

**Interactive Workshop on the *Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Systems***  
*EUA Annual Conference, Sorbonne University, Paris, 12 April 2019*  
*Workshop Moderator: Dr. Sybille Reichert*

The discussions in the interactive workshop on the *Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Systems* focused on external opportunities and constraints for universities, key success factors of regional innovation dynamics, and the obstacles to be overcome by universities and their partners. Five small groups exchanged experiences and assessments of their regional and institutional contexts.

**1. What are external opportunities and constraints in your regional innovation systems?**

Participants agreed that major societal shifts that can currently be observed all across Europe can be seen as opportunities for regional innovation since many of the challenges are shared by regional actors and innovative solutions require multiple perspectives. Often, crises, financial or structural, helped to create a sense of urgency and the need to go beyond familiar traditions and find new paths for economic and social development. The reasons for such crises vary widely. In some regions, this may have been the decline of a particular dominant industry, in others the disappearance of a large military presence.

The size of cities as well as of the businesses it hosts are important since the market size and density of potential relations attracts talents, investments and new businesses to the region. In spite of the advantages of critical mass and market size, it can be an advantage for a university to be the only university in the region, so that it occupies an undisputed central role as moderator of innovation processes.

The awareness of innovation needs among SMEs is an opportunity, or constraint if lacking, that has made systematic use of through events and even services which broker between business needs and university competences.

Of course, the density of the industrial presence of the region and its technological advancement make a big difference to regional potential and dynamics.

A clear place-based identity is a major opportunity for a region, especially if it helps to define regional needs and the industrial strategy that responds to such regional needs.

Funding schemes that aim at cooperation between universities and businesses or other external actors are essential opportunities, especially if they support the overarching coordinating functions or joint structures that cannot be as easily priced into project or institutional core funding.

Some new forms of cooperation or joint structures were seen as very helpful new opportunities. In particular, professors of practice which bring professional experience and real-life cases into the classroom and project work were regarded as a very beneficial format for interaction.

The international orientation of the university is a key opportunity for the region as its access to the frontiers of knowledge and technological development brings stimulus and

potentially competitive advantage to regionally based firms for their product development.

The influx of international students is also clearly an opportunity, especially in regions that have not been globally oriented for a longer period. However, for their presence to contribute to regional dynamics, such mobility has to be underpinned by a culture of free movement and cultural openness so as to be received as an opportunity for intercultural understanding and stimulus. Alternatively, their presence could even create frictions in some contexts.

## **2. What are key success factors of regional innovation dynamics?**

Discussants agree on the importance of building and unifying local alliances. For these to work as innovation platforms, trust and authentic meaningful relationships have to have grown.

In the everyday running of multi-actor inter-institutional cooperation, long-term collaboration frameworks that reduce transaction costs and timely negotiation of IP and other conflicts of interests, which could undermine trust and contaminate the cooperation atmosphere, are important success factors.

In general, the flexibility on the part of the different types of institutions, universities, companies and other non-university stakeholders are important success factors, since all cooperation partners have to go out of their comfort zones, value systems and professional habits to interact successfully. Universities have to be open and responsive to regional stakeholder needs in order to be able to prioritise their engagement accordingly.

A well-reflected shared strategy among different regional partners of the triple helix (of universities, businesses and public agencies) provides a common agenda, key concepts and narratives that help to direct actors in their long-term directions and relationship building, and creates a common ground for trust. Moreover, to fuel motivation, it is helpful to spread and celebrate coherent easy narrative about regional identity, strengths and vision.

To sustain innovation dynamics and future pipelines of ideas, competitive advantage and products, it is important to consider all technological readiness levels (TRLs) and avoid broken links between them. Otherwise bright strategies may still not lead to economic benefit or do so only in the short term (if the first TRLs are undernourished).

In everyday management of inter-institutional cooperation in the region, the professional competences and availability of the key coordinators in the support services and innovation platforms, the core networkers and brokers, constitute key success factors for keeping the dynamics alive.

Financial autonomy of universities is an important success factor. Only with sufficient autonomy they can decide to prioritise funds, sustain the structures and set incentives in accordance with their regional development and innovation aims. Moreover, co-creation and joint ownership, which is widely regarded as another key success factor for long-

term engagement of different partners, presupposes a certain level of financial autonomy on the part of the contributing partners.

Furthermore, it is important for the regional agencies to be proactive in attracting external funds, both from national and EU public funding sources and in the form of direct foreign investments by firms.

The university acts as an anchor institution in its production of talents, which is the key asset of the region. Hence its responsiveness to regional needs in terms of qualifications and competence profiles is a key success factor, as is the availability of talents in the needed fields in the region or the ability of the university to attract talents from other regions or countries.

### **3. What obstacles hinder innovation dynamics and how could they be overcome?**

Workshop participants confirmed the finding of the EUA study that, apart from financial and regulatory restrictions, the most important obstacle to universities' engagement in regional innovation lies in the narrow reward and incentive schemes for professional advancement and peer recognition in most academic communities (engineering and medicine being clear exceptions). Both at national and at institutional level, academic success should be defined more broadly, not just in the framework of career advancement criteria and research grant decisions, but also in cultural terms.

For the development of a more diverse culture of academic success to take root, it is important to broaden the concept of innovation and external cooperation to include social innovation and not-for-profit and public external partners just as prominently as private businesses, since innovation dynamics are needed in all parts of societal life.