UNIVERSITIES’ ROLE IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SMART SPECIALISATION

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Universities commonly seen as relevant players in regional development and an 'overall economic effect' on regional development has been identified in many studies (OECD, 1997; Schubert/Kroll, 2015, Hermansson et al, 2016)

Yet, institutional specificities and economic framework conditions at both national and regional level matter (Koschatzky et al. 2011; Pinheiro/Benneworth, 2012)

In peripheral regions, particular hopes are placed in universities (Benneworth et al. 2009; Gál and Ptácek 2011)

Yet, indications that, in these, traditional high-tech approaches don’t work (Brown, 2016: 'mission impossible‘ in Scotland)

Still: evidence of a strong role for universities in both leading and lagging regions less in between – based on different approaches than spin-off & high-tech (Koschatzky et al. 2011; Kroll et al. 2015)

For their regions, mid-range universities matter, even if contributions are of relative, not absolute importance nationally (Wright et al., 2008; Huggins & Johnston, 2009)
Smart Specialisation

- RIS3, soberly and in a nutshell
  - focus strategic support on **economic domains** in which the region has a chance to become internationally competitive
  - conceive these specialisations in light of **international value chains/networks** and regions’ contribution to that
  - decision on this not centrally, but in collaborative dialogue of government and **local stakeholders who will have to realise economic transformation**

- „entrepreneurial process of discovery“
  - i.e. ideally the economy will drive it, moderated by local policy makers and involving public research where relevant
  - yet, in the periphery there is little chance of this working: weak players, fragmented innovation ecosystem, lack of liberty to engage (subsidiaries)
  - **so: can universities fill the gap?**
Empirical Study
(in collaboration with European Commission, DG Regio)
RIS3/EDP in fact dominantly focused on R&D and Triple-Helix Policy

Investment in research & technology
Industrial modernisation
Science-industry collaboration
Support for small- and medium sized firms
Training and qualification
Vision for long-term territorial development ambitions

n = 138
Accordingly, universities major player in the game

- research organisations (universities & publ. res.): 1.7
- intermediary organisations (e.g. clusters, TTOs): 2.7
- SME and mid-caps: 3.7
- large domestic firms: 4.2
- government agencies not owning the process: 4.6
- start-ups and future entrepreneurs: 4.8
- local subsidiaries of multinational firms: 5.6
- civil society (e.g. NGOs): 6.7
- financial organisations (development banks & VCs): 7.0

n = ~120
EITHER universities OR intermediaries Lead the process

universities

clusters, TTOs, intermediaries

n = ~120
In EDP, universities mostly engage within their core mandate

- promoters of collaborations beyond the area of reference
- entrepreneurial actors driving actual collaborations
- co-developer of strategies
- organisers of collaborative research and mediators of talents
- provider of knowledge as input into the discussion
- representatives of their own interests

n = 118
Leverage on Private Funding

Central (AT, DE, Benelux, FR)
South East (RO, BG, GR, CY, HR)
British Isles (UK, IE)
South (ES, PT, IT, MT)
North (DK, SE, FI)
East (EE, LT, LV, HU, PL, SI, CZ, SK)

n = 107
In Scandinavia and UK, Universities do lead somehow

Co-developer of strategies

Entrepreneurial actors driving actual collaborations

n = 118

n = 118
In weaker contexts, they mostly lobby for their own interests.
Conclusions

- Effectively, universities do play a dominant role in regional strategy design however we choose to assess this.
- Their role develops better – or at least stronger – if there are no other regional development organisations (or administrations) driving the process.
- Apparently, however, they cannot be very effectively used as “short-term fixes” for the absence of entrepreneurial actors => they cannot easily heal dysfunctional systems.
- There may be issues of capture, either driven by universities themselves or from higher echelons, deploying universities for a purpose.
- Having universities drive & design strategic regional development has to be in the culture – and be accepted by the university’s, cf. Scandinavia and UK, less so Central Europe.
- Roles do and will have to differ between leading research universities, mid-range universities and teaching colleges.

*Research – Teaching – Community Engagement/Regional Leadership*