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ROAD2EU SUMMER SCHOOL 2026 — LECTURE 9

Implementation Lab: Urban–Rural Digital Divides, Living Labs and the Campus as a Regional Hub

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WHAT THIS LECTURE COVERS

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01 Urban–rural synergies

02 Functional urban areas

03 Digital divides

04 Polish context

05 Living labs

06 Pilot design

URBAN–RURAL DIVIDES SHAPE ACCESS; UNIVERSITIES CAN HELP THROUGH PLACE-BASED ACTION

- **Urban–rural divides** shape access to higher education, digital services, health care, and economic opportunity — creating cumulative disadvantage for rural populations.
- **Universities** are uniquely positioned to help reduce these divides through place-based action: research, skills provision, community engagement, and regional partnerships.
- This lecture frames territorial engagement as a **core institutional responsibility**, not an optional community-relations activity.

TERRITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Universities are anchor institutions in their regions. Their choices about who they serve, where they engage, and how they design their programmes have direct territorial consequences.

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URBAN–RURAL SYNERGIES IN POLICY: THE TERRITORIAL AGENDA AND BALANCED DEVELOPMENT

- The **Territorial Agenda 2030** promotes urban–rural linkages and balanced territorial development as core principles of EU spatial policy.
- **Cities, towns, and rural areas** should be planned as interconnected spaces — not as separate, competing territories.
- This principle has direct implications for how universities plan their **outreach, service delivery, and partnership strategies**.

THE POLICY PRINCIPLE

The Territorial Agenda 2030 establishes urban–rural synergy as a policy norm. Universities that engage with this principle are aligned with EU territorial strategy — and better positioned for cohesion funding.

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FUNCTIONAL URBAN AREAS: REAL SERVICE GEOGRAPHIES RATHER THAN ADMINISTRATIVE LINES

- **Functional Urban Areas (FUAs)** are defined by real patterns of commuting, service use, and economic interaction — not by administrative boundaries.
- FUAs are useful for understanding **who a university actually serves**: the catchment area for students, staff, and community engagement extends well beyond city limits.
- Using FUAs as a planning lens helps universities identify **underserved populations and territories** within their natural service geography.

BEYOND ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES

A university's real catchment area is defined by where its students come from, where its graduates go, and where its research has impact — not by the city boundary on a map.

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DIGITAL DIVIDE AND RURAL ACCESS: CONNECTIVITY REINFORCES TERRITORIAL EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

- **Connectivity** is now essential for education, health, public administration, and local economic opportunity — not a luxury.
- **Weak digital infrastructure** in rural areas directly reinforces territorial educational disadvantage: students without reliable internet cannot access online learning, digital services, or remote work opportunities.
- Universities can contribute to **digital inclusion** through outreach, digital literacy programmes, and advocacy for rural connectivity investment.

CONNECTIVITY AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Digital connectivity is now as fundamental as road access or electricity. Universities that treat digital inclusion as a core concern are addressing one of the most significant drivers of territorial inequality.

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POLAND AS AN UNEVEN CASE: STRONG ATTAINMENT, PRONOUNCED URBAN–RURAL DIVIDE

- Poland has achieved **strong overall tertiary attainment**, with rates above the EU average among younger age cohorts.
- However, this aggregate performance conceals a **pronounced urban–rural divide**: access to higher education, digital services, and skilled employment is significantly lower in rural and peripheral areas.
- This makes **territorially differentiated HE action** — targeted at specific geographies and populations — especially relevant in the Polish context.

THE POLISH PARADOX

Poland's strong aggregate attainment figures can mask significant territorial inequality. ROAD2EU institutions need to understand the specific territorial context in which they operate, not just national averages.

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THE CAMPUS AS A REGIONAL HUB FOR SKILLS, EXPERIMENTATION, AND COMMUNITY PILOTS

- A campus can function as a **hub for skills development**, providing training, upskilling, and reskilling for the regional workforce beyond traditional degree programmes.
- Campuses can host **experimentation and innovation** — living labs, maker spaces, and co-design facilities that serve regional businesses and communities.
- This 'regional hub' role is consistent with current EU thinking about **transformative universities** and the third mission of higher education.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE UNIVERSITY

The EU's vision of the transformative university is one that actively contributes to regional development — not just through research publications, but through direct engagement with regional challenges and communities.

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SMART SPECIALISATION AND LOCAL PRIORITIES: UNIVERSITIES AS TERRITORIAL STRATEGY PARTNERS

- **Smart specialisation** is the EU's approach to regional innovation strategy: identifying and investing in the distinctive strengths and opportunities of each territory.
- Universities can contribute to smart specialisation through **evidence, expertise, and stakeholder engagement** — helping regions identify their genuine competitive advantages.
- This positions universities as **strategic partners in regional development**, not just service providers or research institutions.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Smart specialisation requires the kind of knowledge, evidence, and stakeholder engagement that universities are uniquely positioned to provide. This is a genuine strategic opportunity for HEIs.

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LIVING LABS: CO-DESIGN, EXPERIMENTATION, AND TESTING WITH REAL USERS IN REAL CONTEXTS

- **Living labs** are spaces for co-design, experimentation, and testing with real users in real contexts — not in controlled laboratory conditions.
- They are a strong format for **university–region cooperation**: bringing together academic expertise, regional stakeholders, and community members to develop and test solutions.
- Living labs are particularly valuable for **urban–rural challenges** because they can be deployed in rural or peripheral contexts, not just on campus.

REAL-WORLD TESTING

Living labs are not just a methodology — they are a commitment to testing ideas with real users in real contexts. This is the difference between academic research and actionable regional innovation.

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A SIMPLE PILOT MODEL: ONE GAP, ONE GEOGRAPHY, ONE MANAGEABLE INTERVENTION

- **Diagnose one territorial gap** — a specific, documented problem of access, connectivity, skills, or service provision in a defined area.
- **Identify one target geography and one target group** — be specific about where and for whom the pilot is designed.
- **Design one manageable pilot** with clear outputs and expected results — resist the temptation to address everything at once.

START SMALL, LEARN FAST

The most effective territorial pilots are those that are specific enough to be implemented, evaluated, and learned from. A focused pilot that works is more valuable than an ambitious programme that cannot be completed.

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SUGGESTED INDICATORS FOR TERRITORIAL PILOTS

1 **Access / Participation**
Number and profile of participants from rural or peripheral areas; share of first-generation participants.

2 **Connectivity and Service Access**
Proportion of participants with reliable internet access; use of digital services before and after intervention.

3 **Stakeholder Involvement**
Number and type of regional stakeholders engaged; quality of co-design process.

4 **Pilot Uptake**
Take-up rate relative to target; completion and satisfaction rates.

5 **Continuation Potential**
Evidence of stakeholder interest in continuing or scaling the pilot after the project ends.

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POSSIBLE OUTPUTS FROM A SUMMER SCHOOL IMPLEMENTATION LAB

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OUTPUT 1

Living-Lab Concept Note

A 2–4 page document describing the living-lab design, target group, territorial focus, and expected outputs.

OUTPUT 2

Stakeholder Map

A visual or tabular map of regional stakeholders relevant to the territorial challenge, including their roles and interests.

OUTPUT 3

Urban–Rural Dashboard

A small set of indicators tracking access, connectivity, and participation across urban and rural areas in the target territory.

OUTPUT 4

Pilot Brief + Short Policy Note

A 1-page pilot brief for implementation, plus a short policy note summarising the territorial gap and proposed response for regional stakeholders.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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- **European Commission.** *Territorial Agenda 2030: A Future for All Places*. 2020.
- **European Commission / OECD.** *Functional Urban Areas: Definition and Methodology*. 2022.
- **European Commission.** *Digital Connectivity for Rural Areas: Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas*. COM(2021) 345 final.
- **JRC / European Commission.** *Transformative Innovation in Higher Education: Regional Engagement and Living Labs*. 2023.
- **European Commission.** *Education and Training Monitor 2025: Poland*. 2025.

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Questions & Discussion

Should your institution start with a living lab, a dashboard, or a territorial mapping exercise?

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