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TEACHING FOOD TOURISM IN IRELAND-REFLECTIONS FROM COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection of the development of a Food Tourism module over the last 5 years in TU Dublin with particular focus on the impact of COVID on pedagogical strategies. The module emerged as a reaction to an environment in which tourism, and food tourism, was being identified as increasingly important and on the program team there was a desire to provide students with different perspectives of food. A key element of the module is interaction with industry, via guest lectures, case studies and a field trip. COVID-19 had a significant impact as teaching and learning pivoted online. As teaching now returns to the classroom we reflect that the experiences of COVID-19 have made the module more accessible and international.

KEY WORDS: food tourism education, Ireland, impact of COVID-19, reflection of teaching

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of food tourism, and the recognition that food can play a significant role in the marketing and development of a destination (Henderson, 2009), there has been increased research interest in this topic and it has also become a focus of teaching and learning within universities internationally. Tourism education has been historically under-represented in the academic literature, and within the recent wave of research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry, tourism education is largely overlooked (Tiwari *et al.*, 2020). Food tourism education has received even less critical analysis. This paper discusses the background to Ireland's first post-graduate food tourism module, part of the Masters of Arts (MA) Gastronomy and Food Studies program at TU Dublin¹, noting its development over the first five years, and reflects on the lessons we learned during the online pivot caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The validation of the MA Gastronomy and Food Studies in 2017 provided the first such post-graduate program in Irelandⁱⁱ. ‘Gastronomy’ and ‘food history’ are terms more associated with European countries, whereas the term ‘food studies’ is predominantly an American phenomenon. One of the earliest programs in food studies in the United States was the Master of Liberal Arts (MLA) in Gastronomy at Boston University in the early 1990s. The fact that it was called ‘Gastronomy’ no doubt reflects the French background of its two collaborative founders, Jacques Pépin and Julia Child. However, when Marion Nestle launched her Masters in Food Studies in 1996 at New York University, she was drawing firmly from the similar ‘studies’ programs already in NYU (Mac Con Iomaire, 2021). In developing the Dublin MA program, both terms were included to attract a broad range of students. In 2000, a Master of Arts in Gastronomy was established at the University of Adelaide, Australia, in conjunction with their Research Centre for the History of Food and Drink and *Le Cordon Bleu*. This program was quite innovative as it ran a traditional face-to-face model alongside a distant education model to facilitate Australian residents and international students alike. The emergence of these and other programs showed that while food was once considered far “too common and quotidian to be taken seriously as a field of study” (Nestle and McIntosh, 2010, p. 161), it was now beginning to seamlessly join other ‘Studies’, staking its place as a serious field in academia, and in many cases is directly linked to and enhances the more traditionally accepted disciplines (Mac Con Iomaire, 2021). Concurrently there is a growing demand for Food Studies (Gastronomy, Foodways, and Culinary History) programs internationally. Similarly, there is a growing demand from culinary arts and liberal arts graduates for post-graduate studies in Gastronomy and Food Studies in order to pursue meaningful careers in the wider food business (both commercial and in the public sector). Building on these earlier developments, the MA Gastronomy and Food Studies in TU Dublin considers the modern food landscape from three main perspectives; Historical, Societal, and Practical, with a semester dedicated to each. The Program examines each of these pillars from a variety of viewpoints offering students a deep-learning opportunity within each pillar.

MODULE DEVELOPMENT

As part of the 2017 MA program, a food tourism module was jointly developed by lecturers from the Schools of Hospitality Management and Tourism, and the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology. This reflects the often-multidisciplinary nature of tourism education (Tiwari *et al.*, 2020), with food tourism, more specifically, incorporating elements from geography, sociology, economics, history, folklore, culinary arts, beverage studies and hospitality management to name a few. The food tourism module was developed so that it could also be taken on its own as a level nine continuous professional development (CPD) module. At level nine, students are expected and encouraged to become critical thinkers, reflective practitioners and independent autonomous learners. This ties in with the underpinning philosophy and unique selling point of the MA program which is to develop an epistemic community, a network of confident, competent, critical thinkers who are creatively engaged with gastronomy and food studies at the forefront of learning, achieved by providing many opportunities for conviviality, networking and discussion both among the students and with the broader gastronomic community both nationally and internationally.

A number of factors drove the decision to develop this module. From a programme perspective, the development of the MA Gastronomy and Food Studies took an interdisciplinary approach exposing students to history, sociology and anthropology of food and sought to introduce a broad range of perspectives into the learning experience. Food Tourism provided the opportunity for students to explore beyond the boundaries of food *per se*. The introduction of the module also reflected the contextual environment at the time. International tourism into Ireland was in a period of consecutive and significant growth - in the five years leading up to the emergence of this module, tourism numbers had grown by 70% and exceeded 10 million (Fáilte, Ireland, 2017). Food had also been identified as an important factor in the visitor experience (Quigley *et al.*, 2019; Mulcahy, 2020) and the first national food tourism implementation framework was published in 2011 and a vision that 'Ireland will be recognised by visitors for the availability, quality and value of our local and regional food experiences which evokes a unique sense of place, culture and hospitality' (Fáilte Ireland, 2013) was identified. At the destination level there was increased attention being paid to food and the Restaurants Association of Ireland began to run an annual Foodie

Destination of the Year competition; while Fáilte Ireland, the national tourism development authority, appointed Food Tourism Leaders and Ambassadors to promote food tourism nationally and internationally (Mulcahy, 2019). It was clearly timely to introduce a module on food tourism to reflect the changes that were occurring in terms of national policy, tourists' trends and destination developments.

Internationally, the concept of foodies and foodism (Johnson and Bauman, 2010) was growing around this period, and indeed Lucy Long (1998) first coined the term 'Culinary Tourism' in 1998. This was followed by Hjalager, and Richards (2002) identification of gastronomy tourism and Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis and Cambourne's (2003) book on food tourism. Boniface (2003) further contributed to the debate with her discussion of tasting tourism. While the academic literature was grappling with terms and definitions, numerous industry associations have developed, perhaps the best known being The World Food Travel Association (WFTA) which was founded in 2003 as a non-profit and non-governmental organization (NGO) (<https://worldfoodtravel.org/about-world-food-travel-association/>). The social and cultural role of food was gaining recognition internationally during this period. UNESCO listed food traditions from Mexico, Croatia and France on its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage for the first time in 2010, with food from Turkey, Georgia, Belgium, Korea, Japan, and the 'Mediterranean Diet' following in 2013 (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018). The UNWTO published a *Global Report on Food Tourism* in 2012, analysing the growing interest in food tourism where gastronomy was becoming a central part of the tourist experience (World Tourism Organisation, 2012) and sponsors forums on food tourism. In 2014, the Committee on Culture and Education of the European Parliament approved a motion for European Parliament Resolution on the "European gastronomic heritage: cultural and educational aspects", recognising the importance of food and gastronomy as artistic and cultural expression and fundamental pillars of family and social relationships (Cavicchi and Ciampi Stancova, 2016). This identification of food as heritage highlighted the potential in terms of tourism.

The food tourism module is run as an optional module in the second semester (societal perspective) of the program and runs for twelve weeks. It introduces students to tourism and then focuses on topics such as food tourists, food tourism providers, leaders in food tourism

and food tourism policy. A key pedagogical strategy is to integrate theory with practice and to bring industry into the classroom, and each year there are a variety of guest lectures, and students are presented with both national and international case studies of food tourism destinations. Over the five years of the programme the guest lectures have included key entrepreneurs, food champions, policymakers and researchers ensuring that students have had a close insight into what is occurring in the sector. Another key component is a field trip which brings students to a food tourism destination where they experience some of the tourism and food offerings and presentations are made by key stakeholders to give them an insight into the development and operation of food tourism in destination. The assessments for the module involve three reflection pieces based on the lectures, a presentation in which they choose an aspect of the field trip and explore the literature, linking theory with practice, and finally a 3,000-word literature review on a topic of their choosing related to the module. The assessments are designed to develop critical thinking, reflection, independent learning and the ability to link practice with theory.

COVID-19

In Ireland, COVID-19 resulted in a pivot to online learning in March 2019 and for the following academic year. This created a number of challenges for the Food Tourism module which was very much based on interaction, discussion, engaging industry with students and getting out into food tourism destinations. This now had to all be re-created using an online platform. The most immediate problem was the fact that due to national restrictions it was not possible to run the field trip which in fact was scheduled to occur just a few weeks after the initial lockdown. In this first year we asked students to engage in secondary research and present on a food tourism destination of their choice. It was difficult for this to be a critical engagement with the topic and in the second year (when we had more time to strategize) we put students in groups of two and they had to create a food tourism itinerary for a group of tourists. The effect of lockdown gave a vicarious and somewhat fantasy element to these projects as they were being planned at a time when the Irish public were not allowed to travel more than five kilometres from their home without good reason and permission. The students presented to each other online. The different proposals varied between combining classic tourist spots and food tours to farms, cheesemakers and distilleries; but some also brought a

more modern approach in reimagining Irish tourism to champion the new Irish with visits to Eatyard (a collection of ethnic food trucks) followed by intercultural exchange at a Nigerian dance bar in Dublin city centre.

In terms of guest lectures, these all shifted online but this opened up new possibilities for us as speakers located outside Dublin and internationally were now able to join the group. Where the international case study element of the module had usually been based on secondary articles and student's experiences, this time we had speakers from Italy and America presenting about their own local areas.

There are a number of aspects of the pivot to online learning which have now been adopted by the module. Firstly, rather than returning to fully face to face, the module is now offered in hyflex mode with those who are unwell or not in a position to travel joining the lectures virtually. As the group is small, it is manageable for the lecturers to ensure an equality of experience for those at home and those in the room. This is helped considerably by the use of online breakout rooms so those online can also interact with each other during discussions, furthermore the fact that students have their camera's on and are easily identifiable makes it easy to incorporate them in the group discussions, ensuring that their voice is heard.

A second aspect is that the module is now more outward facing and global. The experience of working fully online, combined with training provided by the university, has made the idea of bringing global experiences into the classroom via technology easily achievable. This has led to a more international approach. Food tourism is often most important in rural areas and in the past, we have found that although we would like to have guest lectures from rural areas, the distance from Dublin, and the commitment of travelling a long distance to just talk to the group for an hour has limited our scope, this is no longer the case.

However, there are also aspects of the module that COVID-19 made us really appreciate and re-instantiate. In the main that is the ability to have more meaningful and engaged discussions in person. Equally as important is the immersion of students in the reality of food tourism via

the field trip. The substitute assessments that we devised did give students an opportunity to develop an insight into food tours but they did not have the food tourist experience and missed out on the peer to peer learning and the challenge of identifying an issue in practice and then exploring the literature to further develop their thinking. This experiential element of the module has been reinstated in the current version of the module, and in fact it has been extended as we have added in a food tour of Dublin with one of the food tourism entrepreneurs who usually come in to give a guest lecture.

REFLECTIONS

Reflecting on the five years since we started this module shows a clear desire among students to learn more about food tourism, and in fact some graduates are now working in the sector and developing new food tourism initiatives. Students are also developing their critical skills and broadening their perspective, and a number of students have used these skills to explore food tourism more as part of their thesis research. COVID-19 has highlighted the integral role that the field trip, and immersion of the group in food tourism experiences, plays in the module. It has also resulted in identification of opportunities to internationalize the content more and to enhance the accessibility of the module by offering it in a hyflex format. Just as COVID-19 has had a huge impact on tourism internationally, and the full impact on food tourism is as yet to be identified, it is clear that the teaching of food tourism has also had to adapt to the situation. Reflecting on this experience identifies some aspects which have been enhanced as COVID-19 has led to the identification of new pedagogical approaches which will become core elements in the module going forward.

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ⁱ TU Dublin was designated as Ireland's first technological university on the 1st January 2019, incorporating three previous institutes of technology (Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tallaght, and Blanchardstown Institute of Technology). The MA was inaugurated in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

ⁱⁱ For more information on the MA Gastronomy and Food Studies see <https://www.tudublin.ie/study/postgraduate/courses/gastronomy-and-food-studies/> ; for a history of Gastronomy and Food Studies education in Ireland see Mac Con Iomaire, M. (2021). 'From the Dark Margins to the Spotlight: The Evolution of Gastronomy and Food Studies in Ireland.' In: Catherine Maignant, Sylvain Tondeur, and Déborah Vandewoude (eds.) *Margins and Marginalities in Ireland and France: A Sociocultural Perspective*, Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 129-153. <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tschafb/17/>