

Chapter 10

Higher Education and Smart Specialization in North–East Romania: Opportunities for Knowledge– Based Development

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ABSTRACT

The chapter analyzes the links between the higher education system and the design and implementation of smart specialization strategies in north-east Romania, with the aim of providing actionable steps for policymakers, higher education institutions (HEIs), and other stakeholders. This case study allows reflecting on the potential of smart specialization in a region recognized as a higher-education hub in Romania and characterized by a very proactive regional development agency (RDA), but in which universities display limited engagement with the territory and where public administration is highly centralized. The findings identify actions that HEIs and the RDA can undertake to enhance universities' roles within RIS3. These revolve around (1) improving collaborations among HEIs within the region; (2) accessing international collaboration networks for research, teaching, and innovation; and (3) finding avenues of interaction with local actors.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6152-1.ch010

INTRODUCTION

This chapter synthesises the findings of the project Higher Education and Smart Specialisation (HESS) in North East Romania, run by the European Commission – Joint Research Centre in close collaboration with the local RDA (Regional Development Agency). The project analyses the links between the higher education (HE) system and the design and implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), with the aim of providing actionable steps for policymakers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other relevant stakeholders.

Smart specialisation is a concept at the core of the current EU Cohesion policy 2014-2020. It revolves around regions supporting knowledge-based development by focussing on selected priority-areas identified jointly with local stakeholders in light of local strengths and assets (Foray, 2015).

The case of North East Romania provides interesting insights for several reasons. Firstly, it allows reflecting on the potential of Smart Specialisation in a region recognised as a national cultural and higher-education hub and characterised by a very proactive RDA, who has engaged deeply and voluntarily on the development of a local Smart Specialisation Strategy. Secondly, it allows looking at the limitations of S3 as a place-based policy in a context where universities¹ display limited engagement with the territory and where the public administration is highly centralised, affording RDAs limited power to define policy intervention.

Against this background, this study identifies, on the one hand, the challenges that S3 and the shift towards place-based innovation raise for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the region; on the other, it explores how HEIs' activities can best support S3 in a region with an early-stage regional innovation system and limited policy competences on regional development. In so doing, the chapter also provides some reflections on the trade-offs and conflicts inherent in such shift, as well as some policy implications for EU programmes on research and innovation.

The chapter is grounded in the literature on regional engagement of universities and it is methodologically based on participatory action research. It has a strong empirical focus, aiming at identifying concrete actions that HEIs and the RDA can undertake to improve universities engagement in (and impact on) RIS3. These revolve around (1) improving collaborations among HEIs within the region; (2) accessing international collaboration networks for research, teaching and innovation; (3) finding avenues of interaction with local actors.

The chapter is organised as follows: section 2 reviews the relevant literature to frame the study; section 3 describes the policy context and the key characteristics of North East Romania; section 4 reports the methodology of the study; section 5 draws the results and section 6 concludes.

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