

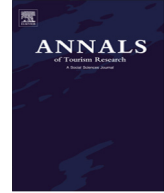


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## Tourism innovation policy: Implementation and outcomes



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### ABSTRACT

The paper opens the “black box” of tourism innovation policy implementation through an analysis of the Spanish Programme of Innovative Business Groups that foster innovation through hybrid top-down bottom-up collaboration embedded in clusters. The focus is on three main issues: process of policy implementation, types of innovation that emerged, and the outcomes and barriers. The findings show the contradictions of this hybrid model of implementation with mixed outcomes of successful collaborations and abandoned trajectories. The Programme has stimulated the ‘propensity’ to innovate resulting in different types of innovation but has revealed the existence of mutually-reinforcing barriers. Some suggestions for future improvements of tourism innovation policies are offered including the importance of polycentricity in effective policy formulation and implementation.

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### Introduction

Innovation concepts have gradually percolated into the tourism literature but research on tourism innovation policies has been limited (Hall, 2009a; Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010, 2012). The

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linked concept of tourism clusters (Hall, 2005; Jackson & Murphy, 2006; Michael et al., 2006; Nordin, 2003; Novelli, Schmitz, & Spencer, 2006; Weidenfeld & Hall, 2014; Weidenfeld, Williams, & Butler, 2010) has been more extensively researched, although it focuses more on spatial proximity and cooperation than on the functioning and outcomes of territorial innovation systems. This situation reinforces Hjalager's (2012: 337) assessment that research on tourism innovation policies remains 'extremely fragmented and largely ignored', potentially reflecting the persistent isolation of tourism from innovation policy and innovation systems discourses (Hall, 2009a; Keller, 2006). It constitutes a striking omission because innovation policies potentially can address systemic failures and institutional and behavioral barriers to innovation processes (Edquist, 2001) which lie at the heart of competitiveness and performance enhancement in a sector with relatively low rates of innovation. Moreover, existing reviews of tourism innovation policies (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2012) have highlighted their highly uneven performance, underlining the need for research in this arena which provides a more critical assessment of the potential.

The limited literature on tourism innovation policies has largely been conceptual or prescriptive, with relatively little empirical evidence about outcomes and effectiveness (Hjalager, 2010). Despite this research gap, tourism innovation policies are increasingly extolled as integral to tourism sector and destination development (Mei, Arcodia, & Ruhanen, 2013; OECD, 2006, 2012a), although such assertions are not always firmly evidence based. In responding to the need for detailed evaluation of tourism innovation policy implementation (Hall & Williams, 2008), this paper addresses Spain's R&D&i Plan, 2008–2011. This policy identifies tourism as an objective of sectoral innovation, and the Programme of the Innovative Business Groups (Agrupaciones Empresariales Innovadoras [AEI]) for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) is a rare example of tourism being funded as part of a national innovation programme. The focus on SMEs also reflects their prevalence in most tourism sub-sectors, and their specific contribution to shaping tourism innovation (Alsos, Eide, & Madsen, 2014; Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010).

The paper focuses on three main issues. First, the hybrid top-down and bottom-up policy setting. Although initiated at the national level, implementation was expected to be at ground level, via clusters of collective actors with firms playing a pivotal role. Tourism partnerships tend to depend on public sector actors and often exhibit 'partnership fatigue' (Caffyn, 2000; Zapata & Hall, 2012). This is particularly relevant where, as in the AEI Programme, partnership incentivisation was top down, and there were substantial implementation barriers. An important exogenous constraint is that the AEI was born in a positive economic era but implemented as the 2008 economic crisis unfolded with particular severity in Spain. The Spanish government's response to the crisis led to sharp reductions in public expenditure, including the AEI Programme. This constituted a particularly severe testing ground for the efficacy and sustainability of attempts to foster innovation through hybrid top-down bottom-up collaboration (Plummer, Kulczycki, & Stacey, 2006). Secondly, innovation is understood in terms of the generic definition of 'the generation, acceptance and implementation of new ideas, processes, products or services' (Kanter, 1983: 20–21), while acknowledging that tourism innovation has distinctive features including a focus on co-terminality of production and consumption, information intensity, and the complex nature of the tourism product (Hall & Williams, 2008: 11–18). This definition frames an examination of the types of innovations (Adams, Tranfield, & Denyer, 2006) that emerge during ground level implementation of policy and the extent to which these are 'distinctive' features of tourism innovation. Thirdly, the paper therefore provides one of the few detailed studies of innovation policy outcomes in tourism. Most policy evaluations, if they occur at all, are made too early after their initiation (Sabatier, 1986). The Spanish Programme had been in operation for six years at the time of this research, making it possible to give an informed commentary on implementation barriers, processes and outcomes. The barriers also highlight some of the specificities of tourism production which represent particular challenges for developing effective tourism innovation policies. This therefore provides a unique longer-term perspective on innovation in tourism across a specific policy initiative. The outcomes are considered not only in material and financial terms, but also innovative capacity and culture, and innovation propensity (Mohnen & Röller, 2005). The article considers these three themes after first reviewing the research literature, explaining the methodology, and outlining the main features of the AEI Programme.

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