

Desafío Programm. An Erasmus rural version for depopulated areas

Nieves García-Casarejos¹, Marta Rincón-Pérez², Luis Antonio Sáez-Pérez³

¹Department of Management and Organizational, University of Zaragoza, Spain, ²Department of Economics, Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain, ³Department of Economic History and Public Economics, University of Zaragoza, Spain.

Abstract

In remote rural areas, economic and social life exists, although young university students don't believe it. Dynamic companies, innovative administrations and creative third sector need talent, the most decisive input, but it is scarce and it is difficult to compete with cities to attract it. Public Universities linked to local communities could match each part, students and employees, facilitating their respective knowledge through summer internships, improving the human and social capital on both sides.

That's the objective of Desafío Programme, the experimental policy which we analyse in this work. It is implemented by the Provincial Council of Zaragoza and its University to do it reducing transaction cost by giving information and offering grants to the students who decide to work and live in very small villages. Thanks to it they obtain a professional experience in which to apply their knowledges, but, more important, they enrich themselves through an exceptional experience, learning by doing and learning by living. We expose the main points of Desafío, the kind of studies required, the type of company and organization, and the relevant costs. In base to the polls and interviews made before and after, we can deduce a very good valuation of students and employers.

Keywords: *Learning .by doing; Professional Practice; Out of class learning.*

1. Introduction

Numerous rural companies, even in sparsely populated areas, are very dynamic, with an international presence, capable of implementing innovation process, integrated in competitive value chains and very complex clusters (Eder, 2019). Also, local administration of small towns is immersed in processes of new governance, focusing on transparency, efficiency and participation, trying to take advantage from electronic administration (Niehaves *et al.*, 2019). Finally, the third sector manages innovative projects affecting qualitative aspects of well-being, a renewed version of social and individual rights (Saz-Gil *et al.*, 2016). That is, *Smart Growth* is also an important aim of rural development strategies, not only for metropolitan areas, (European Commission, 2018), and needs the main factor that defines it, talent (Florida, 2006).

However, the majority of university students do not know the training possibilities of companies and organizations located at rural areas, and they even have a clear prejudice towards them, in the conviction that these are static societies, lacking in incentives for them (Conejós, 2018). But the most recognized values for well-being and smart development (OECD, 2017), such as participation, social capital, openness, diversity, contact with nature, transversally, transparency, festive atmosphere, are more ubiquitous in small communities, where you become a principal actor in all those spheres, than in most of the urban areas. All that can help to the students to grow up if they experience them in a direct way.

To challenge these dilemmas, so essential for social and territorial sustainability and for a mature learning, the Chair on Depopulation and Creativity¹ planned to combine these two worlds, matching students of the different Degrees at the University of Zaragoza and those companies, social entities and administrations located in sparsely populated areas. It was necessary to induce coincidences between talent (students), promising professional future (employers) and suggestive vital experience (social agents), but reducing their costs of transaction, that is, those of information, meeting and negotiation.

That was the ultimate goal of the *Desafío* Program, to link good students, motivated in their professional learning and longing to increase their personal experiences, with creative activities in different public, private and third sector organizations that fit into their specialization, in order to discover the possibilities so fertile to work and live in a rural community. To do it, we took inspiration in a similar policy done by regional government of Catalonia, Odisseu Program².

¹ <http://catedradespoblaciondpz.unizar.es/>

² <http://www.odisseujove.cat/> We thank very much de generous and efficient collaboration of Gemma Estany, Project Manager of ARCA (Associació d'Inicatives Rurals de Catalunya) and responsible for Odisseu Program.

For the success of *Desafío*, it has been crucial to be helped by Universa, a specific service of the University of Zaragoza with a long experience in labor insertion of students in the social and entrepreneurial network of Aragon. His accumulated know-how and his involvement in all the phases of the project, previous and post, is another basic point that allowed us to move forward in the proposal.

Although the differences with the Erasmus program are notable, since the central question in *Desafío* is not the validation of subjects, so the *canonic* academic sphere remains in the background, they do agree that there is an important life experience for the student in both cases. An experimental way of learning, for important aptitudes and values required to be a good professional and, above all, a good citizen.

For these reasons, spontaneously, the first people who heard it started to rename it the *rural Erasmus*, and we thought it was an attractive label, a good metaphor and marketing idea. No doubt the university world and transnational cooperation would be very different without Erasmus policy. So, the *Desafío* program would like very much in future resemble the Erasmus in that change of mentality, in favoring a generous and open exchange on innovation, sensibility and creativity between the rural and the urban world. To have such nickname could be the beginning...

2. Main points

In any policy and strategy, it is possible to distinguish between goals, instruments and agents involved. We briefly describe them in order to explain *Desafío* Program, to contextualize their main issues.

2.1. Goals

1. Allow students to improve his academic, intellectual, professional and personal learning, as a result of carrying out the *Prácticas* subject in a company, organization or public administration from a small town in the province of Zaragoza. (Human capital)
2. Facilitate that companies, entities of the third sector, and public administrations contribute to the training of future graduates and master's degrees by putting into practice renewed knowledge and proactive skills that simultaneously improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their own business. (Efficiency and creativity for companies and local productive ecosystems and, at the same time, human capital for students).
3. Promoting social and economic regeneration of rural communities that welcome these new residents, so that the value of diversity is appreciated at the confluence of the usual neighbors and of young qualified and motivated newcomers,

generating links on both sides that lead them to an open minded and deeper coexistence. (Social capital -bridging and bonding-, and social cohesion).

2.2. Instruments

Economic and organizational support from the Diputación Provincial de Zaragoza (Provincial Council of Zaragoza) to facilitate the balance between a training offer in quality jobs and a demand for practical learning through the following means:

1. Information to managers, CEOs, civil servants, politicians in the rural area of Zaragoza, the opportunity to have between 120 and 300 working hours of university students in internship tasks, from the most suitable areas of knowledge.
2. Information to students from University of Zaragoza about the options to carry out their curricular and extra-curricular practices in companies of the rural environment of the province of Zaragoza that allow them to improve their personal learning.
3. Financial support for students, insofar as this kind of practice involves travel and accommodation fees, not in an urban environment, an important explicit cost, as well as supporting companies that are integrated into the program by co-financing remuneration on account of work performed.
4. Collaboration with Universa at the management of this entire program.

2.3. Agents involved

1. Employers, individually and through their sectorial associations.
2. Local Administration, Counties, Local Development Entities (Local Action Groups for Leader Programs-LAGs).
3. Government of Aragon, and its delegations at the local level.
4. Non-Governmental Organizations, Foundations, Agencies. (Third Sector).
5. University of Zaragoza, with its orientation and employment service, Universa.
6. Student associations: student organizations, student delegations, cultural groups.
7. Trade Unions and Agricultural Organizations.
8. Politicians and elected officials with responsibilities at the local level.

3. Results

On April 17, 2018, a collaboration agreement between Diputación Provincial de Zaragoza and the University of Zaragoza was signed in order to implement the *Desafío* Program. The Provincial Council contributed to the Universa service the total amount of 9,000 euros, which has been paid for accommodation, travel expenses and scholarships for participating students (including Social Security). There were 22 entities initially interested on (Table 1). They sent their requests for internships, which were assessed taking into account criteria

that favored small villages and local organizations, but also considering the suitability of performance. Above all, we account the ability of the internship to culminate a mature, autonomous, critical learning that fosters less developed skills in regulated teaching within the classroom. As the budget did not allow all the applications received to be addressed, after the assessment, those with the best score were prioritized. In total, there were 19 internship positions were broadcast.

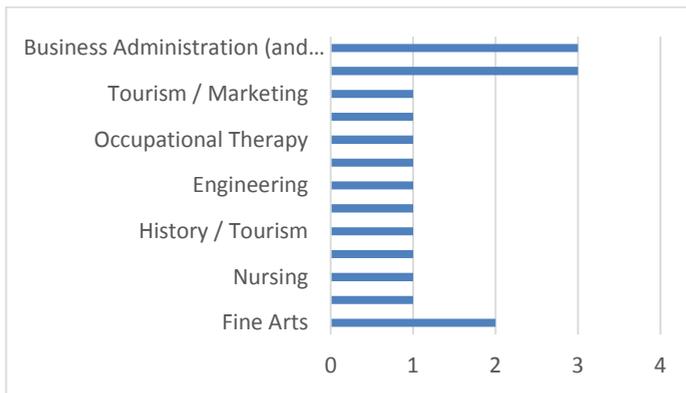
Table 1. Organizations and Studies.

Organization	Studies required
Agrupación Defensa Sanitaria Porcino De Tauste	Veterinary
Asociación Sociocultural Purroy Unido	Fine Arts
Ayuntamiento de Aladrén	Engineering
Ayuntamiento de Herrera De Los Navarros	Pre-School Education
Ayuntamiento de Herrera De Los Navarros	Tourism / Marketing
Ayuntamiento de Herrera De Los Navarros	Law
Ayuntamiento de Jaraba	History / Tourism
Bodegas San Valero S. Coop.	Business Administration (and similar)
Comarca Ribera Baja Del Ebro	Information and documentation
Mermeladas Bubub S.L.U.	Business Administration (and similar)
Pueblos En Arte	Business Administration (and similar)
Pueblos En Arte	Fine Arts
Romanos Aljama S.L	Social Work
Romanos Aljama S.L	Occupational Therapy
Romanos Aljama S.L	Physiotherapy
Romanos Aljama S.L	Nursing
Senderos de Teja S.L	Business Administration (and similar)
Sat 1733 Granja San Miguel	Veterinary
Tomás Yagüe Colas	Veterinary

Source: Universa

As we can see from table 1, the most requested degrees were those in Economics and Business and Veterinary. The first ones are required for all kind of organizations, as they are useful for strategic functions but also for day a day affairs. Veterinary has to see with a specific reason, an important activity in rural areas of Aragón, intensive farming, which is increasing their production exponentially. Most of the pork industry is migrating from Netherlands and Catalonia, congested areas of people and pigs, to depopulated Aragón, as pollution generates negative externalities and in sparsely populated areas the need for jobs and economic vitality does not allow to be so meticulous.

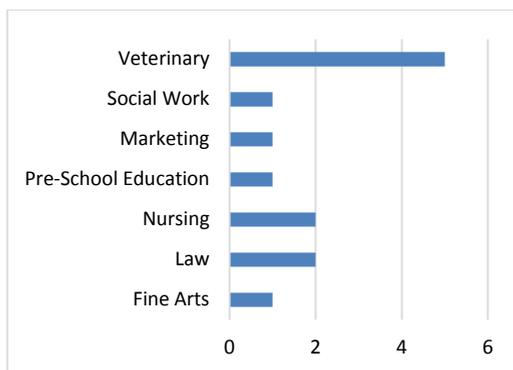
Table 2. Studies Required.



Source: Universa

To cover these offers, publicity was made by e mailing from University, social networks and particular emails of students enrolled in Universa. All the students interested in participating in the *Desafío* Program were selected by the applicant entity. Finally, 13 internships were managed in this Project. Finally, the most demanded studies were Veterinary, whose students covered 5 of the 13 internships, followed by Nursing, due to the aging of rural areas, and Law, polyvalent for local administrations.

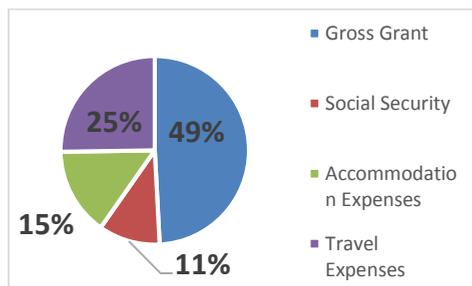
Table 3. Desafío's Internships.



Source: Universa

The average duration of the 13 practices has been 30.92 days, and the average payment amounts to 691.90 Euros (which includes the aforementioned concepts of accommodation expenses, travel expenses and study aid bag for the student - including Social Security). The distribution of the total budget, 9,000 euros, among the different concepts has been as Table 4 shows.

Table 4. Budget Distribution



Source: Universa

4. Conclusions

Desafío Program is a lab policy, which has been improved for the first time last course, but the first impressions, as the polls made by Universa showed, have been very positive, for the local communities, the organizations which employed them, and for students.

First of all, the change of residence from a city like Zaragoza (700,000 inhabitants) to a small village is not merely geographical, but much more sharp. It does not matter so much the physical distance, in our case very short, as the deep change of mentality, of context, of way of relating with people. In a small isolated community, the individual persons are

always relevant actors, and the values inspired by trust and compromise are often more determinant than prices and the market. There can be more contrast between the rural and the urban areas of the same province, than between two European cities placed in the uttermost situation. Perhaps, because of that, *Desafío* promotes diversity, maturing and open minded in a more robust and radical sense. So, pedagogically, it is a good option.

Also, we have to look for a higher responsibility of employers and rest of stakeholders. In this first year, they did not assume any cost, do not pay a euro and didn't participate in any reunion. There is a populist victimism discourse very rooted in depopulated areas, as if everybody ought to compensate them for everything. In part it is true that the rest of territories have to balance the public goods and positive externalities they produce on the rest of society, take into account the problems associated to polarized growth, but at the same time rural citizens have to play their chances in a smart way, by themselves. For next editions, they should have to be more compromised in financial and functional aspects. A co-responsible designing of the program would be interesting.

About the instruments, we appreciate some specific questions. First, we perceived that students, despite knowing the conditions of the project, considered the amount of the scholarship insufficient, since, although accommodation expenses were covered, maintenance expenses are not, so they had to dedicate the grant to pay for them. So, an important part of the money was used to cover the expenses generated during the internship period. It would be advisable to add a new item to cover living expenses. Also, management of accommodation in remote rural areas is not professionalized, as their usual clients are families and not with companies neither public institutions. A simple bureaucratic paperwork involves a complexity that is not always easy to overcome. Finally, at certain types of internships (Fine Arts), it would be advisable to have a heading for variable expenses, to include, for example, the purchase of some materials for the execution.

References

- Conejos, A. (2018). *Expectativas de la juventud en el medio rural aragonés*. Master Thesis, University of Zaragoza.
- Eder, J. (2019). Innovation in the Periphery: A Critical Survey and Research Agenda, *International Regional Science Review*, vol. 42 (2), 119-146. DOI: 10.1177/0160017618764279.
- European Commission (2018). *EU Action for Smart Villages*. https://ec.europa.eu/.../sites/.../rur-dev-small-villages_en.pdf
- Florida, R. (2006). The flight of the creative class: The new global competition for talent. *Liberal Education*, 92(3), 22-29.

- Niehaves B., Röding K., Oschinsky F.M. (2019) Structural Features of Digital Strategies for Municipalities. In: Bergener K., Räckers M., Stein A. (eds) *The Art of Structuring*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-06234-7_40
- OECD (2017). *How's Life? 2017: Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/how-life-2017-en>.
- Saz-Gil, I., Almaguer-Kalixto, P., Gómez-Quintero, J.D. (2016). Social capital and networks: Analysis of the third sector in rural contexts [Capital social y redes sociales: Análisis del tercer sector en contextos rurales], *CIRIEC-España Revista de Economía Pública, Social y Cooperativa*, 86 (1), 123-154.