Smart UAS in Smart Regions: increasing the strategic cooperation between Professional Higher Education and regions in Europe
Portugal
17 November 2020 | 10:30-12:30 am (CET)

EURASHE, in cooperation with the independent group of experts Friends of Smart Specialisation, have agreed to organise a series of online events "Smart UAS in Smart Regions: increasing the strategic cooperation between Professional Higher Education and regions in Europe" to address the growing importance of regional role and engagement of professional higher education (PHE) and in particular universities of applied sciences (UAS).

The first webinar of this series focused on Portugal, addressing, on the one hand, the national context related to the Smart Specialisation Strategy – hereafter S3 – and, on the other hand, the role that Portuguese universities of applied sciences (polytechnics) played in the design, implementation and monitoring of their regions' S3s.

Michal Karpíšek, Secretary-General of EURASHE set the basis by presenting the EURASHE activities in the regional engagement field, including the first results from the ongoing project UASiMAP. Following presentations and panel covered Portuguese experience and lessons learnt from various perspectives – the national agency, the regional authority, as well three cases of Portuguese UAS from different regions. The panel discussion was moderated by John Edwards, Senior Advisor, Policy Experimentation and Evaluation Platform (PEEP).

Please find the background and agenda in the annex.

The recording of the webinar is available here.

Overview from the national context: S3 in Portugal

Alexandre Almeida from the National Innovation Agency gave an overview of the national context of Smart Specialisation, addressing the central role that S3 can play in supporting regions that are lagging behind to better position themselves in the global competitiveness landscape.

One of the main characteristics of the Portuguese case is the co-existence of two set of S3s: one nation-wide strategy and 7 regional strategies. While this dichotomy has proven challenging to manage, the Portuguese multi-level approach to S3 can show its benefits, especially in terms of addressing the macro-trends of the country and pairing them with regional specificities.

Mr Almeida also underlined the importance of recognising the collective nature of S3 as a bottom-up process that is generated from the territory. This characteristic makes it crucial for all stakeholders to be involved in its design, in order to ensure an effective translation of the strategy into the policy tools needed for the growth and advancement of the regions. Ensuring that both strategy and policy are open to society and, in particular, to the society's input is therefore fundamental not only as a way to mobilise all the interested actors, but also to improve the design and the instruments of the strategy as well as the

way the policy is implemented. The experience from this now concluding programming period made it clear that there is a need for *integrating agents* within the territory, who can incorporate the rationale of S3 and build the bridges between the actors and between the actors and the regions, in order to ensure their engagement in the strategy.

It is in this sense that PHE institutions can make the difference. Due to their profile as boundary spanners and being deeply rooted to their regional environments, universities of applied sciences (UAS), University Colleges and, in the case of Portugal, Polytechnics have the ability to take over this role of "wedding planners" as Mr Almeida defined them, offering a hub that brings together the world of work, regional authorities and civil society. In particular, the role of PHE institutions should be based on three key elements. They should firstly have the ability to foresight which are and will be the trends and the technological and business developments in the regions. Based on this, they should be able to read the processes that are in place, identifying and, at the same time, stimulating opportunities for potential cooperation The third aspect is the issue of integration, which is not just about building bridges between the different actors, but also about adding their own intelligence and value to the process. This can be achieved by combing the foresight exercise with the extensive knowledge of the regional environment where PHE institutions strives and work in, in order to combine all these aspects together and formulate action plans that can actively bring forward and improve the development of regional and national strategies.

Smart UAS in Smart Regions: the case of Portuguese Polytechnics

Representatives from three Portuguese polytechnics coming from three regions, respectively Norte, Centro and Alentejo, presented their experiences in working with their regional authorities and other stakeholders in designing, implementing and monitoring S3s.

The institutional experiences of the three polytechnics showed the potential that PHE institutions have in bringing ideas and diversity to the S3 process. In terms of designing the S3, they can be actively engaged as external stakeholders in the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) and in the identification and definition of the S3 priority domains. Concerning the implementation of the S3, all three polytechnics took part and promoted several RDI projects, in line with the priorities set by the regional strategies. However, it was also underlined how PHE institutions can indirectly contribute to the implementation of the strategy, both by offering opportunities for lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling and by promoting entrepreneurial competences in higher education. Lastly, the strong regional links that define the profile of PHE institutions also make them suitable and willing to be engaged in the S3 evaluation phase.

Panel discussion

Reiterating the need for regional agents who can mediate among the different stakeholders and bring forward the process of developing S3s the panel firstly discussed the main funding instruments for such figures.

Mr Almeida pointed out that, while the national budget should be able to cover their funding, another opportunity is represented by the Support Systems for Collective Actions, which aim at creating the framework conditions that facilitate competitiveness by mobilising different regional actors, offering their skills and resources to address key challenges faced by the region. Opportunities for funding exist and can

be different, but the crucial aspect is that management authorities are aware of the importance of supporting the creation of "wedding planners" figures, which will be able to provide a professional approach to design and implement an efficient ecosystem of S3.

The discussion then shifted to the possible role of polytechnics and, in particular, to their underrepresentation in the European Regional and Development Fund (ERDF), with the majority of funded projects pertaining to traditional universities.

According to Mr Almeida this is due to two main factors, one external and one internal to PHE institutions. The first factor is a general misconception about the role and profile of polytechnics in the national context that has created a bias in the public policy, favouring traditional universities. The second factor can be related to internal capacities that some polytechnics have faced over the past years. Many polytechnics were also not inclined in participating in these types of project or were not sufficiently aware of the instruments available to them.

Ms Alina Silva, from the Norte Regional Development and Coordination Commission (CCDRN), brought to the table the experience of the region in working with PHE institutions for the development of Norte's S3. While the region tried to promote the quadruple helix model and the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP), the articulation between the regional and national level was difficult to manage and many thematic calls were not implemented. However, Ms Silva underlined the important role that polytechnics that are based in rural areas played in supporting the coordination with key actors that are usually difficult to engage.

The panel finally addressed the role of PHE institutions in providing their students with skills corresponding to the S3 priorities. More specifically, the issue graduate tracking and retention of graduates in the region was addressed, as well as adjustment of curricula to match the regional priorities. While the employability rate is very high, it is still difficult to verify if graduates choose to remain in their area and, especially, to check if they are working in a field related to highly innovative industries that try to tackle the societal challenges identified in the S3s. Concerning the curricula, polytechnics are working to offer their students flexible learning pathways, which are developed in co-creation with local SMEs. A positive direction can be represented by short-cycle higher education (SCHE) programmes, which are developed in close collaboration with both the world of work and the regional authorities and actively try to address the regional and industrial needs.

Increasing the strategic cooperation between Professional Higher Education and regions in Portugal: takeaways

The experiences of the different speakers showed how successful S3s need to be open to the input of society and of all the stakeholders that contribute to the economic growth of the regions and countries, especially where a multilevel approach to S3 exist, like in the case of Portugal. To this aim, PHE institutions and UAS, by virtue of their strong links to their region, can play a key role in the definition of the S3 and in addressing the regional needs. This is carried through both in terms of providing students with the skills needed to tackle these needs and in acting as regional agents that build bridges and alliances with other knowledge institutions, the business community and the regional entities. However, to achieve this, PHE institutions need to be bolder and more proactive, taking advantage of the opportunities that are offered to them, especially in view of the next programming period 2021-2027.

Annex

1. Background

Smart Specialisation Strategies – hereafter S3 – represent a unique opportunity for European regions to tackle societal and technological challenges, allowing their economies to adapt to the growing competitive environment. Bringing together all the relevant business, research, education and public actors - the quadruple helix - S3s help to identify the region's own strengths and comparative assets, prioritise research and innovation investment in competitive areas, and define a shared vision for regional innovation.

EURASHE, as the European representation of professional higher education institutions, strongly advocates the inclusion of Universities of Applied Sciences – hereafter UAS – in the development and implementation of regional S3s. Through their profile as regional "boundary spanners" and their applied research, lifelong learning activities and development of new skills, UAS actively support and contribute to the competitiveness and innovation capacity of their regions. They therefore provide crucial input and experience in all the different phases of the design of S3: from developing a shared vision and identifying the regional priorities, to implementing the action plan and monitoring and evaluating the results achieved.

The series of webinars, organised in collaboration with the independent group of experts Friends of Smart Specialisation, will provide a platform to discuss a strengthened role for professional higher education institutions in the design and implementation of regional S3. Each webinar will focus on a different European country or region and will provide an overview of the S3 as well as case studies of successful involvement of professional higher education institutions in their design and implementation.

The first webinar of the online event "Smart UAS in Smart Regions" is dedicated to **Portugal**, which is characterised by a multi-level S3, composed of both a national strategy and seven regional strategies. The webinar will address this dichotomy by outlining, on the one hand, the main objectives and vision of the national strategy and, on the other hand, the role played by professional higher education institutions in the development and monitoring of the regional strategies, through the lenses of three Portuguese polytechnics coming from three different regions (Norte, Centro and Alentejo). This will serve as an input for the panel discussion to address what worked and what didn't in collaboration between regional authorities, businesses, civil society and academia. Panelists will also discuss what can be learned from these experiences in order to take better advantage of the added value that the involvement of PHE institutions can bring to the development, implementation and monitoring of the national and regional S3s in the country.

2. Agenda

10:30-10:45	Welcome and context setting • Michal Karpisek, Secretary General, EURASHE
10:45-11:10	Overview from the national context: S3 in Portugal • Alexandre Almeida, Coordinator of the *National* Strategy for Smart Specialisation, National Innovation Agency *Q&A*
11:10-11:45	Smart UAS in Smart Regions: the case of Portuguese Polytechnics • Filipe Chaves, Dean, School for Professional Higher Education, Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (Norte) • Ana Sargento, Vice-President, Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (Centro) • Luís Loures, Vice-President Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre (Alentejo)
11:45-12:20	Panel discussion • Alexandre Almeida, National Innovation Agency • Alina Silva, Senior Economist, Division for Strategic Planning and Regional Development, Norte Regional Development and Coordination Commission (CCDRN) • Michal Karpíšek, EURASHE The discussion will be moderated by John Edwards, Senior Advisor, Policy Experimentation and Evaluation Platform (PEEP)
12:20-12:30	Final remarks and invitation to the next webinar • Dimitri Corpakis, Friends of Smart Specialisation