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NEW APPROACHES IN TOURISM MANAGEMENT: THE INNOVATIVE BUSINESS GROUP PROGRAMME IN SPAIN

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This paper is part of the analysis of the new policies drawn up to promote innovation in the field of tourism. Traditionally, innovation has had a marginal role in tourism, despite its territorial, social and economic importance. There are a series of barriers that hinder tourism with regard to innovation. The level of innovation is rather low compared to that of other economic activities, although the existing systems used to measure this are more appropriate for industrial sectors, so they probably underestimate the innovative capacity of the tourism sector.

In any case innovation is a source of competitive advantage for companies and tourist destinations and therefore it is becoming increasingly more important in tourism policy. This paper analyses an initiative developed in Spain: The Innovative Business Group Programme (IBGs). Before embarking upon the analysis of this Programme however, the evolution of the role of innovation in tourism policy is first summarised and then secondly, a review is carried out on the use of the cluster concept and the policies associated with this concept in tourism, insofar as the inspirational principles of the IBG Programme liken the innovative groups to clusters.

Innovation has had little bearing on Spanish policies in tourism until quite recently. For the first time ever, innovation and knowledge have become two of the central points of Spanish tourism policy within the context of the Strategic *Spanish Tourism Plan Horizon 2020*, the tourism policy instrument in force between 2008 and 2012. This Plan advocates a new tourist economy where innovation, knowledge, the acquisition and the development of talent are fundamental aspects.

Within the context of this Plan, the Tourism Administration tries to encourage the participation of the tourist sector in the Innovative Business Group Programme (IBGs), which is an industrial policy instrument used to promote innovation and competitiveness within the corporate sector. Although it is not a specific tourism policy instrument in the strict sense of the word (it accommodates any industrial/business sector), what is new about this initiative is the pioneering participation of the tourist sector in a programme that traditionally focused on industrial sectors and the access to typical cluster policy innovative cooperation processes.

I. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this paper is to evaluate the recent policy drawn up to promote the creation and the consolidation of Innovative Business Groups in tourism, whereby special attention is paid to the perceptions of management representatives from each IBG regarding the Program and their group's activities. The analysis of the information provided by Segittur (State Company for tourism technology and innovation management*)*, which is the entity in charge of the Programme that is subject to the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Energy and Tourism (MINETUR), has been enhanced with data from Websites and the strategic plans willingly supplied by each IBG. The empirical research is based on a qualitative ad hoc methodology carried out to analyse the opinions of those in charge of running each IBG with regard to their own work and that of the Programme. In November and December 2012 interviews were held with the managers in charge of 28 out of the 33 IBGs registered at that time on the Special MINETUR Register, by means of the qualitative telephone interview technique using a semi-structured questionnaire.

II. ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE INNOVATIVE BUSINESS GROUP PROGRAMME (IBGS) IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

The objective of the Programme that started in 2007 was to promote the joint efforts of companies, the Administration and research centres involved in a certain activity or that operate like a cluster. The drawing up of a cluster policy on a national scale began in 2000 to coordinate and complement activities that were already being carried out in certain regions of Spain such as the Basque country and Catalonia that had pioneered cluster policies on an international scale in the 90's. Applying the Programme on a national level spreads these policies to other regions of Spain and also includes tourism in a type of policy that is more common in the industrial sectors.

The formal definition of an innovative Business Group (IBG) is «*the combination in a geographic area or specific industrial sector of companies, education centres and public or private research units, involved in processes of collaborative exchange, which are intended to obtain advantages and/or benefits by carrying out innovative joint ventures*». The objective of the IBG is therefore to obtain a critical mass that ensures its international competitiveness and visibility. The definition advocates a group/cluster as being an organization that promotes and develops innovation processes. From the territorial point of view, the geographic concentration of businesses is not an essential requirement.

Ever since the Programme first started it has provided for different lines of support for the clusters to: a) produce strategic plans; b) finance the coordination, management and administration structures of the IBGs formed; c) draw up specific projects aimed at increasing the innovative potential of the companies; d) promote joint ventures or consortium projects between different Spanish IBGs or projects between them and groups or clusters in other European Union countries.

There are 161 IBGs on the Special Ministry Register, of which 21 belong to the tourism sector, that is to say, 13% of the total (2013). Just one year before this participation in the Programme peaked with 33 tourism IBGs. The Programme develops gradually in different stages and the budget is distributed according to the lines of support that have significantly conditioned the results obtained. In 2008, the Programme was first introduced into the tourism sector, the financing of such focused on the only activity possible for the IBGs: the preparation of strategic plans, discussion documents that helped identify the future challenges, and if these were assessed positively by the Ministry they could then be recorded in the Special IBG Register as a way to access other lines of credit within the Programme itself.

In 2009 credit was made available to the first projects and coordination structures (formal role of management) for those that presented numerous projects. In view of this, the Programme seems to be more selective and fair in terms of the different lines of support. In the very same year more funding was used to support the formal management structures that guarantee the survival of the IBGs created. Moreover, after just one year of being part of the Programme, the results obtained by the tourism sector in terms of the organisational capacity in the network and the search for alliances between IBGs to present consortium projects together were very positive.

Nevertheless, 2009 was the last year in which the strategic planning was financed, because although it was obligatory, it was thought that no specific aid should be made available for this, and that it should be paid for by the actual members of the IBG instead. In 2010 the initial positive expectations were dashed by the drastic drop in the overall financing available as a result of the budgetary cuts due to the recession. So, for a few years, from 2010 to 2012, there was no funding available for coordination structures and this had a negative effect on the future survival of many IBGs in particular. Nevertheless, there was a surprising recovery in 2013 both in terms of the projects presented (revival of the IBGs that had survived) and the budgetary allowance finally allocated to tourism in line with the type of proposals and the total budget available for all the sectors included in the Programme.

2.1. Type and geographical distribution of the tourism IBGs

If their specialisation is taken into account, a wide variety of different types of IBGs can be identified, and they can then be classified into the following categories:

1) IBGs that obviously specialise in a specific tourism product.
2) IBGs that specialise in new technology as a way to develop innovation in a specific sector (hospitality) or in any other link in the tourism value chain (transversal and multi-sector).
3) IBGs that are not so specialised, whose objective is to innovate in their own reference geographical area and in the tourism activity that brings them all together.

With regard to the geographical distribution, 21.8% of the IBGs are defined as being national. These are the clusters that are associated with a certain product or a specific sector (marinas, golf courses, active tourism, accessible tourism, protected areas, and language tourism). As for those related to a specific geographic area, the majority of them are established in inland regions and areas (34.37%), which in this case are involved in unspecialised horizontal projects, and sometimes they take on the role of business organisations. In contrast to this, only 15.6% of the IBGs cluster together in the Mediterranean region, which is a specialised tourism area, and this points to a lack of correlation between the creation of clusters and areas with developed and specialised tourism. There are more IBGs in the island communities, Balearic Islands and Canary Islands that stand for another 15.5% of clusters, so the correlation could be established with the level of specialised products in tourism that focus on technological and business competitiveness issues. In turn, the IBGs from the Atlantic and Cantabria areas operate within the corresponding autonomous region and concentrate on specialised products (thermal or culinary tourism) or technology in the tourism sector.

The typological analysis clearly highlights the scarcity of the real geographical clusters, localized systems of businesses or institutions on a local or sub-regional scale, among which it would be worthwhile mentioning the destinations that have a critical mass of supply in different geographical settings (coastal, urban or rural). In contrast to innovation intended for localized systems of businesses or institutions, in practice the Programme has benefited more conventional, inter-firm cooperation that basically concentrates on one common product, a certain sub-sector of tourism or technology suppliers, political-administrative relationships and not in tourist areas with distinct functional dynamics.

2.2 Evaluation of those in charge of managing the IBGs about their work and development in the context of the Programme

According to the in-depth interviews held with those in charge of running the IBGs a series of aspects that help to evaluate the work, development and the future prospects of the IBGs that are involved in the Programme have been studied in great detail. The analysis is summarised into the following sections: Members and level of involvement ; Dynamics of internal and external relations; Existence of formal management and coordination structures; Type of activities carried out; Factors that favour and limit the progress of the activity; Progress and future challenges.

The analysis carried out helps identify the key factors to make an IBG viable:

- Existence of good relations and cooperation ventures beforehand between members, which can be assimilated into a natural cluster.
- Additional economic support from other regional or local Public Administrations.
- Active internal management structure with a manager hired for the task.
- Interannual stability when funds from the Programme are received.
- Self-financing capacity based on what the members contribute and the marketing of the projects carried out.
- More member involvement due to a better perception of the real benefits of being an IBG.
- Carrying out more advanced initiatives related to innovation.
- Presence of influential members from the world of tourism and technology.

III. DISCUSSION

The comparison between the Programme and the cluster theories helps identify the important aspects of the cluster policies that should be taken into consideration in future research work. These are classified into four blocks: cluster effect; cooperation that focuses on innovation; leadership from the private sector; and knowledge transfer.

Table 1
CLUSTER POLICY ELEMENTS AND IBGS PROGRAMME: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Key elements of the cluster policy	Aspects observed in the empirical analysis of the tourism IBGs
- Cluster effect caused by the geographical concentration of companies	- Problems when identifying the geographical scope of the cluster effect. - No beneficial effects of the geographical proximity have been observed. - Importance of social proximity (connections based on similarity and trust) and the cognitive proximity.
- Cooperation for innovation	- Importance of pre-existing relationships between the participants: organic genesis of the cluster. - Importance of the perceived benefits/usefulness of innovation to get the business sector involved. - Cooperation is most effective when there is a formal management entity. - Cooperation between the technological and tourism companies in technological tourism projects. - Positive inter-cluster relationships, although they do need to be defined better (distribution of the financing, tasks, etc.). - Positive effect of the cluster structure support programme synergies on different scales. - Lack of participation of the universities and the research institutions as entities that produce extremely valuable knowledge. - No tradition of cooperation and the predominance of an individualistic type of entrepreneurial behaviour.
- Private sector leadership	- Limited business sector leadership. - Too much dependence on the public incentives as the driving force of initiatives (total or partial subsidies). - Spontaneous emergence associated with the chance of getting grants.
- Knowledge transfer	- Limited capacity to absorb new information produced by the pilot projects carried out. - Low level of commercialization/mass implementation of the projects carried out.

Compiled by the authors