IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNING AREA CONCEPT IN CROSS BORDER TOURISM DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

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Abstract. Through the Lisbon agreement the European Union has declared its intent to establish itself as a knowledge-based economy, looking to develop information and communications technology (ICT) throughout its Member States as a means of delivering a competitive edge to its businesses and workforce. Furthermore, the EU sustainable development strategy, the Cardiff process of environmental integration and the ‘Europe of the regions’ of the European cohesion process are used as policy guidance for Structural Fund investment to leverage increased regional development. In these approaches, it is widely acknowledged that at the regional level, both natural and human resources can be more effectively managed through partnerships between public administrations, businesses and local communities. According to this, an idea was born to implement the learning area concept on tourism industry, where a learning process is recognized as a mean to upgrade skills in the tourism industry, thus enhancing the environmental and social dimension in the tourist areas.

Rezumat. Implementarea conceptului «zona de învățare» în managementul turismului transfrontalier. Prin Acordul de la Lisabona a Uniunii Europene a fost declarată intenția de a se implementa o economie bazată pe cunoaștere, în căutarea de a dezvolta tehnologia informației și comunicațiilor (TIC) în toate statele sale membre, ca un mijloc de a furniza un avantaj competitiv pentru întreprinderi și forța de muncă. În plus, strategia de dezvoltare durabilă a UE, procesul de la Cardiff de integrare a mediului și "Europa a regiunilor" a procesului europene de coeziune sunt utilizate ca orientare spre politica de investiții a fondurilor structurale pentru a sprijini creșterea dezvoltării regionale. În aceste abordări, este larg recunoscut faptul că la nivel regional, atât resursele naturale și umane pot fi gestionate mai eficient prin intermediul parteneriatelor între administrațiile publice, întreprinderi și comunitățile locale. Potrivit cu aceasta, s-a născut ideea implementării conceptului de învățare în zona industriei turismului, în cazul în care procesul de învățare este recunoscut ca un mijloc de a actualiza competențele în industria turismului, sporing astfel dimensiunea socială și de environmentală în zonele turistice.

Key words: tourism, destination management, learning area, EU

Cuvinte cheie: turism, managementul destinației, domeniul de învățare, U.E.

1. INTRODUCTION

Through the Lisbon agreement (Treaty of Lisbon, 2007) the European Union has declared its intent to establish itself as a knowledge-based economy, looking to develop information and communications technology (ICT) throughout its Member States as a means of delivering a competitive edge to its businesses and workforce. Furthermore, the
EU sustainable development strategy, the Cardiff process of environmental integration and the ‘Europe of the regions’ of the European cohesion process are used as policy guidance for Structural Fund investment to leverage increased regional development. In these approaches, it is widely acknowledged that at the regional level, both natural and human resources can be more effectively managed through partnerships between public administrations, businesses and local communities. According to this, an idea was born to implement the learning area concept on tourism industry, where a learning process is recognized as a mean to upgrade skills in the tourism industry, thus enhancing the environmental and social dimension in the tourist areas (Sillence et al., 2006).

A tourism learning area (TLA) is a concept of a multi-stakeholder, inter-sectoral, problem-solving approach aimed at improving SME/micro-enterprise performance and human potential in the tourism sector at the destination level. The TLA approach engages a broad range of regionally based stakeholders, bringing them together in a top-down/bottom-up process to form coherent information and cooperation networks. These are aimed at continuous improvements in labour competences and organizational management, in order to foster better entrepreneurial quality, innovation, competitiveness and sustainability. TLA concept implicates that all stakeholders must be involved in information distribution and enhancement of this process. TLA should concern all relevant stakeholders of tourism industry and complementary industries and services, for if it is good organized, it can provide continuous information as well as training process and learning that is essential in European knowledge-based economy.

2. LEARNING AREA CONCEPT IN DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

An increasing range of disciplines have drawn attention both to the significance of knowledge and its various codified and explicit forms in terms of business success. Much of the focus has been not only on the handling of different types of knowledge but also on aspects of knowledge transfer and in particular how innovations in new technologies, business practices and methods are incorporated into different organizations.

The flows of know-how can be considered from the perspective of the company being embedded in a network of intra-, inter- and extra-firm relationships. The network perspective on organisational learning and knowledge transfer has received considerable attention, especially the importance of the absorptive capacity of networks in terms of innovation and business performance (Björk, 2007). The learning organisation concept puts tourism sustainability in a different context to most conventional approaches which focus on problem solving. These approaches require problems to be clearly defined and isolated and this may be difficult in the case of tourism due to complexities at all levels (e.g. stakeholders, site diversity, etc.). The application of the learning organisation concept would alleviate this need to focus on problem solution and allow tourism stakeholders to concentrate on applying and testing theories, methods, and tools with the aim of increasing their own skills. Thus, a shared understanding of:

- how the tourism destinations function,
- how market possibilities can be enhanced,
- the requirements for adaptation to changing environments,
- how to promote collective awareness of eventual economic, social, and environmental risks and impacts, and
how risks can be minimised and/or countered can be developed. In other words, the goal has changed from achieving sustainable tourism destinations to creating tourism organisations within a destination which are adaptive to change and capable of learning how to improve sustainability continuously (Schianetz et al., 2007).

Through the Lisbon agreement and its renewed emphasis Jobs and growth initiative, the European Union has declared its intent to establish itself as a knowledge-based economy, looking to develop information and communications technology (ICT) throughout its Member States as a means of delivering a competitive edge to its businesses and workforce. The Lisbon strategy calls for:

- **information society**: defining a regulatory framework for electronic communications; encouraging the spread of ICT; creating conditions for e-commerce; supporting European leadership in mobile communications technologies;
- **research**: setting up of an area of research and innovation; boosting spending on R & D to 3% of GDP; making Europe more attractive for its best brains; promoting new technologies;
- **education and human capital**: halving the number of early school leavers; adapting education and training systems for the knowledge society; fostering lifelong learning for all; promoting and facilitating mobility (Treaty of Lisbon, 2007).

Tourism innovation systems are complex co-ordinated networks of actors, resources and activities. Innovation system consists of actors and relations between those actors which through collective processes create the innovation performance within the system. Innovations normally emerge through incremental and cumulative processes but may appear as radical and unexpected events. The tourism innovation systems are not isolated phenomena as secluded islands in no contact to other systems. The tourism systems are closely inter-linked to other systems found on micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Björk, 2007).

In 2001, the Commission communication Working together for the future of European tourism (developed by the Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry of the European Commission) focused one of its working groups on the question of how to improve training in order to upgrade skills in the tourism industry, where the following issues were seen as causing difficulties for tourism stability and growth throughout the European tourism sector:

- attracting, retaining and developing skilled labour;
- supporting micro-enterprises to improve competitiveness;
- ensuring destination quality in an expanding and global market.

It is widely acknowledged that at the regional level, both natural and human resources can be more effectively managed through partnerships between public administrations, businesses and local communities. Increasingly, with the awareness that careful use of natural resources is only one part of the story of economic success, attention has turned to the management of ‘human capital’ or human potential in the 21st century (Sillence et al., 2006).

Ideas concerning strategic network theory have extended the search for the source of value-creating resources and capabilities beyond the boundaries of the company. The utilisation of strategic networks holds significant potential for research on knowledge
movement within the tourism sector. In particular, they illustrate the potential role of business networks in enabling innovating firms to go beyond internal resources and to harvest external sources of knowledge, which are particularly valued as uncommon knowledge to the organisation (Shaw, Williams, 2009).

The learning area approach concerns learning regions which are territorial spaces where there is a strong, positive environment that is conducive to collecting learning and knowledge transfer. The central ideas behind this concept are that tacit knowledge is the key competitive advantage, and that proximity is essential to developing strong levels of trust and common values which are critical for effective knowledge sharing. Such proximity is most effective at the local and regional levels because of the ways in which institutions are constituted. Knowledge sharing occurs through different vehicles within learning regions, via inter-firm linkages and partnerships, firms and other knowledge-creating bodies such as universities and government agencies, and informally based exchanges of work-related gossip in both workplace and social settings within the region (Shaw, Williams, 2009).

![The Dynamic Learning Pyramid](source: Sillence et al., 2006)

The diagram of the learning pyramid is an excellent graphic representation of all the levels of activity that are generated in a learning region. The pyramid also shows how each level is integrated in a regional networking process.
Applying the learning-areas concept to the tourism sector was defined as an approach at the local/regional level aimed at improving competitiveness through learning and innovation. In such an approach, a holistic and systemic solution could be developed to face up to the main challenges of the tourist sector. This conceptual approach was based on three basic premises, which can be visualized as dynamic wheels moving the sector forward (Diagram 2):

1. The dynamic wheel of stakeholders (centre), formed by involvement of all stakeholders in an area through coherent partnership, networking, and coordination actions that followed top-down/bottom-up approaches.
2. The dynamic wheel of learning (inner), formed by the combination of strategic information, learning, consultancy/guidance and support.
3. The dynamic wheel of labour factors for competitiveness (outer), formed by improvements in competitiveness by taking into account the labour environment, organisational structures and competences for transforming knowledge into innovation.

For transforming learning into innovation the three wheels must act together; all of them being dynamic and interactive elements. These elements play a critical role in three contexts: inside the enterprises, inside the tourism sector and in the tourism-sector environment (support sectors) (Sillence et al., 2006). All of these contexts are interlinked, forming a complexed structure.

Implementing learning organization concept in tourism destination management creates a tourism learning area model (TLA) which is defined (Sillence et al., 2006) as a concept of a multi-stakeholder, inter-sectoral, problem-solving approach aimed at
improving SME/micro-enterprise performance and human potential in the tourism sector at the destination level. The TLA approach engages a broad range of regionally based stakeholders, bringing them together in a top-down/bottom-up process to form coherent information and cooperation networks. When structured as the primary regional tourism-sector knowledge network, a TLA can address contemporary tourism-sector challenges by developing inter- and intra-organisational collaboration alongside a set of holistic learning opportunities. These are aimed at continuous improvements in labour competences and organizational management, in order to foster better entrepreneurial quality, innovation, competitiveness and sustainability.

3. TOURISM LEARNING AREA POTENTIAL IN DKMT EUROREGION

The quality of the experience offered by a tourist destination is more than the sum of its parts; it depends in important ways on how the organisational parts are interconnected, the way they act and interact and the relations between the actors involved. Tourist destinations are conceptualised as industrial districts – geographic areas that can be defined at various levels of aggregation from narrowly defined tourist destinations to towns, cities, regions and countries (March, Wilkinson, 2009).

Recognition of the important role of relations and networks in business and marketing is growing fast. Individuals, organisations and companies are not isolated, independent actors separately contributing their piece to the total value created for customers; they are parts of value chains and networks through which value is co-created and co-delivered. In Europe, there are already many local and regional tourism networks established. Here is a brief overview of the ones which are most significant:

- **EUCC The Coastal Union** - Network organisation that was formed in 1989. It now has members and member organisations in 40 countries with over 3000 registered. Membership is drawn from a wide range of professionals, institutions and organisations with an interest and/or involvement with the coast.

- **ECT (European cities Tourism)** - Formal Network, European Cities Tourism is the leading professional tourism network promoting and linking the interests of European cities tourism.

- **ETIN (European Tourism Industry Network)** - Established as an informal, virtual network association to provide a single contact point for the Commission to work with the private sector and trade organisations. It has around 50 members drawn from across Europe all of whom are directly involved in the provision of tourism services.

- **EUFED (European Federation of Youth Hostels)** - Formal Network created in 1987. The European Federation of Youth Hostels (EUFED) formal network established to represent the interests of Youth Hostels in Europe. It has 15 full members and 4 affiliates all of whom are Youth Hostel Associations. The organisation is managed through its head office in Brussels staffed by two full time employees.

- **ECEAT (European centre for Agrotourism)** - ECEAT (The European Centre for Eco Agro Tourism) was established as a formal network by several environmental
organic agriculture and nature protection organisations to promote and support sustainable environmental practices. It is represented in 15 member states.

A tourism country’s competitiveness is important especially when countries strive for bigger market shares. Tourism managers have to identify and explore competitive advantages and analyse the destination’s competitive position (Gomezelj, Mihalić, 2008). Countries of the DKMT Euroregion share similar local and regional specificities, meaning that natural and cultural tourism resources are separated by interstate borders. By joining these resources and creating a regional tourism learning area, all stakeholders in Hungary, Romania and Serbia can expect a bigger market share, and therefore enhanced tourism development in the region. As the tourism learning-area concept is very new, it is difficult to find exact models of the approach in reality. TLA can be founded on destination level or thematic level. A fine example of good practice in setting up innovative region, learning region and lifelong learning project, which can act as clear guidance for partnership, coordination and IT development strategies is a thematical Spa Rural Tourism TLA in Hungary. Scale and subject matter differ between each implementation scenario and the vision of one set of stakeholders in one part of DKMT Euroregion about what needs to be done may not be the same as the vision of other stakeholders elsewhere. However, there is still a possibility to establish TLA in DKMT Euroregion:

1. Destination level: a TLA concept in management of cross border river tourism destinations: Danube, Tisa, Kris, Mures, Tamis, Bega…
2. Thematic level: agro tourism (with special emphasis on Szalas network and wine production), cycling paths, cultural tourism (Austrian-Hungarian cultural route, Art Nuevo cultural route, German cultural heritage, industrial heritage, common communist heritage…)

4. CONCLUSION

The World Tourism Organisation has frequently referred to the establishment of a new paradigm of tourism education, which is about seeing what skills the tourism sector needs, and how regions and destinations can govern this process more effectively. The learning-area approach creates the focus, not on formal education as the single solution to the training and skills problems, but on the capability of the enterprise to develop the existing workforce — in cooperation with training institutions, local/regional authorities, the social partners and other relevant stakeholders. This partnership and networking approach to the development of human resources offers SMEs the opportunity to gain sustainable and competitive advantages alongside other businesses, and ensures coherent public governance of this process. A tourism learning area aims to assist stakeholders in:

- forming partnerships, networks and clusters
- creating quality products and services
- demonstrating innovative capability
- increasing performance and outputs
- being more autonomous
- displaying greater work flexibility
- operating in a entrepreneurial context
- working with changing technology
• developing adaptive strategies in the face of globalisation and global change
• understanding how to work in a more sustainable way
• enjoying an increase in quality of life, based on fuller access to information

In particular, a tourism learning area can help to improve general management skills, skills needed to deal with the impact and potential use of information technology, and the overall development of human resources in DKMT Euroregion.

For decision-makers and supervisors, this means improved management, networking and training skills. For the skilled (and semi-skilled) workforce, a learning area will help improve the integration of traditional technical skills with the skills appropriate to emerging new job profiles.

At the present, Romania and Hungary are already EU-member states (with different stages of integration), whilst Serbia still finds itself at the beginning of the complex path towards European integration. Establishment of TLA in DKMT Euroregion would mitigate this regional asynchronism. At the destination level, this spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation developed by the tourism learning-area stakeholders will lead to positive economic, environmental and social results.

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