

EUA 2006 AUTUMN CONFERENCE

Universities as Catalysts in Promoting Regional Innovation Brno, Czech Republic, 19-21 October 2006

General Report

The role of universities in regional innovation is a new topic focus for EUA. In tackling this field, EUA seeks to build upon a key statement on “Excellence in Research and Innovation” within the Glasgow Declaration, 3rd EUA Convention of European Higher Education Institutions (April 2005): “Universities must exercise their own responsibilities for enhancing research and innovation through the optimal use of resources and the development of institutional research strategies. Their diverse profiles ensure that they are increasingly engaged in the research and innovation process, working with different partners at the **regional**, national, European and global level”. After debating strategies and funding of research in European Universities (EUA Autumn 2005 Conference, Uppsala), and on how to improve institutional governance and funding to secure their own future (EUA Spring 2006 Conference, Hamburg), the convening of the Brno Conference on Universities and Regional Innovation was seen as the next important strategic event before the 4th Convention in Lisbon (2007) where EUA members would consider how universities’ missions were developing in the international context, linking regional, national and global activities.

The general objective of the Brno Conference was to provide a “showcase” of university good practices in working at the regional level. In addition, EUA viewed the Brno Conference as an important initiative in bringing the voice and experience of the universities into the debate on the future development of regional policy, particularly given the new emphasis being placed on science and technology investment. The conference was hosted by the six universities based in Brno because this was an excellent example of a European region where strategic cooperation between universities, regional authorities and business enterprises in research and innovation was being developed productively.

Taking account of the above context, the objectives of the Brno Conference were:

- Enable exchange of good practice drawn from different regional examples including exchange of experience between different public and private partners;
- Identify instruments and actions universities themselves can adopt and implement to enhance their contribution to regional development;
- Develop strategies for ensuring both local/regional focus and global outreach as components of institutional mission;
- Clarify the role of European policies and actions in promoting universities as key partners in regional development. Identify synergies between the 7th Framework Programme (FP7) activities and actions co-financed by the European Structural Funds and the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme (CIP).

The conference was attended by 286 delegates. Presentations were given by 39 professionals deeply involved in regional innovation activities from 20 different countries. Amongst them, 22 were from the academic world, 7 were practitioners from regional authorities and industry, 7 were knowledge transfer body professionals and 3 represented the European Commission Directorate-Generals: DG Research, DG Regional Policy and DG Enterprise and Industry. A total of 19 case studies were presented for analysis showing good practices in partnership across university-industry-government.

The Conference addressed the roles of universities as key drivers of innovation in their regions, and considered the main factors in developing innovation in knowledge-based regions and the further potential support offered by European Union policies. As a particular feature of the Brno Conference, a new EUA study, “The Rise of Knowledge Regions”, conducted by Reichert Consulting, was presented in a Round Table Session with representatives from academia, ESIB, industry and DG Research. This report is now being edited for publication shortly.

In the Opening Ceremony, EU Commissioner for Research Janez Potocnick emphasized the benefits of partnership between university and businesses and the key role of universities in producing knowledge and a skilled workforce. He encouraged universities to take a coherent institutional approach in their research activities and maximize opportunities for linking up FP7 project and network funding with the new policy framework for the European Structural Funds, which contribute to the Lisbon objectives.

Discussions in Plenary and Work Group sessions showed clearly the increasing importance of the local and regional dimension of university activities. Sessions illustrated well that the regional dimension encompasses all aspects of the university mission in education and training, research and innovation, and in civil society. The inherent connection between the national, European and global framework of the work of universities was also demonstrated.

Work Groups identified the following key factors in their themes:

Specific Instruments and Actions for Regional Innovation

- Clarity of institutional mission based on regional audit of strengths and weaknesses
- Create adequate internal structures and management systems, particularly developing career opportunities
- Work with other actors at regional level
- Promote the 'science and society' dimension
- Promote the international dimension
- Seek to complement neighbouring Higher Education Institutions

Regional Clustering of Networks of Universities

- Building mutual trust and confidence is a crucial precondition for partnership.
- Clusters should be built based on concrete objectives and clear responsibilities of every partner.
- University regional clusters and networks are an important "bottom-up" instrument for fostering regional innovation.
- The creation of a critical mass, of manageable size, with a single voice in the region allows achieving objectives which would be impossible to reach individually.

Regional Policy Initiatives Involving Universities as Stakeholders

- Interconnection with all the actors (government, university-research centres, industry and enterprises).
- Political support to undertake major actions for innovation in a region (attracting world class work force, attracting investment, etc.).
- Projects need to address also societal needs.
- Use of EU Structural Funds where applicable.

Professional Skill Development for Knowledge-Based Regions

- Bologna reforms used to further promote first cycle degrees relevant to the labour market.
- For entrepreneurship to be fostered effectively, it should be an integral part of the university institutional strategies.
- Careers guidance services for students should be more developed and contribute to raise awareness of opportunities for business start-up, encourage entrepreneurial behaviour of graduates.

In summary, the Conference highlighted both current good practices and new opportunities for universities to maximize synergies between regional, national and European policy initiatives. It identified also the new EU policy linkage between the 7th FP, the European Structural Funds and actions relating to Innovation and Enterprise. The challenge was now with universities to take up these opportunities in strengthening their regional capacity in research and innovation. EUA will be working with its university membership to achieve these goals.