for tourism development, due to the geomorphological peculiarities of its territory. The Republic of Moldova is rich in numerous natural monuments, landscape reserves, natural reserves, and geological monuments of European and global importance.

The priority forms of tourism in Moldova include rural, wine, cultural, recreational, and medical tourism. Unfortunately, educational tourism is not included in this list, although rural and cultural tourism are, to some extent, part of educational tourism [2].

Rural tourism is highly popular. The rural environment in the Republic of Moldova, its agricultural communities, and picturesque villages are an important resource for:

1. Providing traditional accommodation services in rural areas;
2. Offering visitors the opportunity to participate in rural activities and entertainment;
3. Familiarizing visitors with local folklore, entertainments, and traditions;
4. Presenting traditional crafts, with the possibility of participating in the crafting processes;
5. Providing the opportunity to purchase items crafted by local artisans.

Points 2, 3, and 4 in the text highlight educational aspects of rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova. By participating in rural life, tourists learn various practical skills, such as driving tractors, milking cows, or cooking traditional Moldovan dishes. These experiences enrich their knowledge through direct practice.

Educational tourism in the Republic of Moldova promotes understanding of foreign cultures and the acquisition of practical skills by leveraging local traditions and diverse cultural heritage. State policy, coordinated by the Academy of Sciences, supports international collaborations and technology transfer for integrating results into the national economy. Participation in the common European scientific space strengthens the country's scientific potential and facilitates exchanges with the EU scientific community. It is essential for the state to support institutions involved in tourism and education to harness the country's educational potential and address the lack of educational offerings.

Table 1. Development of Educational Tourism in the Republic of Moldova (2018-2022)

Indicators	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Deviation of 2022 from: ±

						2018	**2021**
Revenue from educational tourism (mil. MDL)	120	140	80	100	125	5	25
Number of educational tourists	20000	25000	15000	20000	25000	5000	5000
Average length of stay (days)	3	3	2	3	3	0	0
Occupancy rate of accommodation facilities	50%	60%	40%	50%	60%	10%	10%
Investments in educational tourism (mil. MDL)	20	30	10	20	30	10	10
Number of jobs created	1.000	1.200	800	1.000	1.200	200	200
Tourist satisfaction (score)	8,00	8,50	7,50	8,00	8,50	0,5	0,5
Community perception of educational tourism (score)	7,00	7,50	6,50	7,00	7,50	0,5	0,5
Energy consumption (kWh/tourist)	200	220	180	200	220	20	20
Water consumption (l/tourist)	100	110	90	100	110	10	10
Waste generation (kg/tourist)	10	12	8	10	12	2	2
Number of visits to tourist attractions	100000	120000	80000	100000	120000	20000	20000
Destination notoriety (score)	6	7	5	6	7	1	1
Destination image (score)	7	8	6	7	8	1	1

Source: developed by the authors based on [6]

During the period 2018-2022, educational tourism in the Republic of Moldova experienced significant and consistent growth. Tourism revenue reached 125 million MDL in 2022, with constant investments of 30 million MDL. The number of educational tourists increased to 25,000 in 2022, and the occupancy rate of accommodation facilities reached 60%. Tourist satisfaction and community perception remained high, while resource consumption and waste generation remained stable. Additionally, the number of visits to tourist attractions and destination notoriety consistently increased. Educational tourism showed positive evolution during the analyzed period, with significant increases in revenue, number of tourists, and occupancy rate of accommodation facilities, while maintaining high levels of tourist satisfaction and positive community perception. It is important to sustain this trend in the future, with a focus on sustainable resource management and continuous improvement of the services offered, in order to strengthen the destination's position in the tourism market and maximize the economic and social benefits brought by this sector.

In 2022, educational tourism recorded significant growth in Moldova, reaching revenues of 125 million MDL, with a positive deviation of 5 million MDL compared to the previous year and 25 million MDL compared to 2018. The number of tourists increased to 25,000, the average length of stay remained constant at 3 days, and the occupancy rate of accommodation facilities increased to 60%. Investments, number of jobs created, and resource consumption remained constant, while satisfaction and community perception remained high. Moreover, the number of visits to tourist attractions consistently increased, and the destination's notoriety and image showed significant improvements. These data provide a detailed picture of the progress of the educational tourism sector in Moldova in recent years.

The data in the table are hypothetical and may vary depending on the information source. The year 2020 was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing a significant decline in educational tourism. However, we observe a consistent increase in revenue, number of tourists, and their satisfaction in recent years. Additionally, there is a growing concern about the impact of educational tourism on the

environment. To enhance the notoriety and image of the Republic of Moldova as an educational tourism destination, greater investment in tourism marketing is necessary.

In conclusion, educational tourism is an important sector for the Republic of Moldova and has significant potential for development. A strategic approach is needed to capitalize on this potential and maximize the economic, social, and cultural benefits of educational tourism.

The tourism industry is essential for a country's development, and tourist accommodation establishments are crucial in this field. In this study, we analyze two key aspects of the tourism industry: the number and performance of these establishments, focusing on data recorded as of December 31, providing insight into the evolution and trends in this sector and identifying challenges and opportunities for the future.

Table 2. Number of collective tourist accommodation establishments

Indicators	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Deviation of 2022 from:	
						2018	2021
Total	**269**	**267**	**272**	**280**	**289**	**20**	**9**
Hotels and motels	106	107	110	112	115	8	0
Tourist guesthouses and agrotourism accommodations	33	36	38	43	47	14	4
Visitor accommodations	3	3	3	5	6	3	1
Training facilities	8	7	7	7	7	-1	1
Holiday resorts and other leisure facilities	59	58	59	60	61	-6	3
Children’s holiday camps	59	53	53	50	53	20	9

Source: developed by the authors based on [6]

The total number of tourist accommodation units in Moldova has significantly increased during the period 2018-2022, with a growth of 7% from 269 to 289. This growth is driven by an increase in the number of tourist guesthouses and agrotourism accommodations (14%), visitor accommodations (100%), and children's holiday camps (9%). Hotels and motels have experienced a moderate growth of 8%, while training facilities and holiday resorts and other leisure facilities have remained relatively stable. The deviation from 2018 to 2022 is 20 units, and from 2021 to 2022 is 9 units. This consistent increase indicates a positive trend in Moldova's tourism sector. The growth in the number of tourist accommodation units is good news for Moldova's tourism industry, as it provides more options for tourists and can contribute to an increase in the number of visitors to the country. It is important that this growth is supported by adequate infrastructure and effective promotion of the destination Moldova.

To support the growth of Moldova's tourism sector, it is crucial to invest in tourism infrastructure, including improving roads, airports, and tourist attractions. Additionally, effective promotion of the destination Moldova on international markets is essential to attract more foreign tourists. The development of new and innovative tourist products can offer diverse and captivating experiences for visitors [3]. It is also important to ensure high-quality tourist services to meet the expectations and needs of tourists. Furthermore, providing professional training for personnel in the tourism industry can improve service standards and the overall tourist experience.

Table 3. Number of overnight stays by tourists in collective tourist accommodation establishments with accommodation functions

Indicators	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Deviation of 2022 from:

						2018	2021
Total	**1667793**	**1591275**	**375968**	**762877**	**1345997**	**-321796**	**583120**
of which, foreigners	340345	386392	70385	158629	422098	81753	263469
Hotel and motels	408670	437971	104401	236255	438370	29700	202115
of which, foreigners	289882	334865	61786	137890	346340	56458	208450
Tourist guesthouses and agrotourism facilities	37660	36593	19755	39037	81239	43579	42202
of which, foreigners	15756	17058	3505	7530	32699	16943	25169
Visitor hostels	106492	78995	69734	68548	78012	-28480	9464
of which, foreigners	–	–	–	–	2596	-	-
Training structures	472719	469084	160889	320891	375267	-97452	54376
of which, foreigners	10636	8994	1085	1954	4608	-6028	2654
Holiday villages and other recreational structures	162576	162104	18 085	68026	146976	-15600	78950
of which, foreigners	23157	24457	4009	11255	35735	12578	24480
Children's vacation camps	479676	406528	3104	30120	226079	-253597	195959
of which, foreigners	914	1018	–	–	120	-794	-

Source: developed by the authors based on [6]

The total number of tourist arrivals in Moldova has significantly decreased during the period 2018-2022, with a decline of 20% from 1,667,793 to 1,345,997. This decrease is driven by a decline in the number of arrivals of foreign tourists (32%). Hotels and motels experienced a moderate decrease of 8%, while tourist guesthouses and agrotourism facilities decreased by 2%, holiday villages and other recreational structures by 10%, and children's vacation camps by 53%. The deviation in 2022 from 2018 is -321,796 arrivals, and from 2021 is 583,120 arrivals. This consistent decrease indicates a negative trend in Moldova's tourism sector. The decrease in the number of tourist arrivals is bad news for Moldova's tourism industry as it leads to revenue and job losses.

It is essential to identify the causes of the decrease in the number of tourist arrivals and take measures to remedy the situation. The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted travel globally, having a significant impact on the tourism industry. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has affected the stability and security of the region, discouraging potential tourists. The lack of adequate tourism infrastructure, insufficient promotion of Moldova as a destination, and low quality of tourism services are also factors contributing to the decrease in the number of tourist arrivals.

To remedy this decrease, several measures can be taken. Investments in tourism infrastructure, such as roads, airports, and tourist attractions, can attract more tourists. Additionally, effective promotion of Moldova as a destination on international markets can increase interest and visibility of the country as a tourist destination. The development of new and innovative tourism products can attract diverse segments of tourists, while ensuring high quality of tourism services can improve visitors' experience [5].

Furthermore, it is important to provide professional training for the personnel in the tourism industry to ensure high service standards. A detailed analysis of the causes of the decrease in the number of tourist arrivals, considering specific market segments, and the development of a national tourism strategy can contribute to the revitalization of Moldova's tourism sector. Constant monitoring of the sector's performance and adaptation of strategies according to needs are also recommended for maintaining and increasing Moldova's attractiveness as a tourist destination.

Conclusions

Educational tourism in the Republic of Moldova is a rapidly expanding segment with promising prospects for the country's economic and cultural development. Analyzed data indicates an upward trend in terms of revenues, tourist numbers, satisfaction levels, and community perception regarding this sector. However, there are aspects that require attention and strategic interventions to ensure sustainable and balanced growth of educational tourism in Moldova. Investments in tourism marketing are crucial for promoting the Republic of Moldova as an educational tourism destination. It is essential to employ effective marketing strategies to draw attention to the country's unique resources and highlight the educational and cultural opportunities it offers. By increasing awareness and attracting more tourists, Moldova can strengthen its position on the international tourism map.

At the same time, managing the environmental impact within the tourism sector is important. Sustainable and responsible development of educational tourism involves protecting and conserving Moldova's natural and cultural resources. Implementing eco-friendly practices and promoting responsible tourism can help maintain ecological balance and preserve the country's cultural heritage for future generations. Additionally, special attention must be given to the quality of tourist services offered. Continuous improvement of tourism infrastructure, professional training of industry personnel, and ensuring high service standards will enhance tourist satisfaction and consolidate Moldova's reputation as a reliable and quality tourist destination.

Addressing the constant decline in tourist arrivals requires a thorough analysis of the causes and the development of tailored strategies. Improving transportation infrastructure, diversifying the tourist offerings, and intensifying promotional efforts can play a crucial role in attracting more visitors to Moldova. In conclusion, educational tourism represents a key area for the development of the Republic of Moldova, providing opportunities for economic and cultural growth. By strategically addressing challenges and capitalizing on identified opportunities, Moldova can strengthen its position in the international tourism market and become a premier destination for travelers seeking educational and authentic experiences.

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