



The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Unlocking Regional Innovation Potential and Overcoming Structural Disparities

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Abstract

The contribution of higher education institutions to regional development has been acknowledged by many scholars as well as by political decision makers. The widely discussed economic contribution of universities to their location has led to an increased interest in establishing universities in peripheric locations aiming at job creation and economic growth. However, in many cases university locations benefit mostly from increased local demand for goods generated by incoming students as well as from universities in their role as employer but fail to take advantage of the created human capital due to lacking regional attractiveness for graduates. As a consequence, many university locations experience brain drain instead of becoming innovation hubs while very often experiencing financial reliance on redistributive instruments instead. The lack of jobs or other incentives for graduates at some university locations is very often triggered by the bounded vision of firms caused by the concentration of local markets, their weak absorption capacities of new ideas and technologies as well as the inability of commercialization of new products. In addition, the limited levels of entrepreneurship at these locations impede flexibility, risk-taking and innovation of local firms. As a consequence, some of them appear to be suffering from the lock-in effects caused by the path dependence, which is determined not only by e.g. traditional socio-economic structure, less speedy industrial evolution and inefficient production practice but also by the lack of other types of important social capital in these regions such as accessibility shortcomings of firms' R&D cooperation with the established universities, missing knowledge transfers and personal exchange between firms and higher education institutions. By bringing together the main EU priorities for regional development – the creation of regional innovation network across regions, the enhancing of competitiveness and the promotion of business establishments for social inclusion and poverty reduction, this special session will primarily concentrate on identifying factors that activate and use the endogenous innovation potential at (peripheral) university locations in order to enhance entrepreneurship, job creation, growth and the reduction of structural disparities between regions. Furthermore, the session aims at investigating how to exploit individual competitive advantages of university locations by considering resources, regional stakeholders and their vision of future development. The special session brings together discussions on regional competitiveness, innovation networks, knowledge transfers, and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Special attention will be paid to identifying strategies that overcome the structural limitations of university locations, facilitating a vision for sustainable and inclusive regional development. We invite theoretical, empirical, and policy-oriented contributions addressing the following subtopics:

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1. Brain Drain and Human Capital Retention
2. University-Industry Knowledge Transfers and R&D Cooperation
3. The Role of HEIs to Foster Entrepreneurship as a Driver of Regional Development
4. Path Dependence and Regional Lock-In Effects at HEI Locations
5. Social Capital and Network Creation for Regional Innovation
6. The Role of HEIs in Overcoming Structural Disparities
7. Accessibility and Infrastructure Challenges for HEI Regions
8. The Economic Impact of Universities Beyond Consumption Demand
9. Policy Instruments to Strengthen HEI-Regional Interactions