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Direct Marketing Channel
Strengthening Local Development and the Teaching Process

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Abstract

The teaching-learning process is integrated with practice to meet the demands of the labor market. This study presents the learning experience of students at Universidad Politécnica Salesian (UPS), Ecuador, and their contribution to territorial development through an integrated commercialization proposal. This initiative connects eight rural productive associations from El Valle Parish, Cuenca, Ecuador, with the university. It highlights how knowledge transfer drives proposals aligned with agricultural policies, particularly the promotion of direct marketing channels. A mixed-methods approach was adopted: a quantitative methodology was used for production data collection, market segment profiling, and hypothesis testing; while a qualitative approach, through participatory action research, allowed students to develop skills by interacting with project participants and focusing on solutions to local challenges. Data collection was conducted through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, enabling the identification of producers' and consumers' needs while also fostering key competencies in students to address challenges in the agri-food sector. The results demonstrate the potential of higher education to generate sustainable solutions for local communities. The results obtained demonstrate the potential of higher education to generate sustainable solutions and a positive impact on local communities.

Keywords: *Direct marketing channel; university-local environment link, Popular and Solidarity Economy.*
JEL code: A1. A10. A.100
Q13. Q130.

Introduction

Universities have played a fundamental role in the evolution of higher education throughout history. Originating in the Middle Ages, they have not only witnessed the progress of human knowledge but have also been active participants in its development. These institutions have evolved from humble beginnings in monastic and cathedral schools, where theology, law and medicine were taught, to contemporary entities that foster academic training and integration with the professional field. Over the centuries, universities have undergone significant transformation, adapting their structure and function to meet the changing needs of society.

Today, they continue to be pillars in the training of teachers and in the generation of knowledge, maintaining a close link with professional practice and contributing to the advancement of various disciplines. Thus, universities not only educate, but also inspire and lead in the search for academic and professional excellence (Rüegg, 1992). The first 4 universities that were born in the 12th century were Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Montpellier, each with their own particular characteristics. In the first decade of the 19th century, the Humboldt University was born , the first to include scientific research among its processes (Chuaqui, 2002). (Geiger, 2004)

In the mid-nineteenth century, universities found it necessary to market their scientific results because of research activity. This function was transformed and by the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, the third mission of the university emerged, expressed in the link between the university and society (CRUE, 2018). This link had its first expression in the triple helix model, which then

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evolved into a fifth version, from the leading role of the government to its integration into the sustainable approach (Castillo, 2020). The various ways in which this transfer has been carried out in a general way under the dimensions of the Triple Helix approach have been, among others: Technology Transfer Offices (OTT), Research Results Transfer Offices , Foundations, Marketing Companies (mainly service companies), Technology Parks, Spin-offs, Patents and Licenses, among others (Goebel y otros, 2024). Universities have put into practice various models; in its beginnings, this process was also known as university extension (Pérez y otros, 2023).

However, there are barriers that hinder the development of this process, especially the cultural differences between the university and the companies; the former favors research in terms of inventions, while the latter are attached to economic results (Chen y otros, 2024). In the internal university environment, sometimes, an empirical organization prevails, which results in companies distrusting the establishment of a link that favors the development of the locality (Rueda y otros, 2020). The presence of these problems does not allow the fulfilment of the objectives set out in the linking process (Ciriza, y otros, 2021).

Professional practice is a component of the substantive process of engagement with society in universities, which seeks to establish connections between theory and practice, allowing students to apply the knowledge acquired in real contexts. This connection is essential for the comprehensive training of students and to prepare them to face the challenges of the world of work. The undergraduate training of professionals requires practical development so that actors shape their identities both in the individual and social spheres, to contribute to the training of critical, creative, deliberative and ethical professionals (Cisneros & Mendoza, 2018).

Universities have developed various strategies to strengthen the link with professional practice, such as the implementation of professional practice programs, internships, applied research projects and collaborations with the productive and social sector (Kolb, 1984). These practical experiences provide students with the opportunity to acquire professional skills, develop work competencies and establish contact networks that can be beneficial for their professional future (Zlotkowski, 2002).

The substantive processes of university management must remain closely linked and create synergies in the dynamics of their evolution. The results indicate that a university's performance based on the research pillar strengthens the knowledge transfer pillar over time, through marketing channels and academic participation (Senguta & Ray, 2017). However, integration in these processes becomes difficult and the differences are accentuated when observing their behavior in developed and non-developed countries.

Teacher training and the link with professional practice are intrinsically linked in universities. Teacher training provides students with the theoretical and methodological tools necessary to teach effectively, while the link with practice allows them to apply this knowledge in real contexts and acquire professional experience. The university must pay special attention to the process of planning, carrying out and continuous improvement of pre-professional practices (Chávez y otros, 2019). It is necessary to consider the needs identified in the social and economic development of the environment (Herrera y otros, 2020), which reinforces the necessary integration between the training process and the link process.

The market has significantly affected the mission and functions to be developed by universities in the teaching and research fields, while training has had the tendency to prepare future professionals based on market demands and efforts are made to market the results obtained in the research process (Geiger, 2004). On the other hand, (García & González, 2017)they argue that this trend in Latin America is expressed in that the substantive processes are executed independently and their relationship is observed from specific actions that do not have a systemic approach; the relationship between the substantive processes of the university is bidirectional and fortuitous, which does not contribute substantial changes to the profile of the professional that can be realized in the offer of degree training. Thus, gaps are caused in the teaching-learning processes that limit the connection of the student with professional practice. However, in this regard, regarding the integration of the substantive processes of the university, other studies consider the need for these to be specific in their strategies and management models, in correspondence with their

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capacities to strengthen one of the processes and not necessarily achieve the integration between these three.(Sánchez, 2014)

In Ecuador, university autonomy was recognized in the 1940s (Bravo, 2022). Here, the process of university involvement in society has served as support for local development and entrepreneurship, attempting to promote the innovation process (Salas y otros, 2020).

On the other hand, there is the local environment surrounding the university, particularly the rural local environment and the need to bring about substantial changes in the development of alternatives for these territories.

Since 2011, with the enactment of the Popular and Solidarity Economy Law (EPS) (Asamblea Nacional, 2024), Ecuadorian productive associations have opted for an alternative economic model, based on collaboration and solidarity, as a response to the challenges of inequality.

However, its dynamics do not reach the expected levels and in general, it does not offer an attractive alternative for the generation of income; in most cases it becomes a secondary source of income, there are no policies that stimulate the development of these economic forms (Hidalgo Romero y otros, 2024).

In short, the EPS form is born and developed under the principles of solidarity and collaboration in the production and distribution of wealth, in the face of the inequality generated by the capitalist paradigm and the precepts of private property. Under this modality, the value of use is privileged and not the value of exchange, solidarity vs. the accumulation of capital (Jubeto y otros, 2014) (Coraggio, 2013) (Razzeto, 1993) (Razeto, 1999) (Barbetti, 2011).

Coraggio (2013) develops the idea of coexistence between different forms of economy, the private, the public and the social; however, for these forms to be articulated and to dynamize the development, of the small productive associations organized under the EPS approach, there must be clear policies at the local level [4]. The link between the EPS and local development has been exhaustively treated in the works presented by(Albuquerque, 2004) (Alburquerque, 2007) (Vázquez-Barquero, 1998) (Vázquez-Barquero, 2009) (Coraggio, 2013) (Coraggio, 2011)They emphasize structural transformations based on the use of endogenous resources existing in the territory.

Economic relations in supportive environments involve links of a different nature based on trust, based on social and family relationships (Milanés, 2024). Without a doubt, this process is characterized by a high level of complexity, since it is still a young process under construction. This complexity is accentuated if we consider the lack of articulation between the various actors that influence the process and the current perspectives of management by values.(Guerra, 2020)

One of the alternatives followed by this approach has been the promotion of direct links between productive activities and final consumers, to achieve cost minimization and the value of the products from these economic activities; it involves structuring direct marketing channels with a focus on fair trade.

Fair trade has established itself as an alternative paradigm in the commercial field, based on ethical and solidarity principles. Its objective is to guarantee equal conditions for producers, especially in developing countries, by eliminating intermediaries and promoting direct commercial relations. Despite its potential advantages, its mass adoption has been limited due to various challenges and barriers.

[4] He Details of this analysis, which served as a background for the formulation and execution of the project described in this article, can be found in: Gómez-Ceballos, G.; Vázquez-Loaiza, JP; Herrera-Torres, DP; Vega-Luna, AJ Popular and solidarity economy: policies and realities in the local context. The case of the agricultural production associations of El Valle, Ecuador. *Sustainability* 2021, *13* , 13469. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132313469

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It is defined as "a business model that puts human beings and the social, economic and environmental sustainability of societies at the center, dignifying work, respecting the environment and promoting responsible and sustainable management of natural resources" (FAIRTRADE, 2024). It originates as a social movement aimed at challenging the inequalities and exploitative practices of global trade, particularly those rooted in colonialism. Its beginnings date back to the 1950s and 1960s with "charity trade", which consisted of importing crafts made by vulnerable groups, such as refugees and orphans. In the 1970s and 1980s, the movement evolved into "alternative trade" and "solidarity trade", focusing on establishing fair trade relations and supporting alternative forms of development in the Global South (Reed, 2013).

This movement has gained great strength in the Latin American coffee sector, with the aim of empowering producers through better prices, stable links with the market and better working conditions (Raynolds & Weeks, 2018).

The trend is one of commercial integration and incorporation. Fair trade has increasingly entered the mainstream of commerce, which has led to tensions between its social principles and commercial imperatives. This integration has been characterized by product certification and the participation of large companies.(Barrientos y otros, 2007) (Low & Davenport, 2006) (Smith & VanderHoff, 2013)

The introduction of product certification in the 1980s was a landmark event, with Fairtrade International certifying 20 commodities and generating global sales of $8 billion annually.(Raynolds & Weeks, 2018) (Smith & VanderHoff, 2013)By 2022, certifications had grown to 1,910 organizations, including 1,563 small producer organizations (including those certified for contract production) and 347 larger farms that rely on hired labor (known as hired labor organizations) (FAIRTRADE, 2024). This certification has allowed Fair Trade products to enter mainstream retail channels, increasing consumer awareness and market access.

Fair Trade relies heavily on consumer activism, with consumers in the Global North increasingly seeking socially and environmentally responsible products. This has led to the growth of these markets, especially in Europe and North America. This process is diverse and complex, reflecting several channels and approaches. It includes both alternative trading (Wilkinson, 2007) (Barrientos y otros, 2007)organizations committed to Fair Trade principles, as well as conventional for-profit companies that meet minimum standards (Reed, 2013).(Özçağlar-Toulouse y otros, 2010)

Despite its growth, Fair Trade faces challenges such as maintaining its core values while expanding market access and ensuring that benefits reach the small producers, they are intended for rather than being co-opted by large corporations (Smith & VanderHoff, 2013). Small producers organized in the form of EPSs face greater difficulties in accessing sources of financing to enable certification, and there are no conclusive results on its positive impact. (Guevara-Rosero y otros, 2024)There are also ongoing debates about the effectiveness of Fair Trade labelling and its impact on producers and consumers.(Schmelzer, 2010) (Lyon, 2021)

In short, fair trade emerged from post-war movements and decolonization efforts, with the aim of addressing global inequalities (Winterberg, 2020). The movement seeks to promote social justice, environmental sustainability and better economic conditions for producers in the Global South.(Raynolds & Weeks, 2018) (Stenn, 2013)It is a general movement with significant participation of producers from Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.(Brown, 2007) (Raynolds & Weeks, 2018).

Fair Trade has evolved from a grassroots social movement into a major global market force, balancing its founding principles with the demands of trade integration. It continues to adapt, facing both opportunities and challenges in its quest to promote fairer trade practices around the world.

In this context, it is understood that the university plays an essential role in the connection with the rural productive environment, based on the transfer of knowledge and the search for alternatives to bring about transformations in productive structures from their origin, taking advantage of the endogenous resources existing in the localities. Lang, et.al, 2024, reaffirm in their study the multiple advantages of co-creating knowledge with communities in agricultural fields, addressing various challenges for these areas that they

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summarize in 4 essential arguments: collaborative planning, the role of teachers and students in the learning process, the dynamics of co-construction and co-governance.

Hence, this work sought an answer to the following research question:

How can we promote the creation of a direct marketing channel between productive associations and university workers?

In response to this question, this article aims to bring to the attention of the scientific community a positive experience, showing how through the execution of a project of linkage with practice, it contributed to the formulation of a commercialization proposal by integrating the efforts of the members of the productive associations, and co-creating knowledge of both parties, in order to contribute to the strengthening of these organizations in their management process, especially in the marketing function, and to the development of skills in students for the exercise of their profession and the strengthening of their values, at the same time that, in this interactive process, teachers were able to enrich the contents and methods used in their respective disciplines.

Methodology

The study area has an area of 4,404.4 hectares and is home to 34,785 residents, distributed as follows: 16,279 men (46.8%) and 18,506 women (53.2%). According to INEC data for the year 2023, the level of poverty due to Unsatisfied Basic Needs (NBI) reaches 30.8% at the national level and 52% at the rural level (INEC, 2024), while extreme poverty stands at 10.6% at the national level and 24.1% at the rural level (INEC, 2024). In the productive field, the parish stands out for the cultivation of corn, beans, alfalfa, potatoes, peas and vegetables. In addition, it complements its economy with the raising of animals such as chickens, guinea pigs, pigs and dairy cattle, activities that strengthen the livelihood of its inhabitants (GAD Cuenca, 2015).

Eight productive associations were studied, of which seven are dedicated to agricultural cultivation and one to cattle management. Seven professors from different careers participated, four from Business Administration, one from Veterinary Medicine, one from Industrial Engineering and one from Biotechnology. The 12 students involved in the project worked in small groups, attending each association.

In this way, the methodological approach included permanent interaction with those involved in the project: teachers, members of productive associations, members of the board of directors of the GAD (Decentralized Autonomous Government) of the parish and technicians from the MAG (Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock).

The research was carried out with a non-experimental quantitative approach, descriptive exploratory and correlational analysis with a mixed approach (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018), to collect information regarding cultivated crop areas, types of products, production volume and sales income and, for the analysis of the target market segment to whom the supply of agroecological products would be offered.

In addition, the qualitative approach was used to search for diagnostic information from community members using the action-research methodology. This methodology involves finding solutions to specific community problems, focusing on processes that guide decision-making for the formulation of projects and reformulation of structural processes, with the participation of those involved. Quantitative and qualitative data are collected , integrating inductive and deductive approaches (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). (Tuba Criollo, 2020) The use of this methodology allowed teachers, students and community members to assume an attitude of change in the face of the problems that arise in the community, specifically in relation to the marketing of their products , contributing with their experiences and criteria to a broader perspective of an alternative solution based on an integrative proposal .

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The processing and analysis of information was carried out through the SPSS V29 software on productive associations (Orellana-Quezada, 2017), through indicators and statistical analysis (Villavicencio, Quezada, Chica, & Moreira, 2015), for this, it was necessary for the students to put into practice knowledge linked to production management, human talent management, project management and marketing management, with emphasis on the latter, to promote the operation of a direct marketing channel between productive associations and the staff employed at the Salesian Polytechnic University (UPS) in order to benefit the elimination of intermediaries and the application of the principles of fair trade.

The Techniques Used Were

- *Survey-interview* with members of each organization to update variables on production levels, types of products, current sales, possible expansion of production, markets (From a questionnaire aimed at gathering information on the variables: infrastructure, production costs, major problems in production, current planting area, possibility of expansion, product portfolio, internal strengths of the organization, current market)

- *Surveys of the target market segment,* teachers at the Salesian Polytechnic University (UPS) identify their profile and promote the management of a direct marketing channel. An online survey was applied to them through Google Forms (Carchipulla, Rivera, & Quezada, 2021).

  To obtain the sample, the number of teachers at UPS Cuenca was used as the population. To calculate the sample, a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5% were applied, with a probability of success of 95.8%.

$$n = \frac{N * Z^2 * p * q}{e^2 * (N-1) + Z^2 * p * q}$$

$$n = \frac{310 * 1{,}96^2 * 0{,}958 * 0{,}042}{0.05^2 * (310-1) + 1{,}96^2 * 0{,}958 * 0.042}$$

$$n = 51{,}68 = 52$$

The variables included in the questionnaire include sex, age, number of household members, per capita family income, purchase frequency, expenditure on agricultural products, factors considered when purchasing, places of purchase, time of purchase, sources of information on agricultural products, satisfaction with the current product, knowledge about agroecological production, consumption of agroecological products, payment preferences, acquisition preferences and delivery preferences.

For statistical analysis, these variables were integrated into 4 large groups that correspond to the controllable variables that make up the marketing management process, namely: product, price, promotion and place; in this way, sub variables were classified that completed each of these clusters.

Using SPSS V29.0 software, the normality of the variables was verified with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, obtaining the following results that confirm their normality.

Table 1. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Normality Test

Variable	Kolmogorov-Smirnov [a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistical	gl	Next.	Statistical	gl	Next.
Product	0.117	52	0.072	0.949	52	0.027

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Square	0.096	52	0.200*	0.968	52	0.172
Promotion	0.172	52	0.010	0.735	52	0.010

*. This is a lower limit of the true significance.

Lilliefors significance correction

Note. Source: Surveys. Prepared by: Authors.

Based on the above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Ho: There is a direct and significant relationship between the variables of place of purchase for the members of the target segment and the variables: level of satisfaction, time spent on shopping, knowledge about agricultural products and healthy lifestyle.

H1: There is no direct and significant relationship between the variables of the place of purchase for the members of the target segment, therefore, the level of satisfaction, time spent shopping, knowledge about agricultural products and healthy lifestyle are not improved.

- Surveys aimed at teachers and students participating in the project with the aim of verifying the impact linked to the teaching process

- Focus groups with project members and members of productive associations to determine the essential elements that make up the marketing mix and the product launch strategy.

- Discussion among project members and with the participation of members of the Decentralized Autonomous Government (GAD) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG) that handles the formulation of the project, to complete the project deliverables (Technical study, location, organic structure, personnel, budget and feasibility)

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis is a statistical technique that allows us to simplify complex data sets, identifying underlying patterns or factors that explain the relationships between multiple variables. A consistency analysis of the questionnaire was performed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The results indicate that the questionnaire is suitable for factor analysis (KMO = 0.514; $p < 0.101$). The results are shown in the following table:

Table 2. Consistency Test of the Questionnaire

KMO and Bartlett test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		,514
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-square	22,248
	gl	15
	Next.	,101

Note. Source: Questionnaire of questions. Prepared by: Authors.

Factor analysis revealed two main factors:

Factor 1: Knowledge and Purchase Preference for Agroecological Products: This factor groups variables related to knowledge about agroecological production, the known benefits of agroecological products, purchase frequency and satisfaction with the current product. Consumers with high scores (48%) on this factor tend to be well informed about agroecological production and show high satisfaction with the products they consume.

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Factor 2: Spending and Payment Preferences: This factor groups variables related to spending on agricultural products per purchase, payment preferences and time to get to the place of purchase. Consumers with high scores on this factor tend to spend more on agricultural products and prefer cash payment methods (75%).

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) allowed to reduce the dimensionality of the data, identifying eight main components that explain 70% of the variance (Knowledge about agro-ecological production; Knowledge about the benefits of consuming agro-ecological products; Place of purchase; Healthier lifestyle; Attribute preference for purchasing agro-ecological products; Purchase frequency; Current satisfaction with product consumption; Time spent on purchase). These components are related to knowledge, purchasing habits and consumer satisfaction with agro-ecological products, as shown in the following table.

Table 3. Principal Component Matrix

	Component							
Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Knowledge of agroecological production	,833							
Knowledge about the benefits of consuming agroecological products	,606							
Place of purchase		,640						
Healthier lifestyle				,617				
Attribute preference for the purchase of agroecological products					,752			
Purchase frequency					,665			
Current satisfaction with product consumption						,633		
Time spent on purchase								,644

Note. Source: Results of primary data processing. Prepared by: Authors

Results

Based on the results obtained, the most significant findings related to marketing, the central axis of the research, are highlighted. An innovative business model was proposed that integrates all the associations' products and markets them directly to UPS teachers. A direct marketing channel was established to take advantage of the benefits of eliminating intermediaries, reducing costs and increasing income for these associations. This direct channel favors transparency in the supply chain and allows for greater reliability in the use of technology, especially its integration through blockchain (Burgess y otros, 2024).

As a result of the survey applied to each member of the association and the joint work reviewing the planting areas used, and the area that could be used in the future, the productive capacity and projected sales volumes were calculated (Basis for calculating the feasibility of the project).

Table 4. Current And Projected Sales: Current Segment and Potential Segment. (Sales In Dollars)

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
100.208	105.209	110.465	116.100	121.969

Note. Source: Primary data processing. Prepared by: Authors

The product portfolio considered for the study is presented below.

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Table 5. Portfolio Of Products Managed by Associations

Lettuce, Cilantro, Cabbage, Chard, Purple Cabbage, Parsley, Turnip, Spinach, Carrot, Beet, Radish, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Zucchini, Tomato, Chives, Onion, Garlic, Potato, Tree Tomato, Celery, Cucumber, Pepper, Romanesco, Yogurt.

Note. Source: Primary data processing. Prepared by: Authors

Additionally, the diagnosis provided relevant information on:

Average input costs: $2.51

Current average sowing area 86.36%

Main sales sites: GAD parish, Free Fair, February 27, October 9

Greatest strength of the association members: Responsibility and non-use of chemicals in production

Best-selling products: potatoes and carrots

They do not use any channel to promote the products

Environmental variables that cause the greatest impact: Lack of support from the state, which is concentrated at a higher level in training activities and climate impacts.

Major infrastructure problem for production development: lack of irrigation systems.

- Analysis of the selected target segment to define the direct marketing channel (survey of teachers to assess possible direct marketing channel)

Descriptive Analysis

The primary data show that most respondents are male (55.8%) and are in the 40-50 age range (30.8%). Most households have 4 or 5 members (69.3% in total). In terms of income, 38.5% of respondents report a per capita household income of over $2,000 per month, indicating a market segment with considerable purchasing power.

Purchasing habits reveal that most consumers buy agricultural products weekly and spend between $11 and $20 per purchase. The most important factors when purchasing are the origin of the product and the overall quality (considering all factors). The preferred places to buy are the market and the supermarket; at the moment they spend between 11 minutes and an hour to get to the place of purchase; they spend between 5 minutes and 30 minutes to make the purchase; only 34.6% claim to have extensive knowledge about the benefits of consuming agroecological products; more than half say they would like to buy the product at home and order their products through a mobile application.

Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis test was performed using the inferential statistics tool using parametric analysis through Pearson's correlation coefficient. To determine if there was an association between the place of purchase and the marketing mix variables. The correlation coefficient obtained ($r = 0.519$) suggests a moderate

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positive relationship, which can be useful to understand that the marketing mix influences the choice of the place of purchase by consumers.

Table 6. Results of the Correlation Coefficient Between Variables

Correlations		Place of purchase of the products	MkProm
Place of purchase of the products	Pearson correlation	1	,519 **
	Next (bilateral)		,000
	N	52	52
MkProm	Pearson correlation	,519 **	1
	Next (bilateral)	,000	
	N	52	52

**. The correlation is significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Note. Source: Surveys. Prepared by: Authors.

Regression Analysis Model

To understand the factors that determine the choice of place of purchase, a multiple regression model was built. In this model, the place of purchase was considered as the dependent variable, while the variables product, price, place and promotion (obtained from the average of the responses) acted as independent variables. The analyses were performed using SPSS version 29 software. The detailed results of the model are presented below.

Table 7. Regression Model Results

Model	**R**	**R squared**	**Adjusted R square**	**Standard error of the estimate**
1	,772 to	0.596	0.562	0.664
a. Predictors: (Constant), Price, Promotion, Place, Product				

Note. Source: Surveys. Prepared by: Authors.

Table 5 shows a summary of the regression model. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.772) indicates a strong linear relationship between the variables analyzed, while the coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.596) reveals that 59.6% of the variability in the place of purchase of the products can be explained by the independent variables: Price, Promotion, Place and Product.

Table 8. Regression Model Coefficients

Model		**Unstandardized coefficients**		**Standardized coefficients**	**t**	**Next.**
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
	(Constant)	-2,164	0.778		-2,783	0.008
	Product	0.062	0.034	0.172	1,838	0.072
	Square	0.330	0.043	0.721	7,708	0.000

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	Promotion	0.085	0.091	0.086	0.930	0.357
	Price	0.010	0.028	0.032	0.349	0.729
a. Dependent variable: Place of purchase of the products						

Note. Source: Surveys. Prepared by: Authors.

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that the variables included in the model are significant. The variable 'location' (β2 = 0.330) is the factor that most influences the choice of place of purchase, followed by 'product' (β1 = 0.330), 'promotion' (β3 = 0.085) and 'price' (β4 = 0.010). These results suggest that the geographical location of the points of sale is the most determining factor in the purchase decision.

- *Criteria of the Teachers Who Participated in the Project*

The survey carried out on the teachers who participated in the project (7) collected information on whether the project had contributed to: the development of skills on the part of students, the expansion of knowledge and the level of contribution; generating teaching resources to promote the perspective of teaching based on the practice of economic activities developed in rural contexts; level of integration of various disciplines in order to provoke synergies and thereby achieve a greater impact of the project.

Table 9. Results of Feedback Provided to Teachers Regarding the Impact of the Project

Level of achievement	Skills developed by students	Teaching resources generated from the project	To what extent the project contributed to increasing students' knowledge/skills	The integration of disciplines in the project was achieved
4.7	**100%** of the teachers surveyed considered that the project contributed to the development of skills in the exercise of the profession. **86%** considered that the project contributed to the development of teamwork skills. **86%** considered that the project contributed to the development of Human values.	Case Studies: 1 Workshops: 6 Exercises Practical 1 Extension of topics to the study program: 1 Improvements to a procedure 4 Methodologies 4 Teaching resources on digital platform 1	4.8	3.8

Note. Source: Surveys. Prepared by: Authors.

Open Opinions

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- Students learn the effectiveness of defining and understanding processes, which allows them to visualize responsibilities in the performance of a business.
- Execute longer-term projects with external funding.
- Link students from other majors.
- After executing the project, the students proposed business ideas in class that were connected to the reality of the context.
- The project allowed students to expand their critical diagnosis skills, and the teacher used real examples that positively influenced their level of motivation.
- The project's marketing proposal required the implementation of knowledge that went beyond the level of the teaching programs, thereby increasing student engagement and suggesting the possibility of expanding the program's topics.
- The information obtained through the project exercise allowed the preparation of two thesis works in article format entitled: "Analysis of agricultural production management in associations formed by the MAG, El Valle parish, Cuenca, Ecuador" and "Comparative analysis, business modality with a focus on popular and solidarity economy, rural productive associations."
- Greater cohesion between teachers and students
- Greater understanding from teachers to dedicate time to the activity
- There is more efficient budget management to develop activities on time
- Monitoring after the completion of projects must be at least 1 year, to identify correction problems and motivate their continuity.

- Criteria of the students who participated in the project (12) (Results of feedback given to the students regarding the impact caused by the project)

57.2% express a high level of satisfaction (values of 4 and 5). 28.6% express a medium level of satisfaction (3)

The skills to which the project contributed the most were: exercising the profession, putting knowledge into practice and responsibility.

The knowledge that was most applied in practice was: selection of distribution channels, product branding and project formulation.

57.1% stated that the project was useful in their current job performance. 28.6% stated that it was useful at an average level (3)

The topics that are most applicable in the current workplace are:

- Organization of production
- Costing
- Cost management, budgets, organization, research.

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- Product costing, product prices, distribution and distribution channels of the products offered.

Suggestions for improving other linkage projects:

- More working hours
- Greater support from the university
- Considering times for working together with associations, a project cannot be executed in one semester, a more in-depth follow-up is needed.
- Continue generating projects where students practice, which is a key factor in their future practice of the profession.
- More interaction with entrepreneurs, since the experience helped us a lot

Discussion.

Through this project, students not only acquired theoretical knowledge, but also developed practical skills and core values. By interacting with rural communities, many of them discovered complex social realities and consolidated their social commitment. In addition, some students demonstrated outstanding leadership skills, coordinating work teams and managing projects efficiently. This experience, aligned with the findings of Orellana et al. (2024), demonstrates that university engagement can be a catalyst for the personal and professional development of students, while contributing to the strengthening of communities.

The proposal for a direct marketing channel is consolidated as a key strategy to strengthen the relationship between producers and consumers. This initiative goes beyond traditional analyses (Saini & Savita, 2024), allowing for a more direct and transparent connection. In addition, it opens new possibilities to explore emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and blockchain, as suggested by Niu, et al. (2024), with the aim of guaranteeing traceability and trust in products.

Direct marketing channels can significantly optimize the management of sustainable value chains, as suggested by (Puspi y otros, 2024). By eliminating intermediaries and encouraging the participation of local actors, the implementation of sustainability standards is facilitated, and greater equity is promoted. The advancement of technologies such as those proposed by De Vos et al. (2020) for peer-to-peer markets can accelerate this process, by facilitating the direct connection between producers and consumers.

Structuring a direct marketing channel offers multiple benefits, especially in the context of fair trade. By reducing intermediaries, it is ensured that a greater proportion of the value generated reaches the producers, who can thus improve their living conditions. In addition, consumers have access to higher quality products and can know the origin of the food, which fosters a closer relationship with the (Lyon, 2007)producers .(Linton & Murphy, 2012)

Likewise, direct marketing channels can effectively communicate the fair-trade message by emphasizing the ethical aspects of purchasing decisions. This helps maintain the integrity of its principles by ensuring that consumers are aware of the impact of their purchases.(Witkowski, 2005) (Low & Davenport, 2005)By engaging directly with consumers, producers can share their stories and the benefits of fair trade, fostering a deeper connection and commitment to ethical consumption (Low & Davenport, 2005).

On the other hand, direct marketing channels contribute to reducing conflicts that arise in traditional value chains by eliminating the competing interests of multiple intermediaries. This alignment of interests facilitates the implementation of fair trade practices and strengthens the governance of producer organizations, as indicated by Xing, et al. (2011). Furthermore, by allowing for a more efficient distribution

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of social premiums, the capacity of producers to invest in their communities is improved. This supports community development projects and improves the socio-economic conditions of producers (Linton & Murphy, 2012). The direct relationship allows for better monitoring and reporting on how social premiums are used, ensuring that they are spent in accordance with fair trade principles (Linton & Murphy, 2012).

However, it is important to note that it is crucial to balance the benefits of increasing sales through mainstream channels with the need to maintain the core values of fair trade (Low & Davenport, 2005);(Bezençon & Blili, 2009)

The pandemic significantly accelerated the adoption of technology-based direct marketing channels, as evidenced by (Cruz, 2020). While their use was mainly concentrated in the distribution of mass consumption products, this experience opens new opportunities for the agri-food sector. The results of the study show that there is a growing interest in agroecological products and that consumers are willing to change their purchasing habits. This suggests that it is possible to develop more effective communication strategies to boost the sales of these products through direct channels.

These results also reflect the opportunities offered by the implementation of a direct marketing channel between producers and consumers in terms of generating trust regarding the origin of the products, reducing travel time and purchasing times for the products, raising the level of satisfaction, since they receive the product directly and know who to order from in the supply chain, and ease of making the purchase by being able to use an application to place their orders.

To stand out in a competitive market, production associations must emphasize the unique attributes of their products, such as their local origin and sustainable production practices. Strategic use of social media will allow them to effectively communicate the benefits of agroecological products and reach a wider audience. By creating a strong and differentiated brand identity, demand can be increased, and the profitability of producers can be improved.

The above implies that there are benefits for consumers and producers who, by eliminating intermediaries, will have a safer marketing channel and will be able to establish relationships of trust and transparency with them that will create synergies for the benefit of both parties.

Based on the results obtained from the market study and the interaction through focus groups between teachers, students and members of the productive associations and the parish GAD, the integrated marketing proposal was structured, whose main components are detailed in the following table.

Table 10. Determining Customer Profile

Consumer profile	
SEGMENT	VARIABLE
Geographical	Cuenca, UPS teachers, El Vecino community
Demographic	Age: between 36 and 50 years
	Gender: 55.8 male, 44.2 female
	They make the purchase: indistinctly husband/wife
Psychographic	Economic segment: medium-high Family members: 4 Per capita income: > $2000 Purchase frequency: Weekly Purchase costs: 10 to 20 and more than 20 ($) Motivation: origin Current point of purchase: Markets and supermarkets Would you like to purchase on request: 74.5%

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	Willingness to use APP (Which is combined with travel times and delay in making the purchase): 71.2%

Note: Source: UPS Business Administration Program Project Team Report. Program Repository.

The demographic and economic profile of potential consumers in El Valle Parish suggests that marketing strategies should focus on middle-aged men and women with relatively high household incomes. Marketing campaigns should highlight the quality and benefits of local products, especially those produced without chemicals, to attract this market segment, offer convenient purchasing options, and leverage social media and referrals as key communication channels.

Based on these results, it is understood that the market-related actions to promote the positioning of these products are:

Market Segmentation: Focus on marketing strategies on households with incomes above $2000 per month.

Product Promotion: Highlighting the benefits of local agricultural products, which is the main differentiating factor.

Distribution Channels: Implement direct marketing channels to eliminate intermediaries and reduce costs, which leads to the following action since the preferred places of purchase for these families are in markets and supermarkets.

Use of Technology: Develop a mobile application to facilitate the purchase of agricultural products, taking advantage of the interest shown by consumers.

The product concept was determined as follows: The products to be offered will be vegetables of average size, produced by the associations. They will be sold in bags, baskets and drawers. Each package will contain a kit of vegetables previously selected by the clients. The packaging will be of different colors and made of resistant material for your convenience, which guarantees its good condition. In addition, it will carry the logo of each association under an umbrella brand of the farmers' association.

The attributes contained in the product concept respond to the basic benefits that it offers, articulated by the needs and desires of the client: healthy food, made without chemicals and preservatives, healthy and nutritious, in a wide variety of products. Its competitive advantage over traditional products is that they are produced with natural ingredients and with care for the environment.

Figure 1. Umbrella Brand Proposal

Note: Source: UPS Business Administration Program Project Team Report. Program Repository.

The distribution proposal included the creation of a collection center managed by the El Valle parish GAD and representatives of the associations, for the reception of the products sent by each productive organization. In this center, the cleaning, selection and packaging operations in baskets would be carried out, to sell them according to the advance orders made by UPS teachers. In the future, the university is committed to developing a project, whose main deliverable would be an application that would streamline the sales process.

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Process studies were conducted that led to technical selection decisions, including job profiles, location and project budget, applying the most appropriate tools that fit the context.

The financial study at the feasibility level, considering the Net Present Value (NPV) and Internal Rate of Return (IRR) indicators, yielded a positive result: an Internal Rate of Return (IRR) of 15% and an NPV of $6,403, which makes the project viable.

Conclusions

University, as a space of knowledge and transformation, plays a fundamental role in the development of communities. Through their connection with the environment, higher education institutions can contribute to solving real problems and generate a positive impact on society. This paper presents the results of a co-creation project that seeks to improve the marketing of agricultural products in productive associations, demonstrating how collaboration between students, teachers and producers can generate shared value.

The summary of the results shows the scope of the work carried out as a result of the interaction of the University's teachers and students with the people who are part of the productive associations, in a recognition of their reality and the possible changes that can be made in the field of the exercise of management of the marketing process of the results of their agricultural products, contributing directly to generating greater income and a more effective and transparent relationship with a direct channel.

By participating in this project, students had the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom to a real situation. Using various methodologies, they were able to identify the needs and challenges of producers and designed an integrated marketing proposal. This experience not only strengthened their professional skills but also fostered their social commitment.

The exercise carried out demonstrates the effectiveness of organizing linking projects in which several disciplines from different careers are involved, so that the student can integrate knowledge and skills in the exercise of their training, fostering the collaborative spirit; this practice not only favors their expertise from a professional perspective, but also from a human perspective.

In this way, university-driven projects for co-creation with rural areas favor the process in three essential dimensions. First, they constitute a challenge for teachers, since the execution of the project becomes an iterative process that generates spaces for dialogue to enrich the systemic approach to problem solving, analyzing these from various points of view. Second, it is a challenge for students, since it forces them to put into practice the knowledge acquired in the classroom and to exercise their critical spirit in analyzing the diversity of a highly complex environment, where there are dilemmas regarding the use of local resources and the various barriers that producers face in achieving these goals. Third, it is of great significance for the members of the associations, since it challenges them to put their experience and knowledge to good use, taking advantage of the synergies that are generated between the various actors that dynamize the development of rural areas.

Finally, it is possible to state that the results of the analysis of the proposal based on the creation of a direct marketing channel for these productive associations yield positive results.

To ensure the quality and relevance of teacher training and its connection to practice in universities, it is essential to continue innovating and improving educational practices, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and strengthening relations between higher education, the productive sector and society in general.

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