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Destination competitiveness and competitiveness indicators: Illustration of the Portuguese reality

M.R. Mira^{a,*}, A. Moura^a, Z. Breda^b

^a Coimbra Education School, Polytechnic of Coimbra, R. D. João III Solum, 3030-329 Coimbra, Portugal

^b University of Aveiro – DEGEI, Campus Universitário Santiago, 3810-193 Aveiro, Portugal

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Abstract The gradual importance devoted to policies focused on new challenges faced locally by destinations, in addition to those policies providing awareness about local stakeholders and their needs, is inseparable from the general knowledge about the potentialities of the surrounding environment, as well as the inevitability of measuring results and impacts (Lozano-Oyola, Blancas, & Caballero, 2012). For these reasons, this paper intends to contribute to the understanding of tourism destination competitiveness, specifically how it can be evaluated, in which indicators it is based on, and what is the open access information available in Portugal. Data resulted from in-depth research in the main Portuguese official open access databases, collected between May and June 2014. Results show that little attention has been given to the operationalisation of strategic and comprehensive information to facilitate tourism development in Portugal or, at least, little attention has been given to ease its access.

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1. Introduction

Ruiz and Gândara (2013) systematised several studies on destination competitiveness, highlighting different theoretical models. For these authors, the literature recognises that the theoretical framework is not consensual.

Nevertheless, some approaches are more adequate, allowing better understanding of destinations as integrated units and, furthermore, the creation of a set of indicators to assess them, such as: “Ritchie and Crouch’s Model, Heath’s Model, and Dwyer and Kim’s Model” (Ruiz & Gândara, 2013, p. 266). The conditions facilitating destination competitiveness are associated with the characterisation of resources, making a distinction between inherited, created and support resources, destination management and cyclical conditions. The great added value of these models is the aggregation of a set of factors in key areas of assessment of destination

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mrmira@esec.pt (M.R. Mira), andreiamoura@esec.pt (A. Moura), zelia@ua.pt (Z. Breda).

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competitiveness, which, given their scope, allow comparable assessment at a global level, even if the importance attached to each of these dimensions may vary according to the culture of each country (Ruiz & Gândara, 2013).

Dwyer, Forsyth, and Rao (2000) argue that destination competitiveness is a general concept which deserves in-depth analysis. Park and Jamieson (2009) believe that competitiveness results from the understanding, on the part of stakeholders, of the different dimensions of the tourism system. Estevão and Ferreira (2015) consider that the challenge which tourism competitiveness faces is associated with the ability that destinations have to secure a strong market position, because they combine a mix of different resources with a cluster organisation of the region where they are located. Tourism clusters appear as an added value strategy for tourism competitiveness, since they allow the consolidation of relationships between stakeholders that share common identity, problems and challenges, often specific of a certain geographical area. For Crouch and Ritchie (1999), there is a growing concern with the well-being and the quality of life of citizens, resulting from the management of complex systems, in which there are various interests at play, often contradictory, in economic, social, cultural, political and environmental terms.

This work aims at contributing to the insight on destination competitiveness, more specifically on how to assess it, the indicators in which it is based on, and the information available in Portugal to help tourism companies and organisations to conduct diagnoses on the status and evolution of the sector. In other words, it aims to present a framework of indicators, which includes tangible and intangible information, and is sufficiently objective to collect accurate and reliable data, being, at the same time, comprehensive to include the economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions of tourism, given that studies of this nature are scarce in the literature (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Park & Jamieson, 2009). For this purpose, tourism performance indicators, proposed by Lozano-Oyola, Blancas, González, and Caballero (2012), are used and applied to the Portuguese context at the national level. Data collection was based on information searches conducted on the main official open access Portuguese databases. The decision to use only these databases is supported by the fact that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) dominate the tourism sector in Portugal, mostly in the form of family-owned businesses (Breda, Costa, & Costa, 2008). These companies play an important role in the economy and in the development of destinations

(Buhalis & Peters, 2006). However, the irreversible process of globalisation, where international standards are high and competition is fierce, is forcing them to strive for increasing competitiveness. The key to that lays in knowledge, which is sometimes out of their reach, in paid databases. The idea behind the use of open access databases is to unveil what is the data freely available to these companies, which often lack the resources to acquire paid information.

Results show that much of the necessary data for the calculation of indicators is not available on the accessed databases, therefore, it is not available for most organisations, especially small-sized ones. Consequently, these organisations may find it difficult to base their strategic development plans on objective and reliable data, which would facilitate the inclusion of innovation in supplying tourism services and products. This difficulty in collecting data, which allows the characterisation of the external environment, hampers tourism activity, in the sense that it decreases the ability to anticipate, which is so important for efficient strategic management and planned supply development.

2. Models of tourism destination competitiveness

Ritchie and Crouch (2010) present five components which influence the competitiveness of destinations, namely, the global environment, the competitive framework, and planning and development policies (at macro level); and, basic resources, attractions, and support resources (at micro level). For these authors, destination management and the quality of determining factors are influenced by the previous dimensions. The first combine the factors related to economy, technology, ecology, political, legal, social and cultural conditions, as well as demographic evolution. The second focuses on the relationship with suppliers and customers, for which promotion and dissemination channels take on a particularly relevant role in the stimulation of competition between destinations that offer similar products, boosting the development of relationships between tourism organisations, both competitive and collaborative (cf. Fig. 1).

It is here that public entities play an essential role, as intermediaries of the type of relationship built between competitors, which may evolve in one direction or another, according to the culture of each destination and the way in which such culture transforms the destination into a meta-entity, namely:

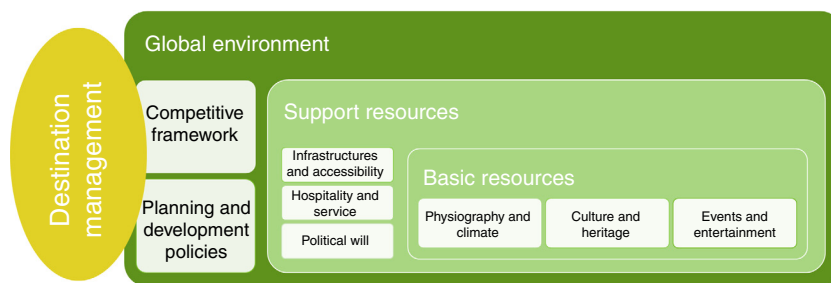


Figure 1 Ritchie and Crouch Model.

Source: Adapted from Ritchie and Crouch (2010).

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