

THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP ECOSYSTEM FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE INCUBATION AND ACCELERATION OF SMEs IN THE PROVINCE OF SANTA ELENA, A CASE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the entrepreneurship ecosystem at Santa Elena province. This baseline will serve for the management and promotion of the incubation and acceleration of SMEs and startups within the framework of the research project: Management of innovation and technology transfer through sustainable business incubation and acceleration systems in the province of Santa Elena.

Methodology: The study variables were approached with a quantitative approach, from the consistency analysis of the data collection instrument, descriptive analysis of the dimensions, and even the deductive contrast of the hypotheses of the relationship between the variables. For this last process, a correlational type of analysis was required.

Results: Using an online survey, the small businesses segment, made up of 678 companies, registered with the Superintendence of Companies, was surveyed. Under this survey, a total of 259 valid responses were obtained.

Conclusions: With the results obtained, it can be concluded that entrepreneurship ecosystems boost the competitiveness of SMEs and start-ups, and they require the support and technical assistance of business incubation and acceleration systems. These, in turn, contribute to the progress and socio-economic well-being of the province and region.

Keywords: business incubation, business accelerator, startups, innovation

INTRODUCTION

In the Latin American region, during the last two decades, entrepreneurship has been one of the key factors for revitalizing local and regional economy, the generation of jobs, reduction of poverty levels and it has therefore become one of the engines of economic growth in the regions (Friar & Meyer, 2013; Toma, Grigore, & Marinescu, 2014).

Historically, large companies have been the most affected in recent economic crises, while start-ups have not suffered much. On the contrary, many of them hired more staff and created strategies to capitalize on these crises and turn them into opportunities (Feld, 2012b; Meyers, 2015).

In this context, governments in different countries started to generate a series of public policies to promote entrepreneurship in their localities, thus achieving a better position for sustained economic growth and poverty reduction. Currently, emerging countries cannot base their economic and social development, job creation and competitiveness on cheap labor and foreign direct investment (Anderson, Chernock, & Mailloux, 2006). Therefore, entrepreneurship and innovation are perceived as the most effective strategies to generate economic development in all types of communities (Atkinson, 2014; CIPE, 2014), including those that have historically had problems

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generating jobs (Anderson et al., 2006). The clearest example of a development policy based on entrepreneurship and innovation is the Silicon Valley region in California, home to global technology companies such as Apple, Facebook and Google.

ECUADOR, AN ENTREPRENEURIAL COUNTRY

According to information from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, as per its initials in Spanish), Ecuador is considered a highly entrepreneurial country since it is the country with the second highest Entrepreneurial Activity Rate (TEA, as per its initials in Spanish) in the Latin American region, with 36.2%. However, it is worrying to note that almost 80% of Ecuadorian small businesses fail during the initial stage, that is, 3.6 million people.

The TEA constitutes one of the indicators of the GEM, the TEA includes all those people of adult age who began the process of generating an enterprise or have started a business and have not exceeded the threshold of 42 months. The TEA is made up of two types of entrepreneurs: nascent entrepreneurs and beginning entrepreneurs.

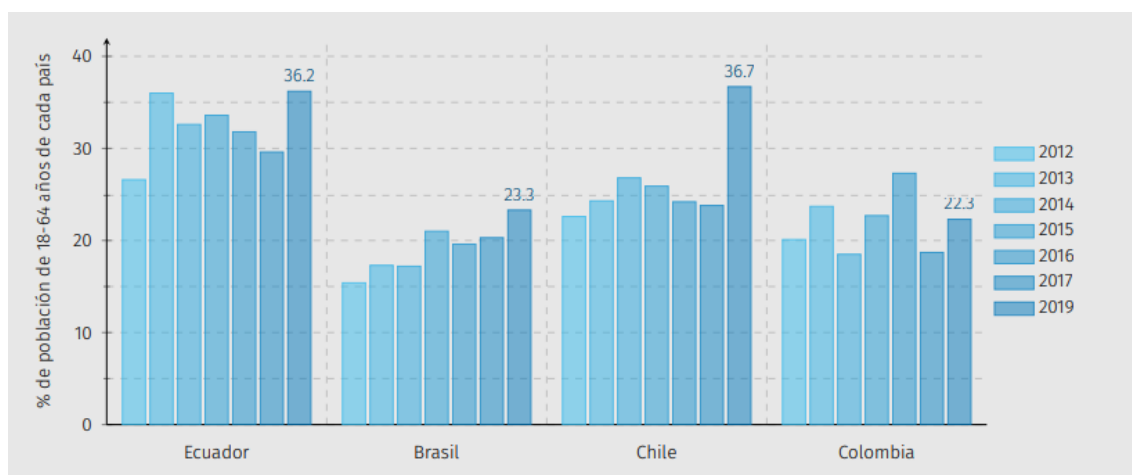


Figure 1 Evolution of Early Entrepreneurial Activity in Ecuador and selected countries

SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ENTREPRENEURS

The entrepreneurial ecosystem requires a set of institutions, organizations and business services to support small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and to provide specialized assistance to newly created companies.

The support infrastructure for entrepreneurs is oriented towards six important keys support for entrepreneurs such as: business incubators, accelerators, technology transfer offices, specialized organizations (consultancies, business chambers, etc.), industrial parks and technology parks (OECD, 2018).

HIGH-IMPACT ENTREPRENEURS SELECTION

In order to have clear data and information on the business ecosystem in which high-impact and representative entrepreneurs live, it is imperative to characterize the entrepreneurs in the province in order to have a clear distinction between traditional SMEs and those high-impact companies. (Blanchflower & Oswald, 1998)

For this, an online survey was structured, and it that was applied directly to businesspeople and entrepreneurs in the province of Santa Elena. This population was defined by entrepreneurs or businesspeople who have a company registered with the Superintendence of Companies and those who have been in the market for three years. This seniority period was applied as a necessary criterion to correctly identify high-impact companies. These "three years" helped to achieve a more detailed analysis of the three defining criteria of "high impact", as well as to include only businesses that surpassed the critical phase of early development (Kantis, Ishida, & Komori, 2002).

Another important aspect mentioned by Morris (2012), entrepreneurs considered to have high impact have in their institutional DNA the intention to collaborate and work in networks. However, in the Latin American region and particularly in Ecuador, this condition does not occur in the SME

sector. This implies that, if a close collaboration between them is achieved, this would expand the possibilities for high-impact companies to emerge in the province. This fully justifies this research process in the small business area.

METHODOLOGY

This study presents research and an approach to the study variables that will be under the quantitative approach, which ranges from a consistency analysis of the information gathering instrument, descriptive analysis of the dimensions until the deductive contrast of the hypotheses of the relationship between the variables. For this last process, it is necessary to apply a correlational scope to the research.

The total study population was 678 companies registered in the Superintendence of Companies, belonging to the segment of small and medium-sized companies, during the period 2022. The information gathering technique was a survey. Based on this premise, the instrument was developed in relation to the dimensions described in the conceptualization of each study variable, which are presented as: Training/reasons to start/ participation in business events/ experience in new businesses/ technical assistance from incubators, accelerators/ success in new business proposals/ tax burden of companies and innovation in certain areas of the company.

Using an online data collection technique, the total population was surveyed by sending a link containing the instrument in Google Forms format. Under this approach, a total of 259 valid surveys were obtained.

For a better description and methodological treatment, three phases are detailed below:

The first phase is to demonstrate the statistical confidence of the applied instrument, through the Cronbach's Alpha test.

Cronbach's Alpha is a method that allows determining the reliability and trustworthiness of a data set so that the theoretical construct is as relevant as possible. The result of applying this indicator admits values between zero and one, for values close to one, the greater the internal consistency of the group of variables and dimensions; and for a lower consistency, for values close to zero (Welch & Comer, 1988).

George & Mallery (2003) suggest intervals based on the result of the indicator, and thereby verify the general condition of the instrument. The values have been named with the following scale: excellent, good, acceptable, questionable, poor and unacceptable.

The second phase corresponds to the descriptive analysis of the main data found in the population that responded to the instrument.

And the third phase is related to checking the correlation between study variables/dimensions/indicators from the results obtained for the study population.

Results and Discussion

The first phase is related with determining the statistical reliability of the data collection instrument. This phase had to be conducted in the pilot stage, in order to define if the instrument is reliable in terms of the robust results that it is intended to collect. The random selection of 50 pilot samples was conducted under the online survey.

From this instrument, it is necessary to calculate the indicator of Cronbach's Alpha, the details are presented below:

Table 1. Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha
0.951

Source: Data processed through the SPSS program based on the data collection obtained from the on-site information.

According to the results, the result of Cronbach's Alpha is greater than 0.8, which indicates that the reliability of each of the questions presented in the instrument is "Excellent", which statistically demonstrates that the results and interpretations derived from this are consistent in providing meaningful information.

During the second phase relevant references were selected to proceed with the descriptive analysis of the results. The process can be evidenced as it follows:

Table 2. Cross-reference between the variables "Position" and "Training"

Position in the company	Training						Total	Percentage
	None	High School	Technical	University	Master's	PhD		
Manager	2	42	16	60	16	3	139	53.67%
Department head	0	9	2	32	8	1	52	20.08%
Secretary	0	0	1	3	0	0	4	1.54%
Other positions worker	3	28	8	25	0	0	64	24.71%
Total	5	79	27	120	24	4	259	100.00%
Percentage	1.93%	30.50%	10.42%	46.33%	9.27%	1.54%	100.00%	

Source: Online information survey, 2022.

According to Table 2, more than 50% of the respondents have the position of managers and around 46% report having university level training. Marked trends can be observed, in which only those who have the position of managers are the ones who invest in better training and specialization with master's degrees and PhD studies. The department heads report having enough with the third level or university level, and the other workers in the role of secretary or and other employees maintain a high school or technical training.

Table 3. Cross-reference between the variables "Company sector" and "Total number of people working in the company"

Company Sector	Number of people working				Total	Percentage
	Between 1 and 5 people	Between 6 and 10 people	Between 11 and 15 people	More than 20 people		
Agriculture	3	2	1	5	11	4.25%
Food	13	6	5	7	31	11.97%
Commerce	49	17	21	22	109	42.08%
Construction	9	3	5	0	17	6.56%
Education	2	0	1	0	3	1.16%
Tourism	5	7	4	3	19	7.34%
Services in general	42	7	9	11	69	26.64%
Total	123	42	46	48	259	100.00%
Percentage	47.49%	16.22%	17.76%	18.53%	100.00%	

Source: Online information survey, 2022.

From the results of Table 3, it can be verified that more than 40% of the surveyed people belong to the commercial sector, followed by general services with 26%. From the population, more than 47% of those surveyed, in their companies have between 1 and 5 people working, and only 18.53% more than 20 employees.

On the other hand, under the cross-reference, there is evidence of a marked trend of companies in the commerce, food, and general services sectors. They have in common a total of people working between 1 and 5 employees; and those with more 20 workers turn out to be those in the agricultural sector.

Table 4. Cross-reference between the variables "Market to which it sells" and "Date of founding"

Market to which it sells	Date of founding			Total	Percentage
	A year ago	Two years ago	More than two years		
Local	14	16	120	150	57.92%
National	1	3	37	41	15.83%
Local and National	2	3	51	56	21.62%
International	0	1	11	12	4.63%
Total	17	23	219	259	100.00%
Percentage	6.56%	8.88%	84.56%	100.00%	

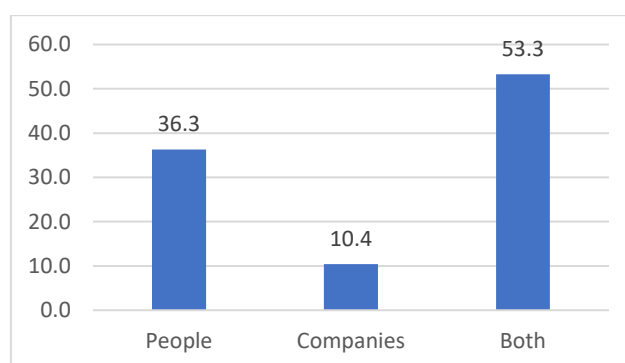
Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Based on the information in Table 5, it can be noted that a large part of the companies (57%) has the local market as sales coverage for their products and only 4% the international market. On the other hand, more than 84% of the companies in the population have been founded for more than two years.

Under the cross-reference above, trends can be seen such as companies that have been founded for more than two years, specializing in the sale of their products both in the local and national markets; while those that have only been created for a year need to enter the local market first, and then, with experience, would escalate to the national coverage market.

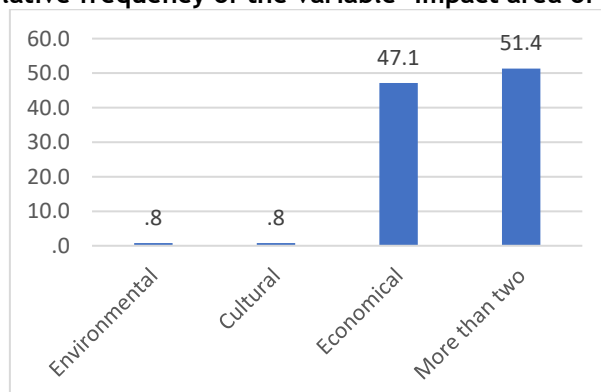
Among other univariate datum, following information is presented:

Figure 1. Relative frequency of the variable "Type of customers"



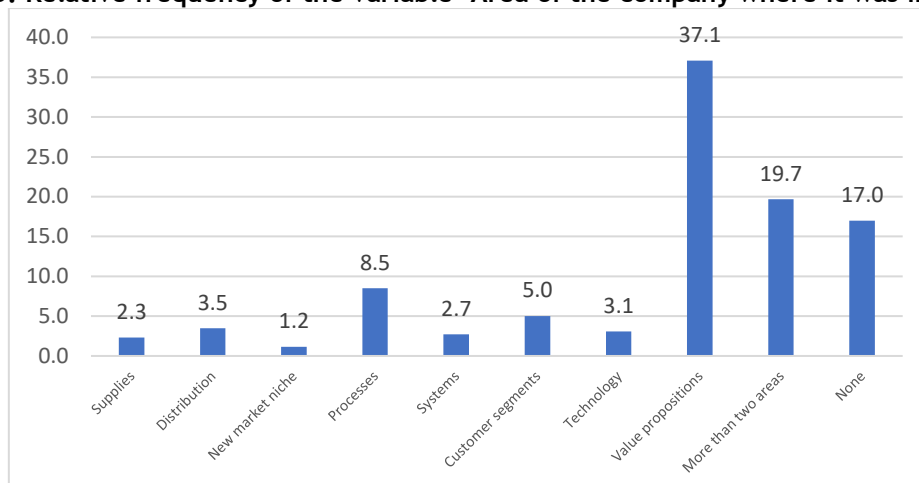
Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Figure 2. Relative frequency of the variable "Impact area of the company"



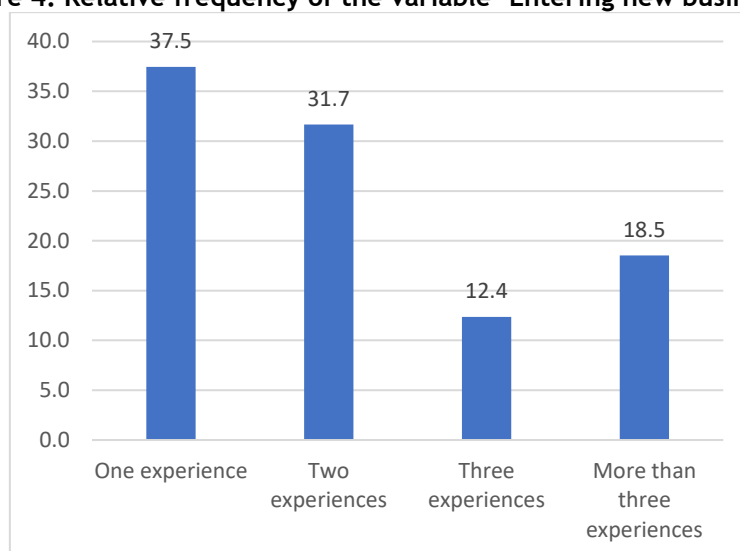
Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Figure 3. Relative frequency of the variable "Area of the company where it was innovated"



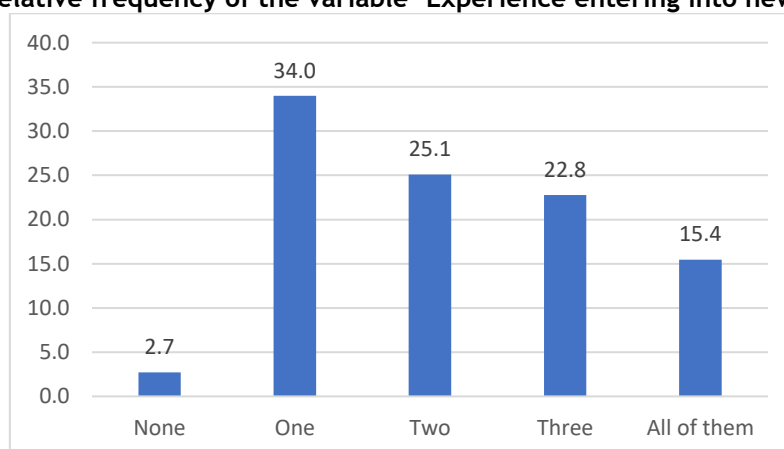
Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Figure 4. Relative frequency of the variable "Entering new businesses"

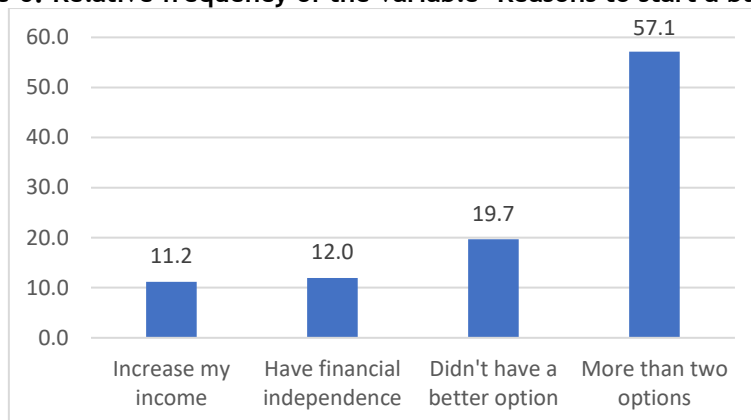


Source: Online information survey, 2022.

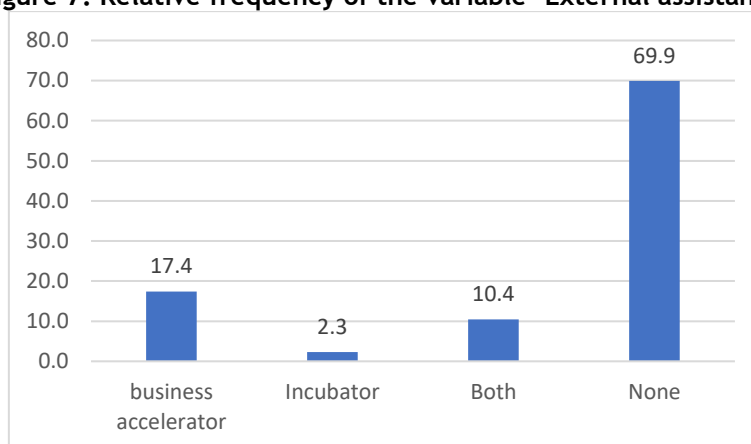
Figure 5. Relative frequency of the variable "Experience entering into new businesses"



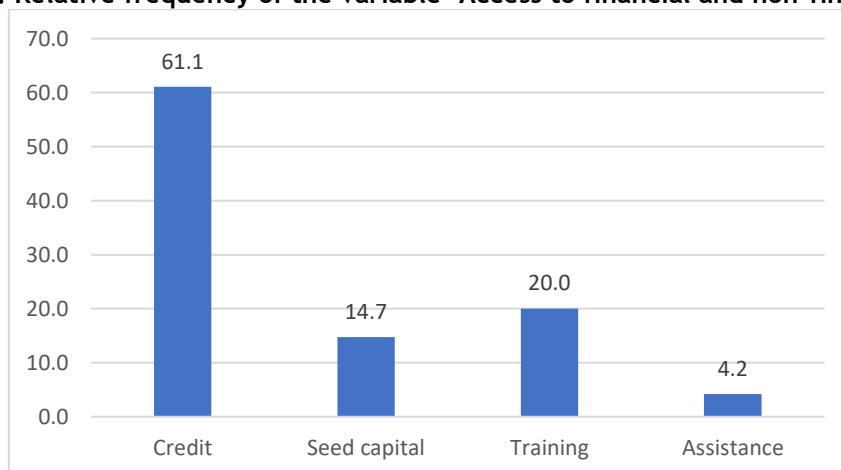
Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Figure 6. Relative frequency of the variable "Reasons to start a business"

Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Figure 7. Relative frequency of the variable "External assistance"

Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Figure 8. Relative frequency of the variable "Access to financial and non-financial aid"

Source: Online information survey, 2022.

According to the data in Figure 1, more than 50% of the surveyed companies do business with both cases, people and companies, in the public and private sectors. In Figure 2, it is evident that more than 90% of the companies have a generalized impact on the conurbation where they are located, this being of an economic, environmental and cultural nature.

On the other hand, Figure 3 shows a majority trend with 37% of the companies reporting that the area where they have carried out some type of innovation turns out to be in the value propositions

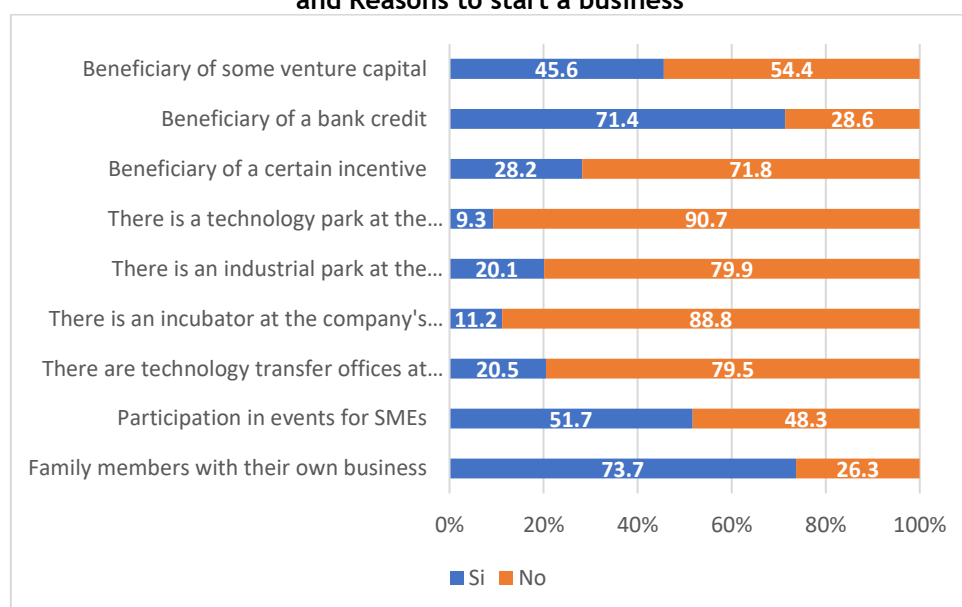
of the products, followed by a combination of areas (with 19%) between: new niche and processes, systems and technology, distribution and new customer niches. It is important to mention that approximately 17% of the companies under study have not conducted any type of innovation.

Figure 4 shows that more than 37% of the companies have ventured into other types of businesses, while around 63% of these invested in portfolio businesses. According to this information and from the data in Figure 5, only 2.7% of the companies did not have any type of success, while the difference, 97.3%, had a greater chance of success with the incursion of another type of business rather than a business portfolio.

In Figure 6, more than 57% of the surveyed people mention that the main reasons that resulted in the creation of a new business was to increase their income and maintain economic independence. Only 19.7% report that they had no other option to invest their capital.

Finally, Figure 7 reveals that more than 69% of the companies surveyed have not received any type of external aid, not even from a business accelerator, incubator, among others. And of those that have received financial and non-financial aid, about 60% of the companies had access to credit through financial institutions.

Figure 9. Relative frequencies of variables associated with "Benefits, Existence of external aid and Reasons to start a business"



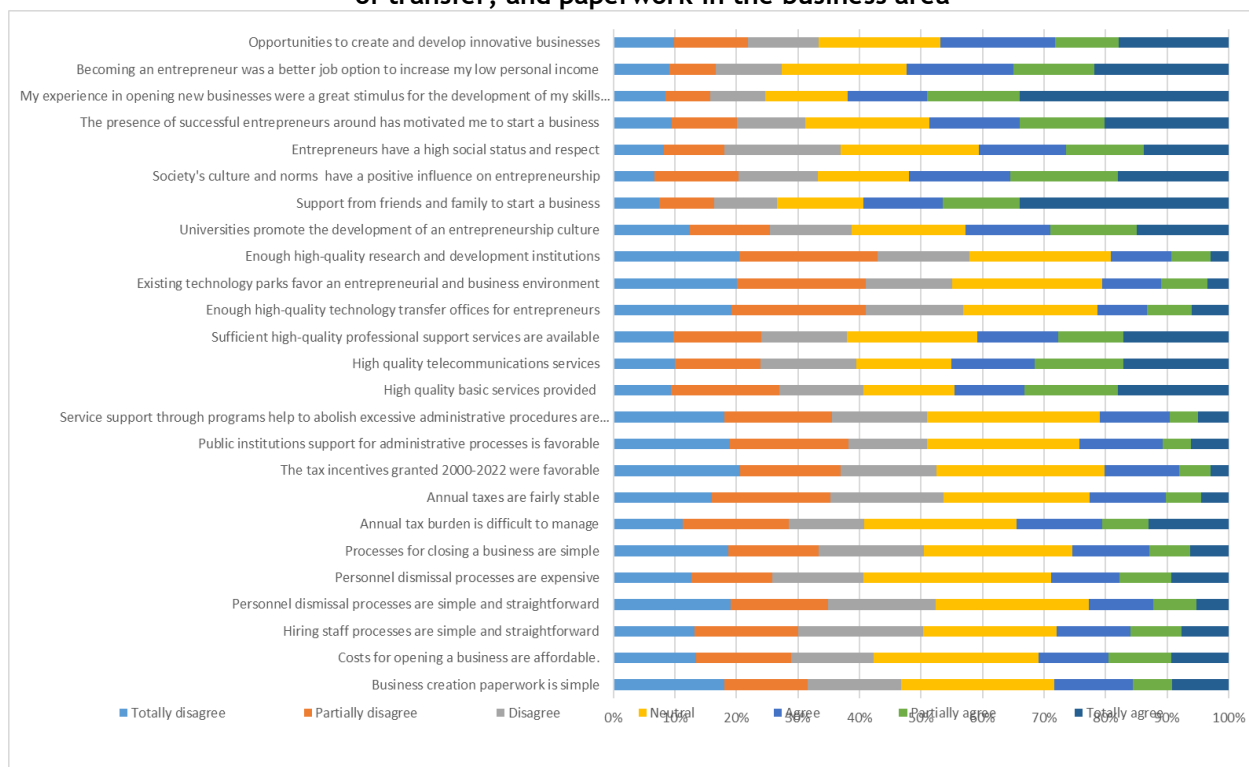
Source: Online information survey, 2022.

Based on the results evidenced in Figure 9, there are several marked trends concerning to the various benefits received by companies related to external aid and in their reasons for starting a business. Most of the companies declared receiving credit from the financial sector and almost 50% invested under capital risks.

There is a scarce existence of industrial and technology parks, incubators and business accelerators around the territorial conurbation of the surveyed companies, causing the insufficient prevalence of innovation and improvement in the services and quality of the products offered in the market. Also, there are no regular events to motivate or increase the participation of entrepreneurs and SMEs, in which new positions and continuous improvement in business management could be stimulated.

It is also evident that a large part of the managers and people in charge of the companies also have at least one member of their family circle who is immersed in the managerial and/or entrepreneurial field.

Figure 10. Relative frequencies of variables associated with "Opportunities, experiences, places of transfer, and paperwork in the business area"



Source: Online information survey, 2022.

According to the data in Figure 10, the registration of results was conducted through Likert scale, trends are verified in terms of opportunities, experiences, places of transfers and paperwork in relation to the business area. Here are the references:

As for the opportunities to create and develop innovative businesses, there is a range of answers, where there is no uniform criterion in terms of their stage, so it is inferred that this irregularity is caused both by the lack of accompaniment and advice spaces.

The category or label of "an entrepreneur" has been linked from the need to improve personal income due to the scarce job opportunities in the market. The experience to undertake and venture into new businesses has affected the improvement of business skills. The existence of the spirit of entrepreneurship in the territorial context has been a great opportunity to also decide to undertake a certain business idea. Entrepreneurs do not necessarily have a high status, but rather the textual focus of the word is evidenced in the actions, behavior and decision to take advantage of the opportunities, that is, more than a status, it results in principles. On the other hand, the social and cultural context influences several aspects at the time of conducting certain activities because where there are favorable conditions, the business risk tends to be lower. One of the aspects that has contributed to improve entrepreneurship in the form of starting new businesses comes from family support to adequate support from the university through research projects.

A little or no existence of places for the transfer of experiences and/or business knowledge affects in some way the dynamism of the idea and business maturation, since there are no spaces dedicated to potentiating, at the higher management levels, the way of treating clients, innovation, distribution, and development of more efficient production processes.

On the paperwork side, there are strong limitations regarding the management that must be followed to open a business, maintain or close a business; so, if there is not a clear guideline, it is possible that the idea of a new business or maintain the current one over time would be abandoned. Limitations in technological access, basic services, tax burden, support from the

government and the private sector mean that business management tends to reduce its effect on ventures and even more on new business trends.

All this evidence a limitation in several areas, for managing and potentializing new ideas or business portfolios, for which a comprehensive monitoring is imperative to improve its management and innovation.

For **phase three**, which corresponds to hypothesis testing, it is verified which variables/indicators theoretically correlate with each other, to verify if they maintain this behavior in the context of the study. Here are some references:

The instrument was designed from items that turn out to be nominal and ordinal, so to verify the relationship between variables/indicators, it is not necessary to verify the normality of their series. Under this premise, it would only be decided to verify if the test corresponds to Chi square or Spearman. The first case is applied for nominal variables; and for ordinal variables and/or combination with nominal, Spearman would be applied.

First reference:

Dimension 1: Training.

Dimension 2: Reasons to start a business.

Ho: There is no relationship between the Training dimensions and the Reasons to start a business; Significance > 0.05.

Ha: There is a relationship between the Training dimensions and the Reasons to start a business; Significance < 0.05.

Table 4. Spearman's correlation test

Variable 1	Criteria	Variable 2
		Reasons to start a business
Training	Spearman's rho	0.005
	Significance	0.938
	N	259

Source: Data processed through the SPSS program based on data obtained from companies, 2022.

According to the results, the significance of Spearman's Rho is accepted, the null hypothesis (Ho) is accepted, that is, there is no relationship between "Training" and "Reasons to start a business", so it is not necessary that there is a high-level of training specialty for the promotion of key reasons to start new business ideas, establishing this existence rather by the very need to cover a need in the market and/or individuals.

Second reference:

Dimension 1: Participation in business events.

Dimension 2: Experience in new businesses.

Ho: There is no relationship between the dimensions Participation in business events and Experience in new businesses; Significance > 0.05.

Ha: There is a relationship between the dimensions Participation in business events and Experience in new businesses; Significance < 0.05.

Table 5. Spearman's correlation test

Variable 1	Criteria	Variable 2
		Experience in new businesses
Participation	Spearman's rho	0.504

in business events	Significance	0.001
	N	259

Source: Data processed through the SPSS program based on data obtained from companies, 2022.

According to the results of the significance of Spearman's Rho, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis (H_a), that is, there is a medium direct relationship between the dimensions "Participation in business events" and "Experience in new businesses"; which indicates that, to promote the experience of creating new business ideas, it is important for entrepreneurs to regularly attend innovation and business management events.

Third reference:

Dimension 1: Technical assistance from incubators, accelerators, among others.

Dimension 2: Success in new business proposals.

H_0 : There is no relationship between the dimensions Technical assistance by incubators, accelerators and Success in new business proposals; Significance > 0.05.

H_a : There is a relationship between the dimensions Technical assistance by incubators, accelerators and Success in new business proposals; Significance < 0.05.

Table 5. Spearman's correlation test

Variable 1	Criteria	Variable 2
		Success in new business proposals
Technical assistance from incubators, accelerators, others	Spearman's rho	0.682
	Significance	0.036
	N	259

Source: Data processed through the SPSS program based on data obtained from companies, 2022.

According to the results of the significance of Spearman's Rho, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis (H_a), that is, there is a medium direct relationship between the dimensions "Technical assistance by incubators, accelerators" and "Success in new business proposals"; which indicates that, to guarantee the success of new business proposals, there must be technical assistance from incubators, business accelerators or both references.

Fourth reference:

Dimension 1: Tax burden of companies.

Dimension 2: Innovation in certain areas of the company.

H_0 : There is no relationship between the dimensions Tax burden of companies and Innovation in certain areas of the company; Significance > 0.05.

H_a : There is a relationship between the dimensions Tax burden of companies and Innovation in certain areas of the company; Significance < 0.05.

Table 5. Spearman's correlation test

Variable 1	Criteria	Variable 2
		Innovation in certain areas of the company
Tax burden of companies	Spearman's rho	-0.782
	Significance	0.0264
	N	259

Source: Data processed through the SPSS program based on data obtained from companies, 2022.

According to the results of the significance of Spearman's Rho, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis (H_a), that is, there is a median indirect relationship between the dimensions "Fiscal burden of companies" and "Innovation in certain areas of the company"; which indicates that, for the promotion of innovations in the various areas of the company, it is significant that the annual tax burden incurred for the fiscal year of the executed year would be reduced.

CONCLUSIONS

It was established that there is no relationship *between training and reasons to start a new business*, this implies that it is essential to have a highly specialized educational offer for the promotion of key reasons to undertake new business ideas. There is a direct medium-range relationship between the dimensions of *participation in business events and experience in new businesses*. This means that, in order to promote the experience of creating new business ideas, it is important for entrepreneurs to regularly attend innovation and business-related management events. The dimensions *technical assistance by incubators and/or accelerators and success in new business proposals* have a medium direct relationship with each other. This means that in order to guarantee the success of new business proposals, specialized technical assistance is required from incubation centers and/or business accelerators, or from both references. Finally, the study shows a medium and indirect relationship between *the tax burden of companies and innovation in certain areas of the company* dimensions. This result implies that, in order to promote innovation in the various areas of the company, a reduction in the annual tax burden is necessary to stimulate innovation in the SMEs in the province of Santa Elena.

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