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Preface

In this edition of the International Conference on Management, Tourism and Technologies—ICMTT 2023, papers were presented in the areas of: Managements, Tourism, Marketing Strategies in Management, Tourism and Technology, and Technology.

We would like to give special thanks to the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Fundación Universitaria Internacional de la Rioja, and Universidad de Cundinamarca, for hosting us, as well as to all the members and collaborators, since without them this dream would not have been possible.

We had more than 200 papers presented, we spent 3 consecutive days in 5 parallel rooms, and more than 400 people passed through the event and generated an academic space that allowed the exchange of experiences to advance in the era of knowledge, where we have so much data that the important thing is to transform it into knowledge. Another of the great experiences that the event left us is that virtuality is definitely a reality, since many of our works were presented in this way.

We still have many challenges, but a very important one and on which we are working is how to get that academic relationship that gives us the presence in these events we can also make up for with virtuality, and this reflection has helped us to understand what a visionary as Mark Zuckerberg CEO of Meta has envisioned in what he called the Metaverse and just put an oculus to understand that virtuality needs these visions to achieve the great challenge we have set ourselves: How will we relate to other people in academic, social, or other contexts through virtual scenarios?

I hope to see you all at the next edition of the International Conference on Management, Tourism and Technologies—ICMTT 2024, in Cusco, Peru, and as we will not stop doing virtual sessions, the challenge is that we all have some oculus to see ourselves in our Metaverse.

May 2023

Carlos Montenegro
Álvaro Rocha

Knowledge Management

Factors Influencing the Economic Growth of the Business Sector in Zone 3 of Ecuador	349
<i>Tania Morales - Molina, Ximena Morales -Urrutia, Chabely Figueredo-Morales, and Geri Belén Bucheli -Vásquez</i>	
Implementation of the General Regulation on Data Protection – In the Intermunicipal Community of Douro, Portugal	360
<i>Pascoal Padrão, Maria Isabel Ribeiro, and Isabel Lopes</i>	
The Role of Higher Education Institutions as Promoters of Regional Competitiveness: A Case Study	368
<i>Joana M. S. R. Fernandes, Luís C. M. Pires, and Sónia P. Nogueira</i>	
Indigenous Painting in Ecuador and Its Impact on Cultural Identity	378
<i>Pablo Alejandro Quezada-Sarmiento, Xavier Andrés Barnuevo-Solis, Patricia Marisol Chango- Cañaverall, Mauricio Patricio Artieda–Ponce, and Silvia Imbaquingo -Narváz</i>	
Proactivity, a Need, or a Trendy Word?	388
<i>Alexandra O’Neill and Mariana Marques</i>	
Factors Influencing Organizational Behavior in Marketing Firms: A Systematic Review	397
<i>Enrique Arellanos-Huaylinos, Gisela Fernandez-Hurtado, and Franklin Cordova-Buiza</i>	
Information User Studies Concepts, Models and Applications	409
<i>Francisco Carlos Paletta</i>	
Author Index	437

The role of Higher Education Institutions as promoters of regional competitiveness: a case study

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Abstract. This paper describes a specific situation where the involvement of a Higher Education Institution (HEI), the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (IPB) acted as a booster for regional competitiveness. The HEI implemented a project named “creation of business cooperation networks in rural cross-border regions between companies in the gourmet agri-food and tourism sectors”, with the Portuguese acronym CRECEER. The main objective of this project was to develop and implement measures to increase the companies’ competitiveness, by enhancing certain areas, such as quality, design, Information and Communication Technologies (ITC), and marketing, along with the creation of a common framework that jointly commercialized products and services, specifically from rural accommodation enterprises and companies producing endogenous products with gourmet potential. It is our intention to describe the activities developed by the HEI involved in the implementation of the project, and to show the crucial part the education institution took in the creation and enhancement of online marketing strategies, in two regions, Douro and Alto Trás-os-Montes (Portugal), that include a total of 28 municipalities.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Gourmet Endogenous Products, Rural Accommodation Enterprises; Cross-Border Project.

1 Introduction

This paper describes the role of a HEI, the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (IPB), in boosting regional competitiveness of a rural cross-border region, with the implementation of an international project. The project named “creation of business cooperation networks in rural cross-border regions between companies in the gourmet agri-food and tourism sectors”, with the Portuguese acronym CRECEER, was coordinated and implemented by the IPB [1].

In order to increase the companies’ competitiveness, the project focused on enhancing strategic areas, such as quality, design, Information and Communication Technologies (ITC) and marketing, and also the creation of a common framework that jointly commercialized products and services. It is our intention to describe the implementation of the project, the activities developed by the education institution involved, and to show the crucial part it took in the creation and development of online marketing strategies.

Even though, HEI have already been established as key engines of regional development, either by their short-term impacts – according to the demand-side approach - or by their long-term impacts – according to the supply-side approach -, this paper will focus only on the supply-side approach, in line with the third mission of HEIs. As such, their contribution to the community is studied, analysing the input, transfer, and application of knowledge outside the boundaries of the academia [2].

Attention will be focused on the Douro and Terras de Trás-os-Montes regions, which cover a total of 28 municipalities. These municipalities are characterized as rural and lagging regions, with an ageing population, economically poor and distant from urban centres. Therefore, our purpose is to analyse how the companies located in these regions can succeed when aiming for outside markets, namely regional, national, or even global markets. The companies that integrated this study were in the tourism sector and in the gourmet agri-food sector, namely rural accommodation enterprises (RAE) and companies manufacturing gourmet endogenous products.

The project followed a qualitative approach were it was intended to characterize the companies for better understanding of their difficulties, goals, partnerships, competition, innovation, markets, commercialization channels and online possibilities.

With this knowledge, an online strategy was developed, since it would bring more visibility to the companies and allow a better access to other markets, with the peculiarity that it joined both sectors, presenting common commercialization proposals, in order to potentialize the sales and reduce the costs. All this was only possible due to the involvement of the IPB's qualified resources and expert knowledge, that analysed the companies and developed strategic improvement plans.

This paper describes the known contributions of the HEI in the regions, and will specify in a particular case how it was possible, with the intervention of an education institution, to improve and develop the products and services produced in the region as well as to create a common strategy to increase the visibility and potential commercialization outside of the region.

2 Background

Presently, even in rural regions, particularly rural and lagging regions, the economic activity has to be up to date with market mechanisms. It is expected that companies use communication and promotion techniques since they are a fundamental aspect of the competitive market [3].

The internet is necessary, not only to the business activities, but also it is an important search tool for the customers to provide information and facilitate the buying process. As such, companies need to have more engaged position regarding their online presence [4].

Companies, need to collect and analyse the available digital data to better fit their offer of services and products to what the customer really want and to better find the target public. This is more important than to be present online, to effectively appear in customers' search and, so, be selected and their services bought, since these are almost

mandatory requirements to be operating online. In rural regions, it is considered to potentially have a major impact in the performance of the enterprises [5].

Therefore, it is important, for the enterprises to develop an effective marketing strategy and digital marketing strategy, to understand how the customers recognize the region and its potential, such as endogenous products and available accommodations [6].

In fact, being the Internet the main source of information for potential customers, companies understand that it is the first source for customers to collect direct information and also to collect other customers information's and opinion's in their social networks, and that all of these that can influence their buying decisions [6]. So, they need to control their internet presence and the available analytical tools to be more effective on their e-commerce strategies [5]. To be more effective, i.e. be more competitive with better results, companies in a rural region need to use ITC and establish a market oriented strategy [7]. However, there are some limitations for rural enterprises, since most of these regions do not have qualified workers available or good internet telecommunications, the full potential that digital tools could bring is constrained [8].

Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) need to be digitally connected, to enhance their competitiveness, however the region characteristics restrict it, namely, due to the small size of the businesses, lack of infrastructures, low investment capability, or lack of expert workers [9]. A way to overcome some of these limitations is to associate with other companies to share resources and costs, or to associate with organizations that can provide the necessary knowledge or expertise. Education institution already have this regional role incorporated through their third academic mission that determines the expected responsible engagement toward regional socioeconomic development [10].

2.1 The third mission of HEI

When rural or lagging regions are close to, or host, a HEI it is expected that they can provide contribution to overcome some regional limitations and even potentialize the innovation and economic development [11]. These institutions are more and more expected to deliver critical contributions to regional innovation and economic development processes namely, through labour market upskilling, collaboration with the industry, regional engagement of the academia and strong effects on the quality and strategy of the regional innovation process [12].

HEI are developing their activities profiles in order to adjust their activities, resources and strategies to drive socioeconomic development, while engaging with external stakeholders [13]. However, even though they are acknowledged as an advantage for a region that seeks to grow, in terms of innovation, economy and social development, this is more visible in developed regions than in lagging regions, since lagging regions lack some elements that potentiate the contribution of the HEI for the region. This means that the value of the knowledge and research contribution to regional development can be different [10].

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) already highlighted the importance of the involvement of the HEI in the regions to boost regional growth. Furthermore, the need for regions with "smart specialisation" required by the European Union (EU) is more than a need for the HEI to engage regionally, but

a mandatory issue [12]. In fact, they are often considered as knowledge brokers since they have the task to increase the effective use of knowledge in regional and international networks and develop the knowledge society [14]. They already have this regional engagement incorporated in their outreach activities as defined in their third mission and also reflected in various models that study their involvement in regional development, such as the Regional Innovation System (RIS) university model, the “Mode 2” university model, now, Third Stream, entrepreneurial or civic university’ model, smart specialization, the triple helix, and the engaged university model [15]. The main difference between the models is their main target, either an economic/technologic dimension or a social, cultural and societal perspective [16].

Traditionally, HEI are main providers of research and education and, as part of their third mission definition, they focused on increasing regional sustainable development and innovation by creating partnerships with local and regional groups and stakeholders [16]. To create these partnerships and networks with regional stakeholders, they have to exchange knowledge. This knowledge exchange can be achieved from different strategies: as a knowledge provider, meaning that the researchers can publicly speak and transfer their knowledge; as an expert opinion provider, directed to specific regional problems; as an educational program provider, designing the curricula focused on regional challenges; or as a joint research provider, conducting a collaborative research between HEI’s researchers and regional and regional stakeholders [16].

The role to increase regional economic development is well known, even more since regions depend on knowledge activities in order to accompany the market evolution and to be able to compete outside of their region [17]. And, for the last decades, HEI realized their importance to the regions and evolve to entities that intend to generate economic impact at local and regional levels and foster regional competitiveness [18][19]. [14] highlight that in depopulated areas, this institutions should pursue regional competitiveness and sustainability through responsible activities. In less developed regions the collaboration between HEI and regional stakeholders is even more important since this can be the only way to provide the region with needed innovative potential and competitiveness factors [10].

The existence of a research system and high levels of human capital, and a collaborative network involving regional entities, public and private, is considered to be a perfect configuration to boost regional competitiveness [19]. The collaborative network was planned and implemented in the regions, through the CRECEER project, that is described in 2.2.

2.2 The CRECEER project

The CRECEER project was developed by the Portuguese Education Institution (IPB) alongside other cross boarder Portuguese and Spanish partners and was co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) through the Interreg V-A Spain-Portugal Program (POCTEP) 2014-2020. The project duration was from 2014 until 2021.

The objective of the CRECEER project is “to promote business cooperation in rural cross-border environments between companies and entities in the agri-food (gourmet)

and tourism sectors. CRECEER wants to promote business cooperation, quality, innovation and marketing of said products and services and their release to foreign markets, with the aim of improving the competitiveness of companies in those areas close to the border in Huelva and boosting the economy of these areas [1].

The entities that planned, developed and applied for the European funds were also responsible for the implementation. In the Portuguese regions of Douro and Trás-os-Montes, the education institution was the responsible entity.

At the end of the project it was expected that a cooperation dynamic between companies, institutions and economic agents from the areas involved, was created, aiming to highlight their endogenous resources and increase their competitiveness; Incorporation of quality and design standards into the products and services offered by the companies targeted by the project, as well as ICT technologies, their management and sales models, to improve their individual competitiveness and their presence in foreign markets; and finally, interaction of the agro-food and tourism sectors, through the development of joint actions for the commercialization of quality products and services, to increase their sales and exports, generating greater added value for their economies.

3 Materials and Methods

This research seeks to analyse the companies located in the Douro and Terras de Trás-os-Montes regions, in a total of 28 municipalities, centring on a major trend that prospers in the regions: endogenous products with gourmet potential and rural accommodations. The intention was to understand the main difficulties that these companies face, their business expectations and how they perceive their necessary actions to commercialize outside the regions. Alongside, it was intended also to understand the perceptions of the companies regarding the contribution of the IPB to regional competitiveness, through the implementation of the CRECEER project.

The methodology followed in the project was based in an interpretative paradigm and supported by a qualitative approach. The data collection joined official documents, regional reports, various data collected from official sources. All existing information on companies in the municipalities under analysis was collected, and the companies most representative of regional endogenous products and tourism accommodations, were contacted. From the initial contacts, 39 companies agreed to participate in the project and the company's director or managers were individually interviewed using an in-depth interview, with an average duration of one hour.

The interviews focused on information about the company (main activity, years of activity, and organizational structure) and about the strategic business lines (main products/services manufactured/commercialized; main markets, clients, and competition; current manufacturing capacity; human resources; product/service differentiation; investment in new products/innovations or new business lines; potential of new markets; international markets; positioning; long term perspectives; and main difficulties). The interviews were then transcribed, and a content analysis was conducted.

Combined with the interviews, individual visits were made to each one of the 29 companies that agreed to continue with the project. These visits intended to analyse

areas as quality, design, ITC, commercialization channels, marketing and digital marketing. Therefore, the visits required expert knowledge from each area, and so the experts from the IPB were the ones that supervised all the visits and analysed the information in order to present the conclusions. After this analysis, an improvement plan was developed for each area and for the companies that presented that necessity. Regarding marketing and online marketing, there were 20 companies that required improvements and accepted to make the improvements, in order to increase their competitiveness.

4 Results

4.1 The implementation of the CRECEER project

To implement the CRECEER project, the IPB had to set up a team, the coordination team, to manage and supervise every step of the project, taking in consideration each team member's expertise. This coordination team was also responsible to contact all the involved entities and to develop all the necessary actions and to evaluate the results.

Activity I - Characterization

The project began with the collection of information necessary for activity A1 – Characterization. The objective was to define the scope of these agro and tourism sectors through the characterization of the industrial base present in each of the target areas, including the type of companies, innovation agents and facilitating agents present in each of them [1]. During this period, research was carried out on all existing information in official databases, it was also necessary to contact and visit various entities to guide the search for information and confirm data collected.

Afterwards, the mapping of the two worked regions, Terras de Trás-os-Montes and Douro, was carried out and concluded. A list of all existing companies, producers of products/services considered relevant and with gourmet potential, high-end or with historical roots, all companies in the area of rural tourism and relevant economic agents that potentially were interested in participating in the project, was obtained.

Initially, 39 companies agreed to participate in the project and were individually interviewed using an in-depth interview to learn about the operation of the company in question, to understand its integration into the business context of the region and to understand the difficulties experienced and the vision of entrepreneurs for the future of their products and the region. The collected data were analysed according to content analysis.

The main considerations that aroused from the analysis is that Portugal is the main market, and many were operating locally or regionally. The competition was clearly identified in three degree, local, regional and national. Although local competition was the strongest one, it was clear that it was a “friendly competition”. The companies could identify what differentiate their product/service and justified different economic results to different investment capabilities. Even though the companies recognized that the

participation in international fairs was a good opportunity for the business, they all felt the costs involved were too high for a single company.

Finally, it was noticeable that companies did not feel supported by local entities and think that there should be more information sharing between competitors, since all would benefit from better promotion. It was also noticeable that they agreed to be involved in this project because the IPB was leading, implementing it and was responsible for every activity. This happened due to the IPB's reputation and also because several companies already worked with the IPB before and had a good evaluation of that. In the words of a company representative "Projects with the IPB, I go with my eyes closed".

At this point, the coordination team of the IPB set up a Coordination Working Group for each of the two regions, made up of regional economic agents and other regional stakeholders. This was necessary due to the regional differences between Douro and Terras de Trás-os-Montes. After the invitation to the entities, the Strategic plan of joint and integrated actions in the sectors considered as drivers was worked out and defined, containing the diagnosis of the situation, declaring the strategic objectives, the action plans, the monitoring of the plan and the respective evaluation.

Activity II - Technological innovation for SMEs

The digital transformation in SMEs, to adapt them to the digital market, could be promoted with the incorporation of cloud applications into SME management processes, such as ERPs – Enterprise Resource Planning, focused on administrative, fiscal and accounting management or CRMs – Customer Relationship Management, to manage and interact with customers and others. To do this, individual diagnoses and ad hoc action plans were carried out to help the digital transformation; and a digital marketing program for the application of marketing strategies appropriate for each company in the field of digital media was made [1].

From the interviews it was understandable that only a few of the companies had an online presence, a website or e-commerce function. The reason presented for this was supported in the associated costs. The companies perceived the costs to be too high for the prospective business they generated.

While in the agri-food companies that agreed to participate in the project a diagnosis was carried out to determine the potential for improvement in the quality and design of their products, in the tourist companies a diagnosis was carried out to assess the possibility of improvement and innovation in the organization and quality of the tourist services they offer. These analyses also intended to study the possibility of reinforcing this improvement in quality/design/image through the creation of joint tourist packages, combining agri-food companies with tourism companies.

Thus, 39 companies in the agri-food and tourism areas were analysed and the respective design diagnoses were prepared. 30 companies were also analysed and the respective quality diagnoses were prepared for each one of them.

It was also carried out during this period, with the aim of facilitating the transition from the traditional businesses of companies involved in businesses adapted to the digital market, individual diagnoses. The 29 diagnoses carried out aimed to understand the realities of the business and also identify needs and propose an action plan so that they

can act in the digital market. Following this analysis, companies that had the potential to develop and apply digital marketing solutions were also studied. For the 20 interested companies with potential, a digital marketing diagnosis was carried out and an action plan was developed for each one of them.

Training actions were carried out in the area of ICT and Digital Marketing for the companies involved in the project and also for companies in the studied municipalities interested in attending the training. The position of the IPB in this matter was to disseminate this knowledge to as many companies as possible since the objective was to facilitate the company's acquisition of knowledge.

This was a very important step, since the majority of the companies did not use any cloud services or any business management software and they were aware of what existed, the free usage possibility, and the help that the IPB experts gave in the implementation of required software from some companies.

Activity III - Quality and marketing of products and services

After individual monitoring the companies participating in the study, individual and joint marketing plans were made, to be carried out by the companies in order to evolve in terms of competitiveness, quality, promotion and marketing, and even with proposals for technological evolution. It was thus possible to execute various actions to publicize the companies participating in the project, showing the potential cooperation between the various sectors involved and publicizing the various products and services, through the development, production and dissemination of various digital elements. These elements developed in the area of digital marketing are intended to enhance the transition from traditional businesses to digital businesses, not only increasing the dissemination of products and services, but also allowing consumers to get to know the various companies together.

When presented with the possibility of a collaborative network, where they could jointly develop an online platform to promote and sell their products, participate in cost-sharing international fairs, and promote other products to their own customers, everyone agreed that it was a good prospect.

An innovation and improvement program were launched in the design of quality and image of gourmet products and tourist services to analyse the improvement potential of different products and services, and design and develop innovation actions in them, with the support of the IPB's specialists in quality and design.

In the agri-food sector, there is a very fragmented business structure, made up of companies with artisanal production systems and non-professional management. But with the advantage that it often gives them the exclusivity of the type of product in the area, which is an element of defence against more general trade. These companies will be supported in the design of containers and packages that contain the product (Packaging), to make it more attractive.

Regarding the tourism sector, synergies will be sought with other potential economic activities in rural areas that contribute to consolidation and enrichment. And it will try to strengthen the tourism business context of each area of action and its capacity to generate new tourist products, taking advantage of the heritage, cultural events, and gastronomic offer.

Activity IV - Communication and dissemination

The communication activity and dissemination of the project will be an essential piece to promote the incorporation at the same time of the entrepreneurs and main economic agents present in each zone, and on the other hand will constitute the main instrument to facilitate the diffusion and the active participation between these off the project development.

On the other hand, the communication of the objectives and the periodic dissemination of the results, participants and main actions that are carried out will have an important effect of recognition towards the participating entrepreneurs and agents, and its consequences on the awareness and support there the project that is going to provoke the population in different areas.

The project was extensively publicized through the media with publications in the written press, through the IPB website and through public dissemination days in four municipalities of the two areas of activity.

5 Conclusions

As stated previously, HEI are key elements to increase regional economic development and this is reinforced by the establishment of the HEI's third academic mission that determines the expected responsible engagement toward regional socioeconomic development [10; 17].

This was visible in the implementation of this project since almost all the companies involved stated that they did not have the expertise or the necessary investment to improve the different areas of the project's intervention. Also, they all stated that they joined the project since it was the IPB, that they all recognized and the majority already worked or requested their services, otherwise they would not be so available to give access to their companies.

It was possible to understand that most of the enterprises feel that it is very hard to work in these regions, that they face difficulties to expand their geographic business area and they all feel that a partnership, a cooperation between local or regional companies could make it easier to reach a broader audience and attract new clients.

In the end of the project, 20 companies finished all the proposed activities and evaluated their participation as very positive, since they had an intervention from different experts in different areas, that pointed out the aspects that could be improved and helped them implement those improvement measurements. The companies' feedback is that they are only sorry they can't afford to implement all the suggestions presented by the IPB's because they recognize it would improve their businesses, however the ones they did implement already made some positive difference.

Acknowledgment

To be included if accepted.

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