

Universities are central to regional innovation across Europe

Universities are uniquely placed to support regional development across the linked domains of knowledge generation, innovation and education and European universities endorse the concept of Smart Specialisation as a strategic foundation for regional development. Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3) are proving most effective where there is strong co-operation between government, enterprise and universities working together at both strategic and practical levels to strengthen regional innovation.

There is increasing recognition by political actors at European, national and regional levels of the key role of higher education institutions in the definition, implementation and impact enhancement of Smart Specialisation strategies. However, more can be done to better leverage the benefits that research universities bring to regional development across Europe.

The European University Association (EUA) offers the following messages and recommendations for action¹:

- Effective Smart Specialisation is an ongoing and evolving process: political support is needed to promote strong co-operation among relevant stakeholders in regional innovation. Platforms for dialogue bringing together universities, public authorities at the national, regional or national level should be put in place, along with focused oversight groups that include meaningful university representation.
- There are already many good examples of effective Smart Specialisation in both established and more recent accession countries. Specific showcase initiatives should be set up with a view to sharing good practice in research and innovation activities for regional development across Europe.
- Decision-making processes in the area of Smart Specialisation and regional innovation should be evidence-based and transparent.
- It will be important for future policy development to monitor and evaluate current approaches. Regions should use an appropriate range of assessment approaches and multi-dimensional measures that are able to capture diverse effects in the local innovation ecosystem.
- Diverse funding mechanisms are available which can be combined to contribute to regional competitiveness and innovation. However, the synergetic use of funds can only be achieved with higher levels of strategic and practical alignment of different funding instruments. Further harmonisation and simplification of regulations would be highly beneficial.

¹ Outcomes of the EUA Workshop on “Universities Promoting Regional Innovation across Europe” and of the first meeting of the EUA Expert Group on Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3), held at the Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain) from 24 to 25 November 2015. The Workshop was jointly organised by EUA, Crue (Universidades Españolas, Spain) and CPU (Conférence des présidents d’université, France). The full report is available at <http://www.eua.be/activities-services/publications.aspx>.

- Many top universities are establishing more and more significant incentives and recognition mechanisms to support collaboration activities with external stakeholders. There is recognition that co-creation of knowledge through active engagement with external stakeholders should be valued on a par with traditional research activities. Teaching that is informed by external engagement ensures relevance and freshness, and gives added value.
- Universities provide a unique and essential link between research and education. Investing in even stronger links between education and research will support the development of human talent which is the fundamental driver of innovation. Physical infrastructures are necessary to build capacity for innovation in the short term, but are not sufficient. Investment in human talent is essential to spark off, take forward and catalyse long-term innovation.

Universities are committed to working with regional, national and European public authorities to boost regional development.

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