

Universities and Regional Engagement: State of Play

Studying the engagement of universities in their geographical surroundings is part of higher education (HE) research and policy-making. Policy-wise, the forms of regional engagement of universities have been gaining prominence since the 1960s when the importance of university activities for socio-economic development of territories the universities and located in (the regions and states) started to be widely recognised. Subsumed under the terms “Third Role” or “Third Mission”, the efforts at forging more intensive, effective and, last but not least, profitable partnerships between the university and regional actors such as businesses have got traction in the process of building knowledge societies and economies. With the post-communist countries in Europe joining the pack in the early 1990s, the references to successful university-industry partnerships worthy of emulation can be found in many declarations, white papers and other strategy or conceptual documents. But what do we actually know about *the real nature* of the state of university-industry cooperation in the times we live in?

Recent European surveys¹ show some interesting findings. First of all, they show that cooperation between universities and businesses (UBC) in Europe is beneficial mainly in terms of:

- improving the economic competitiveness of businesses;
- increasing the relevance and innovativeness of research and teaching at universities;
- improving the future job prospects of students and graduates.

These benefits can in the longer term:

- help to create job openings;
- stimulate economic growth;
- increase living standards;
- reduce hindrances to good living and help decrease social tensions.

UBC is thus universally seen as fundamental for the development of knowledge-intensive, cohesive societies. However, the surveys also show that *systematic, strategic* forms of such cooperation are still in the early stages of development. Over one third of academics is not involved in any such cooperation, whilst one third of European universities shows no or limited amount of UBC activity.

More concretely, the areas most intensively cooperated in:

- research and development incl. commercialization of results;
- mobility of students (for internships);
- consulting;
- curriculum co-delivery and co-design by professionals.

On the other hand, the greatest obstacles to successful UBC can be found in:

- limited financial resources (government, SMEs, regional authorities);
- bureaucracy;
- different motivations/values of universities and businesses;
- insufficient work time allocated by the university for UBC activities;
- lack of people with business knowledge within universities and differing time horizons.

On the other hand, there are several factors facilitating UBC. They range from utilisation of newly gained knowledge, building up specific agencies/positions dedicated to UBC (e.g. technology

¹ These are: a large-N, pan-European “Study on the cooperation between HEIs and public and private organisations in Europe (HIPPO)” and “The State of European university-business cooperation (UBC)”. The former (6,280 respondents) was undertaken in 2010-2011, the latter (17,410 respondents) in 2016-2017.

transfer/industry liaison office) and co-working infrastructures (scientific parks etc.) via study/lifelong-programmes and entrepreneurship courses to personal networks, strategies for collaboration and top-level management commitment to them (both universities and SMEs).

Regarding the Czech Republic, **Czech universities place an emphasis on cooperation with businesses**. The relevant data show that high-level strategic developments incl. top-level managerial commitment, a documented institutional mission for UBC and a communication approach are perceived as well developed. Still, the Czech UBC still leaves **something to be desired** specifically in

- supporting academics in their networking and *systematic* cooperation efforts including time considerations;
- development of incentive and performance measurement systems for those engaging in UBC;
- provision of additional, targeted financial resources;
- reduction of bureaucracy.

Speaking of university third mission, it would, however, be an oversimplification to reduce this mission just to cooperation with businesses including research activities in “hard science”. Activities such as social care for the elderly, commemoration and revival of local traditions and customs as well as holding of cultural events (film festivals, theatre performances), that are typically undertaken by the faculties of arts, social sciences or humanities, also have an indispensable role in the university third mission. Although not bringing profit in financial terms, such activities contribute positively to already mentioned social cohesion and betterment of regional populace.

Third mission activities that help reduce or remove social, economic and educational disparities among regional populace are of very special importance to the localities/regions that fall behind in terms of economic performance and quality of life in a wider sense. Helping the peripheral regions to overcome such disparities, in some cases associated with geographical or historical factors, is not easy. *We see that also in some regions of the Czech Republic*. The relevant research into university third mission in peripheral regions, undertaken in Czech-Norwegian cooperation, has helped to shed more light on this issues. The findings show that mere university existence in a socio-economically afflicted region is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for the regional improvement. This is because outmigration of university educated graduates that has a harmful impact on improving regional competitiveness, thus creating a kind of vicious circle. What is especially needed in such cases are four things:

- sustainable cooperation between the university, SMEs and regional administration, taking into account and successfully coping with their different policy agendas and politics (incl. time-horizons) to attain to real engagement;
- active inter-sectoral engagement of the state ministries – especially Ministries of Labour, Education, Regional Development, Industry and Transport to help by providing coordination, guidance and, importantly, by ensuring sustainable funding channels;
- targeted incentives for especially talented university graduates to keep them in the region (could be material such as affordable quality housing);
- realistic and flexible governing free of sectoral rivalries and bureaucracy.

To conclude, the area of university third mission is central to building up knowledge societies and quality of life in a wider sense. Successful dealing with the challenges that progressing to knowledge societies entails – including support of less developed regions/geographical units – remains an important task for politicians, academics and business people alike.