

## **Smart UAS in Smart Regions: increasing the strategic cooperation between Professional Higher Education and regions in Europe *Basque Country***

**2 December 2020 | 15:00-16:30 (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 the Basque Country, addressing, on the one hand, the regional context related to the Smart Specialisation Strategy – hereafter S3 – and, on the other hand, the role that professional higher education institutions can play in the design, implementation and monitoring of their region’ S3. The case study for this session was presented by EURASHE member Mondragon University.

The event was moderated by Richard Tuffs, Friends of Smart Specialisation.

Please find the agenda and background of the online event in the [annex](#).

The recording of the webinar is available [here](#).

### **Overview from the regional context: S3 in the Basque Country**

James Wilson, from Orkestra – Basque Institute of Competitiveness, gave an overview of the regional context of Smart Specialisation, underlying two key novelties introduced by the “Science, Technology and Innovation Plan 2020”, which was published at the end of 2014 and formally set out the Basque strategy.

The first key aspect of the Basque S3 is represented by a new governance structure, based on three different levels. While the first level is chaired by the President of the Basque Government and the Basque Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (CVCTI), the second level brings together representatives from all the different government departments who have a stake in the strategy. However, it is in the third level that the real novelty was introduced. The bottom level of this “house” structure is in fact composed of different steering groups, one for each priority areas, which have the task of bringing them forward and feeding the interests of the stakeholders into the governance structure. To this aim, each steering group includes representatives of companies, universities, research and technology centres, government departments and, in some cases, civil society. Through its clear and straightforward structure, the new governance introduced by the Basque S3 led the way for universities to position themselves within it, especially at the top and at the bottom level.

The second novelty introduced by the Basque strategy is the explicit mention of entrepreneurial discovery dynamics, as a way to build up the spaces through which the engagement of the different actors in the triple or quadruple helix (collaboration between government, universities, businesses and civil society) can actively take place into the strategic process. In particular, one of the success factors in bringing

forward the dynamics of the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) has been the combination of two key elements: on the one hand, the aforementioned governance structure, which has set out the overall framework for the strategy, and, on the other hand, the focus on different micro-processes within each steering groups, which allowed to shape and bring forward the strategic priorities with the input from all the stakeholders involved. Mr Wilson also presented the results from two reports published by Orkestra respectively in 2016 and 2019. The second report focused, in particular, on the evolution of the Basque strategy from its early phase to the later implementation stage and showed how the organisation and structure of the EDP was adapting itself, reflecting the significant experimentation of the strategy's first years. In terms of the actors, there was a greater involvement of businesses, with yet some challenges in engaging SMEs, but also a more proactive involvement of universities. The report also showed a shift to a "living strategy", which was readjusting itself to the input of the steering groups. This led the way to several positive outcomes, among all a move towards the implementation of projects with higher Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs), which showed a desire to make research more "applied" and market-oriented, and a greater involvement in EU projects.

Finally, Mr Wilson stressed the importance of taking into account the impact that COVID-19 will have on territorial strategies. What the current pandemic has shown is that multi-level governance has become more important than ever and that European and national strategies need to be implemented at the regional level. This requires a close coordination between the European Union, Member States and regions. Universities are again well-positioned to play a bridging role in this multi-level governance, thanks to their regional profile and, at the same time, international connections.

### Smart UAS in Smart Regions: the case of Mondragon University

Roberto Uribeetxeberria, Coordinator of Research and Knowledge Transfer at the Faculty of Engineer of Mondragon University presented his institution's role in the different phases of the Basque S3. This case study showed, in particular, the added value that PHE institutions can bring to the formulation and evolution of regional strategies, especially in terms of offering a bridge between governmental actors and the private sectors. Through its profile as a cooperative university committed to social transformation, Mondragon University has nurtured strong links with the world of work, cooperating with more than 200 companies. This allowed the institution to be in close relations with the need of the industry sector in the region.

In terms of the S3 design, Mondragon University was soundly integrated in the governance structure illustrated by Mr Wilson, being a member of the Basque Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (CVCTI) and an active part of different steering groups. During the implementation phase, the institution participated to the design of the Basque University System's action plan, making sure that its actions would be adjusted to the broader regional strategy. Mondragon University also aligned its internal strategy to the priorities identified by the S3, with a particular focus to ensuring excellence science and the knowledge transfer to cooperative companies. The university was also engaged in the evaluation phase of the strategy, participating in different contrast groups both as a higher education institution and as a member of the CVCTI.

## Panel discussion

Reflecting on the input presented by Mr Wilson and Mr Uribeetxeberria, the panellists acknowledged the positive outcomes of the Basque strategy, reflecting, at the same time, on what can still be improved in view of the next programming period 2021-2027.

Cristina Oyón, from the Basque Business Development Agency (SPRI), underlined how one of the main objectives for the next period is to keep on investing in research and development, improving the evolution of the regional strategy for Research and Innovation for Smart Specialisation (RIS3) and encouraging companies to invest more in R&I.

Jaana Puukka, Innovation Engage, recognised the sound character of the Basque governance structure, especially in terms of bridging science and technology with higher education. What needs to be improved is instead the collaboration with SMEs and their engagement in the strategy. Small businesses and the service sector need to be supported in facing the impact of COVID-19 and, in particular, to address the new digitalisation challenges. Higher education institutions have all the instruments to cover this role, yet collaboration with SMEs still remains limited.

Reflecting on the moderator's question on whether universities of applied sciences should and can play a role in bridging SMEs with civic society, Mr Wilson stated that, in the Basque context, HE institutions are not in the best position to do so. Mondragon University might still be an exception, thanks to its special profile and relations with the world of work, but technology centres and clusters are, in the current state of play, the key institutions that can provide such a bridge for SMEs.

The discussion then shifted to the role of professional higher education institutions as skills providers and in fostering skills development. In particular, the moderator asked whether a skills development strategy linked to S3 is currently in place in the region and what are the possibilities to link curricula development to RIS3, having in mind, at the same time, the autonomy of universities.

According to Mr Wilson, new bridging clusters of key educational institutions, called "lagoon clusters" have been developed during the last couple of years, with the task of identifying what are the main skills for the industry. However, this still remains a weakness of the Basque S3, especially because the education system perceived this as an industry request.

Mr Uribeetxeberria underlined how Mondragon University organises bi-annual meetings with cooperative and non-cooperative companies, to which representatives from the Basque Government are also invited. The main topics discussed are R&I and educational needs in the regions as well as the skills that companies see as crucial for the future. Businesses usually require HE institutions to deliver new skills as fast as possible, universities therefore need to be flexible and adapt their curricula to the need of the industry.

Regarding the issue of graduates' tracking and evaluation, Mondragon University has a very high employment rate, especially for the STEAM sector, but more students are still needed in order to meet the industry needs. Mrs Oyón acknowledged that young graduates feel a special attraction to the opportunities offered by bigger cities, which goes to the detriment of smaller but dynamic regions like the Basque Country. Joint efforts should be therefore organised to attract more students in the STEAM sector, especially women, and to communicate the more glamorous and exciting side of manufacturing, which is becoming more and more centred on sustainability, smart factories and digitalisation, ensuring that graduates see the opportunities offered by their regions and choose to pursue their professional careers in their home cities.

## Increasing the strategic cooperation between Professional Higher Education and regions in Basque Country: takeaways

All speakers agreed that the Basque S3 presents many success factors. Among them are a governance structure that fosters opportunities to share views and opinions between the different stakeholders, a strong network of clusters and a distributed leadership that supports the engagement of all actors. While other regions can indeed learn from the Basque experience, professional higher education institutions need, on their part, to be flexible and fast-adaptive to changes as well as proactive in front of opportunities to engage with their regional environment. Skills ecosystems also need to be adapted to the priorities and needs identified by the regional strategies. Fostering the attractiveness of STEAM studies and the manufacturing sector, with a special attention to the engagement of women, was also seen as a priority in order to encourage the economic development of the regions.

## 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 - following the quadruple helix model - 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 developing 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 second webinar of the online event “Smart UAS in Smart Regions” will be dedicated to the **Basque Country**, an autonomous community in northern Spain that presents one of the strongest Smart Specialisation Strategies in Europe. The webinar will address the specificities that make the Basque case so successful, by providing an overview of the regional S3 and discussing it with the main actors involved. The case study for this session will be provided by EURASHE member Mondragon University, whose experience in the field will highlight the specific role that professional higher education institutions can

bring to the economic development of their regions, by acting as a hub between local SMEs, administrative bodies and civil society.

## 2. Agenda

Wednesday 2 December 2020, 15:00-16:30 CET, Zoom	
<b>15:00-15:05</b>	Welcome and context setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Richard Tuffs, Friends of Smart Specialisation</li> </ul>
<b>15:05-15:30</b>	Overview from the national context: S3 in the Basque Country <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>James Wilson, Research Director, Orkestra - Basque Institute of Competitiveness</li> </ul> Q&A
<b>15:30-15:45</b>	Smart UAS in Smart Regions: the case of Mondragon University <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Roberto Uribeetxeberria, Coordinator of Research and Knowledge Transfer, Mondragon University</li> </ul>
<b>15:45-16:20</b>	Panel discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cristina Oyón, Director of Technology, Innovation and Sustainability of SPRI, Basque Government</li> <li>Jaana Puukka, Founder and President, Innovation Engage</li> <li>Roberto Uribeetxeberria, Mondragon University</li> <li>James Wilson, Orkestra - Basque Institute of Competitiveness</li> </ul> The discussion will be moderate by Richard Tuffs, Friends of Smart Specialisation
<b>16:20-16:30</b>	Final remarks and invitation to the next webinar <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Richard Tuffs, Friends of Smart Specialisation</li> </ul>