



ROAD2EU WINTER SCHOOL 2025

Regional Development and EU Cohesion Policy: The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Regional Strategies

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LECTURE 8



WHAT THIS LECTURE COVERS

- 01** Regional development in the EU
- 02** Cohesion policy 2021–2027
- 03** Smart specialisation
- 04** Universities in regional strategies
- 05** Indicators and monitoring

UNIVERSITIES ARE INCREASINGLY EXPECTED TO JUSTIFY THEIR REGIONAL PUBLIC ROLE



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- **Regional development** is the mechanism that translates abstract EU priorities into tangible, on-the-ground practice.
- Universities are no longer isolated ivory towers; they actively contribute through **skills provision, innovation, strategic partnerships, and civic engagement**.
- This shift requires institutions to align their academic missions with territorial needs.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY SHIFT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly expected to justify their regional public role and demonstrate measurable territorial impact to secure funding and political support.

COHESION POLICY 2021–2027 ADDRESSES ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL IMBALANCES



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- The EU Cohesion Policy is designed to systematically address and reduce **economic, social, and territorial imbalances** across member states.
- It serves as the European Union's main **implementation and investment framework** for regional development.
- The policy is structurally organised around five core Policy Objectives (PO1–PO5) that guide funding and strategic focus.

POLICY OBJECTIVES (PO1-PO5)

- **PO1: Smarter Europe**
- **PO2: Greener, carbon-free Europe**
- **PO3: More connected Europe**
- **PO4: More social Europe**
- **PO5: Europe closer to citizens**

PO1, PO4 AND PO5 DIRECTLY CONNECT UNIVERSITIES TO INNOVATION, INCLUSION AND PLACE



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- Universities matter **beyond research alone**. They are critical infrastructure for regional development.
- The EU Cohesion Policy framework explicitly positions Higher Education Institutions as key actors in delivering specific **Policy Objectives (POs)**.
- Aligning institutional strategy with these POs unlocks funding and strengthens regional relevance.

KEY POLICY OBJECTIVES FOR HEIS

PO1 Smarter Europe

Connects universities to innovation, research, and regional competitiveness.

PO4 More Social Europe

Connects universities to social inclusion, education, and skills development.

PO5 Europe Closer to Citizens

Connects universities to place-based and citizen-oriented territorial development.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION REQUIRES COHERENCE ACROSS ALL GOVERNANCE LEVELS



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- Effective implementation of cohesion policy requires strict coherence across **EU, national, regional, and institutional levels**.
- Regional strategy is therefore a **governance issue** just as much as it is a funding issue.
- Universities must understand both the complex policy layers and the diverse stakeholder environments to participate effectively.

MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

- **EU Level (Frameworks)**
- **National Level (Priorities)**
- **Regional Level (Strategies)**
- **Institutional Level (Action)**

EU GUIDANCE POSITIONS UNIVERSITIES AS PARTNERS, NOT PASSIVE BENEFICIARIES

- EU guidance has long promoted the **active engagement of universities** in regional innovation strategies.
- Universities are explicitly seen as **strategic partners and co-creators**, not merely passive beneficiaries of funding.
- This requires a shift from transactional funding relationships to long-term strategic alignment with regional authorities.



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NORMALISING THE REGIONAL ROLE

We must normalise the regional role of higher education. It is no longer an optional "third mission" add-on, but a core expectation of modern institutional governance.

SMART SPECIALISATION GIVES UNIVERSITIES A ROLE IN SHAPING REGIONAL PRIORITIES

- **Smart specialisation (S3)** is a place-based approach that links innovation, territorial priorities, and governance.
- It requires regions to identify and develop their **unique competitive advantages** rather than copying others.
- Universities are critical knowledge hubs in this process, providing the research and skills needed to drive these specialisations.



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ENTREPRENEURIAL DISCOVERY PROCESS

The Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) gives universities a formal, structural role in shaping regional priorities, connecting institutional expertise directly with regional strategic planning.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE UNIVERSITY IMPLIES RETHINKING GOVERNANCE AND EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

- Current Joint Research Centre (JRC) work presents universities as active **actors in territorial transformation**.
- The regional role of universities is becoming significantly more **explicit and demanding** than in previous funding periods.
- Institutions can no longer rely solely on ad-hoc projects; they need systemic regional engagement strategies.



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RETHINKING THE INSTITUTION

This transformative role implies fundamentally rethinking stakeholder engagement, internal governance structures, and the nature of external partnerships.

POLAND'S TERRITORIAL AND SKILLS GAPS DIRECTLY CONNECT UNIVERSITIES TO REGIONAL STRATEGIES

- While Poland has strong overall educational attainment, it faces visible **skills mismatches, territorial disparities, and lifelong-learning gaps.**
- These specific challenges are exactly the issues that connect universities with **regional development strategies.**
- Addressing these gaps requires targeted, place-based interventions rather than generic national policies.



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THE IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT

Grounding the policy in the Polish context demonstrates that regional development is not abstract; it is about solving specific, local socio-economic challenges through institutional action.

WEAK PROJECTS FAIL BECAUSE THEY START WITH ACTIVITIES INSTEAD OF TERRITORIAL NEEDS



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Many regional projects fail to secure funding or achieve impact because they are designed backwards—starting with what the university wants to do, rather than what the region needs.

1

IDENTIFY NEED

Start from a clearly defined, evidence-based territorial need or gap in the region.

2

MAP TO POLICY

Map this specific need directly to a relevant EU or national Policy Objective (e.g., PO1 or PO4).

3

DEFINE RESULTS

Clearly define the tangible outputs and the expected long-term results of the intervention.

4

SET INDICATORS

Establish measurable indicators and reliable evidence sources to track progress and impact.

BUILD SMALL, USABLE DASHBOARDS RATHER THAN OVERSIZED MONITORING SYSTEMS

- Use **clear, measurable output and result indicators** that directly align with the territorial needs identified.
- Focus on building **small, usable dashboards** that provide actionable insights, rather than oversized, complex monitoring systems.
- Avoid collecting data that will not be used to inform project decisions or demonstrate impact.

MONITORING AS MANAGEMENT

Present monitoring as a proactive management tool to guide implementation, not just a retrospective reporting burden for funders.



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A PRACTICAL CHECKLIST FOR HEIS TO STRENGTHEN REGIONAL RELEVANCE



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✓ **Map Priorities**

Align institutional strengths with specific regional smart specialisation strategies and EU cohesion objectives.

✓ **Engage Stakeholders**

Actively participate in the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process and build cross-sectoral partnerships.

✓ **Define Intervention Logic**

Start from documented territorial needs, not just existing academic activities or available funding.

✓ **Use Manageable Indicators**

Implement clear, practical dashboards to track outputs and results without creating reporting burdens.

✓ **Review Relevance Regularly**

Continuously assess and adapt the institution's regional role to



SELECTED REFERENCES

- **European Commission.** *Cohesion Policy 2021-2027: Priorities and Objectives.* Brussels, 2021.
- **Joint Research Centre (JRC).** *Connecting Universities to Regional Growth: A Practical Guide.* Publications Office of the European Union, 2011/updated.
- **Smart Specialisation Platform.** *S3 Community of Practice Guidelines.* European Commission, JRC.
- **European Commission.** *Education and Training Monitor 2025: Poland Country Report.* Publications Office of the European Union, 2025.

Note: This lecture is grounded in official EU regional-policy frameworks, JRC monitoring reports, and smart specialisation guidelines to ensure alignment with current funding architectures.



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Questions & Discussion

- ? How can universities strengthen their **regional relevance** without losing their core **academic identity**?

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