Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — European Strategy for Universities

(2022/C 301/09)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)

1.   endorses the EU's engagement in and support for promoting excellence in education; in connection with this, highlights the key role played by the European strategy for universities, part of the higher education package which will deliver the European Education Area by 2025;

2.   stresses that a civilisation that strengthens European democratic values can only endure if it invests in human capital. An excellent education system with strong universities at its core is the cornerstone of lifelong learning;

3.   flags up both the importance of raising the standard of European university education and research and boosting the availability of local and regional support for the objectives identified in this strategy;

4.   acknowledges that universities play a crucial role in society and contribute to the sustainable, resilient and inclusive development, founded on democratic values, of Member States, local communities and regions alike. Universities are even more important during times of crisis, when they can help overcome the crisis and contribute to post-crisis recovery ([1]);

5.   underlines the crucial role of universities in addressing global challenges. The EU has long stressed the need to strengthen the close link between research, teaching, learning and innovation in universities, while better financing universities to consolidate the required level of quality. The role of universities in generating new research knowledge and promoting new innovation is vital in addressing the pressing societal challenges identified in European Union missions;

6.   points out that universities must be seen as a fundamental component of European culture and that the diversity of the university sector, which brings together teaching bodies, research institutes and vocational training institutions, etc., is a strategic advantage;

([1])   Howard, G., Weinstein, R., Yang, Y. (2021), Do universities improve local economic resilience?, IZA DP No. 14422, online at https://docs.iza.org/dp14422.pdf.

7.   notes that at local and regional level, the presence of universities generally gives a significant competitive advantage to the communities hosting them ([2]). For instance, investors are interested in and attracted to communities with a highly qualified labour force and opportunities for both cooperation with academic circles and the transfer of technology and know-how from universities to the business sector. The presence of a university also generates significant local income ([3]), as students and staff, both teaching and otherwise, spend considerable amounts of money at local shops and businesses (there is a significant multiplier effect as regards university-generated consumption). Above and beyond these advantages which are economically quantifiable, university towns tend to be cosmopolitan due to the presence of students and teaching staff from various countries and the promotion of values such as tolerance and cultural, religious and ethnic diversity ([4]);

8.   welcomes the multilevel approach taken by the European strategy for universities, which seeks to align policy objectives with EU, national, regional and local investment; would however point out that a stronger local and regional dimension in the design and implementation of the ideal model for universities in future would be beneficial;

9.   notes that strategic partnerships need to be built between local and regional authorities (LRAs) and universities, including as regards framing local and regional development strategies. Universities play a crucial role in the development of place-based ecosystems, for which regional smart specialisation strategies have provided a good basis;

10.   acknowledges that LRAs can support universities by creating and improving local and regional conditions (such as access to all types of infrastructure and services, quality of life, and an inclusive environment) which can make universities more globally competitive;

11.   notes that within the EU, there is already an excellent tradition of universities from various Member States cooperating through the ERASMUS+ programme, and this must be continually developed and strengthened;

12.   notes that the role played by universities in society is changing, and that they are taking on new functions alongside their traditional ones (which focused largely on teaching and research) ([5]). Universities are redefining themselves as major players in fields such as technological and social innovation, entrepreneurship and transferring technology to the economy. They are no longer standing apart from communities and society: they are engaged in the community, becoming stakeholders which are able to help identify answers to some of the problems facing society ([6]);

13.   points out that universities play a pivotal role in promoting objectives which are vital for the EU, such as the green and digital transitions. Universities have a solid pool of expertise in these fields, but at the same time they can enact and spread relevant good practices within and towards their host communities;

14.   notes that universities can provide solutions and tools for tackling some of the major problems facing the EU, such as brain drain ([7]) and rural exodus. The detrimental effects associated with brain drain and the key role of brain circulation are closely linked to cooperation and partnerships between universities, LRAs, the business environment and civil society. Stresses that efforts should be significantly stepped up to narrow the knowledge and innovation divide within Europe and close the innovation gap between Europe and the US;

([2])   Fonseca, L., Nieth, L. (2021), The role of universities in regional development strategies: A comparison across actors and policy stages, *European Urban and Regional Studies,* 22(3); Goddard, J, Puukka, J. (2008), The engagement of higher education institutions in regional development: an overview of the opportunities and challenges, *Higher Education Management and Policy,* 20(2): 11–41.
([3])   Chirca, A., Lazar, D.T. (2021), Cluj-Napoca without students: an estimation of the gap in the city's economy, *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences,* 66E: 44-59.
([4])   Goddard, J., Vallance, P. (2014), The university and the city, *Higher Education,* 68(2): 319–321.
([5])   Liddle J., Addidle G.D. (2022), The Changing Role of Universities in Society: Key Influences in The Role of Universities and HEIs in the Vulnerability Agenda. Rethinking University-Community Policy Connections. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89086-5_3.
([6])   Myklebust, J.P., Smidt, H. (2021), What is the role of universities in global upskilling?, *University World News,* online at https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210129110449887.
([7])   Hammerbauer, M., Pavletić, P., Vespa, M. (2021) Brain drain in higher education in European context, Final report- ESC41, online at https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Brain-Drain-final-report-ESC41-Google-Docs.pdf.

15. would suggest that it is important to identify and ensure the permanent, large-scale take-up of good practices at local and regional level as regards LRA-university cooperation. Forging transnational networks focused on spreading good practices, with broad participation by higher education stakeholders, is therefore a priority for Member State LRAs. This network could be incorporated into the European strategy for universities;

16. points out that universities are encountering significant problems and obstacles as they change and take on new responsibilities. Financial challenges are in all likelihood being encountered in every Member State. Therefore proposes that an investment strategy be devised which takes account of regional, national and European financing and calls for cooperation between the public, private and non-profit sectors to be taken into consideration with a view to building the capacities of European universities. Also notes that there are challenges relating to issues such as the degree of university autonomy and/or political intervention in major decisions on university financing, recruiting and selecting teaching staff, freedom of expression and choice of subjects and direction of research, and opportunities for free communication without any censorship of the outcome of research;

17. emphasises that Member State LRAs need to engage in consolidating a broad range of local and regional ecosystems and to promote cooperation and trust between different community sectors. Points out that at local and regional level, universities must be seen as part of wider ecosystems incorporating a wealth of stakeholders [8]. Cooperation between universities and relevant community stakeholders is key to enabling universities to offer new skills focusing on creative problem solving, technology use and efficient communication in the community;

18. notes that deepening transnational cooperation between universities and developing the European dimension of higher education are fundamental priorities of the European strategy for universities. Accordingly, considers that LRAs can act in support of transnational cooperation between universities wherever possible (the Erasmus+ European Universities Initiative is a key mechanism for university alliances aiming to achieve excellence). LRAs can adopt good practices set out in the strategy, such as the European Student Card. As well as serving academic purposes, the card could be used by transnational students, researchers and teaching staff when communicating with local administrations (for instance, for residence permits, public transport passes and access to museums);

19. points out that within the European strategy for universities, Member State LRAs must act as facilitators able to bring various community stakeholders together around initiatives and projects which are relevant to universities. Also notes that in many Member States, LRAs do not have direct responsibility for university financing. Nonetheless, LRAs can promote financing from a range of sources for universities and their various initiatives, generating synergies at local and regional level;

20. acknowledge the need for universities to reshape study programmes to respond as effectively as possible to fast advances in technology, to the green and digital transitions and to structural changes to European labour markets requiring new skills [9]. Would also point out that LRAs can play an important role in the process of reshaping study programmes and developing such new skills. Underlines at the same time that, while universities greatly contribute to enhancing employability and economic competitiveness within a globalised economy, the autonomous nature of tertiary education must be preserved;

21. flags up LRAs' role in creating and consolidating local and regional ecosystems promoting active cooperation and networking between infranational public authorities, businesses and industry, and universities. LRAs must act as initiators and facilitators in these ecosystems, identifying opportunities for cooperation, allocating resources (financial and otherwise) for networking and cooperation activities, and supporting the establishment of hubs such as education clusters at local

[8] Reichert, S. (2019), The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems, EUA Study, online at https://www.eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20innovation%20ecosystem%20report_final_digital.pdf.
[9] Jackson, N. J. (2011) Learning for a complex world: A lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development. Bloomington, IN: Author House; Williams, S., Dodd, L. J., Steele, C., & Randall, R. (2015), A systematic review of current understandings of employability, *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 29, No. 8, pp 877-901.

and/or regional level. Education clusters are excellent tools, designed to provide space for dialogue and cooperation between the main formal education stakeholders with a view to supporting young people as they prepare to enter the labour market. Through education clusters, LRAs can work with other ecosystem stakeholders to implement mechanisms such as innovation funds and mini grants for start-ups in certain key fields;

22.   considers that students now need to learn using methods which are in some cases radically different from those used in the past. They need opportunities to apply theoretical concepts to real-life situations, to use them to solve problems in their local and regional community. Together with universities and other local and regional ecosystem stakeholders, LRAs can foster these learning experiences, for instance by supporting living laboratories, forwarding policy issues for analysis, developing joint strategic projects for the community and facilitating cooperation with other local and regional stakeholders;

23.   considers that LRAs, in partnership with universities and other local or regional ecosystem stakeholders, can do a lot to support young entrepreneurs, including students and graduates, by helping them gain access to key resources needed for innovation. Many young people and students need resources such as laboratories, new technologies and new connections to develop business ideas and/or products and services. Together with other bodies which have these resources, LRAs can enable young entrepreneurs to access the resources they need to innovate (office space, training, advice, etc.);

24.   points out that LRAs can develop smart relationships with universities to develop the local and regional community. Universities need to produce knowledge and services for their host communities. LRAs can facilitate this relationship by establishing programmes through which universities are involved on a permanent basis in finding answers to local and regional problems, providing advice and know-how and spreading good practices when they arise so that more communities and authorities can act on them as well. Public recognition and incentives for universities to get involved play a major role in proving the value of various academic and/or professional paths, encouraging universities to attach greater value to teacher, researcher and student engagement in the community;

25.   emphasises that local and regional communities of all sizes can benefit equally from hosting a university. LRAs can make a significant contribution to developing universities and making them more attractive by laying the groundwork for high quality of life and encouraging attitudes and behaviour geared towards tolerance, inclusion, multiculturalism and public safety. Universities can locate some of their activities and structures in smaller towns, as well as in cities. LRAs can help establish university structures and/or research institutes in smaller towns by providing services such as affordable housing for students, allowing certain public buildings to be used for teaching, research and communication activities, and producing reliable quality of life indicators, capitalising on what smaller towns can offer in contrast with cities;

26.   considers that the local and regional-level digital transition can be accelerated by cooperating with universities and optimising use of relevant university resources. Together with LRAs, universities can provide advice or devise digital transition strategies geared to local or regional circumstances. In partnership with LRAs, universities can lay on short-term digital skills courses or training sessions for the general public, with a particular focus on groups at risk of exclusion (such as older and less educated people);

27.   LRAs can support the development of hybrid campuses which will act as a driver of the digital transition in both communities and universities, ensuring equal opportunities, promoting social integration, improving the competitiveness of young people on the labour market, strengthening of youth work, non-discrimination and intercultural understanding. Hybrid campuses should pay attention to communication in ensuring equality of opportunity and to the penetration of information, to ensure that it is genuinely accessible to all eligible young people, particularly those living in peripheral regions. LRAs can provide support, financial and otherwise, for measures to open up these hybrid campuses to various community stakeholders, including at-risk and disadvantaged groups, vulnerable and at-risk young people such as NEETs, young job seekers, women, refugees, persons with disabilities and retired people. The EU and Member State policies need to give priority to the inclusion of at-risk young people;

28.   considers that universities have a major pool of knowledge and know-how regarding the green transition. Universities can also be a model for good practices — along with education and information — for the green transition. In partnership with LRAs, universities can develop green campuses and get involved in urban renewal, providing the community with green campuses and exemplary energy efficient buildings which comply with eco-design principles;

29.   welcomes the clear roadmap, annual indicators and benchmarks for the delivery of the strategy, which the CoR has already called for, which will be used to evaluate the progress made towards meeting the objectives of the European Education Area. Nonetheless, would point out that the local and regional dimension must be factored into the European Higher Education Sector Observatory, as this would ensure that the planned scoreboard is also geared to the local and regional level;

30.   notes that LRAs can help European universities to go international and to promote the European Union on the global stage. This assistance should include supporting European universities in joining ambitious transnational alliances developing systemic, long-term cooperation on excellent education, research and innovation and providing students, teachers, researchers and staff with permanent opportunities for academic mobility.

Brussels, 28 April 2022.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS