

Universities Engaging with their Regions - from 3rd strand to core mission

Report of General Rapporteur

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The International Conference, *Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged*, reflected the themes of the OECD project "Supporting the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to Regional Development" and its final synthesis report, *Higher Education and Regions – Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged*.

The conference provided an overview of the drivers and barriers to regional engagement of HEIs. It highlighted good practice in promoting innovation with a regional focus, developing human capital within regions, and promoting the social, cultural and environmental development of regions. It discussed how higher education can be mobilized for regional engagement through governance and management action, and capacity building. It also discussed how this activity can be evaluated and assessed.

The conference underscored certain key points related to the practical challenges of extending the concept of regional engagement to a wider range of countries and regions, as well as to a wider spectrum of higher education institutions. These points extended the discussion beyond broad generalizations to reach at the core of the challenge to bring about fundamental changes in the ways that higher education institutions have traditionally functioned.

From knowledge transfer to knowledge exchange; from "third strand" to core mission

The common understanding of technology transfer as a linear model from science to user has been challenged by a new more complex model which involves interaction, collaboration, and an exchange of knowledge among and between scientists, knowledge brokers, and users. The challenge will be to move knowledge from a marginal "third task" or "third way" to a core activity of the university, requiring engagement across all dimensions of the university's mission to teach, research, and serve.

The early efforts at regional engagement continue to focus primarily on a linear model of technology transfer and as a "third way" somewhat separate from the university's core mission. Overcoming the barriers of institutional culture, reward and incentive systems to move toward the broader ideas of knowledge exchange and core mission present leadership challenges for most institutions.

OECD project provided a conceptual framework which broadens the contribution of HEIs from business innovation to skills and community and civil society. Critical factors include (a) knowledge transfer via workplace learning, graduate recruitment,

professional development and continuing education; (b) Students establishing the social relations on which knowledge exchange is built; (c) Student community action; (c) Cultural activity and campus development contributing to vibrant places that attract and retain creative people; and (d) the university's role in local civil society, joining up separate strands of national policy (learning and skills, research and innovation, culture and social inclusion).

Building capacity for regional engagement on both of the “pillars” while supporting mechanisms needed for bridge-building

Barriers to regional engagement of HEIs include (a) regional structures and governance, (b) national systems of higher education, science and technology policy, finance, and (c) higher education governance, leadership and management. This list of barriers underscores the need for capacity building in higher education institutions and their regions.

Effective partnerships require capacity development related to both “pillars” together with incentives to establish bridges between higher education institutions and regions. To be competitive, regions (especially rural regions) must craft a regional strategy, build robust regional governance, deliberately pursue innovation, and develop entrepreneurs.

The problem is that neither regions nor universities have the mechanisms in place to facilitate connections between innovation and regional competitiveness. On the university side, innovations are scattered across separate research centers, the economic benefits of innovations flow to unknown locations, and the competitive needs of regions are not well known. On the other side, the regions do not understand their competitive advantage nor is there a clear understanding of which innovations might help.

New bridging mechanisms are needed to provide incentives for universities to become engaged in helping regions diagnose competitive advantage and to pursue research informed by the needs of regions. Consequently, regions will be able to better understand their competitive advantage and gain access to relevant innovations. Policy initiatives are needed to provide incentives for this university/region collaboration.

Importance of national context and governance

Variables such as national policies and traditions in higher education regarding institutional autonomy and institutional management, and public policies encouraging or discouraging diversification of institutional funding sources have profound impacts on the ability of higher education institutions to become regionally engaged.

Countries with long traditions of relatively strong institutional management (boards of trustees and presidents or vice chancellors) have a greater capacity for developing and pursuing strategies for greater regional engagement than countries with higher education governance based on the historic Continental European model.

Even more important than explicit “higher education” policies are the policies and traditions of “general government” (e.g., ministries of finance, interior, government operations, or civil service) regarding regional/territorial policies. Even in a country such as the United States with a long tradition of regional engagement (e.g., the Land-Grant Universities), state policies often discourage attention to the needs of specific regions.

Countries that have historically faced political challenges of regionalism will resist decentralization of “national” institutions such as universities and discourage regional alliances that might reinforce fragmentation and undermine national cohesion.

Different missions; different forms of engagement

Among the 14 regions in the OECD project, the examples of regional engagement include a wide range of institutional missions from globally competitive research universities, provincial or regional universities, and non-university sector institutions such as community colleges. While most institutions carry out missions to promote innovation, develop human capital, and encourage social, cultural and environmental development, the relative emphasis on these areas will differ significantly from a globally competitive research university to a provincial university or non-university sector institution, as illustrated in the following figure.

Institution Mission	Dimensions of Regional Engagement		
	Promoting innovation	Developing human capital	Promoting social, cultural and environmental development
Major Research University	High	Low	Low
Regional/Provincial University	Medium	High to Medium	High to Medium
Non-University Sector/Community College	Low	High	High

Institutional capacity

A basic dimension of institutional “capacity” for regional engagement is the alignment of the institution’s leadership, management, and internal faculty reward systems (e.g. faculty promotion and tenure policies) with that mission.

The practical reality is that universities worldwide, including many non-university sector institutions, are caught up in the aspiration to be “world class,” a goal defined by metrics that ignore if not discourage “engagement.” Few scholarly networks that shape careers in the academic community respect and reward faculty scholarship associated with regional engagement. In fact, regional engagement can be a distinct negative for a young faculty member seeking tenure in a university aspiring to move up the mission ladder.

External incentives are key to bringing about the internal changes in institutional capacity for regional engagement. The conference highlighted a number of these mechanisms including national and regional “enablers” (research councils, regional agencies, both

governmental and non-governmental). Equally important is public and private incentive funding to support “bridging” functions.

Effective external mechanisms to leverage internal change are likely to differ significantly by institutional mission. Engaging a research university faculty and research staff in regional issues is a distinctly different challenge from engaging a regional or provincial university, or a community college, in this mission.

What if there is no regional partner for engagement?

The underlying framework for regional engagement presumes or requires a partnership between higher education institutions and regions (the two “pillars”). However, what if there is no viable capacity on the regional side to engage in a partnership?

There is a lack of regional capacity to define competitive advantage and to identify those innovations that might contribute to the region’s competitive future. In most of the regions which participated in the OECD project, there is a deliberate parallel effort, most often driven by governmental policy, to enhance regional competitiveness emphasizing the critical role that links with higher education. In many other regions, regional development, if it exists, is likely to be caught in strategies of the past that emphasize attracting and retaining low-skill, low-wage jobs.

It is exceptionally difficult for a university to pursue an “engagement” agenda if there is limited “pull” from the region to link innovation, human resource development, and other outcomes to the region’s future. The university can create the demand for change by helping the region diagnose its demographic and economic conditions and shape strategies for the future, but it may take a long time before the two “pillars” envisioned in the regional engagement framework achieve a balanced capacity on both sides of the equation.

What is the evidence of impact? What are the metrics?

Evidence and metrics are needed to document faculty scholarship for the purposes of appointment, promotion and tenure as well as institutional quality assurance. A basic challenge to gaining support for regional engagement is to develop metrics to measure scholarly activities that are significantly different and traditionally less valued than publications in scholarly journals or even evaluation of teaching.

The reality is that if “engagement” cannot be measured and documented as a scholarly activity, it will be undervalued in the academy and there will be few incentives to make this role a core element of an institution’s mission. For example, in the United States the late Ernest A. Lynton devoted much of his research in the 1990s to developing the metrics for evaluating the scholarship of engagement, yet the field and the level of acceptance within the tenure and promotion processes of US universities remain in their early stages.

Evidence is needed at various levels: (a) engagement activities; (b) capacity development; and (c) the ultimate impact on culture, quality of life and competitiveness of the regions. The evidence presented focused primarily on the first two levels of measurement.

In the early stages of development, the evidence of engagement activities may be limited to numbers of joint projects completed and other “process” outcomes that are intended to have long-term impacts.

Evidence of capacity development, includes a number of aspects such as (a) institutional capacity in terms of mission, leadership, management, policy (e.g. promotion and tenure policies), financing, and overall culture to support regional engagement; (b) regional capacity in terms of ability to diagnose regional strengths and weaknesses and competitive advantage, to convene and engage regional stakeholders, and to sustain a long-term effort to improve the region's economy and quality of life; (c) Regional brokering, bridging and other mechanisms to develop and sustain the partnership between higher education and the region; and (d) national policy framework capacity, including regulatory frameworks that support regional strategies, financing policies that provide incentives for inter-institutional collaboration, and partnerships between higher education and regional development.

In addition, the availability of basic information on a region's needs and capacity is a critical tool for reaching consensus on joint higher education/regional initiatives and assessing and diagnosing regional needs and higher education capacity.

The case of Kentucky

The higher education reforms in the U.S state of Kentucky enacted in 1997 established capacity (a nationally competitive research university, regionally connected comprehensive universities, and a new community college system) with the long-term goal of improving the education attainment and quality of life of the state's population.

A ten-year assessment of those reforms reveals significant progress in building capacity as well as progress in increasing outcomes (e.g., increased degree production and competitive research). The progress has been slow, however, toward the ultimate goals of increasing education attainment to a level at or above the national average, and transforming the state's economy. The state has made progress, but because other states and nations are improving more rapidly, Kentucky has been "running harder to stay in place."

Moving from projects and pilots to sustainable regional engagement

Many of the regional engagement initiatives are relatively new and highly dependent upon unique leadership and the availability of short-term governmental or private sector funding. National funding policies for higher education generally do not recognize regional engagement as a core institutional mission. The essential "bridging" mechanisms are often not funded on a sustainable basis.

Time and sustainable revenue sources are needed to bring about fundamental changes in institutional cultures, develop regional capacity for partnership, and sustain the essential third party "brokering" and facilitating mechanisms. In many countries, sustaining regional initiatives will not be possible without the development of supportive national policy frameworks and strategies.

The issue of leadership at the institutional and regional levels was a recurrent theme. Many of the regional initiatives exist because of exceptional institutional or regional leadership. As others attempt to replicate these projects or countries attempt to take examples of good practice "to scale," the issue remains about the leadership capacity to bring about necessary institutional and regional changes.

In some countries, this is a structural issue related to the leadership/management capability of institutions. In other cases, there is a need for leadership/professional

development and technical assistance to support institutions and regions as they implement needed changes.

Conclusion

The OECD conference participants shared a wealth of practical information on how to move from broad concepts to implementation in increasing regional engagement of higher education institutions.

OECD will continue to work with regions and HEIs to drive this agenda forward through further reviews. It will also facilitate the establishment of reliable indicators and aims to provide a forum for enhanced partnership-building process between governments, universities and regions.

As higher education engagement in regions requires capacity development at both the institutions *and* regions, the further work will be carried out in collaboration between OECD Education Directorate and the Directorate for Public Governance and Territorial Development. The regional developments in most countries depend fundamentally on supportive national policy and regulatory frameworks. The leadership of the Directorate for Public Governance and Territorial Development on regulatory reform is an essential complement to the work of the Education Directorate on education policy development.

The forthcoming IMHE 2008 General “Outcomes of HE: Quality, Relevance and Impact” provides an opportunity to emphasize that attention to “outcomes” should include, in addition to student learning, also impact through regional engagement (including metrics in the areas summarized above).