



ROAD2EU WINTER SCHOOL 2025

Digital Urban–Rural Synergies in the EU

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LECTURE 9



WHAT THIS LECTURE COVERS

01 Urban-rural linkages

02 Functional urban areas

03 Digital divides

04 Higher education and territorial development

05 Indicators and pilot ideas

TERRITORIAL COHESION DIRECTLY SHAPES HIGHER-EDUCATION ACCESS

- Rural areas cover the **majority of EU territory** and depend increasingly on digital access for services and quality of life.
- Urban-rural divides create **structural inequalities** in education, mobility, and social opportunity.
- Addressing these divides is a precondition for achieving the EU's territorial cohesion goals.

KEY IMPLICATION

Territorial cohesion is not just a planning concept — it is the structural framework that determines who can access higher education and on what terms.



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URBAN-RURAL SYNERGY IS AN INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLE IN THE TERRITORIAL AGENDA

- The EU's **Territorial Agenda 2030** explicitly promotes cooperation within and between cities, towns, and surrounding rural areas.
- Urban growth must be designed to **benefit, not undermine**, rural communities and their services.
- Synergy requires deliberate policy design, not just proximity.

POLICY PRINCIPLE

Urban-rural synergy is an integrated development principle, not an optional add-on. It requires active governance across administrative boundaries.



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FUNCTIONAL URBAN AREAS REFLECT REAL RELATIONSHIPS, NOT ADMINISTRATIVE BORDERS

- **Functional Urban Areas (FUAs)** are defined by real commuting and service relationships, not by administrative or political boundaries.
- They are essential for analysing **student mobility, labour market catchments, and service accessibility**.
- Using FUAs enables more accurate and relevant educational planning at the regional level.

WHY IT MATTERS

Functional geography reveals the true reach of a university's influence and the real population it serves, which often extends far beyond the city limits.



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SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS CAN BECOME REGIONAL NODES FOR EDUCATION AND INNOVATION

- A **polycentric development model** distributes economic and educational opportunities across multiple centres, not just capitals.
- Small and medium-sized towns can help **reduce territorial polarisation** by acting as accessible service hubs.
- They can host satellite campuses, digital learning centres, and regional innovation facilities.

THE POLYCENTRIC VISION

Development need not be concentrated in capital cities alone. Empowering SMSTs creates a more balanced, resilient, and inclusive territorial structure.



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WEAK BROADBAND REINFORCES RURAL DISADVANTAGE AND UNDERMINES TERRITORIAL EQUALITY

- Fast and reliable digital connectivity is a **fundamental precondition** for education, health services, business activity, and public administration.
- Weak or absent broadband infrastructure directly **reinforces rural disadvantage** and deepens existing territorial inequalities.
- Digital connectivity is therefore a territorial justice issue, not merely a technical one.

DIGITALISATION = TERRITORIAL
EQUALITY

Without reliable connectivity, rural populations are structurally excluded from the digital economy, digital education, and digital public services.



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TERTIARY ATTAINMENT REMAINS MUCH LOWER IN RURAL AREAS THAN IN CITIES ACROSS THE EU

- Across the EU and specifically in **Poland**, tertiary educational attainment remains significantly lower in rural areas than in urban centres.
- Universities are overwhelmingly **concentrated in large urban areas**, creating structural access barriers for rural populations.
- These disparities justify dedicated territorial higher-education strategies to bridge the gap.

THE ATTAINMENT GAP

The urban-rural gap in tertiary education is not just an individual outcome; it is a systemic territorial inequality that requires systemic territorial solutions.



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UNIVERSITIES CAN ACT AS REGIONAL ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS FOR SKILLS AND DIALOGUE

- Universities are increasingly called upon to help **drive territorial transformations** beyond their traditional academic functions.
- They can serve as **regional anchor institutions**: stable, trusted hubs for skills development, experimentation, and civic dialogue.
- This role requires deliberate institutional strategy and genuine community engagement.

THE CAMPUS AS ANCHOR

A university campus can be a powerful regional anchor — a place of knowledge, trust, and convening power that serves the whole territory, not just enrolled students.



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SMART SPECIALISATION CONNECTS UNIVERSITIES WITH LOCAL AND REGIONAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

- **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)** and the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) encourage stakeholder-driven territorial prioritisation.
- Universities can contribute **evidence, skills, and experimentation capacity** to regional innovation ecosystems.
- This creates a virtuous cycle: universities gain relevance, regions gain capacity.

THE INNOVATION LINK

Smart Specialisation is the structural mechanism that formally connects university expertise with regional economic priorities and EU cohesion funding.



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LIVING LABS ARE PRACTICAL SPACES FOR URBAN-RURAL CO-DESIGN AND INNOVATION

- **Living labs** are open innovation environments where universities and external stakeholders co-design, test, and refine solutions in real-world contexts.
- They are a particularly **useful and scalable format** for urban-rural and regional innovation work.
- Living labs bridge the gap between academic research and territorial implementation.

WHY LIVING LABS WORK

Living labs are attractive because they are low-risk, participatory, and produce tangible outputs that can be scaled across the region or replicated elsewhere.



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START WITH ONE DIAGNOSABLE TERRITORIAL PROBLEM AND ONE MANAGEABLE INTERVENTION

PRACTICAL MODEL FOR TERRITORIAL PILOTS

Identify one clear, diagnosable territorial problem → design one manageable, evidence-based intervention → track, learn, and scale.

TRACK

Access

TRACK

Connectivity

TRACK

Participation

TRACK

Partnerships

TRACK

Pilot Uptake



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SELECTED REFERENCES



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- **OECD / European Commission.** *Functional Urban Areas: Definition and Methodology.*
- **European Commission.** *Digital Connectivity for Rural Areas.* Digital Agenda for Europe.
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- **European Commission.** *Education and Training Monitor 2025.* Publications Office of the EU, 2025.



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Questions & Discussion

Should a university start with a living lab, a dashboard, or a targeted rural-learning offer?

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