

Using university partnerships to secure market entry: Colombia

October 24th, 2014, some 20 companies gathered in Zurich for a workshop on “How to use university partnerships to secure access to Cleantech opportunities in Colombia”, presented by the ZHAW School of Management and Law, Cleantech Switzerland’s academic business partner.

Valuable inputs were additionally given by Ms. Beatriz Londoño, Ambassador to Colombia in Switzerland, Program Manager Christian Robin from SECO, Project Manager Marcel Gauch from EMPA and Director Óscar Medina from EAFIT University in Medellín.

Why Colombia?

The Colombian Cleantech market offers a great potential for Swiss companies. The country is the fourth largest economy in Latin America and represents a stable political and economic environment for businesses. Annual growth rates are predicted to continue around 3-5% in the next few years.

Colombia is also a key country for SECO, the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, with a focus on three domains. One of those is strengthening the country’s risk management in respect of climate change and developing sustainable cities in order to slow down climate change and to control the rapid urbanization. Of the total provided CHF 55 million, approximately CHF 25 million will be invested into the Cleantech sector. The workshop showed the participants benefits of the newly developed business model, which offers company market penetration by a university partnership. Moreover, an insight into the market potential in Colombia was given. We have spoken to Peter Qvist-Sørensen, Head of the Regional Competence Center Americas and Caribbean at ZHAW, to find out more about the potential contribution of such university partnerships.

Mr. Qvist-Sørensen, ZHAW has been Cleantech Switzerland’s academic partner since 2013. Could you outline the benefits of such a partnership model for Swiss Cleantech companies?

Peter Qvist-Sørensen: The fact that ZHAW is Cleantech Switzerland’s only academic partner means we can offer a uniquely new business model which cannot be found anywhere else yet. Through our cooperation with foreign partner universities, state institutions and private companies, a large local network can be ensured on-site. For a Swiss company, planning to expand their business into Colombia, this cooperation can be of significant help.

In your view, what type of company can benefit the most from this type of partnership model? Who should consider this type of collaboration?

Peter Qvist-Sørensen: The main focus segment of our business model is Swiss SMEs who have already gained some experiences in internationalization. In Colombia, we have identified market opportunities in “Energy Efficiency”, “Waste and Recycling”, “Waste Water Treatment”, “Site Remediation” and “Renewable Energy”. However, the infrastructure sector shows also potential for Swiss companies.

How does collaboration between a Swiss company and a foreign university look like, ideally? What are the must haves to get the most out of each other’s capabilities?

Peter Qvist-Sørensen: The degree of collaboration between the Swiss Cleantech Company and the foreign university depends on each individual project. Our services range from market research and market entry assessments to the support of entering the foreign market. The closer you get to the stadium of market entry, the closer the cooperation between the Swiss company and the project partners will be. However, Market entry clarification as well as the real market entry need time and have to be very well prepared. Taking the example of a market analysis: in a first step, the needs and requirements of the Swiss Cleantech company will be determined by the company and ZHAW. Afterwards, ZHAW coordinates the task with one of its partner universities. Therefore, the coordination of the contract is effected by the ZHAW, whereas the execution of the analysis will be conducted by students, staff / professors of the partner universities in Colombia.

Involving Master, Ph.D or MBA students in our partner universities give the Swiss companies the added benefit that these students can be future high value employees for the (Swiss) companies deciding to enter into the Colombian market.

Mr. Qvist-Sørensen, thank you for sharing those insights with us.