

Interview: Joaquim Cunha, Executive Director, Health Cluster Portugal (HCP)

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Tags:

[medical tourism](#), [R&D](#), [Health Cluster Portugal \(HCP\)](#)

Joaquim Cunha, Executive Director of Health Cluster Portugal (HCP), emphasizes Portugal's need to discover niches in which the country can excel and compete globally, while rebranding its image around the world. He also highlights the drivers behind cluster's main initiatives: innovation, collaboration/coopetition and internationalization.

What is Portugal's number one competitive advantage that the rest of the world needs to know about?

Undoubtedly, this is human resources. Portugal's human resources are very well qualified and competitive, while being affordable.

Portugal's R&D environment is outstanding. However, in order to succeed, our R&D institutions may need to adjust their strategies slightly to be aligned with the needs of the market. This is a difficult adjustment process but they are doing it. I would also like to refer our government's initiatives in creating the best conditions to attract FDI. However, having a strategy to attract FDI and foreign companies only based in low taxes may not be enough. And so we are working on the environment; this means including not just R&D and industry, but also healthcare and clinicians in the equation, since the relation between clinicians and the R&D system is becoming more connected. In the past, there were no habits of cooperation between science and healthcare. Things are changing now as more resources are being shifted to applied research.

What are Portugal's efforts in health tourism?

There is now an ongoing national commitment towards health tourism that involves the major players in the sector in the buildup of a strategy with a stable path of action, clear targets and objectives, and aiming the development of an international reputation for Portugal as a medical tourism destination. HCP is deeply involved in these efforts to promote the country's appeal. The main problem in establishing a health tourism strategy is our deficit of reputation, which is seen across southern Europe, and that is the main constraint we need to overcome.

What factors have lead to that lack of reputation?

Southern Europe countries, and more specifically Portugal, can be very attractive for tourism and holidays mainly because its affordability, friendliness of people, climate and coastline, combined with investments in the golfing infrastructure in recent years.

However, in the context of science and innovation, and especially in what concerns healthcare, southern countries tend to fail in maintaining a good reputation and this is mostly our own fault. We do not sell our image properly. Furthermore, northern Europeans tend to perceive southern Europeans as less motivated and, therefore, less efficient. While this is not true, we have not been efficient in building up another image. Undoubtedly, as I mentioned before, European scientists do see Portugal as strong in health and science, but this may not be true of the average citizen. Therefore, we need to work on a collective strategy to turn this around. Some companies do have successful strategies, but the country, as a whole, has not been effective in this regard. HCP's ambition is to provide a positive contribution to build this strategy through initiatives that overcome Portugal's current image.

With these conditions, we need to work on our reputation, and I am sure we will succeed in this.

HCP was founded in 2008. Since then, what have been the company's main activities?

HCP is a collaborative platform that brings together more than 130 members across the Portuguese health value chain, including universities, R&D institutions, hospitals, and major private healthcare groups, along with national and multinational pharmaceutical, device and ICT companies. The main driver for its foundation was the belief in the scientific and technological progress witnessed in Portugal over the last twenty years. The scientific potential of Portugal has been recognized by the international scientific community, as well, which is a huge asset for the country. Additionally, Portugal's healthcare system, although developed slightly later than the healthcare systems of most European countries, is now globally very well ranked.

There are three key words that embody HCP's goals: innovation, collaboration/coopetition and internationalization. The ultimate design is to turn knowledge into value within the Portuguese health value chain, while focusing all of our efforts on the global market. Interestingly, Portugal's R&D system is somewhat internationalized as seen through research collaborations with the US and northern Europe established in recent years. However, it still lacks internal cooperation. In doing so, Portugal can learn how to be competitive and collaborative abroad. HCP can help create that network, which will develop our critical mass. By promoting cooperative projects, making connections between companies and R&D institutions, and removing bureaucratic barriers that still exist, we can achieve our focus.

Portugal is about to enter a new era. We are preparing a new period of development through a framework program called Portugal 2020, which is totally aligned with the European Commission's Horizon 2020. Additionally, and as our country is emerging from recession, the government is launching an agenda for reindustrialization. I strongly believe that an effective and well-defined strategy to increase industrial work must comprise the so-called "smart specialization". In other words, Portugal must decide in which selective areas the country could be globally competitive. This requires the evaluation of areas where Portugal has exceptional scientific and clinical competencies, and the alignment of these competencies with global needs. As a small country, Portugal cannot be competitive in all areas and lacks the resources to support a broadband scientific system; therefore, we must discover the particularly selective areas where we can work and excel.

What are these niches?

Given our privileged position in the national scientific and innovation context, we are now facilitating this process in which the entire industry is participating using a bottom-up approach. Evidence indicates that cancer and neuroscience are two pilot sub-clusters in which Portugal is specifically strong, but even these are too broad; within each, we must find specific niches to mobilize the best

of our competencies. We are now working on the metrics, refining our current indicators, as the same methodology will be used to select the next few niches. Our ambition is that by 2014, HCP will have outlined its priorities and that other stakeholders follow suit. This will make Portugal stronger and more likely to succeed in the future.

Related to this, we are working on a few other initiatives. For instance, we want to have more presence in platforms and networks that already exist in Europe, particularly for translational research. HCP, or its members, can be more involved in such platforms, which will be the way to build the future. Those who do not put effort into this sort of networking will ultimately fail. Essentially, we have to define priorities in consequence to select those that are relevant for us. HCP is acting as a facilitator for that by creating the right conditions that allow companies to determine the best collaboration and internationalization strategies, while balancing the interests of patients.

We have no doubts about our healthcare system's competencies, the quality of our tourism providers, or the interesting geostrategic position of Portugal in the world.

HCP emphasizes technology transfer as one of its priorities. Is the environment in Portugal strong enough to turn innovation into real commercial activity?

Portugal is no different from most countries. While technology transfer has historically been a bit of a struggle, today we perceive a business-oriented mindset from academia. The new generation of researchers is more global. An individual might study in Portugal, do his PhD in the UK, a postdoctoral in the US, and then go work somewhere else. This global thinking provides an open-minded approach. Ten or 20 years ago, the science system was such that an individual tended to grow within the boundaries of his or her country. The system can no longer do this, and we see the trend of more highly qualified academics moving to the business area. This is a tremendous paradigm shift.

How does HCP facilitate that way of thinking?

HCP is committed in raising awareness on this (and other relevant issues); in informing and training the key stakeholders of the health value chain (universities, research institutions, hospitals, industry, policy makers) on technology transfer and intellectual property protection and exploitation; in promoting the networking between academia and industry in order to contribute to change the paradigm of knowledge exploitation and valuing. HCP is also very committed in facilitating the access to high-quality services in the area of intellectual property. In fact one of our first initiatives in 2008 was to create agreements with patent attorney lawyers in the US and UK. The idea of these special arrangements was to demonstrate to our members that if you are working in science, intellectual property is crucial. If you want to be successful in this field, you have to work with the best in IP, which means about five or six patent lawyers in the world, unfortunately none of which are in Portugal.

Since about one and a half years ago, we are supporting the participation of our members on the European funding programs. Our objective is to bring together and promote network between national entities, top European universities and leading companies because we have to work with the best. We may choose the more expensive or tougher option, but it is the only way to be globally competitive.

This is a global game, and you have to work and cooperate with the best.

We have to come out of the comfort zone and compete globally, finding our niche and place.

Where do you expect HCP to be by Horizon 2020?

We will either succeed or fail. After 2020, I would be happy to see a knowledge-based economy in Portugal. In health, this strength in knowledge will be our vision for the future. We cannot return to a growth strategy based on low salaries. That option disappeared years ago. We have to select niches and define our assets and priorities as the world succeeding economies have done. Our cooperation with PALOPS, Portuguese-speaking African countries, and with the emerging economies of South America, North Africa and Middle East based on cultural links will provide us with a competitive advantage. Additionally, we still need to reinforce our presence in the most demanding markets such as Europe and the United States.

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