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*International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*  
Volume 16, Special Issue A, 2013

## **Higher Education Institutions as Managers of Wicked Problems: Place Branding and Rural Development in Marche Region, Italy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper highlights the role that Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) can play in the development of place umbrella brands in a rural area of Italy. Place branding in rural areas is considered a wicked problem, since it must be managed by many stakeholders who often have diverse and conflicting motives. This case analyzes the “Marche d’Eccellenza,” a Forum held in the Marche Region of Italy, in 2010. Private and public sector stakeholders participated in a series of brainstorming sessions on how to collectively develop the region’s resources and unique value proposition. The results show how the involvement of a university, as a trainer, partner and facilitator, can help build place brands in rural areas.

**Keywords:** Higher education institutions, university, third mission, place branding, rural development, stakeholder engagement, wicked problems, Italy.

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## Introduction

Rural areas are generally characterized as having far-flung small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that are more concerned with day-to-day business survival than developing long-term sustainable development strategies (Mitchell & Hall 2005; Vernon et al. 2005). In order to work together for sustainable development, leaders and players in these rural areas need to formulate long-term visions and articulate the value of what they have to offer in a way that will attract consumers. Partnerships among communities and local stakeholders can form the basic building blocks of the development process (Mitchell and Hall 2005; Pacciani et al. 2001), but their establishment takes both time and significant effort, especially as these stakeholders are notoriously heterogeneous. According to Holmes (2002), ruralities are marked by uncertain, complex and often contradictory modes of decision making, swayed by multiple interest-groups, each with its own distinctive set of values and ideologies. This context has been defined by several authors (Friedmann 1987; Rittel and Webber 1972) as a ‘wicked’ problem. One strategy to help small and medium enterprises become more competitive is to use place branding as a marketing tool.

The first step (Hall et al. 2003, 37) is to identify territorial resources and evaluate them as clusters and/or networks. Networking has been defined as a “wide range of co-operative behavior between otherwise competing organizations and between organizations linked through economic and social relationships and transactions.”

Thus, it is necessary to construct a comprehensive picture of the region, so that policy makers can analyze both the strengths and weaknesses, define the opportunities and threats in order to develop initiatives that will be successful. This process is endorsed by the OECD, and recognizes the necessity of an *ad-hoc* analysis in order to understand regional development problems. An interchangeable model does not exist, given that every region has different needs. Copying best practices is almost impossible when it comes to intangible regional assets that are the results of long histories in particular regional contexts (OECD 2011, 120).

The process of developing a comprehensive picture of a region requires a dialogue among stakeholders: local public institutions, entrepreneurs, consultants, and researchers in order to measure the collective coordination capacity. This step identifies whether sufficient synergies exist among the players so that the key objectives of connecting interested individuals can occur. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can help facilitate this process since they possess the resources and capital needed to research the productive system, lead discussions among stakeholders, and report the progress in all stages of the process (Belletti 2006).

In a globalized world, universities are often called upon to play a greater role as stimulators and facilitators of knowledge transfer within business and society. This paper explores the role that higher education institutions can perform in supporting place branding development by facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement.

This paper outlines (1) place branding and rural development as a wicked problem; (2) the case of “Marche d’Eccellenza” a Forum held in Macerata (Italy) in November 2010, and; (3) how HEI involvement can help bridge the knowledge gap in light of the existing literature on the third mission of universities.

## **Place Branding and Rural Development as Wicked Problems**

As a general premise related to the challenge of managing ‘wicked problems’, it is worth noting that the European Commission is currently conducting an ex-ante assessment that will accompany the regional authorities during the process of planning and conducting the 2014 - 2020 Rural Development Programmes (RDP). Evaluators are preparing the best possible RDP for their country/region by integrating the evaluations into the design process and progressively refining them through a series of incremental improvements. This assessment exercise is specific to the type of beneficiary, territory, unique problems and desired results of the group. The evaluations strive to reflect the needs of each stakeholder group, people and territories to be differentiated and addressed (European Commission 2012).

Moreover, a recent opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee of European Union, on ‘agriculture and crafts —stressed the strategic role of that regional value chains have on local development. Particularly, the committee recognized the significant opportunity for crafts, agriculture, tourism, retailing and the entire rural economy as a whole while developing regional umbrella brands. Thus, a series of initiatives are foreseen in order to strengthen existing economic and social structures and meet future challenges: quality of life, innovation, sustainable protection of the environment and nature, energy security, and preservation of cultural heritage, among others. The strategy adopted by European Commission clearly tries to address the difficulties of rural development planning.

The analysis provided in Table 1 outlines different streams of literature on place branding and rural development suggesting two macro-themes considered as wicked problems. In order to demonstrate this, the paper published by Batie (2008) will be considered a main point of reference. The author offers a set of wicked problems characteristics and a comparison of tame or solvable problems. The list has been used to build a taxonomy that includes both the features of place branding and rural areas development process.

The first wicked component identified by Batie states that “no agreement exists about what the problem is” and “the solution is not true or false”. Clearly this is the case in place branding. This concept, considered part of a regional development and strategic approach, relates to all those promotional activities of an area, made by governments (either country, regional, or city) and industry groups (Papadopoulos 2004), to increase the attractiveness of a specific area as a place for working, living and spending free time (van Ham 2001). This implies that there is not a priori solution on what should be marketed (Gilmore 2002). In fact, dealing with multiple stakeholders with different needs, generally leads to conflicts about the real solution to the problem (Hankinson 2007). Interconnectedness, complicatedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, pluralism and conflict, and societal constraints of rural areas need a strategic integrated and interactive approach Lang (1988). The process reflects a search for shared interests and values, consensus and feasible and acceptable alternative actions,. The actions oriented to solve the problem differently impact local stakeholders. There are some subjects who will move forward and profit from this new development (Van der Ploeg et al. 2000), while others could be left out from the strategic focus.

**Table 1.** Summary of Wicked Problems' Characteristics

Wicked problems' characteristics		Place branding as a wicked problem	Rural areas development process as a wicked problem
<b>The Problem</b>	No agreement exists about what the problem is. Each attempt to create a solution changes the problem.	Destinations are multi-service products and therefore are often of interest to a wide range of audiences. "Conflict may arise, both within and between these segments, as a result of the different needs of each audience" (Hankinson 2007, 249)	Interconnectedness, complicatedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, pluralism and conflict, and societal constraints characterize rural areas (Lang 1988)
	The solution is not true or false—the end is assessed as "better" or "worse" or "good enough."	There is no a prior solution on what should be marketed (Gilmore 2002).	Potential tensions surround the drive towards the production of high quality produce and regional specialities. "Who will move forward and profit from this new development? Will it be large-scale agribusiness or new grass-root farmer co-operatives? (van der Ploeg et al. 2000, 393).
<b>The role of stakeholders</b>	The problem changes over time.	<sup>4</sup> "Place branding is a long-term endeavor. It need not and should not cost more than any place can comfortably afford, but is neither a quick fix nor a short-term campaign" (Anholt 2003, 220)	The concept of rural identity is ambiguous and dynamic... subject to on-going social processes (Messely et al. 2009).
	Many stakeholders are likely to have differing ideas about the "real" problem and causes.	Place branding addresses multiple stakeholders (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009). "There are widely different agendas to be found among the stakeholders of a national or regional brand" (Anholt 2003, 225)	"Rural development is multi-faceted in nature. It unfolds into a wide array of different and sometimes interconnected practices" (van der Ploeg et al. 2000, 394)
<b>The "stopping rule"</b>	The end is accompanied by stakeholders, political forces, and resource availability. There is no definitive solution	Place Branding needs to achieve "a balance between applying cutting-edge advertising and public relations approaches to a marketing problem and the realpolitik of managing local, regional, and national politics" (Morgan 2002, 339).	"Rural development seems, in many important respects, to have a life of its own. Despite concerted efforts by both state agencies and private-sector firms, rural areas continue to follow their own stubborn logic of change and stasis". (Murdoch 2000, 407).
<b>Nature of the problem</b>	Solution(s) to problem is (are) based on "judgments" of multiple stakeholders.	"Settling on a common strategy that considers all stakeholder interests and which meets the criteria of relevance for targeted place consumers and differentiation from competing places is likely to be a cumbersome task." (Therkelsen 2008).	"Participatory approaches to rural development have been emphasised in order to ensure that existing rural resources are put to the best use." (Murdoch 2000, 412).

**Table 1.** Summary of Wicked Problems' Characteristics—*Continued*

Wicked problems' characteristics	Place branding as a wicked problem	Rural areas development process as a wicked problem
The problem is associated with high uncertainty as to system components and outcomes.	Place branding has a high level of intangibility and complexity (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009).	Ruralities are marked by “uncertain, complex and often contradictory modes of decision making, swayed by multiple interest-groups, each with its own distinctive set of values and ideologies” (Holmes 2002, 372).
There are not shared values with respect to societal goals.	“Often local communities may distrust new initiatives and are less likely to take ownership of the brand if there is a tension between economic regeneration and communities in managing the urban environment”. (Trueman et al. 2007, 23)	“Policy objectives may be decided either within the rural area or from outside. Problems arise when one group looks only at its own objectives without taking account of the need for compromise” (Pevetz 1980,36).

**Source.** Adapted from Batie and authors' elaboration (2008).

The role of stakeholders is the second issue noted by Batie (2008). Their direct involvement is necessary in order to define and analyze the problem. While stakeholders face problems which change overtime, there is generally little agreement among them about the real problems faced or the causes. Place branding is a long-term endeavor (Anholt 2003), addressing multiple stakeholders (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009) with varied agendas (Anholt 2003). Analogously, the concept of rural identity is ambiguous and dynamic (Messely et al. 2009), as rural stakeholders belong to very different sectors (not only agriculture) with competing interests. (van der Ploeg et al. 2000).

The third element of a wicked problem as reported by Batie is the “stopping role”—there is no definitive solution, so the end is accompanied by stakeholders, political forces and resource availability. Place branding is an ongoing process aimed at finding a balance between applying cutting-edge advertising and public relations approaches to a marketing problem and the realpolitik of managing local, regional, and national politics (Morgan 2002). “Rural areas continue to follow their own stubborn logic of change and stasis despite concerted efforts by both state agencies and private-sector firms to discover a secret recipe for economic success in the countryside,” (Murdoch 2000).

Finally, the fourth characteristic identified by Batie relates to the nature of the problem. This is split into three components: a) solutions to problems are based on judgments of multiple stakeholders; b) the problem is associated with high uncertainty as to system components and outcomes, and; c) values are not necessarily shared with respect to societal goals. This characteristic contains many common elements of place branding and rural development concepts.

Place branding has a high level of intangibility and complexity (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009) and ruralities are marked by “uncertain, complex and often contradictory modes of decision making, swayed by multiple interest-groups, each with its own distinctive set of values and

ideologies” (Holmes 2002, 372). Local communities distrust new initiatives about place branding, especially in rural areas where problems arise when one group looks only at its own objectives without taking account the need for compromise or the multiple uses of rural areas” (Pevetz 1980).

During the last 10 years many European regions and provinces have tried to pursue creative strategies to promote the qualities of their territories (Hospers 2004) in the broadest sense, trying to leverage: landscape, nature, cultural heritage, regional products, regional gastronomy and traditional quality products, among others (de Bruin, 2008, cited in Messely et al. 2009).

Success of an umbrella brand in the marketplace is gained only if actors “build an identity or brand image that sums up for potential visitors the essence of the physical qualities, landscape, people, culture, quality, and vibrancy of the area” (Garrod et al. 2006).

This identity is a multi-complex concept (Kruit et al. 2004; Ernste 2005, cited in Messely 2009) is difficult to grasp, ambiguous, dynamic, and subject to ongoing social processes. Place branding cannot be considered a tame problem because there is no linear solution. Place branding has multidisciplinary roots, addresses multiple stakeholders, has a high level of intangibility and complexity, needs to take into account social responsibility, deals with multiple identities, and needs long-term development (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009). These combined characteristics comprise the “wicked problem.”

Moreover, rural regions are less place-specific than towns or cities, and often sparsely populated, carry out dispersed activities and encompass diverse landscapes. Due to varying perceptions held of ‘the rural’, rural place branding activities are potentially more difficult to manage than urban place branding attempts (Boyne and Hall 2004).

There are key factors in stakeholders engagement in rural areas to “...influence businesses’ willingness to co-operate, create alliances and actively work towards the long-term benefits deriving from a collaborative use of resources” (Novelli et al. 2006). A key factor for the success of a place branding initiative is to engage stakeholders at an early stage of project planning in order to collectively formulate aims and objectives of initiatives and to provide them a sense of ownership of the project (Boyne and Hall 2003). Trust and reciprocity within and between social groups result from personal contacts and social networking. These early interactions serve as the basis for cooperation and collective action (Miles and Tully 2007; Aylward et al. 2009). Place branding could represent a key driver for sustainability. It facilitates economic growth, social harmony, employability, financial confidence, and environmental sustainability (Maheswari et al. 2011). Place branding, considered a territorial marketing tool, reduces the complexities of reality experienced by rural enterprises. In this context, it seems interesting to identify how the presence of a higher education institution (university) could modify and improve the network relationship. The role of the university in the knowledge-based economy has changed. They are now considered an “engines” of economic development (Florida et al. 1999).

## “Marche d’Eccellenza”: A Case Study

### *Socio-Economic Outlook of Marche Region*

The Marche is a region in Italy located at the crossroads of the Adriatic corridor and the gateway to southern and eastern Europe. The region is 9,963 km<sup>2</sup> with approximately 1.5 million inhabitants. The territory is characterized by inland mountains and a hilly region. Flat lands run along the Adriatic coast and rivers. Rural areas account for 95% of the regional territory and host 81% of the population. More specifically, 65.5% of the Marche is agricultural land; 21% is forest; 9.5% are natural areas; and, 3.9% are artificial areas.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is widely considered one of the most industrialized regions in Italy and belongs to what has been called the “Third Italy,” a model of development based on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) located in small industrial districts.

According to the OECD, 2011<sup>2</sup>, local entrepreneurial activity is mainly based on family-owned firms and the skills levels are generally low. “This is linked to a lack of capacity to absorb innovation, which is a general problem for SMEs” (OECD 2011). In particular, the lack of economic restructuring and adaptation to globalization has made the region more vulnerable to the current financial and economic downturn in the world economy (OECD 2011). In this context, it appears that the regional economy must speed up the restructuring process in order to become more knowledge-intensive and innovative. In order to do so, the role of research organizations and collaboration among universities and industries must become a key focus area of concern in the future economic policy of the region (OECD 2011,112).

One policy recommendation put forth by the OECD (2011, 34) is that of “integrating agricultural and tourism industries to exploit entrepreneurship opportunities throughout the region, taking advantage of the natural scenic resources of Marche.”

### *Background*

Since 2009, an attempt has been underway to collect some of the typical products and key features the Marches under the umbrella-brand “Marche d’Eccellenza,”<sup>3</sup> it includes different brands of food, manufactured products, and tourism destinations.

Stakeholders signing the original agreement (on 12/12/2009), which setup the permanent “Marche d’Eccellenza” Forum included: the Vice-president of the regional council (in charge of rural policies), the Chancellor of the University of Macerata, the CEO of UBI bank (Banca Popolare di Ancona), the Mayor of Fermo (as a delegate of “Tipicità,” the festival of the Marche’s typical products), and the Unioncamere Marche, representing the Chamber of Commerce.

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<sup>1</sup> Source. Marche Rural Development Programme

<sup>2</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

<sup>3</sup> The word *marche* means both the region and the English term, brands. “Brands of Excellence.”



The aim of the “Marche d’Eccellenza” project is to forge a strong connection between the products and services offered in the Marche and the identity of the Marche. The “Marche Product” encompasses the products unique to the region, as well as the resources exclusive to this territory. Typical products are not only food and wine, but also hand-crafted goods, fashion, and all the best products from the traditional knowledge of the region’s local population.

The project developed as a “laboratory of ideas,” with the aim of fostering new research, as well as promoting and monitoring the “*Made in Marche*” trademark in order to sustain productive and economic initiatives that foster sustainable development according to the Marche identity. Tourism and all related supply chains emerged a dominant initiative.

### *Marche d’Eccellenza Forum*

The University of Macerata is the only HEI in the Marche region that offers a three-year degree program in Tourism Sciences and organized the first “Marche d’Eccellenza” Forum in November, 2010. More than 150 bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, consultants, and researchers joined this initiative in order to explore the development of tourism and the local economy under a regional umbrella-brand. The University sought to create an open arena where these participants could analyze opportunities and problems in creating networks, and discuss new initiatives and strategies.

The founders of “Marche d’Eccellenza” presented the initiative and opened the discussion in a general plenary session. Participants then chose among three brainstorming sessions offered on *Internationalization*, *Know-How*, and *Place Umbrella-Brands* led by university professors, to explore the participant’s ideas and strategies for developing the regional economy. Workshop activities were aimed at sharing ideas and knowledge.

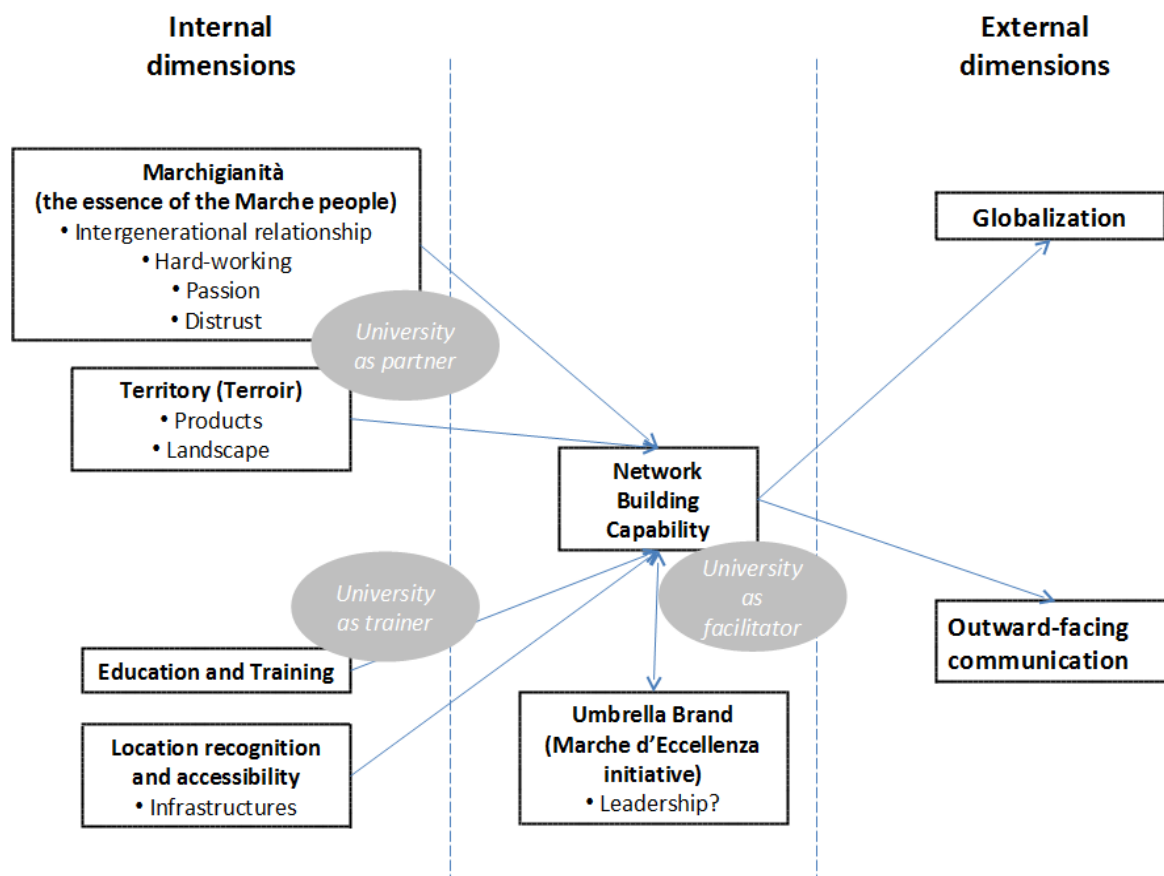
At the conclusion of the Forum, all stakeholders co-signed an umbrella-brand agreement, in order to overcome the historical divisions in the region.

The workshops were recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. The themes were sorted using a grounded theory approach in which researchers, following an iterative process, attributed a certain code (e.g. Education), and then reviewed and fine-tuned their code assignment by searching for further materials to include (Lonkila 1995); in fact, this process represents the basis for the conceptual model. Consistent with this approach, the analysis was structured in phases. In the first step, brainstorming transcription passages were free-coded independently by two researchers. In subsequent meetings, the results were examined in order to identify the main “nodes” (themes) and discuss the level of congruence (Gabbai et al. 2003). This work was carried out jointly because the attribution of a certain code (e.g. Education) is necessarily linked to the subjective interpretation of the researcher. By examining the different coding together researchers were able to agree on the definition of the main themes which emerged from the brainstorming sessions.

## Results

The content analysis of the brainstorming sessions of the first “Marche d’Eccellenza” Forum transcribed verbatim demonstrated that there were some relevant issues common to all stakeholders, regardless of the specific workshop each attended. Grouping main stakeholders’ issues into themes allowed researchers to understand how these different aspects are interconnected and helped form a meaningful framework to understand the dimensions of a Marche region place brand. Eight main themes were highlighted and many of them contain different sub-themes (Figure 1). The role of the University of Macerata reflected the claims stated by stakeholders during the brainstorming sessions.

The central problem, common to all themes, was the need for “network building” capability as the basis of place branding. All the other themes were either indirectly or directly affected by this capability. “Network-building capability”, represents the central point where the internal and external dimensions merge together. These two dimensions affecting rural enterprises are part of a process partly under the control of local actors (endogenous) and external forces (exogenous) (Lowe et al.1995).



**Figure 1.** The wicked problem of Marche place branding: antecedents, goals and challenges.  
Source. Authors’ elaboration

## Internal Dimensions

### *Territory (Terroir) and Marchigianità (the essence of the Marche people)*

Scholars define the “territory” (terroir) as the recognizable and distinctive element in global competition, a synthesis of a culture that creates the product quality; in fact, product uniqueness cannot be copied or found outside the territory. In this sense, participants put forward the need to strengthen associations between the territory and its products, in order to increase their value.

Instead, the complex concept of Marchigianità has something to do with regional identity. Stakeholders showed a passionate attachment to their territory and its products, so that passion for quality products has been recognized as a key feature of the Marche people. This positive attitude towards territory and products is coupled with a deeply engrained historical distrust between producers, who are not used to sharing information.

Another aspect that certainly distinguishes the Marche people is their hard work and strong entrepreneurial mindset. Some entrepreneurs lamented the lack of governmental assistance, especially during the economic crisis, while others underscored that entrepreneurship is a feature of the Marche people, and an essential characteristic that needs to be stressed in difficult moments.

Another important finding to emerge were the differences in intergenerational attitudes. Some entrepreneurs observed that the younger generation is unable to make sacrifices in the way the older generations had. This problem was seen as a central threat to the continuity of businesses in the future.

Researchers identified some core values of the Marche region, shared by all stakeholders. The strong attachment to their region, the agreement on the main features that characterize people from Marche (marchigianità), such as pride, passion, humility, ethics, industriousness, etc..., all elements that could constitute the brand essence.

Common values formed the basis of building a shared strategy: these values needed to be compared with the values emerging from an outsiders’ perspective. If these two sets of values matched, then they could represent the “core” of the Marche region’s brand essence and provide useful indications for local development.

Thus, the *first important role* of University of Macerata in the case discussed here, but more generally of every HEI involved in multi-stakeholder networks—one of a *partner* in identifying common themes and values. A university partner in the network can help bridge the knowledge gap regarding technical know-how, as well as provide new insights into the development of long-term strategies undertaken. Universities can be particularly valuable in rural areas, where lack of training and business planning is recognized as a major problem, due to limited time, finances, personnel, skills, and experience (Verbole 2003; Saxena et al. 2007). Thus, this structure can make the problem “less wicked” over time by framing the wicked problems, detecting common themes, then comparing and counterbalancing common and conflicting values.

### *Education and Training*

Stakeholders agreed on the importance of fostering a stronger collaboration between the production system and the world of education in order to develop a common language between these two spheres. Setting up projects with universities was recognized as a way to help businesses face global competition challenges, especially because many of the Marche entrepreneurs are great producers, but lack the skills necessary to address the current globalized reality.

Thus, another important outcome which participants seemed to value was the University serving as an *educator*. Its solid degree curricula was not only able to provide well trained and skilled young graduates for specialized professions, it brought HEI together with other professional teachers outside academia (local/regional bodies, chambers of commerce, social partners, enterprises, and professional organizations). Moreover, students greatly benefited from the discussions which emerged from the Forum and gave students an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills through examining real-life issues while making further connections between theories learned in the classroom.

### **Network Building Capability**

Marche businesses, composed primarily of SMEs, became aware that only by joining forces could they reach the critical mass necessary to face global competition. Stakeholders lamented that the inability to build networks extended to politics through the fragmentation of initiatives between municipalities, provinces, and the region making it difficult to create a unitary regional proposition. In this context, the “Marche d’Eccellenza” initiative was valued by the majority of stakeholders, since it provided them a mechanism for sharing the same system.

The umbrella-brand concept was widely discussed as well. Stakeholders expressed the need for a clear idea of what could be gained from it. Sharing the same values was recognized as the first step towards acceptance of the same rules across all sectors, although companies with a strong and renowned brand would see the umbrella-brand as a limiting factor.

Thus, an important function served by the University of Macerata was the role of *facilitator* of networking activities among protagonists in the private and public sector. The Forum, hosted at the University, provided stakeholders from diverse backgrounds a neutral venue in which to freely discuss the issues. It also allowed stakeholders to get to know each other and build trust—the antecedent to a successful collective action. HEIs are conducive to trust as stakeholders feel less “embarrassed” to ask information from academics than from colleagues. And, academics have a reputation for competence and scientific objectivity.

### **External Dimensions**

The themes of *Globalization* and *Outward-Facing Communication* were among the most challenging themes elicited by stakeholders and are strictly interrelated dimensions.

Marche producers recognized the significance of globalization and the necessity of developing some common strategies and networks of cooperative association and support. While some stakeholders were afraid that globalization could lead to a 'loss of identity,' others indicated that future competition will likely occur around some key areas: project management, intellectual property, and products, which need to be protected in all the sectors.

Stakeholders discussed the need for ongoing and centralized communications. The lack of continuity in communication and advertising about the Marche region was a concern. The competing Marche region promotional campaigns had not worked to increase awareness about the region. The message should be consistent throughout the region, since a single location is competing with thousands of different destination choices in a global marketplace.

### **Discussion and Conclusions: A New Role for HEIs?**

The case depicted describes the central role of the University of Macerata had in facilitating network building in rural areas.

The role of the university as a trainer, partner and facilitator is previously known (Betts and Lee 2004). The University aids in rural economic development as an innovator through its active research and development portfolio and as a *regional talent magnet* that results from a vibrant and active student body., Only recently Italian universities have considered the importance of all these roles. This stems from the 2010 University Reform where HEIs are to support the development of the territory where they are embedded. This activism is extremely relevant in a period of public funding reduction. If it is true that universities have been principally founded on the activities of teaching and research (*first mission* and *second mission*, respectively), on the other hand, universities have always made contributions, both directly and indirectly, to decision-making in the wider society; this aspect has been called *third mission*. The bundle of these activities concerns the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and, more generally, it is about the interactions between universities and the rest of society (Molas-Gallart J. et al. 2002). Universities are nowadays called to play a greater role as stimulators and facilitators of knowledge transfer within business and society.

These functions are not new in other countries, like for instance in the USA where the Land Grant tradition of providing practical assistance to communities is very long (established after the Morrill Act of 1862) and full of virtuous examples (Stephenson, 2011). The Land Grant model embraces both of Gibbons et al's (1994) Mode 1 (basic research) and Mode 2 (applied problem solving). Mode 2 is especially of interest in the case of the wicked *Marche* problem.

"Mode 2" is problem-focused, interdisciplinary and subject to multiple accountabilities, where knowledge is generated in the context of application (Gibbons et al, 1994). Knowledge in the context of application implies closer connections between different institutions and actors in the knowledge production system. "Working together in a mutually trans-disciplinary frame, academics and managers attempt to learn from one another in a virtuous cycle of understanding,

explication, and action” (Partington 2000, 91)<sup>4</sup>. This seems to be the case explained in this work. Moreover, the role of the university as a *facilitator* underlined here, can be easily assimilated with the concept of a boundary organization (Batie 2008). Boundary organizations are those organizations “that successfully link knowledge with action, tend to bridge both the barriers that separate disciplines and those that separate knowledge production and application”(Clark and Holliday, 2006:8).

The function of facilitator offers the HEI an opportunity to reduce the wickedness of a problem by giving new perspectives on how to address some long processes, for instance, that of territorial value creation. The University can offer fresh new insights on local problems through case study analysis or by inviting experts from outside spheres. In these ways, the University enhances the network increasing *knowledge transfers*, “the process through which one member of a network is affected by the experience of another member” (Novelli 2006: 1143). This knowledge transfer moves not only from University to stakeholders, but also the other way around, especially when dealing with practical problems. These can become real “research questions” for further academic investigation. This virtuous cycle in knowledge transfer can be appropriate even for HEIs, like the University of Macerata, where there is not a department or a school of agriculture, but a transdisciplinary environment (particularly the department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism) that explores a place in its multiple aspects: crafts, agriculture, tourism, retailing, regional umbrella-brands and the entire rural economy.

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<sup>4</sup>According to Sexton and Shu-Ling Lu (2010: 687) “Mode 2, or actionable knowledge production poses significant challenges for both industry and academia to overcome ... For industry, it calls for collaborative approaches to knowledge creation and knowledge transfer between companies and academic institutions. For academics it requires engaged scholarship aimed at knowledge transfer and knowledge contribution to the practical know-why and know-how of managers. In meeting these challenges, the formation of appropriate knowledge collaborations between practitioners and researchers is essential”.. In this context “...Action research has been suggested as one collaborative research method that can be used to bridge the gap between researchers’ and practitioners’ interests and has the potential to produce Mode 2 knowledge”.

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