

Living up to the Significance of Universities for the Future of the EU Proposals for Future EU Funding Programmes by the French, German and Polish Rectors' Conferences (CPU, HRK, KRASP)

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1. Introduction: The multiple tasks and roles of universities and their value for Europe
2. Distributed excellence in frontier research as a distinctive feature of the university systems in the EU
3. Three proposals for funding programmes
 - 3.1. Developing "European Universities" as excellence networks of universities
 - 3.2. Territorial Connections – Supporting universities as the center of regional innovation ecosystems of the EU
 - 3.3. Capacity building in less competitive higher education systems via excellence initiatives
4. Conclusion

1. Introduction: The multiple tasks and roles of universities and their value for Europe

The multiple tasks and roles of universities in Europe have recently been finding more appreciation in European politics. In its conclusions on 14 December 2017, the European Council stated that "Education and Culture are key to building inclusive and cohesive societies, and to sustaining our competitiveness."¹ The Council concluded that the EU should strengthen strategic partnerships between higher education institutions across the EU and should encourage the emergence of at least twenty "European Universities", consisting of bottom-up networks across the EU.

Before the Council meeting the Rectors' Conferences of Germany, France and Poland have stated: "Universities play a crucial role in making the EU stable and future-proof. They bind together capabilities in excellent research, innovation, education and culture in order to create future generations of responsible European citizens. It is a challenging obligation for public policies to sustain universities in these interrelated tasks."²

This paper will discuss different forms of public policies and programmes for sustaining universities in their multiple roles. Among them are initiatives of the EU such as “European Universities”, as well as programmes proposed by the rectors’ conferences.

In particular, the distribution of excellence will be seen as the prerequisite for an evenly spread chance for development of economies and societies in the EU member states.³ The discussion on Distributed Excellence in this sense is also directly linked to issues such as the relationship between center and regions in the Member States and in the EU, as well as to “Smart Specialization Strategies” and regional development.

2. Distributed excellence in frontier research as a distinctive feature of the university systems in the EU

The phrase „Distributed Excellence” has been used in different political, economic and social contexts for a long time.⁴ It may be valued as a phrase that de facto is describing the national situation in France, Germany and Poland and in the EU higher education system(s) in general.

In Germany, for example, the term was recently used to describe the outcome of the first phase of the “Excellence Initiative (ExIni)”, a funding programme financed jointly by the Federal Government and the 16 German Landers between 2006 and 2017.⁵ The competition allowed the funding of doctoral schools, big-sized interdisciplinary research projects and “future strategy”-concepts (colloquially referred to as “elite universities”). Although a number of “elite universities” were chosen, they did not distinguish themselves to a degree that would have created a clear-cut first- and second-tier system of universities based on their research performance. Even if there were obvious frontrunners, it turned out over time that a group of about 40 universities were able to apply successfully for funding in the ExIni. This observation was also confirmed by the dissemination of ERC grants in German universities during that period (2011-2017).

Similar observations can be made about France as a result of the “Initiative d’excellence”. Launched in 2010, it is part of the “Investment for the future” programme (PIA). Its original aim was to increase French competitiveness by bolstering innovation. All successful entities that excelled or were created in this competition are however not evenly distributed across France and not all French universities coordinate or take part in one of them.⁶

In Poland, experience with excellence-based funding programmes for teaching (related to the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in 2012) and for research (establishment of Leading National Research Centres in 2011 and in 2013) have the same characteristics – there are many winners distributed across the country. Currently, the concept of Distributed Excellence is receiving increasing attention and support in discussions taking place in Poland in the context of essential structural changes in universities, and the Research University and Regional Excellence initiatives, proposed in the draft of a new Law on higher education and science.

In this sense the political goal of Distributed Excellence is a well-balanced and strong higher education and research system in the EU, rooted in all regions and Member States. It should not be seen as a levelling instrument that is not allowing for competition and processes of differentiation. Neither cohesion nor distribution precludes differentiation. Distributed Excellence has to be understood as a concept for policies that create excellence and not similarity. This excellence is based on a broad foundation of basic and frontier research inside the Member States as well as inside the EU as a whole. In such a way excellence will be recognized as a valid and useful concept in and beyond academic circles.

3. Three Proposals for Funding Programmes

3.1. Developing “European Universities” as excellence networks of universities

Inspired by French President Macron’s groundbreaking speech at the University of Sorbonne on 26th September 2017, the EU-Council decided that the EU should become more active in the area of education and culture, in which “the EU plays an important supplementing and supporting role.” The European Council called on the member states, the Council itself and the Commission, “in line with their respective competences, to take work forward with a view to encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty “European Universities”, consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities.”

The French, German and Polish rectors’ conferences expressed their active support in favor of more strongly profiled European university networks “that aim to jointly construct their strategy and governance in the triangle of knowledge. Building on previous work and opportunities, this enhanced cooperation will take various forms and fulfill different functions.”⁷

Therefore, a European funding programme should be developed for universities that cooperate with each other in the triangle of knowledge (education, research, innovation) and that want to elevate their cooperation to a new level. A network would consist of universities from at least three EU member states.

Ideally, the funding should come out of a common pot of monies from Erasmus+ and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the EU. Due to the existing political time pressure a coordinated but separate funding by Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 (Framework Programme for Research and Innovation) is conceivable. The member states will also have to commit financially to the sustainability of the networks beyond the European project funding.

The annually available funding should vary between five and fifteen Million Euro⁸ per network, depending on the scope of the cooperation. The evaluation panels should consist of peers with adequate experience in the three corners of the knowledge triangle. Strengthening the links between teaching, research and innovation would be the most important criterion for their decision. The lifespan of a project should be five plus five years with a midterm evaluation, in order to foster the formation of long term structures that deserve the network title of “European Universities”.

The planned pilot action of the DG Education of the EU Commission could start with limited funds in autumn of 2018 in order to test the evaluation processes and to receive more information about the existing networks in Europe. The planned mapping exercise of European university networks could take up these and other findings and present a comprehensive overview before the full start of the programme in 2021.

3.2. Territorial Connections – Supporting universities as the center of regional innovation ecosystems of the EU

The French, German and Polish rectors’ conferences also campaign for active support in favor of universities “that play a central role in the innovative ecosystems of regions and intend to develop their cooperation with other ecosystems and universities in European regions.”⁹ They propose a new European funding instrument “Territorial Connections” that supports excellence in cooperation between regional innovation ecosystems.¹⁰ This proposal will create competition and cooperation between regions of similar profile in their innovation strategies (Regional Innovation

Strategy for Smart Specialization – RIS3) and in their underlying cooperation in research, teaching and innovation. RIS3 strategies are required by the EU from all regions applying for cohesion funds' (ESIF) support of the EU. This process will help to develop and improve the quality of partnerships inside the innovation ecosystems. The programme should lead to a European ecosystem of the regional ecosystems. It would bind regions, universities and enterprises together on a specific theme agreed on bottom up by the ecosystems.

Every network should include at least three strong universities as the heart of most regional ecosystems, as well as enterprises, non-university research institutions and other players. An average range of ten to twenty million Euros per project would have to be provided by the future EU-Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. Additional funding from regional sources including ESIF would be expected.

3.3. Capacity building in less competitive higher education systems via excellence initiatives

In 2016, a European Excellence Initiative was proposed in a report to the President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, on a new innovation concept for the EU. It was based on the assumption that every functioning ecosystem for innovation in the world has one or some first-class universities at its core. The authors proposed to develop a funding programme for "top academic institutions to support innovation 2.0".¹¹

For those member states that so far have been less successful in European competitive research funding this proposal could not deliver. With such a concept, the different social and economic divides would have led to an EU competition where mainly northern and central European institutions and a smaller number of southern institutions would have had a realistic chance to excel and profit from the European funds. Institutions from many other member states would practically have been excluded with no chance to compete and, subsequently, to develop and improve which would lead to the loss of valuable intellectual assets.

Therefore, the three national rectors' conferences proposed "active support to those member states that want to increase the capabilities of their universities in order to sustain and distribute excellence in Europe, possibly through excellence initiatives".¹² Based on the concept of Distributed Excellence this proposal for national excellence initiatives is directed in the first place at those member states that want to improve their national capacity in competing for European and international research funding and will be major recipients of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) after 2020. The member states interested to run such a competition would have to encourage applications from all locations/regions on their territory in order to allow for a fair and broad competition and for opportunities of political and scientific centers of the member states.

Most importantly, European and even global peers would decide on the quality of applications. This international peer review organized on the EU level would create the European surplus value for the member states, the regions and the national science communities involved. The international peers would be able to produce quality judgements independently of the influence of national pressure groups. This review would have to be organized by a consortium of several independent research funding agencies combining experience of all parts of the EU. Finally, the funding programme would have to allow for projects of different sizes – collaborative research projects of universities/ non-university sector and where applicable of industry/society as well as smaller projects such as research labs centered around one principal investigator (PI) and his/her team or doctoral schools. The measure stick of the international peers would have to be project

excellence in a specific member state, but oriented in its potential at European and world excellence standards.

The funding of the peer review process should be provided by the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation from earmarked monies foreseen for "Spreading Excellence". A topping up of these funds via the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation could make these investments in the competitiveness of national research systems attractive for the member states and regions. The bulk of the project funding would have to be provided from national as well as regional funds and the available co-funding of the ESIF of the EU. Funding would have to be offered for a period of seven to ten years with mid-term reviews.

These programmes would help to develop the pockets of excellence in all member states and regions that decide to participate in the competition and would widen the opportunities for participation of all member states in excellence based programmes funded or co-funded by the EU.

4. Conclusion

The proposals presented here by CPU, HRK and KRASP form a set of activities by the EU, member states and regions that would increase excellence in research, education and innovation and foster the cooperation and cultural exchange of important parts of the European population. Thereby, they address the economic and cultural dimension of the European future. Distributed excellence in the knowledge triangle implemented in the three initiatives presented has to be consciously developed in all parts of Europe and in all its member states. These policies form the basis for the sustainability of European societies and economies and the fruitful and peaceful development of the EU in the future.

(1) Conclusions of the European Council Meeting (14 December 2017), p. 3

(2) https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-05-Forschung/Trilateral_Declaration_of_CPU_HRK_KRASP_final.pdf, also http://www.krasp.org.pl/resources/upload/Inne_dokumenty_KRASP/trojstronna_deklaracja_cpu_hrk_krasp-1.pdf

(3) There are proponents of the view that single world-class institutions are the only opportunity for European universities and European innovation to be competitive and visible worldwide, and attract top-level researchers in the same way as the biggest private and public funders in the world (e.g. the Swiss model of the two “Eidgenössische Technische Hochschulen” (ETHs) / the Stanford University - Silicon Valley model / the “Champions League model” as a soccer allegory). Others consider the broad distribution of good institutions in the EU achieving excellence at least in certain fields of activity as the necessary condition for a fair chance of development in all of its regions. These two opposing views could be described as the lighthouse versus the swarm model and can be illustrated through a recent allegory popular in Germany: “Lighthouses or long chains of lights? (Leuchttürme oder Lichterketten)”

(4) It was discussed by the representatives of the French, German and Polish University Rectors’ Conferences (CPU, HRK and KRASP) in Berlin on 20 May of 2017

(5) The programme was initially aimed at defining and developing a small number of world-class universities in Germany that are able to compete in the leading world rankings. International peers rather than politicians selected the winners.

(6) With an original endowment of 47 billion euros, it has allowed the emergence of new projects, and contributed to the creation and development of 18 major communities of universities and institutions (*IdEx* and *I-site*) as well as collaboration between various stakeholders from national research organizations, engineering and management schools, civil society and the economic sector. In addition, excellence in research has been achieved through the creation of 171 Laboratories of Excellence (*LabEx*), as well as in teaching and learning through the promotion of 36 clusters of innovation (*IdEFI*). The funds have also made it possible to support and boost the transfer of research to innovation, through the creation of 14 TTO’s (*Sociétés d’Accélération et de Transfert de Technologie*) and 8 Technical Research Institutes (*IRT*).

(7) Ibid.

(8) As research measures will be more costly as governance, education and mobility measures, 2/3 of the funding could come from the FP and 1/3 from Erasmus+. As the common strategy and the derived research measures are science-driven, the FP funds should come from the envisaged pillar “Fundamental Science”. If the developed research strategies are applicable, the networks could participate in thematic clusters in the framework programme, e.g. in the planned EU research missions.

(9) https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-05-Forschung/Trilateral_Declaration_of_CPU_HRK_KRASP_final.pdf

(10) <http://www.cpu.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Territorial-connections-new-version.pdf>

(11) Robert Madelin and David Ringrose (ed.): Opportunity now: Europe’s mission to innovate. European Union 2016; chap 7: Developing Top Academic Institutions to support Innovation 2.0, p. 75ff.

(12) https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-05-Forschung/Trilateral_Declaration_of_CPU_HRK_KRASP_final.pdf

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