BUILDING LONG LASTING COLLABORATION TO FOSTER INNOVATION BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND WINERIES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN MARCHE REGION

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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Objective/Background

Europe is well known as producer and exporter of wine: wine is part of EU identity, cultural and historical background. If we consider that “between 2009 and 2014, the average annual production was 167 million hectolitres... (that the EU wine sector) accounts for 45% of world wine-growing areas, 65% of production, 57% of global consumption and 70% of exports in global terms.” (European Commission), we can understand that this economic sector is extremely relevant for the sustainable development of several EU regions.

Wine producers are mostly small and micro enterprises: the sector “is composed by an overwhelming majority of small producers, and is therefore extremely atomized in comparison with other food and drinks industries” (DG Agriculture). So, they have to deal with problems related to difficulties of the terroir, isolation, limited access to learning opportunities and the small quantities of production that only in part satisfy the market needs. A coordinated system of relationships that provides a synergy between different stakeholders of a certain area could be the response to this multifaceted issue, and it may bridge a gap in terms of innovation.

The Wine Lab project (funded through the Erasmus + program) wants to stimulate a synergy among higher education institutions (Universities of Agriculture, Oenology, Marketing, Tourism and related fields) and small wineries in disadvantages areas. The main objective is to create a network between research, regional communities and businesses of different countries (Italy, Austria, Hungary and Greece) and generate experiential learning opportunities through new approaches to innovation.

Theoretical Framework/Literature Review

Recently, the need of new scientific knowledge creates the linkage between universities and companies, especially SMEs. (Dylan Jones-Evans et al., 1999).

The academic debate on the issue of innovation is endless. Background literature shows that the literature has focused on exploring the typologies of innovation and their impact on firms and business structure (see among the others the works by Shilling, 2005 and Garcia & Calantone, 2002).

The general definition of innovation provided by Rogers (2010) – innovation is what is perceived as new by the adopter – promotes an approach that is seen in contraposition to the taxonomies provided by other scholars; thus, it has the merit of underlining the key role of the innovation adopter. Yet, since the degree of innovation and its rate of adoption and diffusion vary among sectors and firms (see Rogers, 2004; Peres et al., 2007; there is no doubt that the phenomenon of innovation is complex and it includes cultural issues and entrepreneurial traits that make some firms more innovative than others.

A considerable part of research has focused on innovation in SMEs: scholars (Dressler, 2013) have outlined the impact that entrepreneurial openness to innovation, as well as resources access, internal competences and capabilities, have in the diffusion of innovation.

An extensive body of research has focused on innovation in the Wine Industry: it emerges that networks and clusters can foster the diffusion of innovation (as in the
case of Chilean Wine cluster, examined by Giuliani and Bell in 2005); it also emerges that some countries are more innovative than others, due to a set of conditions (Aylward, 2003), that include, among the others, a stable set of relationships among stakeholders.

As it emerges in some works (see Giuliani et al., 2010), in the wine business a relationship between firms and Universities and research institutes can foster the diffusion of innovation. Firms can create partnerships with universities to acquire knowledge; according to Wilson (2012), “universities are the source of strength in the knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century”. Through this agreement, they produce “movement of embodied expertise and know how in the form of researchers, managers and skilled workers within the regional labor market and via entrepreneur spin-off from existing local firms or organizations to create new technology intensive firms.”(Keeble and Wilkinson, 2013).

So companies can be always updated about latest innovation and researches in their field and increase networks with other stakeholders.(Dada and Fogg, 2012).

From the academic point of view, background research shows how challenging is to find an effective tool for educating entrepreneurs (Higgins & Elliot, 2011). It is widely recognized that passive learning methods will ultimately not develop critical thinking (Munoz et al., 2008). Learning for Entrepreneurs is a social construction and it requires interaction (Higgins & Elliot, 2011; Cook & Brown, 1999). Through the experiential learning theory (Kolb and Kolb, 2011), the main objective is to increase knowledge of students thanks to practical activities in a holistic approach.

**Method**

In the frame of The Wine Lab project, exploratory research has been carried out in order to answer the following research questions:

a) Which are the needs of wineries located in disadvantaged areas, particularly in terms of learning?

b) Which possible forms of cooperation can be established between universities and enterprises?

c) In which contexts the action will take place? Which opportunities and constraints should be taken into account?

Among research activities, semi-structured interviews investigating the relationship between small wineries and universities were carried out: to this aims, 13 wine producers of Marche region, involved inorganic and natural wine production, were consulted.

During the weekend of 20th -21st May 2017, the Consortium Terroir Marche organised in Macerata the third Festival Terroir Marche: in these two days, there was the opportunity to find tasting spots, workshops and to participate to seminars related to the different areas of production and their peculiarities. Terroir Marche™ is an association composed by 16 wineries that aims to promote an organic/biodynamic winegrowing in the area of Marche region. Their mission is to safeguard the territory and resources and the dissemination of culture and practices of a sustainable and fair economy (™ Consortium Statute).

Interviewees were asked to answer the following questions:

- Which are perceived difficulties of small wineries in disadvantage areas, particularly in relation to the market?
- Which are perceived potential of the cooperation with higher education institutions and other stakeholders?
- Which are perceived skills mismatch between the company needs and the newly graduates workers?

**Results and implications**
The main evidence emerging from this exploratory research is that the biggest issues and challenges perceived by winemakers for their businesses are bureaucracy and economic restriction. Other feedbacks describe problems related to the relationship with clients, environment, collaboration with other companies and policymakers in order to create clusters.

In the potential of cooperation point of view, companies expressed the willingness to collaborate with universities and other stakeholders; but in some cases, they lived bad experiences to work together other wineries because they do not share the values of organic production. In addition, some of them had negative prejudices towards policymakers’ projects whilst they affirm the necessity to propose a “real” collaborations, with practical activities and tangible results.

The majority of them agreed that a partnership with university could be a positive experience and it could bring a real contribution for both parties. They designed the opportunity to share knowledge and they are available to learn something new, especially in terms of innovation, new technologies and new ways of cultivation. For the skills mismatch, most of them underlined – based on previous collaborations with other universities and trainees - the lack of competences, skills and practical experience. They also stressed the point to the fact that some of them did not have the willingness to call into questions their previous knowledge.

The objective of this research was to understand the drivers for creating a collaboration between universities and small wineries. The main objective is to co-create a network involving policymakers and other stakeholders, to bring a real contribution in terms of innovation and knowledge.

In general, from this exploratory study, despite it is acknowledgeable the declared willingness to cooperate, some limits and drawbacks emerge, such as different opinions and cultural approaches, and bureaucratic problems.

The Wine Lab wants to improve networking and dialogue at local and regional level, enhancing cooperation between wine players and learning providers, in terms of knowledge sharing, provision and delivery of tailored learning opportunities, mutual understanding and increased transnational dimension of the sector at European level. The research thus plans as upcoming steps to organise and facilitate participatory and networking events aimed at establishing dialogue between concerned players e put the basis for the establishment of a regional network, able to share common visions and to generate innovation through co-creation.

Stakeholders from wine sector, cultural heritage, and rural tourism will be involved, as well as policy makers and academicians.

References


