

Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice in the Wine Business: “The Wine Lab” Experience

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Abstract

This paper describes the experience of the three years European project “The Wine Lab”. The project has involved twelve partners from 5 countries and various associated partners across Europe and the US. The paper describes the tools developed to promote a dialogue between Universities and Entrepreneurs in the field of the wine business, with a particular focus on disadvantaged rural areas. Starting from the experience of The Wine Lab (www.thewinelab.eu), the authors want to stimulate a discussion on the effectiveness of participatory approaches for pursuing entrepreneurial education and for improving orientation towards innovative practices. Therefore, the paper proposes a reflection on further developments of research in the field and on the role of scholarly research for supporting wine business.

Key words: entrepreneurship, Academician-Practitioner gap, participatory approaches, disadvantaged areas, innovation

1. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The competitive landscape of the wine industry is extremely various; European wine production is highly fragmented (Roberto, 2003; Morrison and Rabellotti, 2017) with a predominance of small independent producers. The number of appellations is impressive: in Europe, there are 439 PGIs wine and 1164 PDOs. Italy is the first country for the number of appellations (408 PGIs and 118 PDOs), and France is ranked second (361 PGIs and 75 PDOs). There is an abundance of quality wine production and wines that are made from local grape varieties in contraposition with international varieties. The development of the European wine industry is not homogeneous, and location plays a crucial role in defining the competitiveness of local wine industries.

In particular, location can influence the terroir and the distinctiveness of products. Secondly, it can be a strategic leverage for achieving competitive advantage. Many wineries face difficulties in improving their competitiveness since they are placed in disadvantaged areas (Scalabrelli & Lagomarsini, 2008). Some companies can be tough to be reached, or they have to make extreme efforts when cultivating grapes (i.e. steep slopes vineyards), that require extra costs for making wine and labour-intensive activities (Zottele & Delay, 2017); this is the case of heroic viticulture, for example.

Our curiosity has been captured by these companies who must manage difficulties in marketing their products and achieve profits. In the scenario of disadvantaged areas, the role played by wine for achieving economic development is crucial. Therefore, it becomes essential to manage innovation and to understand market trends and dynamics.

In 2016 we were awarded a three years grant (www.thewinelab.eu) within the Knowledge Alliance Erasmus+ framework: a European funded project with twelve partners from 5 countries and various associated partners across Europe and the US; our research focus was on disadvantaged wine areas and more specifically, our general aim was to help winemakers to enhance their competitiveness.

Background research has helped us to define our project and to individuate some research questions.

First of all, we have examined the relationship between local development and the wine industry

In general, we can say that the existence of an interaction between wineries and local community may create a breeding ground for local economic development.

This emerges from the work by Alonso and Northcote (2008) that shows that this relationship stimulates a local market for wine and job creation; as suggested by the authors, this kind of relationship brings to a win-win strategy and leads to business prosperity and enhancement of the quality of life.

The set of conditions that characterises the competitive environment where companies operate can stimulate the flourishing of the wine industry, as in the case of Casablanca depicted by Overton (2012).

Scholars also highlight the role that wine can have in diversifying economic activities and in improving the economic health of a specific area; Maciejciezak (2018) describes this dynamic in Eastern Europe.

Thus, the capacity to establish relationships between people and other companies is of primary importance not only for economic growth but also for the development of innovation.

The active presence of a system of relationships in a specific area can positively influence the competitiveness of an industry (Porter, 1990). Clusters that are characterised by a consolidated system of relationships among stakeholders show a strong orientation towards innovation. There is no doubt that where wine firms are embedded in localised networks, knowledge-based innovation is more likely to happen (Giuliani, 2007),

In this scenario, the role of Higher Education Institutions is crucial.

Background research shows that scholars have examined the relationship between University and wine business and its impact on local development. There are specific examples showing the role that educational institutions cover in the regional economic development: following the insights by Velluzzi (2010), we can say that an educational system or a research institution, when embedded in the surrounding area and community, can easily understand local needs. This relationship, as described by the case of the centre for oenology and viticulture in Walla Walla Valley in Washington State (Velluzzi, 2010) can create benefits for the industry and the population of residents and companies.

In general, Universities can play a key role in regional systems of innovation (Sternberg, 2007).

If on one side, there is no doubt that a relationship between Universities and Companies can be fruitful, on the other some elements that obstacle this collaboration can arise.

Bartunek (2007) explores the drivers that inhibit the efficacy of the relationship between academicians and practitioners and open to a multitude of questions and reflections on the methods to employ for improving the effectiveness of the academic – practitioners relationship. The work by Cavicchi et al. (2014) goes in this direction, and it introduces a reflection that includes not only communication effectiveness (as suggested by Bartunek, 2007) but also the methodologies that are more suitable to reduce the existing gap between academicians and practitioners.

This scenario was the background for the development of The Wine Lab project, that involved universities, companies and local communities in a dialogue to promote innovative practices and entrepreneurial education in disadvantaged wine areas. To this aim, the project has designed and delivered a set of tools and approaches to stimulate a dialogue that involves companies and universities, aimed to answer also to some specific research questions: What is the effectiveness of participatory tools for stimulating an entrepreneurial orientation in the wine business? How can the distance between thinkers and doers be reduced?

The project has focused on the implementation of some activities inspired by a participatory approach. In particular the experience of Winethons – wine hackathons – carried out at a national and international level and the introduction of regional hubs has stimulated a continuous dialogue among participants, and it has reduced the existing gap between academicians and practitioners.

Following research insights that motivate participatory approach in entrepreneurial education (Leitch, 2007), this paper outlines how in our view the adopted tools have helped the entrepreneurs to manage the complexity of their business and to open to innovation adoption in the wine business

The three years collaborative pathway has opened to a multitude of questions that can foster in our view, a discussion among scholars.

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