

The Geography of  
Higher Education



# Lessons learnt from the Academy for Smart Specialisation in Karlstad

Can Higher Education Institutions Support  
Transformational Innovation in their own Ecosystems?

27 January 2021  
webinar proceedings



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27 January 2021 11:00 – 15:00 CET

### Webinar proceedings

#### Introduction

The webinar “Can Higher Education Institutions support transformational innovation in their own ecosystems?” examined how to harness the power of higher education institutions (HEIs) to support innovation, sustainability and inclusiveness, in all regional ecosystems. The discussion challenged preconceptions and promoted the idea that an enhanced local mission of universities and colleges can go hand in hand with excellence in their respective research fields. HEIs “can bring innovation home”, in the words of Lamia Kamal Chaoui, director of the Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities.

The meeting capitalised on evidence from the OECD report “Evaluation of the Academy of Smart Specialisation,” which is run conjunctly by the University of Karlstad and Region Värmland, in Sweden.

The Academy for Smart Specialisation in Karlstad University in Sweden presents important progress in this area. The Academy stems from the long lasting the University of Karlstad, a regional champion for innovation, and the Regional Government of Värmland in Sweden. The Academy provides intelligence and research capabilities and generates new platforms and incentives for the local academic community to focus research efforts on issues that are relevant for the region. It has created an interdisciplinary platform that provides tailored research activities to regional stakeholders, including specific training programmes. The “Gender Academy” within the Academy serves as a notable example: through research and training, its work focuses on mainstreaming the discussion on gender issues in all productive specialisations featuring in Värmland’s economy, including forestry and other resource-based sectors.

The main takeaways from the online seminar are the following:

1. Policy synergies must emerge to connect higher education institutions to transformational innovation. Innovation policy should be inclusive and involve as many actors as possible to generate a propensity to cooperation and enhance competition.
2. HEIs should be “place responsive.” While preserving their capacity to contribute to international research networks, HEIs should be porous to their ecosystem and networks, including through their research and teaching activities (talent). Internationally relevant HEIs can help regional ecosystems connect to global value chains. To achieve these changes, new incentives, skills, and career opportunities should be in place.
3. The characteristics of the ecosystem matter. To catalyse inclusive innovation, HEIs need a sufficient level of social capital (trust) and a certain density of economic activities and supply chains. If these conditions are not present, there will be a need for additional policy efforts or different policy approaches.

4. More in general, innovative and engaged HEIs will play a role to help their ecosystems cope with transformations spurring from digital transition or climate change adaptation/mitigation, for example.
5. Finally, due to the changes in business and society, occasions to connect research (HEIs) with transformational innovation have emerged in ecosystems all over the world, including in countries that have a different level of development.

### [Round-table 1: How can HEIs promote transformation in regional economies?](#)

The first roundtable of the morning brought together prof Dominique Foray , prof John Goddard, and prof Margherita Russo to discuss smart specialisation, regional development and the connection between industry and higher education. The success of cases such as the Academy of Smart Specialisation are the product of several key factors, including how multiple policies could complement one another, taking a place-centred approach and building the capacity of industry and businesses who traditionally struggle to work with HEIs. They also highlighted the importance of moving the relationship between HEIs and business partners from co-specialisation to co-evolution, progressing projects in a mutually supportive way.

The core challenges to this model, from the perspective of the HEIs, focuses around incentives, particularly regarding funding and prestige spurring from collaborations with the wider ecosystem. A number of potential solutions were discussed by the panel, including: creating functional separation between research and more applied universities; expanding the definition of smart specialisation to encompass economic as well as social issues and embedding community engagement into research and teaching activities, as opposed to considering a separate mission.

Going forward, considering the long-term impact of the pandemic, the experts agreed that HEIs should have a key role supporting social mobility within their ecosystem and inclusive innovation. Within this framework, HEIs will contribute to training and to shape the minds of future entrepreneurs for the region, preparing citizens that can engage with grand social and economic problems and supporting life-long learning in the region. This was also part of the conversation that also took place amongst attendees of the event, confirming the need for teaching and learning to be considered as part of smart specialisation.

The discussion concluded on the importance of not re-inventing the wheel and assuring that HEIs continue to learn from each other's successes.

### [Roundtable 2: The challenge of connecting academic research with “transformational” regional development](#)

The second roundtable gathered five policy practitioners representing a variety of national, regional and international institutions (Marco Blouin, Government of Québec, Canada; Darja Isaksson, Vinnova, Sweden; Joerg Niehoff, DG EAC, European Commission; Juan Carlos Navarro, Principal Technical Leader at the Inter-American Development Bank ; and Giuseppe Provenzano, Expert, Union for the Mediterranean). These experts discussed the challenge of connecting academic research with regional development to develop a transformative and forward-looking sustainable agenda.

Panellist agreed that universities need to overcome certain fundamental challenges to interact better with their regional ecosystems. The challenges discussed echoed those highlighted during the first roundtable, namely the lack of proper incentives within the HEI system (incentives to publish but not commercialise research), as well as the need for funding. Panellists also discussed trust as an essential ingredient for effective collaboration and connection between HEIs and external stakeholders. Furthermore, speakers representing the European Commission and the Union for the Mediterranean underlined the imperative for HEIs to connect basic and applied research, to increase the pace of research and to offer skills that match labour-market needs. Other remarks included paying attention to inclusiveness, sustainability and life-long learning as strategies for HEIs to connect with their regions and become leaders of economic and sustainable development.

When asked for solutions to these challenges, practitioners argued for the importance of HEIs adopting a “place-responsive” or “place-based” approach to understand the characteristics of the regional ecosystem in which they evolve. The “knowledge-absorption” capacity of stakeholders differs from one ecosystem to the other and within the same ecosystem. For instance, the SME sector tends to be less connected to research, in turn, some mature industrial sectors depend less on research than others (for instance textile industry). The geographical setting, whether urban or rural, also influences HEIs, as HEIs located in rural areas can sometimes have less stakeholders with whom to interact. The panellists also considered that HEIs have an important role in developing the entrepreneurial skills of students.

Panellists also reflected on the role of policy makers in supporting HEIs to develop more targeted strategies in their ecosystems. Based on the experience done by the IADB in Latin American countries, national innovation policies could be successfully delivered through HEIs also in non-metropolitan regions. For example, in Peru, the government provides funding to underdeveloped rural regions where HEIs are collaborating with businesses and the private sector. In Québec, the regional government uses targeted policy approaches for each sector and supports several research consortiums in different cutting-edge fields. In the EU, the EC and the OECD are jointly working to help HEIs, and policy makers develop an entrepreneurial and innovative agenda in Higher Education, through the HEInnovate initiative and country reviews, as well as the Labour-market Relevance and Outcomes of Higher Education Partnership Initiative (LMRO-PI). In addition, the EC is promoting a stronger linkage between the European Institute of Technology and the knowledge and innovation communities (KICs) to promote innovation regional platforms. In the same vein, the UFM has launched a dialogue for regional cooperation, a multi-stakeholder platform where academia, businesses and civil society can connect and reflect on pressing challenges.

## Conclusions and way forward

The Academy of Smart Specialisation in Karlstad is part of a global effort to develop a new narrative about the role Higher Education Institutions can play in society and economy, where HEIs are a critical part of the social and economic fabric of their regions. This is an important issue for all countries, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown the need to connect basic and applied research and the need to speed-up the pace of research. “Building back better” will require the active participation of business and civil society and the capacity to share responsibility when setting objectives and assessing results.

The panel discussions showed a growing consensus that HEIs are important regional actors and that no region is an island. Universities are regional gateways that can stimulate collaboration at the national and international level. In addition, participants agreed on the importance of generating complementarities between different policy areas, enabling a switch from sectorial policies to a more integrated cross-sectorial policy approach and to enhance a more place-responsive approach. This will need to be a process of evolution across all actors in the system. We must build capacities of SMEs to allow their participation in Smart Specialisation strategies, and help universities connect to SMEs to support innovation diffusion and scale-up.

To reflect on the complexity of roles and linkages of HEI, Céline Kaufmann, Head of the Entrepreneurship, SMEs and Tourism division, announced that the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Cities and Regions will be launching a new International and heterogeneous platform bringing together HEIs, policy makers, civil society, business, and finance. This platform will offer an opportunity to discuss and share practices, and capitalise on the experience accumulated by HEIs, global and regional champions, to understand how to link research with innovation, business performance and policies.



## Contact us



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