



## Editorial

### **The Role of Higher Education in the Socio-Economic Development of Peripheral Regions**

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Interest towards the contribution of higher education institutions (HEIs) to the development of their surrounding regions is not a new phenomenon. This is illustrated by the establishment (in the late 1800s) of land-grant colleges in North America and technical and civic universities in Germany and England, respectively. What is new, however, is the criticality of knowledge structures to the competitiveness of localities, regions, and nations, a direct consequence of the rise of the post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, and, subsequently, the market value attributed to knowledge-intensive goods and services. As the quintessential knowledge institution of modernity, HEIs are at the forefront of such developments and have, in recent years, been identified as basic pillars to the competitiveness of nations and regions (see the paper by Kohoutek et al. in this special issue). Yet, despite this renewed attention on the topic, by both policy makers and academic communities alike, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role that HEIs located in relatively peripheral regions play in the socio-economic and cultural development of their local surroundings. Thus, this special issue addresses this knowledge gap, most importantly by comparing a set of case institutions and regions in two distinct national settings within the broader European context, namely Norway and the Czech Republic. Each individual paper provides insightful empirical and conceptual accounts of the various aspects associated with the regional role of HEIs ranging from national policy to key tensions facing HEIs to regional leadership to specific tasks and missions to cultural dimensions. Taken together, these contributions illuminate the complexities and challenges facing contemporary HEIs in their attempt to address the multiple and often conflicting demands from a variety of external stakeholders. If one key lesson is to be learned, it is that *context* — national, regional, and organizational — does matter, and thus, no ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ is suitable to all situations.

In the first paper, Kohoutek et al. provide an overview on the existing knowledge base and identify critical gaps, some of which are addressed in this special issue. Further, the authors advance and empirically test a new analytical framework centered on the endogenous characteristics of HEIs and the exogenous features of the regions surrounding them. Their analysis (of six case regions across the two countries) sheds light on the importance attributed to path dependencies and

pinpoints critical variations (key factors) associated with the role of HEIs in the developments of their regions.

Pinheiro et al. contextualize ongoing developments surrounding HEIs' third mission (TM) by comparing policy approaches in Norway and the Czech Republic. Their analysis shows that TM, in the form of the regional mission of HEIs, has thus rarely made it into national policy discourses, except incidentally. Thus, no evidence was found of a new policy area emerging, as hypothesized at the onset. Rather, the tension between the new policy orientation towards research excellence and the regional mission of HEIs has become more pronounced in recent years. Finally, the paper points to the importance of assessing TM developments in the light of wider policy dynamics and priorities, both at the national and the supranational (European) levels.

Benneworth et al.'s paper provides a critical take on whether the third mission of regional development can ever truly be a strategic objective for HEIs, given the increasing demands and external pressures they face. To understand this tension, the paper explores the ways in which national higher education policies frame the strategic latitude that HEIs enjoy to engage with regional partners in teaching and research activities. The paper reveals that the space for regional engagement is squeezed at every stage as institutions in Norway and the Czech Republic seek to implement national directives whilst remaining true to their regional roots. The authors contend that better understanding the regional mission requires comprehending the processes by which regional engagement is framed as unprestigious by wider policy fields.

Karlsen et al.'s contribution sheds light on the actual practices of HEIs in four case regions in the Czech Republic and in Norway. The paper combines theories on the roles of HEIs and regional leadership and their engagement in the development of their host regions. The analysis shows that HEIs' leadership roles are much more complex than the strategic narratives suggest, and that the case HEIs face a critical tension between their institutional and regional roles. What is more, it was found that HEIs play different roles in their host regions depending on the regional context, and that their local engagement occurs mainly through their primary mission of teaching.

Čábelková et al.'s contribution investigates the role played by HEIs in the development of local industrial clusters in two peripheral regions in Norway and the Czech Republic. Their analysis contrasts between a more and a less successful case scenario shedding light on key contextual factors, including the importance attributed to top-down versus bottom-up approaches. Whilst the role of the local HEI was a substantial factor impacting on the success or failure of technological clusters, the authors reiterate the importance attributed to other national and local factors, such as the role of regional authorities, central government mechanisms to support innovations, the differences in the policy approaches towards peripheral regions, and the culture of communication between the relevant actors.

The paper by Šmídová et al. focuses on a rather underexplored area, namely the contribution of lifelong learning (LLL) to the local economic development of peripheral regions. The authors present two cases of HEIs in two distinct peripheral regions of Norway (Agder) and the Czech Republic (Vysočina), discussing similarities and dissimilarities in the adoption of LLL at two main levels, national and regional. Amongst other aspects, it was found that, in Norway, the main interest in LLL is connected with the education of low-skilled and under-educated adults with HEIs being marginally involved, whereas in the Czech Republic the focus is directed towards retraining and requalification, with the main providers being commercial organizations rather than HEIs. The authors conclude that, despite some positive developments in recent years, few strategic aims and practices associated with LLL can be considered as actively promoting regional development.

The paper by Šima et al. explores the relationship between disciplinary and organizational cultures — key factors of academic identity — and regional engagement. The authors call into question the conjecture that only specific organizational settings and incentive mechanisms — the formal structural side of HEIs — lead to better interactions between HEIs and regions. The analysis builds on empirical data from selected Czech and Norwegian case HEIs and concludes by demonstrating that informal tacit dimensions (i.e. epistemological orientations and disciplinary values and postures) are also important in understanding the dynamics of university regional engagement.

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