

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S S3 PLATFORM AND THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

“MOBILISING UNIVERSITIES FOR SMART SPECIALISATION”

How universities can be part of smart specialisation was the question discussed by participants at a major Commission conference¹ on 20 June 2014. The President of the [European University Association](#) (EUA) told over 300 stakeholders that it was the first time universities had been addressed jointly by the Director Generals for Research, Education and Regional Policy. The result was a commitment from all sides to support universities in having a central role in the development and implementation of smart specialisation strategies (S3), as expressed in the concluding panel by Vladimir Sucha, Director-General of the Commission's [Joint Research Centre](#).

The conference followed an [S3 Platform](#) thematic workshop organised with the EUA on the role of universities in smart specialisation which took place in February 2013 at the JRC's Institute for Prospective Technological Studies in Seville. EUA and S3 Platform members produced a joint report with a [list of recommendations](#) that was distributed and endorsed by the conference.

Universities as strategic institutions

Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn called for universities *“to act as strategic institutions pulling together all their know-how to create bigger economic and social impacts”*. Some *“trailblazers”* have shown that this is possible, but many more universities have the potential to play this strategic role building upon their ‘core’ activities of teaching and research. As the Commissioner stated, *“Smart specialisation calls on universities to do more”*.

The key to becoming strategic institutions is to take a holistic view of the university's activities, rather than treating them in isolation, which was underlined in particular by Robert Jan Smits, Director General for Research and Innovation. By integrating research, teaching and external engagement, the knowledge created can have a much greater impact. In support of this approach, Jan Truszczyński, Director General for Education and Culture, said that collaboration in the design of higher education courses can drive regional innovation. University management as well as academic staff need to become pro-active including more multidisciplinary thinking and approaches. However, EU and national incentive structures also need to change because they are overly biased towards research output and can hinder universities in playing this strategic role. Moreover in many countries universities do not have the autonomy to act strategically, with management restricted by centralised regulation.

Regional-university partnerships driving smart specialisation

Close partnerships are the key to successful implementation of S3 as illustrated by the joint presentations of senior university and government leaders from four regions. They are based on a common regional vision through mutual trust and understanding. The conference presentations and other [case studies](#) prepared by the S3 Platform show that smart specialisations are produced by the specific profile and opportunities of regions, which include the unique contribution of universities. The role of universities in regional partnerships may include the following activities - among others - as illustrated in the conference as well as an [S3 Platform Policy Brief](#):

- Analysis of regional dynamics to identify priorities for investment
- Engagement with civil society to assess the demand for innovations
- Coordinating an ‘entrepreneurial process of discovery’
- Participation in governance and decision making structures
- Alignment of teaching curricula or research portfolio with the region's S3 priorities
- Industry student placements, technology transfer to hi-tech start-ups, testing of prototypes
- Nurturing creativity and social innovation

¹ The conference, entitled ‘Mobilising Universities for Smart Specialisation’, was held in Brussels and organised by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (S3 Platform) and DG Regional Policy together with the European University Association (EUA).

- Attracting and retaining talent, internationalisation and regional marketing

In short, universities through the above activities can increase the capital and capabilities of regions to become competitive, creative and sustainable. For their part regional authorities should not view universities simply as a resource but as equal partners, making an effort to understand the constraints and obstacles that they face. Moreover, just as all regions are different and require place sensitive policies, there are many types of university and their potential contribution to smart specialisation must be assessed on an individual basis.

We should not underestimate the task of creating successful partnerships, which need much more than EU funds. They are built upon basic but vital principles, as summarised by Vladimir Sucha, Director-General, Joint Research Centre, in his conclusions, including importantly:

- **Trust** which is the basis for cooperation;
- **Time** because partnerships cannot be formed overnight; and
- **Talent** since human capital is the cornerstone of regional innovation

New approach to EU and national funding

EU and national funding programmes should help create partnerships by becoming more flexible and simplified, allowing them to work in synergy to create critical mass. Walter Deffaa, Director General for Regional Policy, announced the long awaited publication of an [EU funding synergies guide](#). This will help Managing Authorities and beneficiaries to combine funds; a potentially significant policy innovation in the new programming period that opens up new opportunities. For example, the European Structural and Investment Funds could finance projects that pass the quality threshold of Horizon 2020 but are not in first place, as agreed between the Director Generals for Research and Innovation and Regional Policy. However, many potential problems remain in combining funds and continued advisory support to the European Commission will be required from universities and other stakeholders.

Policies and governments need to be more integrated if universities are to successfully integrate their activities in pursuit of smart specialisation. Higher education, research and economic development policies among many others must assess their impact on this desired role for universities and work together to create a supportive regulatory environment. This includes breaking down geographical barriers in policy making which currently lead some universities to prioritise national or international targets over regional objectives.

European cooperation

Smart specialisation builds on the strengths of a region but requires an outward looking approach, analysing how innovations can meet local, national and global demands. Universities can link regions to the outside world. The EU offers many opportunities for cooperation which had also been highlighted at a recent event on smart specialisation partnerships held by the Committee of the Regions. Universities should be more involved in European cooperation, not only through academic exchanges, such as the Marie Curie programme, but also transnational regional development initiatives such as INTEREG Europe. They should use these opportunities to learn from other successful partnerships for smart specialisation, and then work to build networks between universities in one region with firms and civil society in another.

From words to actions

There is a risk that the good ideas and intentions from the conference will not be translated into actions. As the Commissioner said, "We need to start the learning and building process now". The conference was very timely because it was held as hundreds of S3 and the Operational Programmes of the European Structural and Investment Funds are being negotiated between the European Commission and Member States. Partnerships between regions and their local universities, together with other stakeholders, need to be built into the new policy framework. The S3 Platform will continue to give this advice to national and regional authorities. For its part, the European University Association will promote good practices and sharing of experience amongst its wide university membership and particularly through engagement with its National Rectors Conference members raise awareness of the opportunities for universities to contribute towards the implementation of smart specialisation strategies in their regions.

To conclude, universities are a vital part of our economies and societies but in many cases they are simply located in a region and are not fully part of it. The new EU policy instrument of smart specialisation can be a vehicle for change enabling universities' education, research and innovation activities to have greater impact in their region's economic and social development.