Chapter 14

Entrepreneurial Universities and Regional Innovation: Matching Smart Specialisation Strategies to Regional Needs?

Liliana Fonseca
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9041-0921
University of Aveiro, Portugal

Maria Salomaa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4415-0161
University of Lincoln, UK

ABSTRACT

Universities are expected to play a leading role in the smart specialisation strategy process. However, a gap between discourse and practice is marking the RIS3-related regional development programmes, which can be extended to the involvement of universities in the process. A mismatch can be speculated between the expectations towards universities’ roles in RIS3 implementation and actual practice, and its repercussions on a regional innovation ecosystem. This chapter addresses the extent to which the role played by universities in a region’s innovation and entrepreneurial practice aligns with the smart specialisation strategic outline. As an in-depth case-study of the University of Aveiro (Portugal), it draws on both quantitative and qualitative data, with an analysis of RIS3 approved projects in the Portuguese NUTS II Centro region, and interviews with key actors within the university and the regional administration. Through this, it weighs the contribution of entrepreneurial universities to the RIS3 goals, drawing lessons for public policy and discussing the future of RIS3.

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INTRODUCTION

Universities are expected to contribute to the development of their regions, not just through their teaching and research missions, but increasingly through a “third mission” of dynamic engagement with external, and mainly regional partners (Charles, Kitagawa, & Uyarra, 2014; Chatterton & Goddard, 2000). In turn, the promotion of interaction between the university and other regional institutional actors through diverse engagement mechanisms is believed to stimulate innovation processes (Uyarra, 2010). Adapting to the strain of these growing expectations, and in search of alternative funding sources, universities have assumed a more entrepreneurial approach in their regional engagement. This is exemplified by their involvement in the development of incubators and science parks, and by their increasing pursuit of contract research, consultancy services and partnerships (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008). The importance of these relationships has been progressively underlined and encouraged in the political discourse, more evidently within EU’s most recent Cohesion Policy, which in its incorporation of the smart specialisation concept has linked structural funds (SF) and ERDF particularly to research and innovation initiatives (Goddard, Kempton, & Vallance, 2013).

Universities are also considered crucial institutions in the regional development dynamics associated with smart specialisation, and particularly the research and innovation smart specialisation strategies (RIS3). The basic underlying argument is that development potential inherent to the knowledge generation, diffusion and dissemination capacity of academia is instrumental in a regional development policy context inspired by the smart specialisation concept (Begg, 2016). In other words, universities are expected to play a leading role in strategy implementation, relying on what is unique in a given region, namely the R&D and innovation domains in which that region can hope to excel (Foray, David, & Hall, 2009).

There is, however, evidence that a gap between discourse and practice is marking the RIS3-related regional development programmes (e.g. Iacobucci, 2012; Kroll, 2017), particularly evident in less-developed regions (LDRs), and which can be extended to the involvement of universities in the process. Universities themselves manage different forms of incorporation of the RIS3 processes, which are very much dependent on territorial context, historical legacy (Breznitz & Feldman, 2012) and overall entrepreneurial architecture (Salomaa, 2019). As can often be the case of universities in peripheral regions, even entrepreneurial ones, if there is a divergence between the universities’ activities and the needs of the surrounding local innovation ecosystem (Charles, 2016), it is likely entrepreneurial spillovers will remain minimal (Brown, 2016) and RIS3 processes fail to further them. Accordingly, one can speculate about a mismatch between the expectations towards the role of universities in RIS3 implementation and actual practice, and its repercussions on a regional innovation ecosystem.

This chapter reflects on an entrepreneurial university’s potential to contribute towards regional development through its involvement in the RIS3 process and resulting projects funded through SF. Empirically, it presents an in-depth case study of a university – the University of Aveiro – in a particular regional context – the less-developed Centro NUTS II region of Portugal –, aiming to address the relation between the regional government authority, the RIS3 process and the university in responding to regional needs and in fomenting the innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystem. The study strives to contribute to the debate on the implementation issues of regional policies driven by smart specialisation, focusing particularly on the role of academia.
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