



COE in Tourism Innovation



Keywords: Tourism, Innovation, Sustainability, Centers

The aim of the project: The COE in Tourism Innovation is an initiative shared between public and private sectors to promote innovation, sustainability, and competitiveness of destinations and companies through applied research activities, innovation, knowledge transfer, and competitive intelligence services.

Partners: Eurecat, Directorate General of Tourism of the Generalitat de Catalunya, the four Catalan Provincial Councils, the City Councils of Barcelona and Vila-Seca, and several leading companies and businesses in the sector (as of Nov. 2021: ALS, Barcelona Aquarium, Avant Grup, Avoris, Baqueira/Beret, Caixa Bank, CONFECAT, Fira Barcelona, La Pedrera/ Casa Milà, Guitart Hotels, La Roca Villaga, medplaya.com, H!tels Hotels and Resorts, PortAventura, ROCROI, and Sangulí Salou camping and resort).

Project implementation time: Founded 2019, currently active with no set end date.

Budget: Not available to the public.

Granted by: Co-financed by the public and private sectors.

Priority line/Specific objective: To promote innovation, sustainability, and the competitiveness of businesses in the tourism sector, particularly through the use of digital technologies.

Context:

Before the pandemic, Barcelona's relationship with tourism was complicated, and the city was categorized as an over-touristed destination. In 2019, Barcelona received nearly 9.5 million annual arrivals and registered 19.8 million overnight stays, in a city of just over 1.6 million residents. The growth of mass tourism and leisure tourism led to tensions between tourists and city residents, who had already begun to complain (since at least 2010) about tourism's negative externalities in the city: dirtiness, noise, overcrowding in public spaces, rising rents and home prices, increases in the general cost of living, gentrification, and others. Still, the tourism sector has an immense economic impact on the city, providing over 96,000 formal jobs in 2018 and constituting 7.3% of Barcelona's GDP the same year. Tourism's spill-over effect on related sectors (such as hospitality, hotels, and transportation) also means that tourism contributes great wealth to the city and sustains the livelihoods of many residents. This tension between economic sustainability and social/ environmental sustainability has led to the need for innovative practices and organizations that will improve the overall, comprehensive sustainability of tourism in the city.

Description:

Given the pre-pandemic state of tourism in Barcelona as an overcrowded tourist destination, the COE in Tourism Innovation was launched in 2019 as a way to bring varied public and private sector actors together in order to address the important issue of improving the sustainability of tourism and its relationship not only to Barcelona, but also to the wider region of Catalonia. This group believes that sustainability is best achieved through innovative practices in both research and practical activities, without forgetting the important economic impact of tourism. As a result, its main objective is to promote innovation, sustainability, and the



competitiveness of destinations and companies through market intelligence, research programs, and tourism information systems, as well as the dissemination of good practices. The group also aims to promote innovation and technological instruments for efficiency in the management of tourism, to promote the creation of new innovative projects, to promote the internationalization of the solutions developed in collaborative practices, and to favor the exchange of knowledge and the generation of new initiatives through a series of public events, publications, and other dissemination activities.

The COE in Tourism Innovation is unique because it seeks to engage the city's many actors and stakeholders in the tourism sector, including local and regional governments, tourism companies, public services in tourism, and other types of public services that are impacted by tourism (such as safety, mobility, urbanism, etc.), as well as seeking to improve the well-being of the inhabitants who live in tourist destinations year-round. The organization is currently working on several key projects, including a pilot project that uses booking and search engine data at tourist attractions to learn more about visitors' profiles and another qualitative research project that seeks to analyze the best tools for talent management in tourism-related organizations.

Since the organization was launched directly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has also dedicated itself to building an extensive web resource center that includes a listing of COVID protocols at the European and Spanish national levels; best practices for returning to tourism amidst the ongoing pandemic; and a robust set of resources, including current data on the pandemic, policy proposals and measures, reports, websites, and other information regarding tourism's reopening at the Catalan, Spanish, European, and global levels.

Results:

With the onset of the pandemic occurring just after the COE's founding, the organization has certainly had to pivot away from the projects it originally intended to begin implementing, and instead focus on COVID-19 and its effects on tourism. Still, the COE has managed to build an extensive web resource center with many helpful sources of data, policy information, general updates, specific viewpoints from experts in the sector, and other resources that help academics, tourists, business owners in the sector, and other stakeholders. Likewise, the two projects that have already begun (detailed above) are progressing and will both conclude in 2022, so we may expect to see clear results and analysis of these efforts in 2023.

Success factors:

An important element of the COE's success is that it has joined both public sector and private sector businesses in the common goal of improving tourism's sustainability. Getting such varied actors on board with this goal is not an easy task. Another success factor is the COE's focus on innovation, particularly in terms of using digital technologies to advance an understanding of the tourism sector and its relationship to the city. This is clearly in line with the city's latest economic plan and COVID-19 recovery efforts as outlined in the Barcelona Green Deal economic plan (April 2021). This plan has specified the city's wish to rebrand itself as a "digital city" and to increase its efforts to invest in technology as a means of not only streamlining city management, but also becoming an international reference in this area.

Limiting factors:

At the moment, the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be the COE's biggest limiting factor since there are so many unknowns as to whether new waves of infections will crop up, whether countries will have to return to health measures limiting mobility and travel, etc. Furthermore, just as the varied nature and interests of the consortium members may be a success factor, so to may they possibly be a limiting factor. It remains to be seen whether these organizations will work together toward a more comprehensive sustainability in the post-COVID future, or whether they will return to pre-pandemic levels and styles of tourism in order to recover from the large economic losses the pandemic has occasioned.



Applicability and upscaling:

It is quite likely that the broad sketches of this type of initiative can be applied in a different area (i.e., starting a consortium of stakeholders from across the public and private sectors to improve tourism sustainability), though the implementation will depend greatly on the stakeholders involved, the institutional relations, and the specific social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts of each area. It is also far more likely that this type of initiative will succeed in a city or urban environment, rather than a rural area. Each area must take into account the necessity of balancing the different pillars of sustainability in its own individual context, as well as weighing (and balancing) the concerns of the varied stakeholders that will ultimately make up the organization.

Other Resources:

COE Innovation in Tourism website in English: <https://coeintourisminnovation.org/en/>

Barcelona Green Deal Economic Plan:

https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/economiatreball/sites/default/files/documents/GreenDeal_abril2021.pdf



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