

Article

# Internships for Higher Education Students to Promote the Local Sustainability of Rural Places

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**Abstract:** Sustainability and population have a complex relationship. Popular versions of the first are usually based on the premise of reducing the population. However, in some remote rural areas with a low density, this condition needs to be reconsidered, as it would put the viability of the local community at risk and lead to environmental, economic and, above all, social losses. Although repopulation is impossible, since remote rural areas have an ageing demographic structure and an extremely low fertility rate, we can propose the regeneration of their human, social and relational capital by attracting talent and commitment. To achieve this, the Desafío Programme (*Rural Erasmus*) enables university students to do internships in companies and institutions in sparsely populated areas, living alongside their residents. Despite being an experimental policy with a narrow scope in statistical terms, the Desafío Programme is an inspiring experience supported by those who have participated in it and contributes to the social and economic regeneration of areas in decline. This is a practical case of applying a sustainable strategy to a rural area in crisis, which can be transferred to many other countries facing a similar problem.

**Keywords:** higher education; sustainable development; shrinking rural areas; social capital; human capital; talent; internships; sparsely populated areas; experimental policy; sustainable strategy; rural erasmus

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainability is associated with fewer people. Currently, there is a broad consensus that demographic shrinkage is inevitable, regardless of technology and consumer and producer behaviour—the other terms in the equation which could ideally compensate for it [1]. However, degrowth is often questioned when it concerns communities, social or territorial, that still experience significant shortfalls and imbalances. In particular, in less developed countries (LDC), there is intense discussion about how to combine sustainability (which implies less) with better quality of life (which requires more). The citizens of these countries want commodities produced using non-renewable resources, and their companies look for labour and human capital—key factors which depend on population. There are important contradictions in sustainable development goals, as shown by extensive academic research on their global dimensions and the coherence between the macro and micro levels.

A few studies have also focused on similar dilemmas inside countries, at the regional and, specifically, local levels. Many of these have investigated sparsely populated and ageing areas, which might not be viable if they do not attract new residents: i.e., if they do not grow, economically and demographically [2]. However, these have usually been in advanced countries [3], which are considered more strongly committed to material and demographic decreases, as they have contributed much more to global environmental deterioration and to North–South inequality.

Thus, defining sustainable development objectives is a complex task. It is even more complex to implement them, especially when we try to coherently link macro and micro, global and local, urban and rural contexts. In their most radical forms—very popular today, given the climate emergency and the environmental crisis [4]—their urgency can be counterproductive. Firstly, they involve structural situations, requiring long periods for any solution to mature [5]. Secondly, their universality can be erroneous, as they lack territorial nuance and historical contextualisation [6]. Rural depopulation is a good example of these limitations. There are no short-term solutions to the qualitative problems, and no one-size-fits-all strategy is appropriate across idiosyncratic local situations, which may diverge greatly from national trends [7].

This paper describes the *Desafío* Programme (commonly known as “Rural Erasmus”). This policy, in our opinion, may help achieve sustainable rural development in a way that can overcome some of those dilemmas. It is flexible, improving the local atmosphere according to territorial stakeholders’ interests and priorities; it works on talent and social capital, intangible and never-ending inputs. The programme has nothing to do with the prevalent ways to promote rural growth in remote areas—exhausting natural resources, building costly and unsustainable infrastructure, commodifying landscapes and culture—which have achieved very little success.

Instead, as we will explain, *Desafío* is based on internships for young university students, attracted to a lifestyle linked to small rural communities in which they can play an active role. This provides renewed human capital for local companies and institutions, adding vibrancy to declining areas. Statistically, as their impact barely changes migratory balances—which are almost always negative—it does not appear to solve the depopulation problem. This seems obvious immediately. However, it can be very useful in the long term, as it helps to open minds; it shows that a different kind of personal and professional fulfilment is possible, and non-urban settings are ideal places to try it. Although sparsely populated areas have many handicaps, low-density living also has many advantages [8,9], and “small is beautiful”, as Schumacher explained so well [10].

Following this line, we think that the decisive issue is the awareness that there are many different ways to live. Consequently, we would like students to be capable of independent, unbiased cost-benefit analyses of what to do with their future. In this sense, *Desafío*’s aim is to broaden the perspectives of students beyond conventional notions of professional success and material wellbeing. We think that living and working for a time in a small rural town, an unknown cultural, economic and social ecosystem for most young people, becomes a personal challenge (this is the English translation of the Spanish “*Desafío*”, which encapsulates the meaning of our programme). It allows them to take better and more rigorous decisions on their future. They will have experienced another kind of professional and personal itinerary, in which coherently combining sustainability and development (on individual and social terms) is less difficult—or, at least, different—than the urban alternative. Without *Desafío*’s internships, they would not have achieved this.

In the next section, we explain possible contradictions between qualitative growth in depopulated areas and an overcrowded planet, and explore how this difficulty can become a rebalancing opportunity to improve the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. These are the main ideas inspiring the *Desafío* Programme to face the relevant challenges step by step. In the third section, we outline why the University of Zaragoza (UZ) has proposed, to local institutions, a policy of talent transfer to firms, institutions and rural development agencies in sparsely populated areas. In the fourth section, we set out the *Desafío* Programme in detail; in the fifth, we present its results, including key statistics and stakeholder assessments. In the sixth section, we analyse the lessons drawn from its implementation and discuss its possible development in the medium term. Finally, our conclusions describe how the *Desafío* Programme can contribute to sustainability.

## 2. Sustainability and Depopulation

Sustainability is a concept recognised as a main political target by most governments, based on theoretical foundations accepted by the majority of the scientific community. These agreements do not prevent it from being endlessly debated, especially when deciding which policies should be

applied to achieve it. Its widespread acceptance reflects both a lack of precision in its definition and the uncertainty regarding the future, characteristic of most broad social consensuses [11]. Consequently, the notion of sustainable development as a balance between present and future requirements [12] can adapt to multiple contexts, ranging from local to global.

A generic and neutral definition “allows almost everyone to identify with some interpretation of sustainability” [13]. However, this acceptance does not always have meaningful effects. Diverging and even contradictory theses—such as, for example, those inspiring green growth, the circular economy and eco-efficiency—often resort to the concept of sustainability, attracted by its reputation and usability, but fail to produce concrete strategies [14,15]. As López et al. [16] mention, the main feature of this notion is that it is paradoxical. Everyone supports sustainability as a principle, yet very few agree on specific programmes. This is shown by the UN Climate Summits, which have lacked any real effectiveness, and, in more everyday contexts, by controversies in the Western world about green taxes and restrictive mobility regulations.

In all these areas, demography plays a key role, because it explains how people—the pivotal variable in the sustainability equation [8]—enter and leave the system (births, deaths, migrations) and can indicate whether a population exceeds an area’s capacity [17,18]. In general, demographers and social scientists are increasingly convinced by the Malthusian thesis about population versus sustainability—even though long periods of generalised growth and international peace, for half of the 20th century, suggest it is an “example of ingenuous prediction” [19]. According to that approach, there is an irresolvable contradiction between the slow regeneration of finite natural resources and the economic growth that consumes them at great speed to improve living conditions [20]. This growth, in turn, enables present generations to live longer and consume even more, and causes later generations to be even more numerous. Consequently, demographic and economic growth feed back into each other until the resulting degradation of nature and scarcity of resources is so extreme that the system collapses, with poverty and loss of life. This results in a spontaneous readjustment of the population to the absorption capacity of the territory.

In principle, this prediction could seem grim and exaggerated [21]—the crises Malthus forecast never happened, even though growth became more intense. However, the reason it has not been confirmed is that many highly populated countries (LDC) were not involved in such intense consumerism until a few years ago. Furthermore, technological advances have enabled higher productivity, doing more with less. Nevertheless, “the specter of Malthus returns” [19] from the 1970s, due to the scarcity of energy and raw materials in international markets. Recently, his views have become very common, as globalisation processes tend to generalise Western consumer patterns that are not viable.

Thus, although the definition of sustainability is imprecise [22], most researchers agree that recognising physical limits to growth is an important part of it [23]. In other words, sustainability involves a stable population—even if technology is accessible and efficient and there is a shift towards a less materialistic behaviour.

However, this axiomatic view at the macro scale is relativised at the territorial and social scale. Fewer inhabitants do not always lead to better environmental conditions—nor to a stable and sustainable economy or a more cohesive society. It depends. In real life, contexts need to be differentiated by their state of development, production system, consumption levels, distribution rules and inequality, power and cooperation mechanisms, predominant values and beliefs, and so on. There are countless cases, and depopulated rural areas are one of the most controversial, as they need more residents if they are not to disappear in a short time. Countries and regions of any size contain heterogeneous subsets within them, which can become exceptions to radical concepts like degrowth. Increases in their population and wellbeing could be compatible with the whole trend becoming stationary or decreasing. Redistribution and cohesion should be introduced as part of the equation.

Consequently, this is not a case of immutable criteria, of more vs. less—a radical approach that seems inevitable when facing hard challenges—but rather of assessing suitability, based on (im)balances in the three ever-interdependent dimensions of sustainable development: ecological,

economic and social. Population plays a central role in all of these, and can be critical, either due to excess or deficit. Research on the sustainable development problem associated with excess population has been far more usual, because it is the result of a total macro calculation that is more visible and encompasses all spheres. However, without abandoning the global perspective—which is always relevant—the lower-level territorial, social and ecological spheres must also be included, as this is where most of the relationships between stakeholders unfold.

Therefore, introducing the study of depopulated areas in an overpopulated world is essential. This enables us to be aware of inconsistencies between the macro and micro levels, of discrepancies between cross-sectional interpretations and historical and longitudinal ones, and of the relevance of a holistic and contextual approach to such complex issues. This refocusing should inspire new strategies of territorial and demographic rebalance, adapted to the environmental, economic and social idiosyncrasies of every community.

In the case of Spain and our reference area—the province of Zaragoza (Figure 1)—this type of contradiction occurs because highly overcrowded places coexist with demographic deserts, each requiring a specific logic to become sustainable. In the next section, we explain how the grant programme for university students in rural areas that is the focus of this article (popularised as “Rural Erasmus”) can be a simple yet effective strategy along these lines. Rather than having a quantitative impact—which is very limited, as it is a pilot experience—its strength lies in putting forward an alternative way of interpreting local dynamics and opening minds. This the key issue for a transition towards alternative lifestyles, which will include changes in production, consumption and, especially, residence [3].



**Figure 1.** Map of Spain and the province of Zaragoza (highlighted). This shows the area where the academic internships were carried out.

### 3. Sustainability and Depopulation in the Province of Zaragoza and the Desafío Programme

Spain is a country with major territorial imbalances. It has two of the largest metropolitan areas in Europe (Barcelona and Madrid), and its Mediterranean coast is a region of high urban density whose resources and infrastructure are close to congestion [24–26]. At the same time, its interior contains some of the European Union’s most significant demographic deserts. Out of 271 regions or NUTS 2 (French: Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques) in the European Union, four of the 20 least densely populated are in Spain, occupying over half its territory [27]. Out of its provinces, or NUTS 3, three have a density lower than 12.5 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, the threshold for being considered a low-population-density region (according to article 158.b of the Guidelines on Regional State Aid 2014–2020, 2013/C 209/01).

Zaragoza, a NUTS 3 where the Desafío Programme is applied, has some demographic imbalances, equivalent to the national ones. This parallelism makes the province a good case study within the tradition of electoral and market analyses, since Zaragoza acts as a laboratory for the

nation as a whole, which—popularly speaking—makes it the Ohio of Spain [28]. In Zaragoza, almost 80% of the population is concentrated in the metropolitan area of its capital city, with close to 800,000 inhabitants. The rest of the province has just over 20% and, with a surface area of 87%, it has a density of slightly more than 13 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> [29], almost at the abovementioned EU threshold for a demographic desert. Furthermore, the smaller the rural settlements, the more imbalanced their demographic structure, ageing and mostly male. For example, out of the 293 municipalities, almost a tenth, 26, have no children or residents under 15, and almost a third, 86, have at most five [29]. Low fertility, longevity and emigration have produced a very fragile rural world; in this respect, this province is a paradigm of the whole of Spain [30].

Since the beginning of the current century, the population living in rural settlements in Zaragoza province has shrunk by 16%, but their environmental, economic and social development has not improved as a result. Quite the contrary, vibrancy has decreased in the smallest villages as they lose their residents, endangering their economic and social sustainability. Many services and social relations are not viable without a minimum critical mass, and neither is their ecological sustainability. The natural environment requires agriculture, forestry and livestock farming that are not intensive and that contribute to the conservation of landscapes, fauna, infrastructure and traditional culture. With depopulation, these activities—the last to be abandoned—disappear. The Synthetic Index of Territorial Development, which combines dozens of qualitative and quantitative data sources, shows how over half of rural towns show negative values for 2019 [31].

Economically, a decreased population contributes to a depreciation of assets (housing, businesses and rural properties), since it increases their peripheral and marginal nature in social and economic terms. This decay affects the whole community: with the expectation of a sharp, inevitable decline, people reduce their investments, fail to perform any repairs and look for alternative locations to start new projects and live. This means that individual migration, low birth rate and ageing generate a distressing climate affecting everyone in the community, which accentuates the devaluation of their property in a continuous downward spiral [32].

According to Marshall's work on agglomeration economies [33], in the opposite situation, low population levels involve reduced and precarious labour markets, problems in finding efficient suppliers and generating links with other businesses and serious difficulties in generating knowledge spillover. Thus, the businesses that remain experience a continuous and major deterioration in their comparative advantages. Locations with a low population cannot achieve sufficient critical mass to enjoy basic public and private services, since they have to face the inevitable indivisibility of their production processes, mainly of a financial and technological nature, which are not absorbed by the low number of customers and consumers.

In social terms, when small communities decrease rapidly, they also lose a significant part of their social and relational capital. Informal cooperation and solidarity networks weaken as homes lose family members, neighbours and friends [34]. Intangible cultural heritage is reduced, since there are no younger generations to whom specific knowledge and traditions can be conveyed. Most community initiatives usually fall on the same very few people, who then experience significant personal wear and stress [35]. The number of city councils that only had one candidate applying to be mayor in the 2019 municipal elections was 83 out of 260 rural settlements; in other words, in almost a third of them there was no political debate, strictly speaking, among alternative options [36]. Consequently, depopulation leads to a major deficit in rural communities concerning participatory processes promoting social and cultural vibrancy.

Regarding the environmental aspect, in which the population seems to have a more direct but opposite relationship to the objective of sustainability, there is an open debate with no conclusive evidence. On the one hand, the environment surrounding abandoned locations is deteriorating, since most of its features are anthropogenic. Residents play a crucial role in maintaining the balance of their respective ecosystems, and it has been proved that their absence results in high environmental cost [37]. On the other hand, excessive demographic pressure can cause the natural environment to deteriorate anywhere, but the disappearance of a long-standing population breaks the continuity of the ecological chain [32].

Consequently, depopulation dividends [38]—which, in the most densely populated areas, might include reduced resource consumption, ecosystem and biodiversity restoration, reduced waste and pollution, and subsequent societal benefits that encompass a more comfortable way of life—do not appear in sparsely populated areas, since they hardly ever experience these negative situations. In rural areas, rather than material and environmental shortages, the sustainability at risk is predominately social. It arises from an understanding of how to live that is now a minority standpoint and does not manage to attract enough people. There is a need to show rural life as a dynamic and creative ecosystem, in which people who live in small communities realize their potential as persons, making their own decisions and running their own lives [39].

Given that the essential role of social sustainability is still to be recognised [34], the Desafío Programme is justified. It tries to attract human and social capital to small rural towns, by encouraging people to appreciate “a clearly different lifestyle” [40].

#### 4. The Desafío Programme

This programme is the result of the ongoing collaboration between the University of Zaragoza (UZ) and the Provincial Government of Zaragoza (DPZ) through the Department of Depopulation and Creativity at the UZ.

In this province, as in the rest of Aragón (Figure 2), we find extreme depopulation combined with a low density and small settlements. This reflects major migratory flows during the years of intense growth, which has led to significant ageing [32], and a low birth rate, as in the rest of Spain. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Zaragoza, or even Aragón, as it is part of the so-called Spanish “demographic ultra-periphery,” which is not located in remote parts of the world but dozens of kilometres from large cities, provincial capital cities and major towns in LAU 1s (Local Administrative Unit) and includes 61% of Spanish municipalities and 3.15% of the population (for settlements with fewer than 1000 inhabitants) [41].



**Figure 2.** The situation on the map of Spain showing the Spanish regions. Aragón (Spanish region) is shown in an ochre colour). The province of Zaragoza is in a darker shade.

Under these conditions, if the aim is to contribute to reversing the situation, attracting trained young people to rural areas becomes a necessity, for all the reasons previously mentioned. This idea is not new, since it appears in development strategies implemented in peripheral areas throughout northern Europe, whose objectives include some that are very similar to the Desafío Programme’s: modernising and diversifying the economic structure of rural areas—which requires attracting exogenous talent from among the youngest and best-qualified population—and creating a welcoming atmosphere for future residents based on accessible housing and facilities, to enable a good work–life balance [42,43].

The university has human capital—both trained and in training. These are young people with a collaborative spirit and a strong commitment to sustainability. All these ingredients are necessary to revitalise rural areas.

In the countryside, the situation is far more complex. Economies of agglomeration are difficult to generate in small, isolated settlements [44], thus greatly limiting business localisation policies. This and other evidence have resulted in settlements with fewer than 3000 inhabitants being in a more vulnerable situation to tackle the two abovementioned challenges: ageing and depopulation.

As one of the main objectives of the 2014–2020 European Regional Development Fund Operational Programme for Aragón, *Desafío* aims to promote the transfer and management of knowledge to businesses and society in general.

#### 4.1. Programme Characteristics

The purpose of the project is for UZ students to have internships in the province of Zaragoza outside its metropolitan area and in towns with fewer than 3000 inhabitants. The aim is to contribute to territorial rebalancing, by encouraging the arrival of human capital in more depopulated areas to revitalise their productive, social and institutional fabric. That is why no entity is excluded. To achieve these goals, large companies (over 250 employees) may benefit from the programme, but they will have to pay the student's aid grant in full.

The programme began in April 2018, with the signing of the collaboration agreement between the DPZ and the UZ, and two years (2018 and 2019) have been covered so far. The *Desafío* Programme has become popular among students and the media, and is known as 'Rural Erasmus'.

The DPZ provides the funding, which amounted to €9000 euros in 2018, €30,000 in 2019 and €100,000 in 2020. These funds were entirely used to cover the needs of the students participating in the programme: specifically, travel, board and lodging expenses, and aid grant (including the worker's Social Security, which the entity must pay). Registering the students for Social Security, besides fulfilling a legal requirement, serves to cover any eventuality due to any accident, temporary incapacity or disability that may occur during the internship. The programme has been disseminated by several media outlets with the collaboration of DPZ and UZ. Each student's internship lasts between 120 and 500 h.

A total of 56 organisations expressed an interest in participating in the programme. In 2019, 37.5% of applications were made by organisations that had requested internships in 2018, since all entities stated they would repeat the experience in the assessment of the 2018 programme. The entities requesting to be part of the programme include local development agencies, city councils, LAU 1s, associations, foundations, trading companies, cooperatives, agricultural processing companies (SAT), etc.

The programme is managed by the UZ Orientation and Employment Service, which is responsible for receiving applications, providing information, finding students for the internships, matching entities and students, and managing the implementation of the internship until it ends. Students are selected by adapting their profile to the requirements of the companies and institutions, with special attention paid to entities in small municipalities. Requests were received from 24 different degree courses: those with the most applications were Veterinary Science and Business Administration and Management (9.8% each), followed by Tourism, with 7.8% of the applications. To cover the internship offers, they were advertised in the distribution lists of the university centres, on social media and in emails sent to students registered in the UZ Employment Department.

To determine which organisations would be allowed to provide internships, applying organisations were assessed in three respects: territorial characteristics (up to 50 points); characteristics of the organisation itself (up to 25 points); and the educational value of the internship (25 points). The following elements were scored within each of the previous blocks: concerning the territory, the size of the settlement and population age; concerning the entity receiving the internship, its strategic role in revitalising the area and its size (the score is higher the smaller the entity is); concerning the educational potential of the internship, how well the tasks match the students' degree and can provide them with a valuable experience.

#### 4.2. Participating Entities and Students

Twelve undergraduate courses and three master's courses were finally involved in academic internships throughout the project, and 16 entities received internships (Table 1).

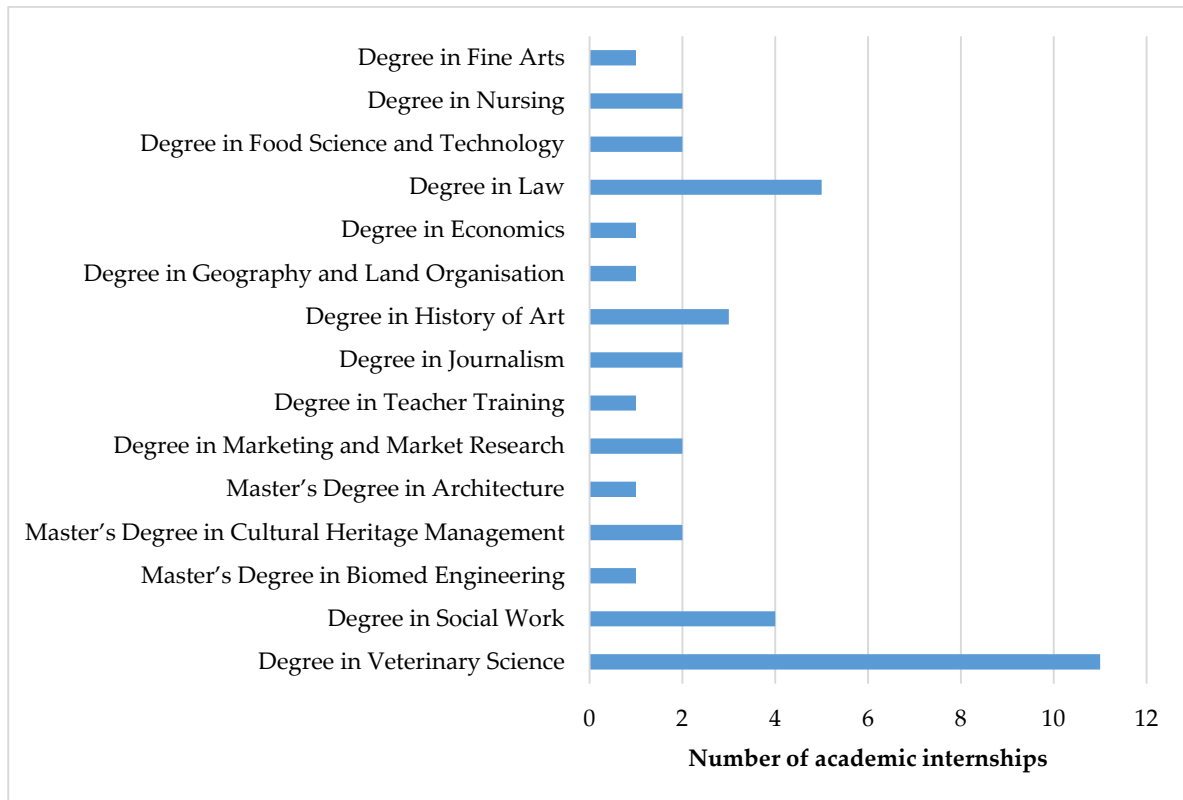
**Table 1.** Entities and higher education courses involved in the Rural Erasmus Programme.

Entities for Internship	Courses
Fundación Pueblo Viejo de Belchite	Journalism
Pueblos en Arte	History of Art
Procter & Gamble Mataró, S.L.	Master's Degree in Biomed Engineering
Tomás Yagüe Colás	Veterinary Science
City Council of Aladrén	Social Work
SAT Manubles	Food Science and Technology
LAU 1 Campo de Belchite	Geography and Land Organisation
Granja La Almenara, S.L.	Veterinary Science
Asociación Territorio Mudejar	History of Art, Master's Degree in Cultural Heritage Management
Asociación del Patrimonio Industrial Arquitectónico (ASOPIA)	Master's Degree in Architecture
City Council of Herrera de los Navarros	Marketing and Market Research, Law, Teacher Training
SAT Granja San Miguel	Veterinary Science
Asociación Sociocultural Purroy Unido	Fine Arts
Romanos Aljama, S.L.	Nursing, Social Work
Bantierra	Economics
Mermeladas Bubud S.L.U.	Food Science and Technology

In 2018 and 2019, a total of 39 internships were managed for students in 15 different degree courses, both bachelor's and master's programmes, belonging to five macro areas (Arts and Humanities, Science, Health Sciences, Law and Social Sciences, and Engineering and Architecture). This shows that all kinds of profiles are required in rural areas, and the idea that small localities only need profiles linked to the primary sector has been ruled out.

Veterinary Science and Law degrees were in first and second place in terms of the number of internships. History of Art and Social Work were tied in third place (Figure 3).

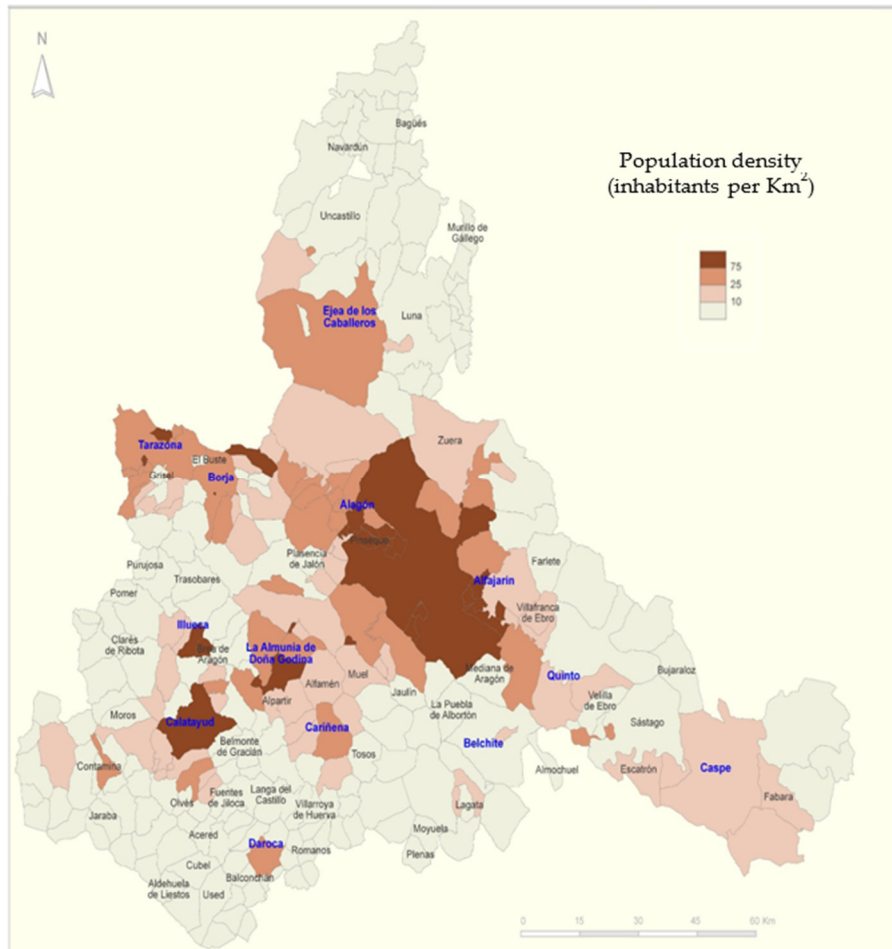




**Figure 3.** Number of academic internships, by degree course, in the province of Zaragoza, Aragón, Spain. Period: 2018–2019.

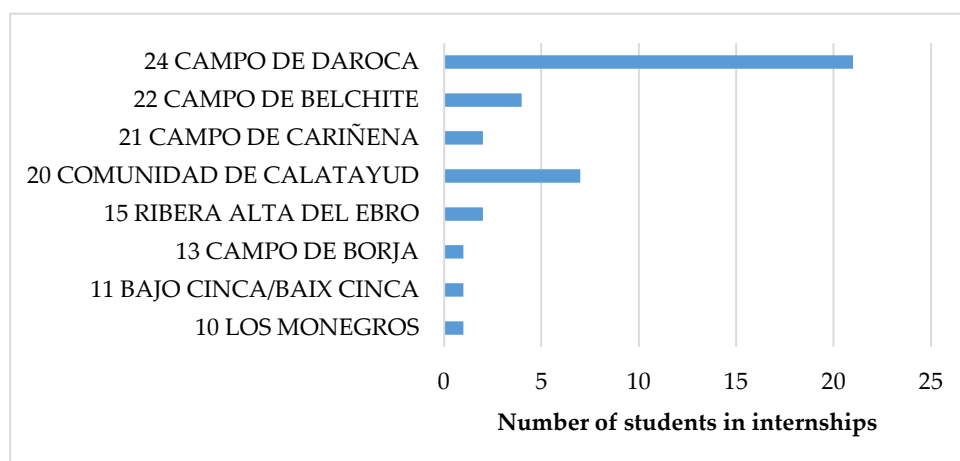
Out of the 17 LAU 1s in the province of Zaragoza (Spain), eight received students for academic internships. Ordered by the number of internships, they were: Campo de Daroca, Comunidad de Calatayud, Campo de Belchite, Campo de Cariñena, Ribera Alta del Ebro, Los Monegros, Bajo Cinca/Baix Cinca and Campo de Borja.

The LAU 1s Campo de Belchite and Campo de Daroca were in the first and second place out of the 33 Aragonese LAU 1s; over 70% of their municipalities had an ageing index above or equal to 300. The Comunidad de Calatayud was in the fifth position. Similarly, Campo de Belchite and Campo de Daroca had the highest ageing index. Campo de Belchite and Campo de Daroca also had the lowest (most negative) natural increases out of all Aragonese LAU 1s. All the internships took place in settlements with a density below 25 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 4).



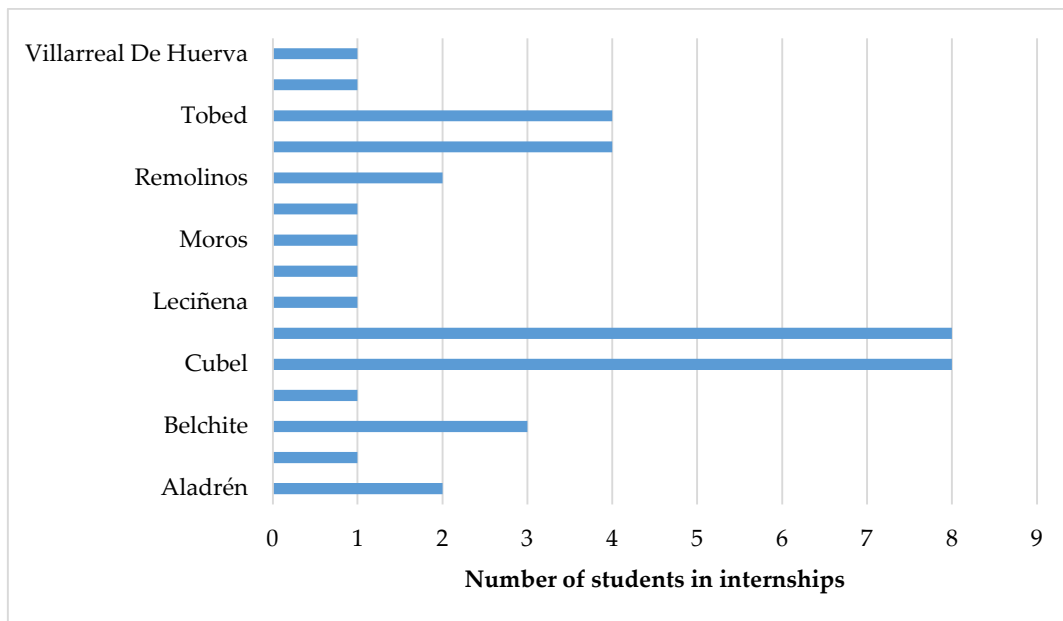
**Figure 4.** Populated areas of the Province of Zaragoza. A lower colour intensity indicates a lower population density. Major towns in LAU 1s are shown in blue.

Campo de Daroca was the main LAU 1 receiving internships, accounting for over 53.8% of the total internships managed (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Number of students in internships, by LAU 1, in the province of Zaragoza, Aragón, Spain. Period: 2018–2019.

The localities of Herrera de los Navarros and Cubel, followed by Romanos and Tobed—three of them in the LAU 1 Campo de Daroca and the other in Comunidad de Calatayud—were the main settlements receiving internships (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Number of internships, by locality, in the province of Zaragoza, Aragón, Spain. Period: 2018–2019.

#### 4.3. The Questionnaires

It is common practice to evaluate a programme through surveys from the participants. In addition to appreciating their opinions, new ideas for improving them may emerge from their responses.

Although our surveys were designed to measure learning aspects related to student employability, and the effectiveness in its implementation, some of the questions could be related to sustainability, mainly social and economic.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, the satisfaction of its protagonists and its impact on the territory and on the host entities, two questionnaires have been developed. One aimed at internships and the other at the host entities.

One questionnaire was completed among the students (Table 2) and another one between the host entities (Table 3). Both were divided into five blocks, most of them related to social and economic sustainability.

**Table 2.** Internship students' questionnaire blocks.

Block	Topic
I	The satisfaction with working experience developed in rural areas
II	The satisfaction with their social integration in rural areas
III	The satisfaction of discovering new expectations in their lives
IV	Perception on the economic sustainability of existing projects in rural areas
V	The sort of continuity of the pre-employment relationship in rural environment

**Table 3.** Entities' questionnaire blocks.

Block	Topic
I	Their satisfaction with the knowledge and skills of internship students
II	Their satisfaction with the social integration of internship students in rural areas
III	Their satisfaction of discovering new expectations for their rural areas and companies
IV	Main contributions of the internships to the economic sustainability of entities
V	The sort of continuity for their future relationship with the internship students

In Table 2, the relevant questions in each block are related to the *opinions of the internship students* for each of these major themes: developing work experience, social integration in rural areas, the discovery of new expectations, economic sustainability of projects in rural areas and how this pre-employment relationship could continue.

In Table 3, the relevant questions in each block are related to the *entities' opinions* for each of the following topics: knowledge and skills of the internship students, social integration of the students in rural areas, discovery of new expectations in the territory and for their companies, economic sustainability of entities in rural areas and possible ways to continue the relationship with students (Appendix A shows the questions asked in both surveys).

## 5. Results

The questionnaires were completed at the end of the internship by both sides, entities (firms, public institutions, rural development agencies, foundations) and students. The main points are the following.

### 5.1. Students' Results

The university internships have as their main purpose a learning based on work experience. Through them, students face situations similar to those they will find in their professional lives, so that they have to be smart to tailor their analytical knowledge to unfamiliar contexts. They also learn to work within an organisation, as an active part of teams and networks, which are located within a particular society and a specific territory. Social, cognitive and ethical dimensions of labour that are difficult to transmit within the classroom become explicit and easier to assimilate in real environments.

Desafío is, first of all, an internship programme. Therefore, it was designed in order to improve competencies and skills acquired in rural organisations, with students living in small towns. This situation gives the programme an important value-added.

Consequently, the first thing to assess is its results in terms of pedagogy and the effectiveness in its implementation, similar to those of an academic practice carried out in an urban environment.

In this way, the interns recognize that the experience has improved their personal autonomy. In general, it has enhanced their work skills in an excellent working environment. Furthermore, the programme has allowed the students with bachelor's and master's degree to carry out a job that fits their knowledge and the tasks they are capable of performing.

Likewise, they consider that they have been able to learn by their company/institution tutor and that the practice carried out will be appreciated by future employers, although these two variables translate into a greater dispersion in the degree of satisfaction (Table 4).

According to the above, the students' overall degree of satisfaction with the Desafío Programme amounted to an average of 9.11 (out of 10). Furthermore, 85% of them would recommend an internship with the same entity and location to another student. That is, the subjective efficiency, the satisfaction of the protagonists with their learning, was very high. Few policies achieve such high scores in their first years of existence. This assessment as an educational programme also boosts its potential in the field of economic sustainability, as the economy of the rural environment is attractive, and in the field of social sustainability, as this experience may broaden its horizons and ways of reasoning.

Based on the tasks performed by the students, they could be grouped into eight activity types: management, improving products and processes, finances, art, tourism, personalised service, animal handling and care, and agriculture (Table 5).

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics of the variables related with working experience developed \*.

<b>The Satisfaction of Internship Students with the Working Experience Developed in Rural Areas</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Future employers will appreciate my internship experience in a rural environment	8.04	1.73
Enhancing my bachelor's/master's degree knowledge	8.76	1.44
Improving my work skills	9.00	1.17
Improving my personal autonomy	9.24	0.90
Enjoying an ideal working environment	9.03	1.46
Learning from the company/institution tutor	8.55	2.49

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

**Table 5.** Tasks and higher education courses involved in the Rural Erasmus Programme.

<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Number of Internships</b>	<b>Courses</b>
Management	5	Degree in Law Degree in Geography and Land Organisation
Improving products and processes	3	Master's Degree in Biomed Engineering Degree in Veterinary Science Degree in Food Science and Technology
Finances	1	Degree in Economics
Art	9	Degree in Fine Arts Master's Degree in Cultural Heritage Management Degree in History of Art Master's Degree in Architecture Degree in Journalism
Tourism	2	Marketing and Market Research
Personalised service	7	Degree in Nursing Degree in Social Work Degree in Pre-school Education Teacher Training
Animal handling and care	10	Degree in Veterinary Science
Agriculture	1	Food Science and Technology

However, the most original contribution of Desafío, for which it has been recognised as an innovative strategy, is that it promotes young qualified professionals in rural areas where they would hardly arrive spontaneously, and matches them to the entities, contributing to the enrichment of both parts.

On the one hand, students usually acquire professional knowledge and experience in organisations that offer them different training opportunities than in large metropolitan companies, much more mature responsibilities, and broaden their perspectives on the rural world, showing them that there is life outside cities. They appreciate that living and working in small towns can be good for them as individuals and as professionals. They expand their mentality with vital and professional experience.

Secondly, these territories receive talent, which is the most decisive factor for a business or political project to succeed. Although on a small scale, Desafío is a creative strategy for social and economic sustainability, based on renewed human capital in places where it is very scarce and, in the medium term, it can take root in the territory and strengthen local social capital.

So, if we manage to attract human capital to these shrinking rural areas from the congested metropolitan ones, their social and economic rebalancing contributes to a cohesive development model [45].

Regarding social sustainability, the results show short-term and long-term consequences of the satisfaction expressed by the students with their integration in rural areas and also the discovery of new expectations about life.

Internship students seek to live a new personal and professional experience and to meet new people and new places in rural areas. They are satisfied enough with how they have integrated into the local community where they did their internship, as well as the support received by the town council and other stakeholders, although with high standard deviations.

Likewise, they value positively: the leisure away from the hustle and bustle and having greater control over time, because being more aware of it facilitates creativity and commitment (Table 6). Over time, social sustainability is achieved, because interns do not rule out working in small municipalities, and for that to happen it is necessary to discover new and attractive places, thanks to a programme like this.

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics of the variables of Social Sustainability \*.

<b>The Satisfaction of Internship Students with Their Social Integration in Rural Areas</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Integration will by the town council and other stakeholders	8.45	2.81
Leisure in the municipality	8.16	3.00
Integration in the local community where you did your internship	8.68	2.35
Meeting new people and new places	9.18	1.12
Having a new personal and professional experience in a rural environment	9.41	0.91
<b>The Satisfaction of Internship Students with Discovering New Expectations in Their Lives</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Offering this internship programme in rural areas	9.34	0.95
Discovering unknown places that are attractive	8.87	1.24
Thinking about working in small municipalities	9.00	1.55

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

The students agreed with the entities that companies in rural areas are not less dynamic than those in urban areas, although with high standard deviations.

From the point of view of economic sustainability, the main interest is working on projects that revitalise rural areas and, therefore, that the internships take place in that environment. The part related to visiting and discovering new and different companies and meeting attractive organisations is also highly appreciated (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Descriptive statistics of the variables of Economic Sustainability \*.

<b>Perception of the Internship Students on the Economic Sustainability of Existing Projects in Rural Areas</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Discovering different companies/organisations	8.92	1.58
Rural areas have interesting and attractive companies and jobs	8.24	1.84
Companies in rural areas are less dynamic than those in urban areas	4.97	3.39
Working with organisations/companies whose projects revitalise rural areas	8.92	1.40

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

The students are interested in continuing the relationship with the entity, although they would prefer it to be based on an employment contract (Table 8). When the relationship type is linked to the place of residence, with a temporary contract, they prefer to live in the town or its surrounding area; however, with an indefinite contract, which implies a long-term situation, they prefer to live in Zaragoza (the nearest major town).

**Table 8.** Descriptive statistics of the variables associated with the type of continuity of the pre-employment relationship \*.

<b>The Sort of Continuity of the Pre-Employment Relationship that Internship Students Would Like to Have in the Rural Environment</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Extending the internship period	7.50	2.65
Being hired on a temporary basis	7.79	2.59
Being hired on an indefinite basis	7.79	2.36
Extending the internship period and living in the town	7.11	2.58
Being hired on a temporary basis and living in the town	7.58	2.37
Being hired on an indefinite basis and living in the town	7.24	2.43
Extending the internship period and living in the major towns in the LAUs 1	7.13	3.05
Being hired on a temporary basis and living in the major towns in the LAUs 1	7.32	2.95
Being hired on an indefinite basis and living in the major towns in the LAUs 1	7.32	2.70

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

## 5.2. Entities' Results

The entities have also assessed their satisfaction with the programme through a questionnaire that they completed for each of the internships that they carried out.

The entities value receiving qualified human capital in their organisations and are therefore satisfied with being able to have contact with university students, since they possess the knowledge and skills that are valued by the entities. On some occasions, the latter can even learn from the students, although this occurs with a higher degree of dispersion (standard deviations). However, what entities value is providing students with training and learning opportunities. The behaviour of these students within the organisation is good enough to create an optimal work environment. It is true that when knowledge and skills are adapted and behaviour is appropriate, it is easier to create an environment of creativity and trust within the organisation (Table 9). That is why when asking entities for a general score on internships, the average achieved was 9.30 (out of 10), and 100% of entities would take another student in the future for a similar internship.

**Table 9.** Descriptive statistics of the variables related with the qualification of the students received \*.

<b>The Satisfaction of the Entities of Rural Areas with the Knowledge and Skills of University Internship Students</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
The internships are performed by qualified people (university students)	8.57	1.59
Creating an optimal working environment within the organisation	8.76	1.19
Learning from the internship students	7.68	2.14
Having contact with recent graduates and appreciating their knowledge/skills	9.05	1.18
Providing training and learning opportunities	8.92	1.02

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

From the point of view of the entities, they are the ones that have contributed to the social integration of the internship students in the local community, along with the town council, the town's residents and other stakeholders. The organisations considered that they, rather than the local communities, city councils or other stakeholders, contributed the most to integrate the students. They also consider that the programme has had a high impact on the locality where it took place (with high standard deviations, though), increasing social and relational capital.

The social sustainability of the programme does not end with the integration of the student in internships in the locality, but seeks a greater long-term impact, an updated vision for young people in rural areas that could allow the municipalities to be revitalised. In this sense, the entities declared that one of the main contributions of the programme to their organisations was the very existence of the programme, which allows them to meet new people in order to have a longer relationship with them (Table 10).

**Table 10.** Descriptive statistics of the variables of Social Sustainability \*.

<b>The Satisfaction of the Entities with the Social Integration of Internship Students in Rural Areas</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Integration will by the town council and other stakeholders	8.92	1.81
Integration in the local community and with the town's residents	8.97	1.05
The company has helped to integrate the student in the local community	9.14	0.83
Rate the impact on the locality	8.78	2.00
<b>The Satisfaction of the Entities with Discovering New Expectations for Their Rural Areas and Companies</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Offering this internship programme in rural areas	9.24	0.85
Meeting new people with whom to have a longer relationship	8.22	1.82
Contributing to an updated view of their rural area	8.94	1.27
Helping to revitalise your town	8.86	1.32

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

All of the above indicates that from an economic perspective, the internships are the best selection process for companies with few resources and that they provide a portfolio of trained human capital in case they need it (Table 11). The entities also want to help revitalise the rural area and believe they can offer interesting jobs to university students: they reject the idea that entities in a rural setting are less dynamic than the ones in an urban setting.

The entities also recognised that—although the participants were still students—they added value to the organisation, likely due to new knowledge transferred and skills linked to revitalising the organisation, allowing them to add new business lines and projects, although both with high standard deviations.

**Table 11.** Descriptive statistics of the variables of Economic Sustainability \*.

<b>Main Contributions of the Internships to the Economic Sustainability of Entities and Their Localities</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Adding new knowledge to new business lines and strategies	7.25	3.14
Rural areas have interesting and attractive jobs	8.43	2.02
Companies in rural areas are less dynamic than those in urban areas	2.33	2.64
Beginning new lines of management and projects	6.94	2.46

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

The entities prefer to extend the period of practice of the students before hiring, in any of its forms (temporary or indefinite). On the one hand, the valuation is low for both hiring options (at the time of completing the questionnaire), but on the other hand, the entities are considering building a job bank for future hiring that may arise (Table 12). In any case, the hiring options have very low



valuations and a high dispersion of data. The entities made it very clear they did not seek to supply vacations or other contingencies with the internship (albeit with high dispersion). Because of that, they assessed this aspect with a score of 2.03 out of 10.

**Table 12.** Descriptive statistics of the variables associated with possible ways to continue the relationship with students\*.

<b>The Sort of Continuity Wished by Rural Areas Entities for a Future Relationship with the Internship Students</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Stand. Dev.</b>
Extending the internship period	7.68	3.27
Being hired on a temporary basis	5.15	3.19
Being hired on an indefinite basis	2.85	2.62
Having a tried and tested job bank for future hiring	7.28	2.14
Supplementing roles left vacant by holidays	2.03	3.70

\* n = 38; period 2018–2019; Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10; mean out of 10.

## 6. Discussion on the Desafío Programme

### 6.1. Lessons Learned

Based on the results obtained from this programme, we can confirm that universities train professionals and citizens. Theoretical competencies are usually achieved with high standards, but the most practical aspects of knowledge are not easy to impart in a classroom, nor is reality reproducible in laboratories. For this reason, internship programmes in companies and institutions have long been generalised as a way to acquire learning that is more comprehensive, by synthesising the theory and practice accessed by professionals with real jobs.

The novelty of Desafío Programme is that these practices are developed in rural areas, within entities that promote endogenous local development and with students living together with the people of these small towns, as one of them. In this way, it becomes an innovative learning strategy for its students that can contribute to the vibrancy of sparsely populated areas by renewing their human capital, removing stereotypes and prejudices about provincial life and reinforcing their social and relational capital.

Our surveys were initially proposed to measure the effectiveness of the programme, but the results also display its ability to contribute to economic and social sustainability in territories with difficulties just to survive. In fact, the collaboration of different entities and institutions has been necessary for this programme (which aims to address the sustainability of the territories) to be able to go ahead, which would fit into the SDG 17, target 17.16 (enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources).

In our practice review, conducted through visits to the places where they take place and interviews with the tutors, we have found that the students carry out tasks in small companies and organisations, usually more creative and with a greater degree of responsibility than their peers in urban settings, where their role is more standardised. Therefore, the pedagogical aspects of the programme are usually very satisfactorily accomplished.

Furthermore, students point out the progress in their most transversal and humanistic skills thanks to the coexistence in small towns, where for a few weeks they also open their minds and those of their neighbours, being very well received and integrating into their social ecosystem. Therefore, technical and humanistic formation are intertwined thanks to Desafío Programme.

In this way, firstly, the economic sustainability of these small towns receives a boost, as their companies, institutions and third sector will have less difficulty, in the future, to attract qualified human capital, the most complicated resource for them to get. At the moment, the advantages are more qualitative than quantitative, because there have been only 38 students, a very small percentage of those attending the University of Zaragoza. However, these results imply a change in trend. Desafío Programme opens a new route that facilitates new collaborations between the rural and

university worlds, in a double sense—something that is still very uncommon, but indispensable to both sides.

So, as the University of Zaragoza shows, year after year, that there is a set of dynamic, creative companies and entities that offer quality internships that could be transformed into job opportunities, *Desafío* will be contributing to territorial rebalancing. It will do it by improving the matches between the supply and demand of human resources, which is directly related with the achievement of SDG 8, target 8.6 (a substantial reduction in the proportion of youth people that have no employment, no education or training, is expected by 2020). We have to note that quality jobs are scarce in many areas, in a country that has one of the highest OECD youth unemployment rates [46]—something that is very relevant for the sustainable and inclusive development proposed by the European Union, when it advocates Smart Rural Growth [47]. The programme could thus be an active learning and employment policy, promoting the decongestion of metropolitan hinterlands and the attractiveness of remote rural areas, a dynamic desired in most governments to make their growth more spatially and socially coherent [48].

Figures 5 and 6 show the internships that have been developed in very small towns in the province of Zaragoza, of which many of them are critically sized but with very dynamic economic and social projects.

On the other hand, *Desafío* tries to deactivate the false but robust conviction, held by young people, that big cities are the only places of opportunity [49]. Against this, the basis for the call requires that students reside in these small towns, so that they can directly experience their social life and can select it in this way. For young people who only know urban life, new ways of thinking are opened to them by experiencing another rhythm of life, unknown forms of relationship, the opportunity to have a close contact with nature and a quality landscape—characteristics that in times of pandemics have been much more valued [50]. This constant search for a balanced development of cities and communities, between urban, peri-urban and rural areas, favours the development of SDG 11, target 11.a (support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning). A life in smaller communities is something that contributes to the social sustainability of a country and to its cohesion as a territory and a society.

Consequently, *Desafío* advances towards a possible change in the approach to university education, usually focused on the environments closest to its faculties, of urban character, and with a highly productivist economic model.

## 6.2. Aspects in Common with Other Experiences and the Future of the Programme

The revitalisation of areas in decline in some parts of Northern Europe shows that economic and demographic recession can be reversed using several approaches: a holistic and economically diversified approach to rural development; strengthening rural communities; active fostering of local entrepreneurship; investment in connectivity and infrastructure, facilities and services; providing educational opportunities adapted to the areas' economic potentialities and requirements; integrating instruments and funds and collaboration among all kinds of public and private entities; presence and direct action in the area of local development agents and of local participatory development procedures; and the existence of specific agencies and authorities in rural areas with severe and permanent demographic disadvantages to organise the area and plan development actions [43]. The achievements of this endogenous local development model—supported by improved governance, better human capital and more social capital—suggest the lines along which the Aragonese strategy should progress.

The *Desafío* Programme shares these approaches. First, the scheme has worked with organisations from diverse sectors—including professional activities and services that differ from traditional ones—which highlights the diversity of professional profiles and employment opportunities in rural areas; second, the UZ offers education in line with the area's employment requirements and opportunities, since the entities receiving the academic internships consider that the students' training fits their requirements; and, third, the programme is the result of the financial

collaboration between two public entities, the DPZ and the UZ, which contribute funds and manage the project. There is also collaboration between the entities in the rural organisation and UZ students exogenous to these rural areas, the real protagonists and beneficiaries of *Desafío*. These three aspects contribute to the goal of transforming rural areas into more sustainable and inclusive places, so that the rejuvenation of the rural population becomes the consequence of creating opportunities for the students' professional and personal development.

In short, the aim would be to generate a kind of "social economy of scale", based on boosting social relationships in these areas, revitalising trade and demand for public services and, naturally, improving economic activity and the job market [42].

Other similar experiences have been reported in sparsely populated areas in Portugal, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Spain, in Catalonia. All of these are encouraging and invite study and reflection, which can support the drafting of specific policies for other areas experiencing severe demographic decline [51,52]. Outside the EU, Japan and the United States, there are examples of regeneration of sparsely populated rural areas taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by the New Economy, cultural dimensions and collaboration dynamics. Combining technology, creativity, amenities and social capital could prove essential in seeking solutions [53].

With the aim of attracting and retaining people in every area, the system must offer a wider range of educational options for those that have not yet completed their studies, and employment options for those that have. There may be several incentives for this: working and studying can be made more compatible, with the possibility of a transition to dual training systems if a job opportunity arises in a depopulated area, or with the ability to complete training online; the requirements for returning to study, after dropping out to perform a job in a rural area, can be reduced; continuous online education can take place at the workplace; etc. Students must also be provided with a portfolio of services with basic conditions (soft landing) that can enable newcomers to settle in [42]: low rent, travel and sports discounts, advisory services, integration into the community, etc.

## 7. Conclusions

The main objective in sparsely populated rural areas is population growth; indeed, some are at a critical level and, if their population decreases, they will disappear. To achieve this growth, they must grow economically, generate employment and attract new residents, but these are goals that contradict sustainability [54]. The authors, as researchers on rural depopulation and social economy, as well as active members at the University of Zaragoza, were interested in advancing this dilemma from the standpoint of basic and applied research, proposing concrete strategies to overcome it. In our opinion, the collaboration of the university on relevant social problems would generate learning in both directions and improve the transforming capacity of institutions [55]. We believe that the key issue is to present the great principles of sustainability in the appropriate context. In our case, by highlighting the idiosyncrasy of the small and the local, we are able to redefine what we understand by sustainable development.

Therefore, first of all, we must recognize the heterogeneity of countries, and even provinces like Zaragoza, with congested metropolitan areas and numerous empty rural areas very close by. "One-size-fits-all" solutions from macro-political and theoretical academic positions miss specific local perspectives on cultural, demographic, environmental and economic issues and can be counterproductive. The "dividends of the depopulation" [38], evident at the planetary level, and even at the regional scale in most of Spain, must be nuanced according to local situations, which do not experience the problems of congestion and where many of the rural small towns have a very real and urgent problem of survival.

Secondly, when delving into the complexity of the rural society and how well-being and sustainability are defined in it, the question arises as to what type of development is necessary. The quantitative and monetary parameters are not usually useful in rural areas because the problem is mainly one of accessibility [8]—of not being able to consume or use certain services, independently of income, because they are far away. In addition, there is an existential issue caused by the shortage

of a young adult generation that could renew social and human capital—much more so than by the level of wealth and income, which are medium-high in most of these villages. If local talent is reduced and is disrupting social connections, there is no future.

Therefore, our theses on rural development differ from the mainstream simplifying approach, which assumes that more is always better—that the only solution is to commodify landscapes thorough tourism, lower taxes to attract investors, most of whom are only rent-seekers, or build disproportionate infrastructure. We believe that our approach is better than a focus on the quantitative growth in inhabitants and income, which would be perverse and frustrating [56], as it would never allow for recovery—neither to the levels experienced by residents decades ago, nor to the levels of consumption and efficiency of urban agglomerations.

We argue that, in the rural world, it is possible to find evidence of the advantages of living in low-density and small communities. In this context, development is a kind of personal fulfilment that is also communitarian. This can force a paradigm shift in governments—more is not always better, and, for many people, another lifestyle is possible and more satisfying. In rural areas, the challenge is less difficult. Therefore, we propose vibrancy more than growth, and *Desafío Programme* can be an instrument.

Obviously, a university internship programme alone cannot change statistics, nor reverse a secular demographic decline. Neither can it change the mainstream views of career success and happiness. Most graduates will go on looking for urban jobs and living in metropolitan areas. The programme's impacts are intangible, qualitative and, in the long term, relevant outside of conventional measures. For this reason, our evaluation focuses on its implementation efficiency and the assessments of its protagonists through surveys.

Given their practically unanimous support, we believe that some premises of minimal impact rural development should be reviewed, and policies on human capital should be renovated, in order to stimulate more mature and thoughtful university learning.

In small towns, there are efficient and sustainable business models—social economy projects that promote cohesion, and institutions that improve the participation of citizens. This type of programme is coherent with those strategies and supports them by offering talent, the basic input to all of them. It is also a way to increase the residential attractiveness of these places, so that people who would never have lived there are able to do so for a few months and can experience its high quality of life, amenities and nature.

The policies against depopulation carried out to date in Spain, focused on hardware (money and public expenditure), have not been positive, because the problem was in the software—in creativity and commitment, and the turn to rural areas [28]. The *Desafío Programme* works with these resources, human capital and social capital, values and persuasions. Young people are usually more able to face challenges in their training, and small rural communities are appropriate laboratories, willing to experiment with new development strategies in order to regenerate their situation because they need alternatives. So far, the experience is proving positive, as shown by the data provided in this work, recognition by national and regional governments that want to expand it and the European networks that have proposed it as a good practice.

The limitations of the *Desafío Programme* include its still small number of internships, given its experimental nature. However, in 2020, before COVID19 appeared, the plan was to develop new lines of work, such as collaborations with Local Agencies Groups (LAGs, which implement LEADER funding), normally located in populations not affected by depopulation, but which would reinforce an approach against depopulation focused on creativity and social participation, to which we are highly committed. Another development would be to support final degree projects that present replicable revitalising measures in rural areas, so that the knowledge does not remain in a folder and is put into practice, improving social reality. In conclusion, the *Desafío Programme* will continue to experiment with formulas that promote a development model focused on vibrancy rather than quantity, improving the attractiveness of peripheral rural areas.

We are also aware that the evaluation in the present work remains imperfect; it only concerns implementation. We are now studying how to measure its impact more completely. We have already

noted that Desafío cannot change demographic trends, which are subject to a multitude of variables, although it affects the driver that is most decisive—a change in mentality. We would like students to see the rural world as a territory of opportunities, as an exciting challenge to face, and we intend to approach this issue.

Specifically, we hope to do research following up on the graduated students, to assess if their experience has any effect on their subsequent career. One important variable to analyse would be their employability, to determine if this professional and vital learning helps them to obtain quality jobs, and whether they start their professional career in firms located in rural or urban areas. At the same time, we would like to investigate whether the companies that have collaborated with Desafío have been more sensitive to the recruitment of recent graduates—if they value their talent more than previously.

These are medium-term projects: given the current state of the Desafío Programme, evaluation cannot yet be focused on its impact. However, the satisfaction of the participants, which is conceptualised as subjective efficiency, is a relevant scientific target [57], which could inform better policies.

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## Appendix A

### Appendix A.1. Students Questionnaire

#### I. The satisfaction of internship students with the working experience developed in rural areas

- Future employers will appreciate my internship experience in a rural environment
- Enhancing my bachelor's/master's degree knowledge
- Improving my work skills
- Improving my personal autonomy
- Enjoying an ideal working environment
- Learning from the company/institution tutor that I had during the internship

#### II. The satisfaction of internship students with their social integration in rural areas

- Rate how the town council and other stakeholders have facilitated your integration
- Rate your leisure time in the town
- Rate your level of integration in the local community where you did your internship
- Interest in meeting new people and discovering new places
- Interest in having a new personal and professional experience in a rural environment

#### III. The satisfaction of internship students with discovering new expectations in their lives

- Rate the importance for your rural area of the Orientation and Employment Service offering this internship programme
- Discovering unknown places that are attractive

- Thinking about working in small municipalities

#### **IV. Perception of the internship students on the economic sustainability of existing projects in rural areas**

- Interest in discovering different companies
- Rural areas have interesting and attractive companies and jobs that match my training
- Companies in rural areas are less dynamic than those in urban areas
- I want to work with companies and organisations that perform attractive projects that revitalise rural areas

#### **V. The sort of continuity of the pre-employment relationship that internship students would like to have in the rural environment**

- Extending the internship period
- Being hired on a temporary basis
- Being hired on an indefinite basis
- Extending the internship period and living in the town or its surrounding area
- Being hired on a temporary basis and living in the town or its surrounding area
- Being hired on an indefinite basis and living in the town or its surrounding area
- Extending the internship period and living in Zaragoza on in the major towns in the LAUs 1
- Being hired on a temporary basis and living in Zaragoza on in the major towns in the LAUs 1
- Being hired on an indefinite basis and living in Zaragoza on in the major towns in the LAUs 1

#### *Entities Questionnaire*

##### **I. The satisfaction of the entities of rural areas with the knowledge and skills of university internship students**

- The Desafío Programme is attractive because the internships are performed by qualified people (university students)
- Creating an optimal working environment within the organisation
- Learning from the student that I have had on the internship
- Interest in having contact with recent graduates and appreciating their knowledge and skills
- Providing inexperienced young people with training and learning opportunities

##### **II. The satisfaction of the entities with the social integration of internship students in rural areas**

- Rate how the town council and other stakeholders have facilitated the student's integration
- Rate the student's level of integration in the local community and with the town's residents
- Rate how your company/institution has helped to integrate the student in the local community
- Rate the impact of the internship on the locality where it took place

##### **III. The satisfaction of the entities with discovering new expectations for their rural areas and companies.**

- Rate the importance for your rural area of the Orientation and Employment Service offering this internship programme
- Meeting new people with whom to have a longer relationship
- Contributing to an updated view of my town and LAU 1 by young people that might be attracted to it in future
- Rate the extent to which this programme helps to revitalise your town

##### **IV. Main contributions of the internships to the economic sustainability of entities and their localities**

- Adding new knowledge to new business lines and strategies
- Rural areas have interesting and attractive jobs for young qualified university students.

- Companies in rural areas are less dynamic than those in urban areas
- Beginning new lines of management and projects

#### V. The sort of continuity wished by rural areas entities for a future relationship with the internship students

- Extending the internship period
- Being hired on a temporary basis
- Being hired on an indefinite basis
- Having a tried and tested job bank for future hirings
- Supplementing roles left vacant by holidays

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