

THE ROLE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL ADMINISTRATIONS IN IMPLEMENTING THE EU STRATEGY FOR UNIVERSITIES

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***Abstract:** Just like in the Renaissance, today’s universities are the ones leading the paradigm shift, this time towards the green and digital transition. The Commission proposed in 2022 a “European Strategy for Universities” that contributes in the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025. The European Committee of the Regions appreciated the approach suggested, requesting though a wider local and regional dimension, considering that universities play an important role in the sustainable and resilient development.*

***Keywords:** university, green and digital transition, local and regional dimension*

The university is a European institution

The University is a European institution, in some respects it is the very European institution. It is a creation of the Christian medieval Europe, which manifests itself from the beginning at a level that goes beyond the states’ borders, the attempts to restrict the movement of professors and students being present ever since the very first universities, but being destined to fail. As a community consisting of professors and students, organised with the purpose of transmitting, cultivating and developing the scientific and scholarly knowledge, the university has answered certain needs present in the European societies (the four traditional faculties were arts, law, medicine and theology faculties - Pedersen, 1996, p. 451) and it has kept its fundamental social role to this day. If there is a European ethos, it was formed in the universities, the values and ideals extending beyond the national borders propagate at the level of an academic elite, which is a European one (Rüegg, 1992, pp. XIX-XX).

As in the Renaissance or in the Scientific Revolution period, today’s universities are the ones leading the paradigm shift, this time towards the green and digital transition, just like they generated in the past a new approach in the anatomy study and just like the rediscovery of mathematics in ancient Greece produced the Renaissance of mathematics (Grendler, 2002, pp. 413-415). In those time, as it is today, the universities were centres of knowledge, with a strong mark at local and regional level. More recently, the Scientific Revolution was a product of the university. Scholars who founded modern science were university professors (e.g.: Galileo or Newton) and most of those who contributed to this revolution passed through universities. Furthermore, the fields where scientific knowledge made major progress were those strongly present at the time in the university curriculum (Porter, 1996, pp. 542-544). In western modernity, the university models diversify, but their role never ceases to grow, such university models producing the intellectual foundation in which modern states are looking for their legitimation and are supporting the education

necessary for the functioning of societies (Hammerstein, 1996, p. 639). At global level, along with the European powers expansion, an expansion of the universities also takes place – often accompanied by the challenging of the colonising authority – based on the consensus regarding the type of knowledge promoted by the universities, the one based on formulating theories and testing them and on the critical study of sources (Shils and Roberts, 2004, pp. 227-229).

In the context of building the European architecture, the Universities began, relatively difficultly, to be seen as an element of European integration and of European value expression, even if, in fact, they are such an element ever since they first emerged. The emergence of universities of Europe (Barblan, 2011, pp. 572-574) is a process that has accelerated in recent years also due to the framework created by the European Union. The Commission proposed in 2022 a “European Strategy for Universities”, part of the "Higher education package", that contributes in the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025 and it outlines a few essential aspects of the relationship between the universities and the European construction: the EU's commitment to excellence in education; the universities are seen as a basic component of the European way of life and of the European values; there is a sector of the diverse higher education, with approximately 5.000 higher education institutions, 17.5 million students in the tertiary education, 1.35 million professors who teach within the tertiary education 3 and 1.17 million researchers; the pan-European Erasmus programme has exceeded 10 million learners; the universities are key actors in the green and digital transition, but, within this role, they face limitations and barriers; for the implementation of the Strategy, a multi-level governance approach is needed, which will involve all the social actors interested on multiple levels, European, national, regional and local level (EC, 2022). The European Committee of the Regions appreciated the approach proposed, requesting though a wider local and regional dimension (CoR, 2022).

A wider local and regional dimension

When a more obvious local and regional dimension is requested, regarding the implementation of the Strategy for the universities, CoR takes into consideration several main lines of action, where local and regional authorities have the capacity and the need to act. In short, they can be summarised in three aspects: the competitive advantage for the communities (especially if we think about the digital and green transformation), the creation and consolidation of local and regional innovation ecosystems, which are able to cultivate the cooperation and the symbolic role of the European dimension development of the tertiary education.

Universities have a key role in the sustainable development, at local and regional level, being an essential element of resilience in case of economic shocks and being able to contribute to crisis management and to post-crisis economic and social recovery (Howard, Weinstein and Yang, 2021, *passim*). Problem solving is something that people expect from the universities, when it comes to the pressing issues of the contemporary world, namely the specific problems identified at the EU level within the two transformation processes manifesting today, the digital and “green” transformation. Of course, these expectations need to be accompanied by an appropriate financing and by a closer connection between research, teaching, learning and innovation in universities (CoR, 2021, pp. 3-4). Education expenditure in the tertiary sector is significantly higher than the expenditure with other

education levels in almost all OECD countries, by an average of more than 50% as compared to the secondary education. In the last 20 years, the number of tertiary education graduates increased from 27% in 2000 and up to 48% in 2021 for people aged between 25 and 34 years old from the OECD countries (OECD, 2022, p. 22). It is noteworthy that this increase was higher among women, who represent today 57% of the adults with tertiary education.

At local and regional level, universities can provide a major competitive advantage by generating and actively supporting the implementation of certain strategies, starting from the strategy design level, continuing with the monitoring and even the implementation of specific projects, where both an institutional presence and a university environment specialist presence is seen, such specialists acting as leaders or experts within projects developed by several partners (Fonseca and Nieth, 2021, pp. 308-309). Likewise, universities are a point of attraction for investors, because they generate highly skilled labour force, cooperation and technological transfer opportunities. From an economic point of view, the existence of the universities may be quantified by their generating significant income within the community and there is a relevant multiplication effect regarding the consumption generated by the universities (Chircă and Lazăr, 2021, pp. 56-57). However, the advantages brought by the universities go beyond the economic factor, although such element must be taken into consideration and many strategies and action plans have failed because they lacked a solid and pragmatic economic approach, the advantages being oriented towards the values related to cultural, ethnic, religious diversity etc. (Goddard and Vallance, 2013, pp. 26-27).

According to the “European Strategy for Universities”, a synchronization of the public policies at local, regional, national and European level is necessary, but it is extremely important to build strategic partnerships between the local and regional authorities and the universities, mainly regarding the local development strategies and the development of local ecosystems (CoR, 2021, p. 4).

From a different perspective, the access to infrastructure, the quality of life, the facilities regarding sustainable mobility, an inclusive and safe environment, are all elements determined by the actions of local and regional authorities and they influence universities, they represent a framework where the universities manifest themselves. One can see here a process that might become a virtuous circle: the universities undertake and are pushed to undertake new functions as actors involved in the community, of actors promoting technological and social innovation, entrepreneurship, technological transfer towards economy, besides their traditional research and teaching role (Liddle and Addidle, 2022, pp. 99-100); on the other hand, they are part of the city’s life and the universities’ development also depends on the way in which “the city” is led, on the values promoted within the communities, on the type of local governance established. The fact that the environment influences the evolution of any institution, including the academic institutions, can be seen by the way in which universities manage to cooperate with other social actors, namely in the fact that there is the temptation of the authorities to intervene in various aspects related to the university autonomy, in the important limitations regarding the appropriate financing in certain countries or in the bottlenecks caused by bureaucracy pathologies.

Universities can answer with more or less success to the structural changes on the labour market, because there are fields where the fast reaction of the higher education institutions

is a plus for the societies and the cooperation with the local authorities is an advantage. We can see that more and more emphasis is placed, at all levels, on “practical” STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), undoubtedly starting from the needs of the digital transition. However, it is important for us to remember that universities are – or it would be desirable for them to be – places where people discuss and debate fundamental aspects regarding human condition and the way in which the material and symbolic world in which we are living is built (Moore, 2019, p. 111), which is more, much more, than acquiring certain crafty skills useful on the labour market.

The impact of education is major at local and regional community level and for issues related to the innovation ecosystem development, to the brain drain/gain phenomenon, to the cooperation between social actors in general and between the academic environment and other sectors in particular. Although education related public policies represent a field where national authorities play the pivotal role in defining the legislative framework, ultimately, education, as praxis, is local. That is why it is desirable for the regional and local levels to be included in the creation of the European education area, besides the European and national levels, so that local and regional authorities may take part in the decision making processes and may undertake resource allocation.

Local and regional authorities can play the role of initiators and supporters of certain local collaboration and innovation ecosystems, where universities play a central role through the expertise they bring. More specifically, local and regional authorities can be the initiators or supporters of educational clusters. Together with such clusters and with the support of the private sector, innovation and entrepreneurship stimulation tools can be generated. Such an example is the Innovation and Experiment Fund (FIX), launched in 2022, in Cluj-Napoca, where local authorities are the co-financers and the co-participants respectively to the fund’s management, but the main resources and most of the people involved in the unfolding of this project come from the private sector and from the organised civil society. The Fund aims to provide assistance (space, training, consultancy, financing etc.) for the young entrepreneurs. Another example, also from the experience of the city of Cluj-Napoca, is represented by the Award for the young science and engineering researchers, which already reached its eight edition in 2022 and which is considered to be a good practice model at European level (Cavallini, S. et al., 2018, pp. 33-34), by the fact that it provides recognition and a cash prize for the young researchers (up to 35 years old) and it attracts the attention of private companies on projects with technological transfer potential. Local and regional authorities can facilitate the experimenting of certain solutions in various fields, related to the citizens’ everyday life, constituting the so-called “living labs”, spaces where innovative solutions are tested within pilot projects, which, depending on the results, can be later on scaled to another dimension (CoR, 2022, p. 7). This requires though an approach that goes beyond the strictly bureaucratic framework, because such framework very often limits the formal role of local and regional authorities in their relation with the universities.

Local and regional authorities can and must play an important role in supporting social categories exposed to social exclusion risk through social programmes addressing basic needs (food, housing, scholarships for pupils and students etc.), but they can collaborate with the universities in order to provide professional training for these categories exposed to risks. In particular, digital skill and digital equipment courses. Such an example comes also from Cluj, where, during the pandemic, both at the city level and at the county level,

the authorities purchased tablets for the pupils belonging to disadvantaged groups, who did not have access otherwise to the online courses.

Local and regional authorities are in direct contact with vulnerable people, and the universities have the capacity to provide training courses. Besides, the universities can turn diversity, inclusion and equity into a core part of their organisational culture (Stoeber and Morrisroe, 2021, p. 24), acting together with local and regional authorities, or, in other words, bringing the undertaking of a set of actions to the ecosystem level, answering thus to the “nobody is left behind” desideratum.

As for the new green technologies, from the research projects carried out for the most part either within the universities or in collaboration with the universities, the solutions enabling Europe to put in practice its ambitious plans are expected. When the allocation of the resources necessary to carry out the disruptive innovation is lacking, the necessary technological leaps, the European plans and commitments can cause other effects than the desired ones, namely the social cleavages. The digital and green transition needs to comply with the social contract that sees the European construction as a welfare construction and it needs the consent and the participation of all social actors.

Local and regional levels are important from the political perspective, because the European option is a political option and not a technocrat one. And because "all politics is local" (Trounstine, 2009), local and regional authorities and the European Committee of the Regions are structured and continuous dialogue partners for the national and European authorities respectively. The European option is a political option also from the European identity perspective, which is built through joint action in order to answer local and regional educational needs and through the development of tools by means of which local and regional authorities can learn from the local good practice experiences of other communities at Union level. The development of a pan-European experience and existing resource system, which enables the use of such resources in a flexible and efficient manner, will contribute to the creation of the European education area (CoR, 2021, pp. 3-4).

Likewise, local and regional authorities can support universities in their effort to assert a European identity and to promote the Union at global level (CoR, 2022, p. 8). Such effort includes the support for the involvement of universities in transnational alliances, the Commission's target being a very ambitious one, that of reaching 60 European Universities comprising over 500 academic institutions until mid-2024 and a budget of 1.1 billion euro for the Erasmus+ programme between 2021 and 2027 (EC, 2022, p. 6). The construction of the European universities as transnational institutions represents a relatively recent development in the EU landscape and the Strategy proposed by the Commission is a challenging one, which encourages the universities to imagine their future in the European context. The European universities are, practically, a continuation of the Bologna Agreement, which was a document negotiated by people with a political vision (Ritzen, 2009, p. 190), a vision that believes universities to be a fundamental element of the European life style and that trusts Europe and the values proposed by this Union.

Conclusions

Education, and especially the university education, is the basis on which the technological solutions are built, the solutions we are waiting for in order to solve the problems of the contemporary world. The two transitions – the green and the digital one – are processes that are putting a constant pressure upon everyday life, where local and regional authorities

are called to find answers, because they are the closest ones to the citizen. In our "lifeworld" (Habermas, 2001, p. 82), in which our values and practices are developed and shared, citizens are waiting for solutions from the authorities who are closest to them, solutions to the changes on the labour market, which impose lifelong training, advanced training and retraining, solutions for the disadvantaged groups, for maintaining and increasing the quality of life given that the world is changing on an accelerated basis. Thus, local and regional authorities can have a significant impact upon university development, not only by creating the right environment, but also by promoting certain values such as intercultural dialogue, social inclusion, public safety, intellectual rigour and free debate based on verifiable arguments, but also directly by initiating certain participatory governance structures, an innovation ecosystem and by actually transposing certain concrete projects where universities play a pivotal role.

In a situation where the European Strategy for Universities is one of the pillars on which building the European education area until 2025 and further is based, the European Committee of the Regions underlined the importance of cooperation and partnership between local and regional authorities, on one hand, and universities, on the other hand, the strategic advantage with which the Union is provided due to the diversity of the tertiary education sector and it proposed "the establishment of transnational networks" (CoR, 2022, p. 5) to help identify and disseminate the good practices.

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