

Chapter 14

The Role of Higher Education in Supporting Sustainable Rural Entrepreneurship: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter refers to an empirical research that aims to analyze how the knowledge and skills acquired during undergraduate studies have been perceived by the graduate students and also how the higher education contributes to the development of entrepreneurship in rural areas. The research method identified as being more appropriate was a quantitative research based on an online survey established in accordance with the objectives set up. The participants in the research were the graduate students of the Faculty of Agri-food and Environmental Economy within The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The findings are based on participants' open statements that could be important arguments to be taken into consideration for improving the decision making in higher education which would lead to the professional development of the graduates.

INTRODUCTION

In Romania the rural area represents approximately half of the total surface and population (NSI, 2016). This area tends to be described by a low level of education, poor infrastructure and a low level of income generated especially by agriculture (NRDP, 2014).

It is reasonable to expect that such a large part of Romania – as a member of the European Union (EU) - should be engaged in activities related to the knowledge market. Since 2000, the EU has promoted the knowledge economy as the new era of global economy and has required equal participation from

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all its members (Lisbon Agenda, 2000). The population could get involved in using new agricultural technologies, rural tourism as branches of entrepreneurship in the rural area or engage in taking decisions for the local community.

Bitterly, such expectations are challenged by the real situation of the rural area. It is acknowledged both by authorities and researchers that rural people are not sufficiently prepared to be an active part of the knowledge economy and its market. As a result, a set of solutions must be found and implemented by the authorities in order to bridge the gap between the current rural area and the desirable one.

Considering that entrepreneurship is acknowledged as a process that enhances *wealth through innovation and exploitation of opportunities* (Nasution, Mavondo, Matanda & Ndubisi, 2011) and that it requires characteristics like risk taking, proactiveness and autonomy of a person, is it possible to speak of it in rural Romania? Even if the current situation is not a desirable one, researchers (Fromhold-Eisebith & Werker, 2013; Bercovitz & Feldman, 2006) imply that the higher education institutions have an important role in enhancing the entrepreneurial development of a region.

In this case, the Faculty of Agri-food and Environmental Economy (FAEE), as part of The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, has the advantage of being the only one with such a profile in Romania. Arguably, the Faculty must fulfil their role in the field of agriculture and rural development and thus, to contribute to ensuring long term food security by educating the rural youth and by triggering its entrepreneurial potential.

The purpose of this paper is to compare the perceptions of FAEE's graduates on the role of this institution with the Faculty's goals and potential of providing a connection between the rural areas' challenges and the knowledge economy by educating new generations of entrepreneurs. One can justifiably assume that the most graduates who choose to work in rural areas build a career in agriculture and the knowledge acquired during their studies can contribute to the development of the rural area.

The graduates' perceptions and the correlations they make between their choice of school, the knowledge and skills needed in the field of work and their possibilities of developing a business have been gathered in a piece of quantitative research based on an online survey. Generating the findings will involve:

- Calculating the proportion of respondents that work in the field of agricultural, food or environmental economy and the proportion of respondents that are rural entrepreneurs;
- Gauging the extent to which the knowledge and skills acquired during undergraduate education has helped the respondents in their current situation;
- Analyzing the respondents' beliefs and attitudes on the usefulness of their education in relation to their career.

BACKGROUND

Entrepreneurship is defined as *any attempt to create a new business enterprise or to expand an existing business by an individual, a team of individuals, or an established business* (Zacharis, Bygrave, & Shepherd, 2000). The concept of new business implies also new information, new relations and new products, which creates a direct connection between entrepreneurship and the knowledge-based economy that is currently replacing the industrial economy. Even more, Kayne (1999) considers entrepreneurs to be *individuals who blend innovation with sound business practices to commercialize new products and services that result in high-growth firms*.

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