

OPINION ARTICLE

Catalonia needs a hub if it wants to fly high



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The importance of an airport for a metropolitan area such as Barcelona and for Catalonia as a whole cannot be underestimated. An airport is a city's or region's gateway to the world.

Firstly, it is crucial for attracting corporate headquarters to the region. In a study I conducted for the United States on a diverse sample of companies, I found that the availability of a major airport –a hub– led to a considerable rise in the region's capacity to draw businesses. When Boeing decided to leave Seattle it only considered locations with a topranked airport. It chose Chicago–over Denver and Dallas–whose airport is one of the best connected and most visited in the US. Secondly, an airport is important for consolidating a region's innovative operations, given that a skilled workforce should have a fast connection to other knowledge centres. Thirdly, a good travel and leisure destination needs a good airport.

Of the three strategies, a corporate city needs a world-class hub with intercontinental flights paramount. Next in order of importance comes the innovation city and, finally, the leisure city.

The prospect of Barcelona becoming a corporate, or innovation city hangs on a hub with sufficient overseas flights. Currently, Catalonia's population and economic figures are not reflected in its airport. One reason is there are many critical aspects that are lacking: investment, historic aspiration, vision and coordination on the part of local governments, a push from the public. Another reason is the anachronistic model–centralised, with no role

for private initiative– presented by airport manager Aena. European airports tend to be run by local entities and private corporations. One need only look at London's airports, managed by Ferrovial. It's a wonder why capable and efficient Spanish companies cannot manage Spanish airports.

At present, the contract for El Prat's Terminal Sud is on the table and Catalan society seems to have awoken. The delayed AVE train, problems with Renfe and the noticeable impact of Madrid's T-4 airport terminal have ultimately proved that the chronic public investment shortage in Catalonia pays a heavy toll.

What is needed is a public explanation of the specifications and criteria outlined in the contract for Terminal Sud. This process should be transparent; the professional and public sectors should have a say.

Of all the big alliances, Oneworld (with Iberia and British Airways), Sky Team (Air France-KLM and Air Europa) and Star Alliance (Spanair, Lufthansa and SAS), the latter seems to be the most appealing in terms of making Barcelona a distribution centre, although it is not clear whether it will provide intercontinental flights. But all bids should be evaluated. Barcelona's airport could be very competitive if it is allowed to compete; for that to happen, it must have decentralised management, decisive private investment and a more forward-looking government vision.