

Tourism Destination Benchmarking: Evaluation and Selection of the Benchmarking Partners

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Abstract

Tourism development has an irreplaceable role in regional policy of almost all countries. This is due to its undeniable benefits for the local population with regards to the economic, social and environmental sphere. Tourist destinations compete for visitors at tourism market and subsequently get into a relatively sharp competitive struggle. The main goal of regional governments and destination management institutions is to succeed in this struggle by increasing the competitiveness of their destination. The quality of strategic planning and final strategies is a key factor of competitiveness. Even though the tourism sector is not the typical field where the benchmarking methods are widely used, such approaches could be successfully applied. The paper focuses on key phases of the benchmarking process which lies in the search for suitable referencing partners. The partners are consequently selected to meet general requirements to ensure the quality of strategies. Following from this, some specific characteristics are developed according to the SMART approach. The paper tests this procedure with an expert evaluation of eight selected regional tourism strategies of regions in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Great Britain. In this way it validates the selected criteria in the frame of the international environment. Hence, it makes it possible to find strengths and weaknesses of selected strategies and at the same time facilitates the discovery of suitable benchmarking partners.

Key words: benchmarking, evaluation, tourism, strategic planning

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism still represents one of the largest economic sectors and is widely recognized as an important factor in regional development (Commission of the European Communities, 2010). It contributes by its nature to the stability of regional and local economies, primarily because of its positive multiplier effect, which acts on creating business opportunities in a wide range of activities and significantly influences the development of employment in the region (Sharma, 2004).

Just like any other economic sector, tourism also faces competitive pressures which are rising substantially in today's globalized society (Kozak, 2004). The European Union, national and regional governments therefore develop efforts aimed at increasing competitiveness in tourism. Competitive advantage comes not only from the potential possibilities of external environment, but mainly from internal characteristics, i.e., from unique sources and methods of their use (Johnson, Scholes & Whittington 2008; David, 2009). Comparative advantage of destination is made up of its resources, which Dwyer and Kim (2003) classify into inherited (natural, cultural-historical), human-created and supporting sources (e.g. availability, quality of service, security, basic infrastructure). To achieve a competitive advantage it is essential to use these resources effectively with regard to changing environmental conditions (Crouch, 2010).



2. THEORETICAL SOLUTIONS

The emphasis on strategic planning as one of the major factors of competitiveness comes from the experience of the private sector. Strategic planning, respectively the resulting strategy, determines the desirable direction of the subject development which should help to align the ownership and method of use of available resources with conditions of external environment and expectations of people involved (Johnson et al. 2008; David, 2009). In the travel & tourism industry it is a process trying to ensure a balance between the quality and quantity of a supply with a corresponding level of demand with respect to socio-economic development, environmental factors and the principle of sustainability. Strategic planning is a concept to determine the correct direction, which must reflect the new trends, changing markets and competition in order to provide a competitive advantage for the destination at the market (Edgell, Allen, Smith & Swanson, 2008). Planning is also one of the conditions of sustainability of a competitive advantage (Dymond, 1997).

One of the best known models of destination competitiveness of the authors Ritchie and Crouch is established on this basic principle (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). This model tries to describe the generally accepted factors that affect the tourist destination competitiveness, taking into account the effects of global macro-environmental forces and factors of micro-environment, which directly affect the functioning of tourism destination (Crouch, 2010). The model identifies 36 factors of destination competitiveness, which combines into five main groups: core resources and attractors, supporting resources, destination management, planning and destination policy development, acceleration resources (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The core resources of destination represent the main role, including geography; climate; culture and history; variety of attractions, events, entertainment; basic tourism infrastructure and trade links.

As Ritchie and Crouch note in their model (2003), an attractive, efficient and highly competitive destination cannot exist only by pure coincidence. This requires a well-planned environment that supports and enables the development of tourism. The key to this environment is their factor of planning and creating the tourism development policy. During its further analysis we can find links to other factors of competitiveness. The essence of these relations lies in the ability of planning to influence actively the composition of most sources of destination (with the exception of some key and acceleration sources), the way of their usage and destination management activities in accordance with the general conditions of the external environment and especially the requirements of visitors. This important role of planning in the concept of destination competitiveness showed Crouch (2010) in his further research.

Destination management along with strategic planning takes a similar role also in Dwyer and Kim (2003) model of competitiveness. Destination management constitutes the second key component of the model after the destination's sources. Its planning function connects the sources of destination with tourist demand and situational conditions surrounding the destination, in order to increase the competitiveness of destination and subsequent socio-economic prosperity of the region (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Crouch, 2010). Destination management impacts on attraction of the destination key resources, increases the quality and effectiveness of supporting resources (factors) with regard to potential opportunities or threats arising from the

external environment. The above mentioned planning function of destination management in relation to the competitiveness of destinations is confirmed in the research of Gomezelj and Mihalič (2008), who applied the model of authors Dwyer and Kim in terms of Slovenian tourism, and Navickas and Malakauskaite (2009), who studied the theoretical background of this model.

2.1 Strategic Planning Process

Planning can be characterized as a system of partial steps, which tries to achieve the objectives based on the previous analysis and the following actions leading to improving the current situation (Hall, 2002). The planning process is defined as *“a process aimed to optimize the benefits of the appropriate quality and quantity of supply with the proper level of demand, without compromising neither the locale’s socioeconomic and environmental developments neither its sustainability”* (Edgell et al., 2008, p. 297). Accordingly, the main goal of planning is to maximize tourism benefits through increasing competitiveness of destinations - and thus to improve the living standards of local residents (Yoon, 2002).

The most used approaches to planning usually reflect two basic planning methods called The Design Schools and The Planning School (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel, 1998). The first one belongs to resource-based methods and its quintessence consists in match between internal and external factors of the given subject. The planning process is then comprehended within the framework of SWOT analysis. The external factors are understood as opportunities or threads which are able to create the key factors of success. The internal factors are perceived as strengths or weaknesses; some of them can be consider as the key competences. The second method takes the SWOT analysis as a starting point and on its basis defines the main strategic goals, selects the best possible strategy and implements it.

Clear definition of planning sense and its initial conditions should be the initial step of the planning cycle. Identification of the key stakeholders should also be part of this phase. The key stakeholders are represented by individuals, groups or organizations which are directly or indirectly influenced by the planning process or by its realization, or which can have a significant influence on the planning process results (Bryson, 2004).

Strategic analysis follows this step. It makes the necessary information base for determining a vision of tourism development and a strategy for its achievement. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) consider the strategic analysis as a key factor in the process of influencing destination competitiveness. Tourism responds quite strongly to changes in a variety of factors in the economics, politics, legislation and demographics, which the analysis should not ignore (Evans, Campbell & Stonehouse, 2003). The external strategic analysis must be engaged with the development of the tourism market and identify its main trends (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2008). The analysis of tourism sector should be followed by a quite detailed analysis of competition. In this way the destination can determine its most important competitors in the number of visitors, but also in the nature of the services offered, identify their goals, strengths and weaknesses, and thus identify its strategic position in tourism market (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

The success of the strategy depends, however, not only on external conditions, but mainly on internal resources and the ways how to use them. Analysis of internal environment should deal

primarily with these facts and give answer to the question whether they are in harmony with the environment in which a given destination exists and are able to contribute to its competitiveness (Johnson et al. 2008). Another important part of internal strategic analysis is investigating the development of tourism in the destination. Results of external and internal strategic analysis are summarized in the SWOT analysis which identifies the key factors of development and competence for the next stages of the planning cycle.

The results of external and internal analysis are closely followed by the definition of long-term vision and main strategic objectives. The vision reflects a primary direction where the destination wants to get, the objectives elaborate the direction in greater detail. The proposed strategy represents the way how to achieve the objectives. The chosen arrangements should support the development of internal resources and capabilities to use possible further opportunities and effective defence against threats from outside. They should also help to change or diminish the identified weaknesses and they must be in accordance with the key stakeholders interests and requests (Johnson et al. 2008).

The phase of strategy implementation identifies the specific conditions for its conversion into the practice. It should specify the way of proposed arrangements realization, including the specification of accountability and necessary resources. The important part of this phase is also the definition of control mechanism to monitor the obtained results and updating system of the strategy (Johnson et al. 2008).

2.2 Tourism Development Strategies

The strategy for tourism development is a synthesis of planning cycle results and in synoptical way summarizes the outputs of all previous phases (Johnson et al. 2008; Hall, 2008). Thus the strategy should consist of the same two primary phases as the planning cycle – the analytical and the design phase (Vystoupil, Holešinská, Kunc & Šauer, 2007). A precedent to these phases is an introduction part which specifies all elementary premises, and a part devoted to the implementation process.

The introduction should clearly define the principles of the planning process, its purpose and goals. Furthermore, there should be also clear, who is the target group of the document, who is the author and regard to which strategy of higher hierarchical level is the document prepared (Baer, 1997).

Information of the highest possible quality is absolutely essential for elaboration and subsequent implementation of the strategy (Grant, 2008; David, 2009). The analytical part of the documents deals with their summarization, analysis and interpretation. Its main objective is to identify, analyse and assess the key factors of external and internal environment which have a potential to influence the final selection of the strategic goals and tools needed to their achievement. The results of the strategic analysis represent a starting point for identification of the competitive advantage sources. Suitable tool for their summarization is the SWOT analysis method (Grant, 2008). Its function is to create the relevant information base for definition of a vision, region's main objectives and consequential strategy.

The proposed part of the documents is closely connected with the analytical part. It contains a long-term vision of tourism development, main strategic objectives and concrete arrangements for their achievement. The strategic objectives characterize the future phases which must be

achieved for a fulfilment of the development vision. The concrete tools for achievement of the strategic objectives - and thereby for a realization of the whole strategy - are the individual arrangements (David, 2009).

The final part of the strategic document deals with the implementation process. The outcomes from previous stages are further developed and specified into particular actions and steps, including detailed time schedule, delimitation of necessary resources and responsibilities (Cooper et al., 2008; Hall, 2008). The integral part of implementation is also the specification of controlling mechanisms based on pre-defined criteria.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The term destination benchmarking can be taken into consideration as *“the continuous measurement of the performance of tourist destinations (strengths and weaknesses) not only against itself or other destinations in the same or in a different country but also against national / international quality grading systems by assessing both primary and secondary data for the purpose of establishing priorities, setting targets and gaining improvements in order to gain competitive advantage”* (Kozak, 2004, p. 41). Wöber (2001) distinguishes these areas of benchmarking focus in tourism: benchmarking of profit-oriented organizations (such as hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies), benchmarking of non-profit making organizations (such as some types of museums, galleries, destination management, various associations) and benchmarking of destinations (at national, regional and local level).

The sphere of strategic planning is not the typical application area of benchmarking processes yet. However, Kozak (2004), Kozak and Baloglu (2011) suppose the possibility of benchmarking spread into the sphere of tourism destinations planning processes. This possibility is indirectly confirmed by Stapenhurst (2009) who defines the strategic benchmarking. This type of benchmarking is focused on examination of benchmarking partners' long-term strategies and plans which create the keystone for their success in tourism market.

Kozak (2004) identifies 40 different benchmarking models that differ in the number and composition of individual steps and phases. When comparing these models, he defines four basic phases of benchmarking, which the vast majority of other authors agree with (e.g. Zairi, 1998; Camp, 2006; Stapenhurst, 2009). This is the phase of planning, data collection, data analysis and the stage of adoption of adequate measures. Benchmarking should start with a thorough planning of the entire process associated with defining the appropriate areas for benchmarking process and finding the benchmarking partner or partners. The next step is to collect data from own and partner's organizations. It is followed by the analytic phase, which consists of the identification and quantification of performance gaps between partners, this leads to detecting strengths and weaknesses of compared processes. It should also be followed by the draft of actions to improve identified weaknesses and a review of the level achieved in its own organization, which allows assessing whether the process has achieved its objectives.

The introduced benchmarking research of tourism destinations strategic planning is in its planning phase right now. The objective of this phase and presented paper is to draft an evaluation procedure of tourism development strategies, stipulate the evaluation criteria and define a method for selection of appropriate benchmarking partners (tourism destinations) for the next phases of benchmarking process. This phase also includes the drafted procedure testing

on selected regional development strategies of the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic and the Great Britain.

3.1 The Evaluation Procedure of Strategic Planning in Tourism

A prerequisite for the implementation of benchmarking is to determine the right metrics, respectively evaluation criteria, which form the basis for further analysis and recommendations, which confirm Kozak (2004) and Stapenhurst (2009). Many approaches can be used for an evaluation of the strategies and plans, such as plan critique, plan testing and evaluation, comparative research and professional evaluation, post hoc evaluation of plan outcomes (Baer, 1997). As Šauer (2008) mentions in his dissertation, an evaluation of the real outcomes of tourism development policy is very difficult; this is also confirmed by Edgell et al. (2008). That's the reason for selection of the evaluation approach which is derived from three general managerial requirements on quality of all strategies. The fulfilment of these requirements cannot guarantee the success of planning which is primary given by the way of strategy implementation. However, it creates substantial conditions for strategy's successful conversion to practise. From the benchmarking point of view, the evaluation procedure based on these requirements enables identification of those regions which dispose of such strategies with high potential for successful influence of tourism development.

The presented evaluation procedure used an analogy with the procedure of authors Vorhies and Morgan (2005), who were engaged in identifying the key marketing capabilities and their use in benchmarking as comparing criteria. For their definition authors used literature review and especially active cooperation with representatives of various organizations. A very similar approach, based on pre-defined criteria evaluation by selected experts with the aim to quantify the qualitative indicators, is often used in the area of competitiveness of destinations and it can be found e.g. in the studies of Crouch (2010) or Gomezelj and Mihalič (2008).

There is the basis for evaluating strategies for tourism development consisting of three general requirements on quality strategies, so-called quality areas. It is a requirement for the suitability of the strategy due to the strategic position of the region, acceptability by key stakeholders, and its feasibility (Johnson et al. 2008). The requirement of strategy suitability is related to the ability of planning which can specifically affect the composition and usage of resources by a series of measures in accordance with the conditions of macro- and micro-environment. The requirement of acceptability focuses on the satisfaction of the key stakeholders through the development of demand for tourism in the destination. Finally, the requirement of the strategy feasibility is aimed at creating conditions for strategy implementation.

With respect to the specific conditions of regional planning, or tourism planning, those requirements were elaborated to the set of sub-requirements in all three quality areas. In accordance with the principles of quality management, as described by Hoyle (2007), these sub-requirements were verified and evaluated by the key regional actors which influence tourism development. Specifically, these were the managers of appropriate departments of regional government's offices, professional associations, the CzechTourism, Ministry of Regional Development, regional development agencies, local action groups and others (48 subjects were involved in the research). The primary objective of the survey was to identify their requirements for the strategies in all three quality areas and refine the previously developed set of

requirements. By the form of interviews or on-line questioners the addressed respondents had the opportunity to comment the appropriateness of individual requests and evaluate them according to the importance for the quality of strategies at a five-degree Likert scale, which is shown in the table No. 1. The resulting assessment of the requirements has been determined as the arithmetic mean of individual evaluations.

Tab. 1 – Likert scale. Source: own proposal

Point Value	Importance of the requirement
0,00	Zero importance – the requirement is not relevant
1,00	Slight importance – the requirement has insignificant importance for strategies quality
2,00	Little importance – the requirement has substandard importance for strategies quality
3,00	Medium importance – the requirement has standard importance for strategies quality
4,00	Great importance – the requirement has above standard importance for strategies quality
5,00	Key importance – the requirement has crucial importance for strategies quality

The next step was to transfer the modified set of 13 identified requirements for the criteria that can be evaluated. These criteria were drafted in such a way to enable an evaluation of any tourism development strategy, reflect the general requirement on strategies' quality and respect the specific requirements for their completeness, flexibility, non-redundancy and minimum range (Goodwin & Wright, 2010). This transformation was performed by using the method of Quality Function Deployment (QFD), which serves to transfer requirements defined by stakeholders into specific measurable characteristics (Madu, 2006). When applying QFD method it also leads to evaluation of relations between requirement and criteria derived from them. In cooperation with regional actors, such relationships were evaluated by 100 points allocation method. Examples of information sources used for evaluation criteria stipulation are mentioned in the following table.

Tab. 2 – Information sources for evaluation criteria stipulation. Source: own elaboration

Criteria	Cooper et al. (2008)	David (2009)	Evans et al. (2003)	Grant (2008)	Richie, Crouch (2003)	Hall (2008)	OECD (2010)
The strategy has clearly defined its purpose and method of elaborating	X				X		
The strategy defines the most relevant target groups					X		
The strategy builds on other plans and strategies			X	X			
The strategy takes into account the impact of selected global factors	X	X	X	X	X		
The strategy takes into account the impact of selected local factors	X	X	X	X	X		
The strategy analyses the situation in other destinations		X			X		
The strategy deals with the internal sources of destination	X		X	X	X	X	
The strategy evaluates the resources according to their ability to create competitive advantage	X		X	X	X	X	
The strategy clearly and understandable summarizes the results of particular analyses	X	X	X	X	X	X	
The strategy contains a tourism development vision	X	X	X	X		X	
The strategy has set clear and specific targets	X	X	X	X	X	X	
The strategy proposes targets in accordance with the conclusions of proceeded analyses		X		X			
The strategy proposes measures to achieve the vision		X	X	X			
The strategy reflects the requirements of elderly and handicapped travellers	X					X	
The strategy reflects specific needs of young, individual travellers							X
The strategy reflects specific needs of busy travellers						X	
The strategy motivates tourism operators to improve service quality	X						X
The strategy supports cooperation and coordination of tourism operators						X	
The strategy supports environmental-friendly behaviour	X		X		X	X	
The strategy supports tourist experiences products	X		X			X	X

The strategy supports products to improve visitors' physical condition	X						X
The strategy supports products to increase visitors' knowledge						X	X
The strategy supports on-line information and reservation systems	X						X
The strategy supports integrated communication with target groups of visitors	X					X	
The strategy supports easy movement of visitors among major attractions in the region			X			X	
The strategy identifies the necessary resources for its implementation		X		X	X		
The strategy defines responsibility of particular entities for its implementation					X		
The strategy defines a timetable for its implementation	X						
The strategy proposes a control system of its implementation					X		
The strategy proposes the method of its updating		X			X	X	

The importance of individual criterion is derived from the converted assessment of the significance of the given requirement for particular quality area (strategy suitability, acceptability, feasibility) and from evaluation of the relationship intensity between the requirement and derived criterion. The importance of the criterion is given by the following formula.

$$DC_i = \frac{IR_{nj}}{\sum DPO_{nj}} \times \frac{RRC_{ni}}{100} \quad (1)$$

DC_i importance of the i-th criterion

IR_{nj} average importance of the n-th requirement in the frame of the j-th quality area

RRC_{ni} relationship between the n-th requirement and the i-th criterion

The evaluation procedure is based on a fundamental proposition, which says that quality is determined by the level of satisfaction of requirements through specific quality marks (Hoy-le, 2007). The evaluator uses our own-designed on-line application which includes all above mentioned evaluation rules. There he/she judges the level of criterion fulfilment by three key characteristics. These characteristics were defined in order to reduce the evaluation subjectivity and vagueness of some criteria. In this case the evaluation procedure takes an advantage of basic Fuzzy logic principle and its ability to operate with vague terms (Negnevitsky, 2005). The evaluator judges the level of each key characteristics fulfilment on a quality scale “entirely – partially – not at all”. Based on this judgement the criterion is automatically classed into one of the five qualitative levels which are described in table No. 3. After that the evaluator assigns this criterion by concrete point value which represents the level of belonging to the given qualitative level (the point value must be chosen within the pre-defined range).

Tab. 3 – Evaluation scale. Source: own proposal

Value	Characteristics of the qualitative level
0,00 – 0,10	Insufficient – the key characteristics are achieved in a minimal intensity
0,11 – 0,40	Sufficient - the key characteristics are achieved in a limited intensity
0,41 – 0,60	Good – the key characteristics are achieved in a medium intensity
0,61 – 0,90	Very good - the key characteristics are achieved in a high intensity
0,91 – 1,00	Excellent - the key characteristics are achieved in a maximal intensity

Selection of the appropriate benchmarking partners is realized by the means of Simple Multi-Attribute Rating Technique (SMART) on the basis of evaluation of their development strategies. The SMART method is simple and efficient multi-attribute decision-making method which is described for example by Goodwin and Wright (2010). With respect to the principles of this method the assigned point value of each criterion is further adjusted by the importance of criterion within a specific quality area. The resulting value of the criterion gives its real share on strategy quality in the given quality area. To increase the objectivity of evaluation, it is assumed to involve more evaluators. The final value of criterion is the arithmetic mean of partial evaluation and it is given by the following formula.

$$RVC_i = IC_i \times \frac{\sum PEC_i}{\sum E_m} \quad (2)$$

RVC_i resulting value of the i-the criterion
 IC_i importance of the i-th criterion
 PEC_i partial evaluation of the i-th criterion
 E_m the m-th evaluator

The SMART method enables the selection on the basis of weighted score of particular criteria. The method is based on one final summative indicator and thus it anticipates an additivity of the evaluation results (Goodwin & Wright, 2010). Overall assessment of tourism development strategies can be expressed as the sum of the resulting values of individual criteria, i.e. a real share of all criteria on the strategy quality composed of the three quality areas. This leads to the transformation of values of the criteria to one dimensionless additive quantity. In this phase of benchmarking process, it is also important to determine the deviation from the ideal value for individual criteria, either absolutely ($IC_i - RVC_i$) or in relative terms (RVC_i / IC_i).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The testing phase of selected evaluation procedure included the analysis of four strategies of Czech regions: South Bohemian Region (SBR), South Moravia Region (SMR), Vysočina Region (VR), Pilsner region (PR), two Slovak strategies: Bratislava region (BR), Žilina Region (ZR), two British strategies: North East England (NEE), North Wales (NW). Czech regions represent destinations which are attractive at various levels for tourists. Slovak regions were chosen because of similar cultural and historical conditions of the Czech and Slovak Republic, which influence a regional planning process, thus creating a realistic assumption of a high comparability of strategic documents. WTTC Competitiveness Index of Great Britain is steadily higher than the Czech Index. The UK ranked the sixth place in competitiveness ranking of

European destinations in 2011 (Blanke & Chiesa, 2011). This fact was the reason for inclusion of the UK regions in the evaluation. Another reason was the intention to validate the proposed metrics in an international environment.

The evaluation process was conducted according to the above procedure. Four members of the research team were chosen as evaluators. They individually evaluated the degree of fulfilment of all the evaluation criteria by selected strategies. The evaluation results are summarized in table No. 4. It includes the evaluation criteria and their key characteristics. Due to the limited extent only resulting values of the criteria (RVCi) are mentioned there. The table also contains the values of importance of individual criteria (ICi), which indicate the maximum possible (optimum) value that can be reached by the criterion.

Tab. 4 – Evaluation of tourism development strategies. Source: own research

Evaluation Criteria	ICi	RVCi							
		SBR	SMR	VR	PR	BR	ZR	NEE	NW
Strategy suitability									
The strategy has clearly defined its purpose and method of elaborating	0,068	0,061	0,057	0,054	0,061	0,061	0,054	0,061	0,061
The strategy defines the most relevant target groups	0,060	0,048	0,042	0,048	0,054	0,048	0,048	0,054	0,048
The strategy builds on other plans and strategies	0,033	0,030	0,010	0,026	0,030	0,030	0,030	0,062	0,010
The strategy takes into account the impact of selected global factors	0,044	0,018	0,022	0,004	0,035	0,031	0,009	0,054	0,026
The strategy takes into account the impact of selected local factors	0,085	0,068	0,068	0,034	0,077	0,068	0,077	0,010	0,043
The strategy analyses the situation in other destinations	0,031	0,028	0,025	0,015	0,015	0,021	0,021	0,010	0,021
The strategy deals with the internal sources of destination	0,110	0,099	0,082	0,088	0,088	0,088	0,077	0,056	0,066
The strategy evaluates the resources according to their ability to create competitive advantage	0,071	0,046	0,063	0,042	0,056	0,056	0,056	0,015	0,028
The strategy clearly and understandable summarizes the results of particular analyses	0,120	0,102	0,102	0,108	0,108	0,108	0,108	0,045	0,060
The strategy contains a tourism development vision	0,045	0,041	0,041	0,041	0,041	0,041	0,041	0,030	0,036

The strategy has set clear and specific targets	0,105	0,063	0,084	0,084	0,084	0,084	0,084	0,048	0,063
The strategy proposes targets in accordance with the conclusions of proceeded analyses	0,030	0,015	0,024	0,021	0,024	0,024	0,024	0,039	0,012
The strategy proposes measures to achieve the vision	0,200	0,180	0,170	0,170	0,100	0,160	0,140	0,080	0,120
Partial evaluation of the strategy	1,000	0,799	0,790	0,735	0,773	0,820	0,769	0,583	0,594
Strategy acceptability									
The strategy reflects the requirements of elderly and handicapped travellers	0,098	0,079	0,020	0,079	0,079	0,059	0,029	0,020	0,020
The strategy reflects specific needs of young, individual travellers	0,063	0,056	0,013	0,038	0,044	0,044	0,025	0,019	0,025
The strategy reflects specific needs of busy travellers	0,054	0,043	0,038	0,038	0,038	0,038	0,038	0,038	0,032
The strategy motivates tourism operators to improve service quality	0,084	0,055	0,038	0,008	0,067	0,067	0,059	0,035	0,008
The strategy supports cooperation and coordination of tourism operators	0,070	0,063	0,063	0,028	0,056	0,056	0,014	0,059	0,049
The strategy supports environmental-friendly behaviour	0,061	0,055	0,024	0,036	0,049	0,024	0,049	0,033	0,030
The strategy supports tourist experiences products	0,106	0,096	0,011	0,043	0,011	0,085	0,011	0,040	0,021
The strategy supports products to improve visitors' physical condition	0,051	0,046	0,046	0,046	0,046	0,046	0,046	0,010	0,015
The strategy supports products to increase visitors' knowledge	0,033	0,030	0,030	0,030	0,030	0,030	0,030	0,023	0,010
The strategy supports on-line information and reservation systems	0,141	0,085	0,028	0,028	0,099	0,099	0,099	0,134	0,085
The strategy supports integrated communication with target groups of visitors	0,097	0,088	0,049	0,068	0,088	0,083	0,083	0,078	0,088
The strategy supports easy movement of visitors among major attractions in the region	0,143	0,129	0,129	0,100	0,129	0,086	0,086	0,100	0,100

Partial evaluation of the strategy	1,000	0,825	0,489	0,542	0,736	0,717	0,569	0,588	0,483
Strategy feasibility									
The strategy identifies the necessary resources for its implementation	0,250	0,225	0,175	0,025	0,225	0,100	0,175	0,131	0,025
The strategy defines responsibility of particular entities for its implementation	0,181	0,163	0,045	0,163	0,072	0,144	0,163	0,119	0,018
The strategy defines a timetable for its implementation	0,125	0,094	0,060	0,088	0,075	0,075	0,075	0,110	0,038
The strategy proposes a control system of its implementation	0,248	0,099	0,049	0,124	0,099	0,149	0,199	0,223	0,050
The strategy proposes the method of its updating	0,196	0,039	0,038	0,059	0,059	0,079	0,059	0,039	0,039
Partial evaluation of the strategy	1,000	0,620	0,367	0,459	0,530	0,547	0,671	0,623	0,170
Overall evaluation of the strategy	3,000	2,244	1,646	1,736	2,039	2,084	2,009	1,794	1,247

Based on the analysis of deviations of criteria values from the ideal state the examined strategies show the highest variability in the case of the feasibility requirement. Here you can see marked differences in the approach to the definition of financial, human and other resources necessary for successful implementation of strategy and defining the responsibilities of the entities for fulfilling their objectives. This is closely related to the issues of success control of implementation of the strategy, which is also understood in varying degrees of detail. The identified deviations are already lower in fulfilment of the other two requirements. Strategy still quite significantly differs in the area of its contextualization within the external environment, which shows varying degrees of linkage with hierarchically higher strategies and plans, and especially in the analysis of global macro-factors and tourism trends. Surprisingly, significant differences can be seen in the responsiveness of proposed measures to the demands of new and developing segments of travellers and providing today so much preferred tourist experiences products. The following figure summarizes the partial strategy evaluation for all quality areas.

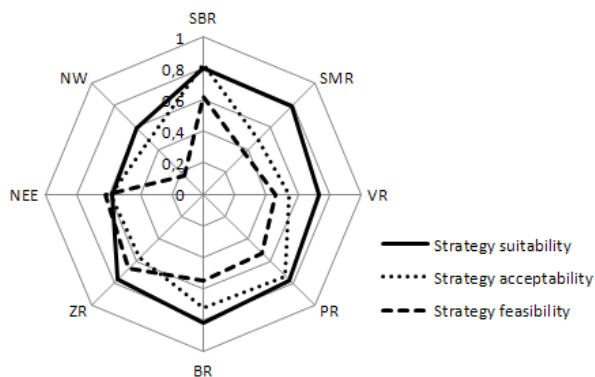


Fig. 1 – Results of the Strategy Evaluation. Source: own elaboration

If we focus on detailed analysis of the quality areas in the context of benchmarking, the Bratislava Region's tourism development strategy reaches the best overall values in the suitability requirement. Appropriate definition of the basic premises is contained in the strategy of the North East England Region, but with the exception of linking to other conceptual documents, which are only marginally mentioned here. Very well done external analysis can be found in the strategy of the Pilsner Region. It focuses on destination macro-environment and fundamental factors of the micro-environment, and thus achieves the best results here. A slightly worse situation arises in the case of the competitive analysis, which is adequately dealt in only few strategies, best in the strategy of South Bohemia Region, which fulfils the criterion of 90%. There can be found a well-elaborated internal analysis of internal resources of destinations in the same document. This analysis is not missed in any of the strategies, but usually neglects assessment of the ways of the identified resources usage in terms of competitive advantage. The example of good practice is the strategy of the South Moravia Region with 88% of fulfilment of the criterion. In the case of other criteria, the situation is more balanced; most of good practices can be found in the strategies of the Bratislava and the Pilsner Regions, eventually in the South Bohemia and the Žilina Regions.

In terms of acceptability the most appropriate document for the transfer of good practices is the strategy of the South Bohemia Region, followed by the Pilsner and the Bratislava Region. The first mentioned strategy is very good in dealing with changes in the behaviour of current tourists and needs of dynamically developing segments of travellers. It also does not omit the environmental issues and development of cooperation between tourism operators. It is encouraging that measures promoting improvement of quality services can be found in all strategies, to the fullest extent in the strategy of the Pilsner and the Bratislava Region. Both the British strategies are more focused on marketing, which corresponds with the emphasis on supporting integrated communication with visitors, including the development of on-line information and reservation systems. Appropriate criteria are met to 90%, respectively 95%. In this area, Slovak strategies are doing well, Czech lagging behind in the most cases.

In assessing the feasibility the Žilina Region and the North East England Region excel. Strategies makers identified the necessary resources for their implementation and established a relatively accurate control system for assessment of achieved results. The Žilina strategy also

addresses liability relationships in the process of strategy implementation that we can find in the same quality in the strategy of the South Bohemian Region. Where all strategies fail is the exact definition of the update method based on the achieved results. Despite the difficulty of quantifying the results of planning in tourism it is necessary to provide at least a general procedure, which could determine the success of the strategy implementation and on which basis the update within changing external and internal conditions could be done.

4.1 Summary and Recommendations

Looking at the total results, the South Bohemia Region appears to be the most convenient benchmarking partner in this testing phase. Its development strategy shows the highest potential for a successful realization. An alternative to this kind of decision-making is to select partners based on their results in particular quality areas. From this point of view, the Bratislava Region and the Žilina Region should become other suitable partners.

The Czech and Slovak strategies have quite a good capability to identify the development resources and influence their composition due to the micro-environment conditions. Greater attention should be paid to how to use these resources to contribute effectively to achieving the competitive advantage. One possible way is to implement more detailed analysis of the situation in other regions in order to find ways to use these resources that are different and also difficult to reproduce. This recommendation particularly relates to the strategies of the Pilsner, Bratislava and Vysočina Regions. For the planning process of the Vysočina Region and the Žilina Region it is possible to recommend putting greater emphasis on the analysis of global conditions for tourism development and its development trends within the strategy suitability criterion. This is the only way how to propose measures that are consistent with the general conditions of the external environment and especially the requirements of visitors.

This is linked with the degree of satisfaction of key stakeholders through the development of demand for tourism, reflecting the strategy acceptance criterion. As shown in figure No. 1, only two Czech strategies have witnessed the compliance of both criteria, and thus to the close link between internal and external conditions of the destination. From this point of view, the other strategies are somewhat left behind. The biggest differences can be seen in the South Bohemia Region and the Vysočina Region. Both regions should concentrate on supporting the modern forms of communication with visitors of their regions, development of information and reservation systems and also put emphasis on the services quality enhancement, along with the environmental aspects.

The space for improvement of almost all Czech strategies lies in the feasibility criterion, i.e. setting the conditions for successful strategy implementation and its long-term sustainability. Converting the strategy into practice can be influenced by many factors such as political will, the overall economic situation, etc., nevertheless properly set up conditions make the implementation process considerably easier and minimize the risk of failure. The possible recommendations can be summarized into these points: do not omit the precise delimitation of all necessary resources for strategy implementation (the Vysočina Region), define criteria for judgment of implementation success (the South Bohemia Region), and consequently determine the way of strategy updating (the South Bohemia and Moravia Regions).

5. CONCLUSION

Rating based on three main criteria identified as the best the South Bohemian tourism development strategy, although it can take examples of good practices from other strategies. The purpose of evaluation is not a competition in the quality of individual documents. It should serve as a basis for determining strengths and weaknesses of each strategy and the subsequent selection of the best examples. The research has verified the suitability of selected benchmarking metrics for domestic strategies, similarly designed strategies and strategies based on different conditions and experience of regional planning. Surprising was the assessment of British strategies that did not reach the expected levels, but because of the very small sample, these results cannot be generalized in any way. Despite this fact it was possible to identify the examples of good practices e.g. in the form of initial premises, communication with visitors, or control of the success of strategy implementation.

The project team is aware of certain weaknesses of the proposed action, stemming from not quite traditional application area of benchmarking and evaluation subjectivity of individual criteria. Although the evaluation process is based on relatively precise criteria, which are also amended by three concrete key characteristics, it is not possible to remove completely a factor of subjectivity from this type of assessment. The evaluation process is implemented in an on-line application through which addressed foreign collaborators can perform evaluations of their “home” strategies. This application will serve not only for strategies evaluation and consequent selection of the appropriate partners for further benchmarking phases; its part will also be a database of the evaluation results and particular examples of good practice in the case of individual criteria. Thus, the engaged subjects will have the opportunity to uncover strong and weak sides of their own planning process, to compare individual strategies and to learn from others’ strengths or weaknesses.

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