ABSTRACT

The regional impact of entrepreneurial universities is a well-researched topic, but less attention is paid to the expectations of the regional policy institutes toward the university. This chapter investigates the regional policy expectations toward the university and what the influence of the university to these expectations is. This study is based on a technological university case in a peripheral region in Finland. The results of the study show that the existence of a single university leads easily to a university-dominant policy and thus to a regional policy lock-in. Consequently, the implementation of the regional policies can be in the hands of the university, leaving other regional stakeholders with a minor role. In order to fully utilize the potential of the university to address the specific regional challenges, the university should not only be seen as a locus of new spin-offs and start-ups, but rather as a producer of qualified graduates and future entrepreneurs.
BACKGROUND

Across the globe, universities have a significant economic impact on regions. Earlier research shows that a 10% increase in the number of universities in a region is expected to lead to about 0.4% higher GDP per capita in that region (Valero & Van Reenen, 2019). Universities’ influence on regional economic development is fostered by linear knowledge transfer mechanisms, human capital and innovations (Valero & Van Reenen, 2019), as well as a combination of teaching and research activities of universities with entrepreneurship support and programs among faculty and students (Bramwell & Wolfe, 2008; Lawton Smith & Bagchi-Sen, 2012). However, the benefits of technology transfer activities of universities not only depend on the features of universities, but also on regional networking activities (Lawton Smith & Bagchi-Sen, 2012) and other institutional and structural aspects in which universities are located (Uyarra, 2010).

This study takes a special focus on a technological university case in a peripheral region and analyzes the regional policy perspective to understand the regional expectations toward the university. Earlier literature has emphasized the role and impact of the university on the regions (Audretsch, Hülsbeck, & Lehmann, 2012; Bramwell & Wolfe, 2008; Guerrero, Urbano, & Fayolle, 2016) and brought up evidence of operations and mechanisms through which universities can benefit their immediate surroundings (Guerrero, Urbano, Fayolle, Klofsten, & Mian, 2016; Lawton Smith & Bagchi-Sen, 2012).

However, little attention has been paid to the other side of the continuum, i.e., the expectations that the region is setting for the university. In this perspective, earlier studies have stressed that the characteristics of the region have an effect on the expectations and impact of the university (Bergmann, Hundt & Stenberg, 2016; Schaeffer & Matt, 2016). In other words, the interaction between the region and the university within metropolitan areas is likely to be different from that of peripheral regions. In peripheral regions, the role of the university is likely to be drastically larger, since the university can become a hub organization in regional entrepreneurial ecosystems (Shaeffer & Matt, 2016) and peripheral regions tend to be more dependent on the income and innovation of universities (Huggins & Johnston, 2009).

In this chapter, we continue from the themes raised by Brown (2016). He proposed that entrepreneurial spillovers from universities may be exaggerated, especially in some peripheral regions. In that sense, the regional expectations may be unrealistic in terms of the universities’ direct impact on the regional economy, or not enough attention is paid to specificities of local entrepreneurial ecosystems when designing regional innovation policy instruments (Brown, Gregson, & Mason, 2016). On the other hand, the regional policies may exaggerate the regions’ absorptive capacity to assume the scientific and technological innovations in the local business processes. Brown (2016) also points out that in peripheral regions the university may be in a position where it can have a strong impact on the regional policy expectations toward the university. In such cases, universities’ dominant role through ‘institutional capture’ can result in a ‘policy lock-in’ in regions. While there may be several signs of institutional capture in the regional policy, it is also evident that the regional policy seeks to address specific development needs through the help of a technological university. This research aims to find out the expectations of the regional policy institutions toward the university in addressing the regional challenges, and what the influence of the university itself to the formation of these expectations is. This paper contributes by showing that the policy lock-in is preferable situation for most of the policy decision-makers in the region. Furthermore, it seems that the university focus guides the organizations to invest the regional and local resources to the same direction. In that sense, the policy lock-in may be an important way to reach economies of scale in the regional development. However, the similarity of the policy documents and unanimity of decision makers may be a source for collective blindness in the region.
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