Chapter 13
Regional Policy Implications of the Entrepreneurial University: Lessons From the ECIU

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ABSTRACT

The chapter addresses the question of how universities respond to regional policy, and in particular, the ways in which academics are motivated and encouraged by regional development policies. The chapter specifically asks whether entrepreneurial universities create frameworks which allow university actors to positively contribute to collective development activities (such as clusters or technology transfer networks) by building new kinds of regional institutions. The chapter uses examples from three universities that all seek to be actively regionally engaged. This chapter identifies the factors that both encourage but also discourage these individual actors and notes that ongoing connections between individual academics and regional partners are critical to ensuring this constructive collaboration. The chapter contends that regional innovation policy should devote more resources to building these critical links.

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INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly common to assert that policy-makers are demanding that universities make themselves more relevant to society with more useful knowledge. In response to this, some have argued for a new ideal type of university which places creating societal impact at the heart of its institutional mission (Alain & Redford, 2014; Benneworth, 2014). It is widely agreed that this new ideal type of university develops new internal governance approaches that allow them to encourage external engagement, whether in terms of the kinds of strategic projects they pursue, their support infrastructures for knowledge exchange or even how internal culture regards external engagement. Clark (1998) proposed the idea of the entrepreneurial university, as a university which managed to align these various elements in self-reinforcing ways, building engagement into the institutional DNA of the university. Although many other ideal types have been promoted for engaged universities, what all these models have in common is the notion that university engagement relies upon a set of institutional alignments, from the steering centre to the individual academics.

These are not exclusively academic notions - they have emerged in the literature in response to this policy enthusiasm amongst regional policy-makers to make universities more engaged. And in focusing on ‘universities’ as institutions, they fail to address one of the critical characteristics of the university, that universities are ‘loosely coupled communities’ (Weick, 1976; Reponen, 1999). Although universities have undoubtedly become more centralised in governance and management terms in recent years, they remain knowledge institutions. The knowledge processes of teaching and research vary widely between different disciplines and reflect different contexts, making it hard to create singular policy structures to steer them (Benneworth, Pinheiro, & Karlsen, 2017). This is also true for university engagement activities, what Laredo (2007) referred to as the ‘Third Mission’, where there has been a tendency for universities to focus on supporting and creating infrastructures for income generation activities such as licensing or contract research. This ignores the many other ways in which academics come into contact with societal partners, and through which their research may be useful, and has framed the idea of the entrepreneurial university as a top-down institution that steers its staff towards acts of commercial engagement.

We contend that the idea of the entrepreneurial university could be enhanced by decentring the notion of entrepreneurship away from commercial acts of technology transfer towards the ways in which university actors create knowledge that is useful for external partners. We propose to focus on how individual academics, undertaking a range of entrepreneurial activities within their knowledge processes, shape the wider institutional environment and support structures for entrepreneurship; conceptualising these individuals as “institutional entrepreneurs” (Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007). We consider the ways in which these university institutional entrepreneurs attempt to create new activities to respond to regional knowledge needs, addressing particular problems that external partners such as businesses face in accessing university knowledge. These individual acts of institutional entrepreneurship have the potential to grow and concatenate into a broader process of institutional change within universities, shaping the universities’ internal institutional pillars to increase this overall orientation towards creating useful knowledge for external actors. To do that, we ask the research question: How do entrepreneurial universities create (or do not) frameworks which enable purposive actions by academic actors to participate in regional development outcomes?

To answer this question, we develop a conceptual framework to explore these acts of institutional entrepreneurship where academics incorporate regional partners in their teaching, research and third mission activities. We explore this framework with case studies of three universities which have all re-