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Tourism Creative Factory as a Knowledge-Based Entrepreneurship Programme: Innovation, Learning, and Sustainability in Post-Pandemic Portugal

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of entrepreneurship, innovation, and sustainability in the tourism sector through the lens of knowledge creation and transfer. It focuses on the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) ideation programme, developed under Turismo de Portugal's Fostering Innovation in Tourism 2.0 initiative. Using a case study methodology, the research situates the 2021–2022 “RESTART” edition of TCF within broader theoretical frameworks of knowledge-based development and organisational learning. This study highlights the programme's role in facilitating knowledge exchange among participants, mentors, and institutional actors, thereby enhancing entrepreneurial readiness and resilience in a post-pandemic context. Emphasis is placed on mentorship, capacity-building, and experiential learning as mechanisms for knowledge management, enabling the 39 selected participants to develop sustainable business models and Minimum Viable Products (MVPs), with the 16 most innovative being selected for a final pitch presentation to a panel of experts representing diverse sectors of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The findings underscore the transferability of TCF's methodology to other knowledge-intensive sectors and contribute to advancing theoretical and practical understanding of how structured ideation programmes function as knowledge systems within tourism and beyond.

Keywords: tourism; entrepreneurship and innovation; knowledge; sustainable development goals; Tourism Creative Factory



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1. Introduction

This paper explores the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) ideation programme as a structured mechanism for knowledge creation, transfer, and management within the tourism sector. Positioned at the intersection of entrepreneurship, innovation, and sustainability, the study integrates empirical insights with theoretical perspectives to contribute to a deeper understanding of how knowledge-based processes drive sectoral transformation. By analysing the TCF's 2021–2022 “RESTART” edition, this paper examines how structured entrepreneurship education programmes serve not only as platforms for business development, but also as dynamic knowledge ecosystems that foster individual and organisational

learning. In addition to being a contribution to all those interested in the mechanisms of knowledge transfer and knowledge creation, the account of the programme that we will provide (along with its specific context) contributes broadly to knowledge about how entrepreneurship education programmes can be structured and conceived and can be useful for decision-makers and stakeholders involved in education, evidence-based policymaking, and the implementation of initiatives to foster entrepreneurship. The tourism sector is increasingly recognised as a knowledge-intensive domain in which competitiveness depends on the ability of organisations (especially micro and small enterprises) to acquire, create, and apply knowledge effectively [1–3]. However, structural constraints, scarce resources, and the predominance of informal learning mechanisms often limit the innovation capacity of these firms [4,5].

The tourism sector has long faced challenges in embedding innovation and entrepreneurial thinking due to its structural reliance on micro and small enterprises. These enterprises often lack the formal mechanisms and institutional support needed for systematic knowledge development. These dynamics became even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the sector's vulnerability and highlighted the absence of structured knowledge frameworks capable of supporting rapid adaptation. Businesses were suddenly required to reinterpret consumer behaviour, adopt digital tools, and adjust their operational models [6] without the institutionalised learning processes typically found in more knowledge-intensive industries. The TCF programme helped respond to these challenges by offering a structured learning environment where emerging entrepreneurs could access mentorship, collaborate with peers, and work with iterative ideation methods. These elements supported the development and sharing of practical knowledge at a time when the sector's recovery clearly depended on platforms capable of speeding up learning and turning tacit insights into concrete innovation.

This case study responds to the scarcity of research on knowledge management in tourism entrepreneurship [5,7–9], particularly the limited empirical evidence on how ideation programmes function as knowledge systems embedded within national policy frameworks, or how such initiatives foster self-development capacities, mentor-based learning, and iterative knowledge exchange in early-stage tourism entrepreneurship. Existing research highlights the importance of understanding how entrepreneurs acquire and transform knowledge [10,11]; however, few studies analyse how structured entrepreneurship and tourism focused programmes provide the mechanisms that make this knowledge transferable, validated, and integrated into day-to-day operations and activities. This gap reinforces the relevance of analysing TCF as an example of an ideation-stage program that intentionally embeds knowledge processes into its methodological design.

In particular, the analysis of the TCF case offers a situated analysis of how knowledge-based capacities—such as creativity, critical thinking, and strategic planning—are fostered and institutionalised within a national innovation programme. Methodologically, the study follows a case study approach informed by relevant literature [12–15], drawing on first-hand data and programme documentation (including program documentation provided by Turismo de Portugal, internal evaluation materials, contents produced by participants during their journey, and notes/records taken by the implementation team) to understand how TCF contributes to the production and dissemination of tourism-specific knowledge. This mixed analysis of TCF's outputs aligns with recommendations for case-based research in knowledge-intensive contexts and increases the robustness of the analysis [13,14].

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global systems and particularly impacted tourism, exposing vulnerabilities while simultaneously creating opportunities for innovation and learning. As tourism sectors worldwide reevaluate their economic models, programmes like TCF demonstrate how entrepreneurship education can act as a conduit for knowledge-

based resilience and recovery. Within Turismo de Portugal's broader strategy [16], TCF exemplifies how public policy can leverage knowledge management practices to foster sustainable, competitive, and innovative tourism ecosystems.

2. Background: Tourism, Innovation, and the Knowledge Economy

Tourism operates as a complex, knowledge-intensive ecosystem encompassing a wide range of interconnected economic and social activities—from accommodation and gastronomy to culture, mobility, and technology. Within this context, the ability of tourism enterprises to create, absorb, and apply knowledge is increasingly recognised as a key driver of competitiveness, resilience, and innovation [1,2]. As Europe's tourism sector is predominantly composed of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which represent over 99% of the industry [17], knowledge transfer mechanisms are critical to enabling these firms to adapt and thrive amid structural and environmental changes. Other studies further explore and point to the fact that tourism innovation depends heavily on knowledge-intensive ecosystems, namely platforms and communication channels that enable two-way knowledge flows, stakeholder participation, and the integration of customer and partner insights into service development [18,19]. Iglesias-Sánchez et al. [20] also highlight the importance of hybrid collaborative spaces, both digital and physical, where ideas can circulate and be assimilated into business strategy. Complementing these authors and their research, Yeh and Ku [21] show that when knowledge exchange is promoted through collaborative methodologies, organisations strengthen their innovation capabilities and achieve a more solid alignment between learning processes and strategic goals. All in all, it is clear that tourism development benefits from structured systems capable of organising stakeholder knowledge, promoting iterative learning, and transforming insights into improved offerings.

Tourism contributes not only to economic development but also to knowledge-based social inclusion, as it creates jobs and learning opportunities for underrepresented groups, including women, youth, and minorities [22]. Over the past decade, Portugal has capitalised on these dynamics, positioning tourism as a strategic pillar for sustainable development. The sector's role in generating experiential knowledge—through service delivery, place branding, and cultural engagement—has contributed to Portugal's broader knowledge economy, particularly in the hospitality domain [23,24].

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant gaps in the sector's preparedness, leading to a sharp decline in global tourism employment and GDP contribution [22]. This crisis underscored the importance of institutional learning, knowledge exchange, and rapid adaptation. By 2023, the global recovery in tourism had reached 88% of pre-pandemic levels [25], highlighting the sector's inherent resilience and capacity to rebuild, provided the right learning and innovation frameworks are in place.

To sustain this momentum, scholars and policymakers alike have called for systematic efforts to embed knowledge management and innovation practices within tourism development strategies [1,23]. The European Commission's 2021 report *Transition Pathways for Tourism* [1] advocates for ecological, digital, and socioeconomic integration, foregrounding knowledge as a core enabler of sustainable transition. Similarly, the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030* [17] emphasises the importance of developing tourism ecosystems that can generate, share, and retain knowledge to improve competitiveness, innovation, and adaptability.

In this context, structured knowledge-based interventions—such as entrepreneurship education, mentorship, and ideation and open innovation programmes—can play a central role in equipping tourism entrepreneurs with the tools and networks needed to innovate.

These interventions facilitate the circulation of knowledge within and across organisational boundaries, supporting a culture of continuous learning and experimentation [26–30].

Sustainable innovation, in particular, has become a focal point in tourism and hospitality research. It reflects the sector's growing recognition of the need to integrate environmental, social, and economic knowledge into the design of new products, services, and business models [31–33]. By enabling businesses to anticipate change, reduce negative impacts, and contribute to broader well-being, sustainable innovation supports both organisational learning and long-term knowledge retention in the tourism economy.

Entrepreneurs are key agents in this process, acting as conduits for translating tacit knowledge and local insight into scalable, market-ready solutions. In Portugal, the institutional ecosystem—particularly through initiatives led by Turismo de Portugal—has created pathways for structured learning, mentorship, and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. The national network of 12 tourism schools exemplifies how education and training institutions can play a dual role in preparing the workforce and diffusing practical knowledge across the sector.

2.1. Conceptualising Knowledge in the Present Study

In order to address the conceptual scope of knowledge within this study, the manuscript adopts a pragmatic and policy-relevant definition aligned with the objectives of applied knowledge research. The European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) framework of reference defines knowledge as “facts, principles, theories, and practices accumulated through learning; both cognitive reflection and direct experience of individuals or groups contribute to the body of knowledge” [34].

This definition is particularly appropriate for the present research, as the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) programme is explicitly designed as a structured learning environment combining formal instruction, mentoring, peer interaction, and experiential learning. Knowledge within the TCF framework is therefore understood not only as abstract or codified information, but also as applied, practice-based, and experiential knowledge generated and transferred through entrepreneurial training and project development activities.

Accordingly, the study conceptualises knowledge transfer as a multidimensional process encompassing (i) the transmission of formal entrepreneurial and business knowledge, (ii) the development of practical skills through applied learning, and (iii) the accumulation of experiential and contextual knowledge emerging from interaction with mentors, experts, and peers within the programme ecosystem.

2.2. Knowledge Creation, Entrepreneurial Learning, and Innovation in Tourism

In the evolving landscape of global tourism, entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a knowledge-intensive process that involves not only opportunity recognition and resource mobilisation, but also the generation, transfer, and application of knowledge. As the sector grows and customer expectations become more sophisticated, tourism enterprises must innovate by building on both experiential and formalised knowledge systems [3,7,35]. This shift positions entrepreneurs as key nodes in the tourism knowledge ecosystem—actors who synthesise diverse forms of knowledge to create value-added offerings. This perspective is particularly relevant for the TCF programme, which was directly designed to strengthen participants' ability to work and interact with different forms of inputs, data and knowledge, and integrate them into new solutions.

Despite growing scholarly interest in this area, research on knowledge processes in tourism entrepreneurship remains underdeveloped. Scholars have called for deeper exploration into how entrepreneurs acquire, transform, and leverage knowledge to design novel products, services, and business models [10,11]. Entrepreneurial learning is

especially important in a sector dominated by micro and small firms, where formal research and development structures are rare, and innovation often depends on informal knowledge networks, learning-by-doing, and peer collaboration. Moreover, by fomenting entrepreneurship education in tourism, through the development of entrepreneurial and business skills among its stakeholders, it is expected to find direct contributions to economic and social stimulation [36,37]. TCF directly responds to these gaps by promoting a supportive and added-value environment where entrepreneurs can access structured and backed-up learning instead of solely relying on informal, unstructured or ad hoc sources.

Entrepreneurship research has long argued that the field is defined not merely by the profiles of entrepreneurs but by the nexus between enterprising individuals and the discovery/exploitation of opportunities [38]. This perspective is particularly relevant for tourism, where opportunities frequently emerge from changing mobility patterns, cultural consumption, and destination governance. In that sense, entrepreneurship education programmes can be understood as structured mechanisms that increase participants' opportunity-recognition capacity and their ability to mobilise resources to act under uncertainty. At the ideation stage, where participants often do not yet possess a fully articulated product, market, or organisational form, decision-making tends to rely on iterative learning and experiment-based reasoning rather than linear planning; this is consistent with effectuation arguments that early ventures frequently progress through incremental commitment, stakeholder feedback, and iterative reframing of goals [39,40].

At the same time, the TCF programme is not only a pedagogical intervention but also an innovation intervention. The programme's design deliberately connects teams with external actors—mentors, institutional partners, sector organisations, and ecosystem stakeholders—so that knowledge and resources circulate across boundaries. Such boundary-crossing is consistent with open innovation logics, according to which innovation processes can benefit from purposive knowledge inflows and outflows rather than being confined to a single organisation. In a tourism context, this matters because destinations are multi-actor systems in which firms, public authorities, training institutions, and communities co-produce value; therefore, entrepreneurship education that incorporates external stakeholders can be conceptualised as an open, ecosystem-based learning architecture rather than a closed classroom-based intervention.

The tourism sector's capacity for innovation has traditionally been constrained by resource limitations, particularly among smaller enterprises [4,5]. These constraints hinder not only the production of novel ideas but also the absorption and internalisation of external knowledge—processes crucial to organisational adaptation and sustained innovation. In this context, programmes like the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) play a vital role in structuring knowledge flows, providing entrepreneurs with targeted support, mentorship, and ideation methodologies that enhance knowledge transfer and application.

Innovation in tourism can be understood as a staged process, beginning with idea generation and culminating in implementation and diffusion [5]. Each stage relies on different forms of knowledge—tacit, experiential, technical—and on mechanisms for transforming that knowledge into market-ready solutions. For instance, ideation techniques such as brainstorming and brainwriting [41,42] facilitate the externalisation of implicit knowledge among participants, while prototyping and MVP development support the validation and codification of emergent ideas [43,44]. TCF fomented these mechanisms by embedding them into its programme journey, ensuring that participants were not only exposed to these techniques but also had a team of experts supporting them in applying them to their own entrepreneurial business ideas.

Design thinking represents another powerful tool in knowledge-driven innovation. This human-centred approach combines creative ideation with iterative testing to tackle

complex challenges, drawing on the cognitive and collaborative strengths of diverse teams [45,46]. According to Brown [47], design thinking helps align human needs with technological feasibility and market viability—an inherently knowledge-based alignment. When embedded in entrepreneurial initiatives like TCF, such approaches enhance participants' capacity to reflect, adapt, and integrate learning into their decision-making processes, being supported by previously tested and validated methodologies.

Creativity, therefore, is not simply a spark of inspiration, but a cultivated skill rooted in exposure to diverse knowledge domains and experiential learning [48,49]. Entrepreneurial training programmes that prioritise creativity—as TCF does, namely, with its structured processes supported by mentorship and peer interaction—build human capital by fostering environments where individuals can combine technical knowledge with intuition and market awareness. These knowledge environments promote individual and collective learning while driving sustainable innovation [9,50].

Ultimately, the interdependence of an open innovation approach, with knowledge creation, innovation, and entrepreneurship underscores the importance of structured programmes that manage and facilitate these interactions [51]. By embedding creativity and innovation into formalised learning experiences, programmes such as TCF strengthen the capacity of entrepreneurs to generate and retain knowledge that supports adaptive and competitive growth.

2.3. The Tourism Creative Factory Programme as a Structured Knowledge System

The Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) represents a strategic knowledge platform within Portugal's tourism innovation ecosystem. Launched under the Fostering Innovation in Tourism 2.0 (FIT 2.0) programme by Turismo de Portugal (TdP), TCF functions as both a knowledge creation and knowledge transfer mechanism, enabling emerging entrepreneurs to transform ideas into viable, sustainable business models. Rooted in the objectives of the national Tourism Strategy 2027 [16], the programme operationalises knowledge management principles by integrating ideation, mentorship, collaboration, and experimentation into a structured entrepreneurial journey.

FIT 2.0 itself is designed to accelerate innovation capacity across the tourism sector by fostering an interconnected network of incubators, accelerators, and training entities. As one of the programme's core components, TCF focuses on the ideation phase—where entrepreneurial knowledge is initially formed and shared. Between 2016 and the 2021–2022 cycle, FIT 2.0 supported 69 ideation and acceleration programmes, resulting in over 1400 startups/projects and facilitating business model experimentation across various markets, including B2B, B2C, and SaaS channels.

TCF's success as a knowledge initiative can be attributed to its multilayered structure, which supports iterative learning, knowledge co-creation, and applied experimentation. Participants engage in a guided process that links conceptual thinking with practical development. This process is enriched by access to expert mentorship, collaborative peer environments, and institutional resources provided by TdP and its partner network. Such environments foster the absorption and transformation of knowledge, bridging the often-cited gap between entrepreneurial intent and implementation.

Nevertheless, TdP has identified persistent knowledge-related challenges that the programme addressed: (i) a misalignment between the number of supported startups and their capacity for sustained innovation; (ii) limited collaboration between advanced knowledge producers (e.g., universities, R&D centres) and tourism enterprises; (iii) inconsistent networking and mentoring infrastructure; and (iv) a recurring disconnect between conceptual innovation and operational execution.

TCF's ideation structure is specifically designed to tackle these limitations by embedding mentoring and collaborative learning within the programme's core. Through six editions to date, the initiative has engaged over 220 entrepreneurs and nearly 400 projects, working in partnership with TdP's national network of hospitality and tourism schools. These schools act not only as training sites, but also as local hubs for knowledge dissemination and regional innovation.

Notably, TCF adapted swiftly to pandemic-era constraints, incorporating hybrid models, virtual collaboration tools, and flexible learning environments. These adaptations demonstrate the programme's role in cultivating organisational resilience through agile knowledge systems. In doing so, TCF supports knowledge retention and learning continuity, both of which are essential for navigating the uncertainties of the tourism sector.

The programme has contributed to the formation of a new generation of knowledge-driven tourism ventures. These include companies specialising in sustainable hospitality, cultural tourism, food safety technologies, transport logistics, and themed experiences. Such ventures reflect not only commercial innovation but also the embedded knowledge capacities that TCF helps cultivate—capacities that combine technical know-how, market intelligence, and collaborative creativity.

In sum, the Tourism Creative Factory functions as a microcosm of a knowledge-based economy in action. It integrates ideation, education, mentorship, and experimentation to enable the structured development and flow of entrepreneurial knowledge. Moreover, by collecting, analysing and transforming different data sources, such as official documentation from Turismo de Portugal, internal evaluation materials (participants feedback, mentor evaluation comments and formal reports), outputs produced by participants (MVP drafts, pitch decks and action plans) and by the implementation team (records, recommendations and comments), TCF's contribution extends beyond individual project outcomes to the systemic strengthening of tourism innovation in Portugal.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

According to the literature, studies on ideation programmes in the tourism context constitute an emerging research topic [5,7–9]. For this reason, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted, based on a single case study, with the aim of obtaining an in-depth and contextualised understanding of the phenomenon under investigation [12–15]. The study has an exploratory and descriptive nature, suitable for the analysis of phenomena that are still under-researched in the literature [14].

This study uses a qualitative case study design to examine the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) as a structured mechanism of knowledge creation and transfer in tourism entrepreneurship education. The case is bound to the 2021–2022 “RESTART” edition, which is analytically suitable because it formalised sustainability (including SDGs) within the training logic and because it provides a complete cycle from open call to Demoday. The case study approach is appropriate for investigating complex programme architectures where learning, mentoring, and ecosystem interaction co-produce outcomes that cannot be reduced to a single metric.

3.2. Data and Analytical Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design centred on the “RESTART” edition of the Tourism Creative Factory programme. The empirical material consists mainly of primary sources, i.e., of programme-related documentary sources and institutional materials produced during the design, implementation, and evaluation phases of the initiative. These included official programme regulations and calls, programme architecture descrip-

tions (phases, learning objectives, deliverables), training content outlines and thematic modules, mentoring and tutoring structures, participant selection and participation figures, and programme output descriptors (e.g., MVP development requirements, action-plan templates, and pitch/Demoday formats). These documents were complemented by first-hand operational information available to the authors through their involvement with the programme ecosystem, allowing clarification of programme sequencing and the function of key learning activities. Most of these data were generated in accordance with the design and implementation of the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) ideation programme, based on the requirements defined by Turismo de Portugal's Fostering Innovation in Tourism 2.0 initiative [16,23]. Thus, TdP, the institution that promoted TCF, is also the owner of most of the data. The use of multiple document types enabled cross-referencing of information across sources, contributing to a more robust interpretation of the phenomenon [14].

Data analysis followed a qualitative document-based approach, involving systematic reading, organisation, and interpretation of content [14,52]. All relevant materials were systematically reviewed to reconstruct the programme architecture and its phases. This method proved appropriate as it allowed for a detailed description of the programme, identification of its operational mechanisms, and understanding of the results achieved, providing a contextualised and comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study [14].

Participant selection was determined by the programme's formal admission procedures, which were based on open calls. The participants had to present business ideas and, after the development stage, have them aligned with the following premises: sustainable company management; enrichment of the tourist experience; promotion of intelligent and sustainable mobility; data-based management; and optimisation of operations [23]. As the present study focuses on the programme as a knowledge-transfer and learning system rather than on individual participant trajectories, the analysis does not rely on primary interviews or surveys but on documented processes and institutional records that reflect collective participation patterns and learning mechanisms.

4. Results: Knowledge Types, Transfer Mechanisms, and Outputs in the TCF "RESTART" Edition

Before proceeding to the description of the phases, a more systematic and structured approach to it is in order. The "RESTART" edition operationalised knowledge as a combination of facts, principles, theories, and practices developed through both instruction and experience. Across programme materials, knowledge transfer was organised around a staged learning journey (Open Call, Bootcamp, Idea Modelling, and Demoday) that progressively moved participants from opportunity articulation to business-model structuring and public validation.

A first result concerns the types of knowledge targeted. Programme materials consistently referenced the transfer of explicit entrepreneurial knowledge—business modelling principles, marketing and communication logics, basic financial planning and pricing rationales, and innovation frameworks—as well as sustainability-oriented knowledge aligned with SDG framing. This codified knowledge was delivered through structured modules and translated into practice via templates, toolkits, and milestone-based deliverables.

A second result concerns the mechanisms of knowledge transfer. The "RESTART" edition embedded experiential learning through mentoring clinics, iterative feedback, and peer-to-peer exchange. Mentoring served as a key transfer channel through which tacit and contextual knowledge—judgement, feasibility assessment, problem reframing, and domain-specific know-how—was transmitted in a way that could not be fully captured through instructional sessions alone. Importantly, documents also indicate that knowledge transfer was not unidirectional (from experts to participants) but co-creative: the programme

architecture created repeated opportunities for participants to externalise ideas, receive critique, revise propositions, and test assumptions in progressively more public settings.

A third result concerns knowledge outputs. The programme required each team to produce artefacts that function as codified knowledge repositories, notably a validated MVP concept, a structured business model, communication materials for pitching, and a 12-month action plan. These outputs demonstrate how the programme converts learning into transferable assets: they stabilise knowledge created during mentoring and experimentation, enabling teams to communicate their ventures to external stakeholders (e.g., partners, funders, customers) and to carry forward the learning after the programme's conclusion.

5. The 2022 “RESTART” Edition: Operationalising Knowledge for Sustainable Innovation

Building on the success of previous years, the 2022 edition of the TCF adopted the “RESTART” theme, resonating with the sector's renewed focus on adapting lifestyles and post-pandemic habits. For the first time, sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were incorporated into the training programme, aiming to launch innovative concepts with an increasingly sustainable focus.

The primary objective of the “RESTART” programme was to provide future entrepreneurs with best practices in tourism ideation. The initiative aimed to nurture innovative ideas by creating the necessary conditions for developing well-structured business models and preparing participants for entering the market. Its main priorities included guiding startups in designing their Minimum Viable Product (MVP), defining their business models, preparing communication materials, and creating a 12-month action plan.

To enhance mentoring support, the 2022 edition expanded its team of +20 mentors and consultants, featuring individuals from various industries and sectors, with diverse profiles, experiences, expertise, and networks. These mentors supported entrepreneurs throughout the ideation journey, assisting them in refining their MVPs, marketing strategies, and action plans.

The added value provided by the mentors selected for this edition of TCF was evident due to their solid expertise in multidisciplinary and foundational areas crucial for the implementation of future start-ups. Their presence in the programme allowed participants to learn about the mentors' diverse career paths, acquire new concepts and knowledge, and expand their perspectives on building their business ideas while benefiting from the global knowledge capital and networks that each mentor could offer.

In structural terms, this ideation journey was further enriched by the contributions of national and international partners (from the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the business sector) invited by the programme's consulting team. These partners contributed resources, products, services, and solutions, fostering synergies and enabling entrepreneurs to test their MVPs in real-world contexts.

From an operational perspective, this edition of the TCF launched a call for proposals within the following eligible business areas: New Technologies applied to the tourism sector; Gastronomy and Catering; Local and Rural Accommodation; Health and Wellness Tourism; Tourism Entertainment and Services; Wine Tourism; Outdoor Tourism; Sports Tourism; Inclusive Tourism; Industrial Tourism; Cultural and Heritage Tourism; Religious Tourism; and Maritime Tourism.

Following the evaluation of the applications, all proposals meeting the criteria defined in Regulation 02/2021 of the FIT 2.0—Fostering Innovation in Tourism—Open Ideation Programmes Support 2021/2022 were selected. The proponents of these applications then participated in an Online Bootcamp, where they presented 39 business ideas to the TCF

team of consultants and mentors. Subsequently, the Multidisciplinary Team of TCF Restart worked with the selected teams over two months, culminating in the Demoday, held at the Porto School of Hospitality and Tourism on 29 November 2022.

Structuring Knowledge Acquisition and Entrepreneurial Outcomes

Within the TCF programme, knowledge transfer occurs primarily through structured training modules and entrepreneurial support activities. These include workshops and courses on business modelling, marketing strategies, financial planning, intellectual property, sustainability practices, and project pitching. In addition, participants acquire tacit and experiential knowledge through mentoring sessions, feedback from industry professionals, peer-to-peer exchange, and hands-on project development.

The combination of formal instruction and experiential learning enables participants to transform theoretical knowledge into applied entrepreneurial practices, reinforcing the programme's role as a knowledge-based support mechanism rather than solely a funding or incubation initiative.

The 2022 "RESTART" edition of the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) was designed to operationalise knowledge at multiple levels—individual, organisational, and systemic. Its programme structure reflected best practices in knowledge management, guiding participants through a sequential, multi-phased learning journey that integrated ideation, mentoring, applied experimentation, and feedback loops.

The programme consisted of four interlinked phases: Open Call, Bootcamp, Ideation/Idea Modelling, and Demoday. Each phase acted as a site of knowledge acquisition and application, fostering cumulative learning that aligned with the entrepreneurial development cycle.

The Open Call phase promoted broad access and inclusivity, disseminating programme information across all regions of Portugal through different communication and roadshow techniques. This ensured diversity in project proposals and facilitated the integration of different local knowledge perspectives into the entrepreneurial ecosystem. During this stage, the TCF team also engaged directly with local partners such as incubators and regional associations, which made it possible to understand the state of the art of emerging entrepreneurial solutions and to communicate the key challenges faced by the tourism sector. These interactions contributed not only to the dissemination of relevant knowledge but also to the creation of new networks for both the TCF team and local stakeholders. A total of 48 applications were received, of which 39 were selected for participation, based on their alignment with the programme's sustainability and innovation objectives.

The Bootcamp phase launched the programme with an intensive orientation, introducing participants to the TCF's collaborative learning environment and its network of consultants and mentors. Knowledge transfer in this phase was facilitated through workshops, peer-to-peer exchanges, and interactive sessions designed to rapidly develop participants' awareness of key business concepts, sustainability frameworks, and tourism-specific challenges. Importantly, the knowledge shared by the participating entrepreneurs during this phase also enriched the TCF team's understanding of the sector. Their insights provided a consolidated view of emerging trends, operational constraints, and innovation opportunities, which was subsequently shared with decision-makers at Turismo de Portugal and other ecosystem innovation actors.

During the Idea Modelling phase, structured knowledge support was delivered through four thematic areas: (i) productisation—translating ideas into marketable offerings; (ii) marketing—refining value propositions and communication strategies; (iii) finance—assessing investment needs, budgeting, and pricing strategies; (iv) innovation—embedding creativity and sustainability into business models.

Each team was assigned a resident tutor for ongoing guidance, and the programme alternated between virtual and in-person sessions to provide flexibility while maintaining knowledge continuity. This hybrid format also allowed for real-time adaptation and iterative refinement of participants' ideas—a hallmark of dynamic knowledge environments.

A distinctive feature of this phase was the integration of experiential learning mechanisms, such as thematic sprints, mentoring clinics, and real-world testing. These activities supported the internalisation of entrepreneurial knowledge by prompting participants to apply new tools, frameworks, and insights directly to their business concepts.

Participants also engaged with stakeholders from academia, industry, and policy, gaining multidimensional perspectives on their projects. Activities such as Pitch Days, individual mentoring, and networking events enhanced not only business readiness but also social capital and access to distributed knowledge resources.

The final phase, Demoday, was held on 29 November 2022. Sixteen selected projects were presented to a panel of experts representing diverse sectors of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This event served both as a culmination of the programme and a platform for knowledge validation, enabling participants to articulate the rationale, feasibility, and scalability of their ventures in front of a critical audience.

To recognise excellence in communication and innovation, the TCF team introduced two awards: the Pitch Award, recognising presentation and storytelling effectiveness; and the Future Award, celebrating the project with the most innovative and scalable solution.

By the conclusion of the programme, each participant had acquired a set of tangible knowledge assets: a validated MVP, a timeline for implementation, and a strategic roadmap for market entry. Moreover, several concrete outcomes illustrate the practical relevance of these knowledge assets. For instance, (1) a mobility-related solution received direct support from the TCF team in preparing an application for investment from the national public venture capital company, (2) a project offering technological solutions for hotel room keys was presented to two major hotel groups for potential implementation, (3) an entrepreneur focused on travel-related health tourism expanded her activity through access to new industry partners, (4) and a local accommodation project located near a reservoir refined its market segmentation and communication strategy to meet post-pandemic demand. As a whole, the "RESTART" edition thus exemplifies how structured entrepreneurial initiatives can serve as embedded knowledge systems—shaping not only business outcomes but also participants' capacity for critical thinking, adaptability, and long-term learning.

6. Discussion

6.1. Generalisable Approaches to Knowledge-Driven Innovation

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the conceptualisation of entrepreneurship programmes as structured knowledge systems. In line with organisational learning and knowledge-creation perspectives, the TCF "RESTART" edition demonstrates how formal instruction, mentoring, and iterative project development jointly enable the transformation of abstract principles into actionable entrepreneurial practices. This confirms that knowledge transfer in entrepreneurship education is not a linear process but an interactive and socially embedded one.

The TCF model addresses one of the tourism sector's persistent structural gaps: the limited capacity of micro and small enterprises to access, absorb, and utilise knowledge for innovation. By integrating structured ideation, expert mentorship, and targeted learning modules, TCF compensates for this gap by providing a ready-made infrastructure for knowledge acquisition and application. The integration of sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further strengthens the programme's relevance, encouraging participants to align their ventures with long-term environmental and social priorities.

Furthermore, initiatives such as TCF, promoted by TdP are aligned with recommendations from the OECD and acknowledged as best practices that ought to be shared with peers and the public. TdP's director, Sérgio Guerreiro, has recently participated in December 2025, on a OECD webinar on "Using Incubators and Accelerators to Support Travel and Tourism Start-Ups" [53]. The inclusion of TCF in wider discussions at a very high institutional level is a testament to its originality and relevance.

Importantly, TCF demonstrates that knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship can be cultivated through systemic interventions. The programme does not merely expose participants to abstract business concepts; it enables the internalisation of those concepts through iterative practice, personalised feedback, and real-world testing. This aligns with the broader understanding of knowledge as an actionable and context-dependent resource, shaped by experience and refined through structured reflection.

Moreover, the programme's emphasis on multi-actor collaboration—with consultants, mentors, institutions, and industry stakeholders—facilitates knowledge co-creation and distributed learning, both of which are essential for generating innovative responses to complex sectoral challenges. As discussed in the background section, these dynamics are critical to transitioning toward a knowledge-based tourism economy.

Considering the challenges faced by the tourism sector, it is essential to understand how entrepreneurs (and their respective projects) can enhance their capabilities through interaction with the various actors and tools available within the entrepreneurial ecosystem that surrounds them. TCF is not an outlier in promoting innovation and entrepreneurial spirit in tourism. In fact, a variety of international initiatives also support tourism innovation, such as the Singapore Tourism Accelerator, which helps startups test solutions with industry partners, or the UNWTO Startup Challenges, which provide mentoring and visibility for global potential. Programmes like FU-TOURISM in the European Union frameworks, likewise, combine guidance and networking to help startups and entrepreneurs develop more innovative solutions. What distinguishes TCF from these examples is its clear focus on the ideation phase: instead of targeting startups or entrepreneurs already prepared to scale-up activities, it focuses on early knowledge creation, mentoring and experimentation. This makes TCF closer to a learning-driven ideation platform than to a traditional accelerator, strengthening the foundations that later programmes try to develop.

In this sense, and although Portugal and most Western countries have excellent infrastructures and tools to foster entrepreneurial initiatives, along with adequate funding mechanisms for start-up launches, the reality is that most ideas presented to investors are neither well-structured nor are the entrepreneurs adequately prepared [54]. Indeed, since entrepreneurial capacity is a necessary condition for transforming ideas into viable projects, the Tourism Creative Factory programme offers those eager to make a difference the proper foundations for accelerating the growth of their business ideas. As discussed in the background, the tourism sector's capacity for innovation remains relatively weak, owing in part to the predominance of small enterprises that lack the necessary resources and expertise. The TCF programme addresses this gap by offering targeted mentorship, capacity-building initiatives, and structured ideation processes that enhance entrepreneurial readiness. The programme's emphasis on testing entrepreneurial initiative and creativity within a dynamic, supportive environment ensures that participants are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of the tourism sector. In sum, and when it comes to knowledge transferred through the programme, main examples include: entrepreneurial and business planning principles; marketing, communication, and audience-development strategies; financial literacy and funding mechanisms; sustainability-oriented practices in tourism entrepreneurship; practical know-how derived from mentorship and peer interaction.

6.2. Learning from the Programme

The TCF “RESTART” edition confirmed the value of embedding knowledge management strategies into the core of entrepreneurship education. From design to delivery, the programme structured learning opportunities that enabled entrepreneurs to access relevant information, refine it through experimentation, and transform it into strategic capabilities.

Participants engaged in both formal knowledge transfer (e.g., instructional sessions, frameworks, toolkits) and informal, tacit knowledge sharing (e.g., mentorship, peer feedback, real-time project refinement). The mentorship model in particular played a crucial role in building entrepreneurial absorptive capacity—that is, the ability of individuals to identify, assimilate, and exploit knowledge from external sources. These processes enhanced not only the immediate quality of entrepreneurial outputs (e.g., MVPs and action plans) but also the long-term learning trajectories of participants.

Incorporating the SDGs into entrepreneurial ideation was another strategic knowledge intervention. As noted in the introduction, economic recovery in the tourism sector is increasingly contingent on embedding environmental and social considerations into business models. The inclusion of SDGs trains participants to integrate systemic thinking into their business logic, encouraging ventures that deliver not only market value but also social and environmental impact. In this way, the programme functioned as a knowledge platform for sustainable innovation, fostering startups that are equipped to meet future challenges. By introducing these improvements to the Ideation Programme, as noted in the background section, the role of tourism in fostering social inclusion and economic development, particularly through its impact on job creation is underlined. Thus, the programme’s success in preparing participants for market entry underscores its potential contribution to wider economic growth, reinforcing tourism’s role as a key driver of socio-economic progress. The TCF provided participants to develop solutions that not only enhance competitiveness but also contribute to sustainable tourism practices. This approach aligns with the European Commission’s Transition Pathways for Tourism, which advocates for a more resilient, sustainable, and competitive tourism sector.

This TCF edition reaffirms the importance of embedding knowledge management practices—such as iterative feedback, milestone-based development, and ecosystem engagement—into the early stages of entrepreneurial journeys. It also provides actionable insights for programme designers and policymakers seeking to develop similar knowledge-based interventions in tourism or other industries. Taken together, the findings extend existing theoretical frameworks by demonstrating how knowledge systems operate in practice within early-stage tourism entrepreneurship support programmes. Rather than functioning merely as training platforms, such initiatives emerge as integrative infrastructures that align learning, experimentation, and policy objectives within a coherent institutional setting. This paper emphasises precisely that and adds to the preexisting literature the description of a case study that can provide best practices and insights into how entrepreneurship education initiatives can relate to broader societal, institutional and educational aspects.

Ultimately, the TCF model illustrates that entrepreneurship education is most effective when it functions as a process of organisational learning—cultivating not just business outcomes, but also mindsets, capabilities, and networks rooted in structured knowledge exchange.

7. Conclusions: Toward Knowledge-Based Innovation in Tourism Entrepreneurship

7.1. Is the Model Transferable?

The Tourism Creative Factory (TCF) “RESTART” edition exemplifies how structured entrepreneurship programmes can function as practical vehicles for knowledge creation, knowledge transfer, and systemic learning. As demonstrated throughout this study, TCF not only facilitated the development of sustainable business models but also established an environment where knowledge could be generated, tested, and shared among actors from diverse sectors.

Given its modular design and flexible implementation, the TCF model exhibits high potential for transferability to other industries, particularly those undergoing digital, environmental, or structural transformation. At its core, the programme provides a replicable framework for ideation, mentoring, and capacity-building that can be customised to fit different regional or sectoral knowledge ecosystems.

This adaptability is already visible in the successful implementation of the CITECH-Boost programme (2022–2023), which applied key principles from TCF to support innovation in the construction and habitat industries. Much like TCF, CITECH-Boost used bootcamps, capacity-building sprints, and mentorship to activate knowledge flows across disciplinary boundaries and foster cross-sectoral collaboration. Participants engaged in co-creation activities that strengthened intrapreneurial learning, encouraged inter-organisational knowledge exchange, and promoted a systems-thinking approach to innovation.

These results suggest that the core design of TCF—its knowledge architecture, learning logic, and network engagement model—can be leveraged to foster innovation in other domains where sustainable transformation depends on the mobilisation of knowledge across institutions, sectors, and communities.

7.2. Limitations

While the case study approach adopted in this paper provides valuable depth and context, it also presents inherent limitations in terms of generalisability. This study is primarily descriptive, focusing on the TCF “RESTART” edition as a bounded instance of a broader phenomenon. Although the findings offer insight into how knowledge management and transfer were enacted in this specific setting, longitudinal data would be required to fully assess the sustained impact of the programme on participants and the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Furthermore, this study does not include formal evaluation metrics on knowledge retention, venture survival, or post-programme performance—elements that future research should explore. Tracking the evolution of participating startups over time, and analysing their ability to internalise and apply knowledge in diverse contexts, would yield a more comprehensive understanding of the programme’s long-term contributions.

Lastly, while the paper highlights the knowledge-intensive aspects of tourism entrepreneurship, deeper empirical work is needed to examine the specific mechanisms through which knowledge is shared between institutions, mentors, and entrepreneurs within public policy frameworks.

7.3. Contribution to Theory and Practice

This study makes a twofold contribution to the literature on knowledge-based innovation and entrepreneurship education. First, it responds to a documented gap concerning the role of structured entrepreneurship programmes in tourism [5,7–9] by providing a detailed and empirically grounded case study of the Tourism Creative Factory (TCF). By concep-

tualising TCF as a knowledge system rather than merely an entrepreneurial programme, this paper extends existing analytical frameworks and demonstrates how entrepreneurship programmes can be understood as organised arrangements of actors, practices, and artefacts that enable knowledge creation, transfer, and retention. This reframing contributes to ongoing debates on how knowledge-based innovation is operationalised in applied, policy-oriented contexts.

Second, the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and innovation ecosystem builders. The TCF case illustrates how knowledge management principles—particularly mentorship, iterative design, and experiential learning—can be systematically embedded within programme architectures to enhance entrepreneurial learning and capability development. This aligns with the strategic objectives of knowledge-based economies, which emphasise human capital development, institutional learning, and innovation capacity as key drivers of long-term growth. While longitudinal impact assessment lies beyond the direct scope of this study, the case also highlights the importance of developing mechanisms to monitor longer-term outcomes, suggesting that entrepreneurship programmes may benefit from systematic follow-up using tangible indicators (e.g., KPIs or comparable evaluative metrics).

From a practice-oriented perspective, several implications emerge. First, the TCF structure suggests that ideation programmes are more effective when designed as knowledge architectures rather than as ad hoc training initiatives. Aligning learning modules with mandatory artefacts—such as Minimum Viable Products (MVPs), business models, and action plans—ensures that knowledge acquired during training is immediately translated into reusable outputs that persist beyond the programme’s duration. Second, the analysis indicates that mentoring should be treated as a central knowledge-transfer mechanism rather than an optional complement. By institutionalising mentoring through scheduled clinics, resident tutoring, and iterative feedback loops, the TCF model strengthens participants’ absorptive capacity by repeatedly requiring application, revision, and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Programmes seeking transferability can replicate this approach by linking mentoring explicitly to milestones and deliverables.

Third, the “RESTART” edition demonstrates how sustainability objectives can be operationalised as actionable knowledge rather than aspirational discourse. Embedding SDG-related considerations within ideation tasks and evaluation criteria encourages participants to integrate sustainability directly into their business logic—across value propositions, customer segments, cost structures, and partnerships—rather than treating it as an external or purely communicative layer. For tourism authorities, this provides a concrete mechanism to align entrepreneurial experimentation with public-policy priorities while maintaining creative autonomy and market orientation. Finally, the collaborative design of TCF illustrates how tourism entrepreneurship education can function as an open innovation environment, in which external stakeholders—including industry partners, public authorities, educational institutions, and mentors—contribute distributed knowledge and real-world validation opportunities. For destinations seeking to replicate the model, ensuring stakeholder continuity across programme phases appears critical, as effective knowledge transfer depends on sustained interaction rather than isolated or one-off engagements.

Overall, the TCF “RESTART” edition illustrates how tourism entrepreneurship programmes can act as conduits for broader knowledge-based development, reinforcing the role of structured educational interventions in fostering adaptive, resilient, and sustainable socio-economic systems. As societies confront increasing complexity and uncertainty, the deliberate design and dissemination of knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship models are likely to become central to inclusive and long-term economic transformation.

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