1 Universities' Mundaneness and Regional Engagement

Setting the Stage

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the main logic of this volume, which starts from the grassroots level of universities' "everyday" engagements, looking at the manifold ways in which university knowledge agents build connections with multiple regional partners across the public and private sectors, and civic society more generally. Roles, functions and normative orientations of universities in the context of their surrounding regions have, in many cases, been taken for granted and, thus, have not been systematically addressed and/or still lack theorizing, due to the focus being on extraordinary, large-scale and eye-catching activities, and financially impressive transactions such as patents and spin-offs, embedded in "happy family stories" of ambitious regional development projects and coalitions.

There is an extensive academic and policy literature regarding the various ways in which universities contribute to society through their teaching and research activities, as well as what has been termed the "third mission" (cf. Pinheiro et al., 2015). Much attention has been given to universities' formal relationships with multiple stakeholders, in the context of making their knowledge externally available in different ways as a means of supporting national and local economic development, as well as innovation (Perkmann et al., 2013).

However, there is a growing recognition that this set of easily measured activities is only a very limited subset of what universities do (Laredo, 2007), and that tasks associated with broader regional engagement are often located at the fringes of universities' core purposes (Benneworth, 2013). Nonetheless, these restrictive conceptions have dominated policy and academic debates because of their easy measurability (OECD, 2007; Charles & Wilson, 2012). There has been a tendency within the literature to treat universities' societal contributions in a very reductive way, regarding them as strategic actors contributing mainly to innovation, and with a limited number of best practices which can optimize these knowledge transfer activities.

This reduction has created a situation in which we are often studying and making policy for the small and the exceptional, forming university policies for counting measurable outcomes such as numbers of spin-offs and/or patents. This ignores the larger contexts – local, regional, national and global – within which universities and other types of higher education institutions (HEIs) operate and are deeply embedded (Krücken et al., 2007; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) and, specifically, the variety of ways in which their everyday teaching, research and engagement activities – what we term here as "mundaneness" – can create wider and more sustainable societal impacts.

This edited volume comprises 11 empirical chapters from different geographical and cultural contexts. Through these chapters, we not only chart the diversity among case institutions, engagement mechanisms and regional contexts, but also use that diversity to advance a novel conceptual/analytical framework for unpacking university–regions' everyday activities, taking into account the dynamic, complex and co-evolving interplay between (a) key social agents and institutions, (b) the contexts in which they are embedded, as well as (c) the historical trajectories and strategic ambitions underpinning context-specific social arrangements and interactions that are mediated by temporal and spatial dimensions.

For the last 50 years, universities' contributions to society in general and their regions in particular have become a thorny issue for policymakers, practitioners and researchers alike (Charles & Benneworth, 2001; World Bank, 2008). In the last two decades, and particularly since the enactment of the European Union's 2000 Lisbon Agenda, universities have emerged as key actors in driving the knowledge economy (Harding et al., 2007; Pinheiro, 2015; Oftedal et al., 2018). Yet, as a handful of studies show, policy prioritization through catchy but often ill-defined concepts such as the triple-helix, science parks, research excellence, smart specialization and entrepreneurialism has been found to have had mixed results. For example, a recent study encompassing 266 European regions concluded that, despite the policy and managerial attention devoted to research excellence or rankings, and its apparent positive effect on regional competitiveness, in terms of its contribution to regional development, research excellence was found to be a valuable but not a crucial factor per se and always required contextualization (Garcia-Alvarez-Coque et al., 2021).

The existing state-of-the-art literature on the topic often regards universities as strategic actors, contributing through infrastructures and focused methods to the fostering of trajectories for regional change, and is overseen by strategic managers who coordinate their organizations to deliver effectively for regional needs (cf. Benneworth et al., 2017). In this edited volume, we contend that the failure to solve the aforementioned thorny issue has been driven by the fact that there has been a focus on extraordinary regional engagement, large-scale and eye-catching activities, and financially impressive transactions such as patents and spin-offs, embedded in "happy family stories" of ambitious regional development projects and coalitions. These "happy" stories have had a tendency not only to focus on individual cases ("my country" or "my university") but also

to glorify formalized arrangements, like policies, strategies and leadership discourses, instead of shedding critical light on how these affect the daily lives of university actors across the board, including the tensions and volitions that arise as a result of making strategic intentions an everyday reality. We are not here arguing that we are the first to raise these critical queries or to provide an alternative path for unpacking the complexities associated with university–region interactions (cf. Uyarra, 2010; Perry, 2012 Lattu & Cai, 2020). We are simply stating that certain assumptions as regards the roles, functions and normative orientations of universities in the context of their surrounding regions have, in many cases, been taken for granted and, thus, have not been systematically addressed and/or still lack theorizing.

Nonetheless, this extraordinary engagement does not explain what we know matters about universities' societal contributions, embedded in their core tasks of teaching and research. Therefore, the approach taken in this volume is to start from the grassroots level of universities' "everyday" engagements, looking at the manifold ways in which university knowledge agents, most often academics and students, build connections with multiple regional partners across the public and private sectors, and civic society more generally. This agenda is, in part, a reflection of the attention given in recent years to the interplay between place-based (formal) structures and (informal) social interactions in shaping dynamics that are conducive (or not) to sustained regional engagement and development over the long run (cf. Sotarauta, 2015; Kolehmainen et al., 2022). The empirical chapters comprising the heart of this volume both identify and describe a range of repertoires by which universities couple and become coupled to their regional surroundings, creating external, regional benefits but also remaking internal structures (formal and informal ones) for supporting and empowering university staff and students to use their knowledge to make a local difference. This in turn allows us to reconceptualize the very notion of university-regional engagement, embracing its underlying complexity and proposing a roadmap for a renewed research agenda that brings together social science scholars within the sub-fields of regional science, higher education, management, and innovation and entrepreneurship studies, among others.

The volume's starting point is to consider the various processes by which university knowledge is made available and actionable for regional development, by being taken up by and shaped in concert with regional actors. The framework sets out the pathways which universities, as organizations and institutions (Pinheiro, 2012), create in their regions and the ways in which universities couple their knowledge to regional actors, systems and institutions. The primary focus of analysis is the micro-scale of individual agency (knowledge actor) and the ways in which university interactions with societal partners shape local contexts for actionable knowledge (Karlsen, 2005).

This in turn motivates the volume's main theme, namely the fact that co-creation with different stakeholders results in a new set of tensions, volitions and unintended outcomes. The main contributions come through a rich set of empirical chapters, each focusing on micro-practices of knowledge interactions

by academics, students, citizens, policymakers and businesses. These chapters explore the different ways in which these actors help shape knowledge exchange and co-creation networks and the long-lasting effects (both intended and unintended) these have on those institutions and the geographies in which they are embedded.

Drawing on evolutionary economic geography, innovation studies, management and organization studies, and informed by historical perspectives, the volume creates a new mode of understanding university-regional engagement as a form of extendable temporary coupling, which also helps to address perennial policy questions of what to do with universities that do not serve local labour market needs and/or are in regions suffering from brain drain or "institutional thinness". The book illustrates such dynamics by drawing upon examples from a wide range of regions in diverse national contexts: Brazil, Caribbean, China, Italy, Norway and Poland. Through practical examples and by observing the phenomena in different contextual situations, this edited volume addresses several research queries that are associated with the following (four) key elements composing the analytical framework advanced in Chapter 2:

1. Who are the key, internal and external, actors (or agents) involved in regional engagement? What are their strategic intentions and roles, and what types of tensions and volitions occur as a result of normative and strategic clashes?
2. How does HEIs' embeddedness in global, national, regional and local contexts and institutions affect patterns, structures and mechanisms of academic engagement across the board?
3. To what extent do the everyday affairs of HEIs both contribute and reflect the nature, scope and strategic commitment towards external engagement?
4. How do past experiences, materialized in the form of local norms, traditions and identities, help determine current and future engagement patterns and strategic aspirations?

The Volume and Its Key Contributions

This volume consists of 14 chapters, including 11 empirical chapters. In the second chapter, "Unpacking mundaneness: a novel conceptual framework for universities and regional engagement", editors Rómulo Pinheiro, Laila Nordstrand Berg, Tatiana Iakovleva, Elisa Thomas, and Paul Benneworth debate the current view on university-regional engagements and suggest a renewed theoretical framework based on four main elements – macro, meso, micro dimensions, as well as temporality – that are further explored in the volume in different contexts. The starting point for the analysis relates to the fact that actors motivations and actions do not exist in a vacuum, and thus are greatly influenced by the context in which they operate. Too often, context – in its manifold manifestations (from macro to micro) – is taken for granted, and its influence is under-reported, although, we content, it offers deeper insights into

how actors within and beyond the university interact with situations and how these, in turn, influence the behaviours of individuals involved with processes of regional engagement.

Our empirical section opens in Chapter 3 with Laila Nordstrand Berg and Gunnar Yttri's "Changes and continuities in the development of rural teacher education in the fjords of Western Norway". This chapter looks at the development of teacher education in Sogndal, a Norwegian rural village, through the lens of historical institutionalism. The authors review key events and critical junctures over six decades from the early 1960s to the present. Developments and changes are understood within the historically determined and changing framework of institutional strategies, regional needs, and national policies. The study is illuminated by a story from a rural Norwegian teacher-training institution, which was quite successful in supplying teachers for the region until the 2010s. Nonetheless, this regional success offered no guarantee of satisfying higher academic requirements following national reforms.

Chapter 4, authored by Kadígia Faccin, Elisa Thomas, and Caroline Kretschmer and titled "University dynamic capabilities to boost innovation ecosystems: the case of a university alliance in Brazil", examines how universities' dynamic capabilities are mobilized to take on the role of fostering and orchestrating regional innovation ecosystems. Increasingly, universities are applying strategic and entrepreneurial management practices to be able to expand themselves into governance structures to deal with dynamic and changing environments. Different phases of an innovation ecosystem (initial stage, development, and renewal) require different key dynamic capabilities. The authors find that there is a fourth phase, the boost stage, in which an existing but declining innovation ecosystem requires an agent to be the propellant and revitalizer so that its development cycle can be resumed and expanded. We address this issue with a unique Brazilian case study concerning an alliance founded by three universities to develop the region into an environment conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship. This case study reveals the role of universities as an orchestrating agent when there is a need to boost an ecosystem that is experiencing difficulties, by organizing, motivating, and supporting a network of stakeholders to drive the regional ecosystem. The research found that universities in declining ecosystems need to combine three dynamic capabilities at the same intensity in several activities to lead the local initiative.

Chapter 5, "Exploring the role of the university in the creation of knowledge networks in the Aso Valley, a rural area in Marche Region (Italy)", authored by Sabrina Tomasi, Concetta Ferrara, Gigliola Paviotti, Chiara Aleffi, Alessio Cavicchi, and Giovanna Bertella, questions how and to what extent universities can stimulate knowledge networks to valorize regional cultural capital in remote rural regions. Rural areas are often disadvantaged by their peripheral position, depopulation, and the scarcity of primary services, but they also have specific characteristics, especially in terms of cultural capital, that can make them attractive as tourism destinations. Sustainable tourism paths can be developed through collaboration between various actors with complementary skills

and areas of expertise, especially local cooperatives and associations. In this context, universities can play a crucial role in creating knowledge networks and enhancing "rural buzz", that is, the flow of information and knowledge among the individuals, organizations, and businesses in a rural area through face-to-face interaction. This chapter is based on an Italian case study from the Marche Region: the collaboration between the University of Macerata (UNIMC) and a local association, Agritur-Aso, has been chosen as an example of a network for the co-valorization of regional cultural capital.

Chapter 6, authored by Tatiana Iakovleva and Mette Eriksen Adkins and titled "The third mission – enhancing academic engagement with industry", explores what types of knowledge spillover are preferable for academics and how universities can support them. There is an ongoing debate in the literature about a "third mission" for universities. Examples of successful academic spin-offs have led to a widespread policy of encouraging collaboration between the academic and commercial worlds. However, the commercialization of research-based innovation often suggests a conflict of interest to academics. Analysing a survey of 226 academics in a medium-sized university in Norway, the authors found that supporting the entrepreneurial knowledge and skills of academics might cause a modest increase in their entrepreneurial intentions. At the same time, incentives for joint research projects with industrial partners enhance academics' desire to take part in such collaborations. The authors conclude by questioning the well-publicized policy efforts focused on boosting academic start-ups and argue that more knowledge about starting and running a business would be helpful, but only for a small number of academics who are already interested in such activities. To enhance broader academic involvement in the "third mission", policies should encourage a wider range of activities and focus on providing incentives, such as tax regimes or co-funding possibilities, for other types of research–industry collaboration such as joint research projects.

Chapter 7, "Student entrepreneurship programmes in higher education institutions: multi-scalar embeddedness and heterogeneous regional responses", authored by Øyvind Midtbø Berge, Øystein Stavø Høvig, and Svein Gunnar Sjøtun, investigates how different HEIs interact with the region regarding student entrepreneurship. Since the 2000s there has been an increasing prevalence of student entrepreneurship programmes in HEIs. Even though the HEIs have different institutional and regional preconditions for student entrepreneurship, the concrete activities and strategies are often shaped by best-practice models derived from successful and well-performing organizations. With empirical examples, this chapter shows how the embeddedness of HEIs in a regional context influences strategies for student entrepreneurship. The authors discuss the activities and strategies at three different HEIs in the Bergen region with regard to how they have been influenced by the dynamic interaction between the HEIs and the regional context.

Chapter 8, by Dian Liu, "Student incubators in China: the cases in Shanghai and Wuhan", focuses on the impact of environmental contextual character-istics on incubator practice. "Environmental contextual characteristics" refers

to both the organizational character of the host university and the regional features where the university incubator is located, which intertwine and jointly shape the current profile of university incubators. Drawing upon two case studies of incubators in two universities with varying disciplinary strength (science and engineering, and teacher education) in two different cities (Shanghai and Wuhan), this chapter examines the management policies and practices of the two student incubators and how such incubator profiles are framed by environmental contextual perspectives. This chapter first demonstrates the entrepreneurship initiative and student entrepreneurship development as the background of the generation of university incubators, followed by an introduction to the two cases of university incubators. It then compares the varied incubation policies, structures, and practices in the two cases, underpinned by regional characteristics and organizational institutions and supplies empirical evidence for further policy recommendations regarding student incubators and entrepreneurship in China.

Chapter 9, by Iyad Abualrub and Rómulo Pinheiro, is titled "Aligning university roles and strategic orientations: when local mandates and global aspirations meet". HEIs are increasingly under pressure to make societal contributions, for example, in the form of job creation, technology transfers, local economic development, and so on, which result in tensions and dilemmas at multiple levels, not least as regards strategic management. In this chapter, the authors investigate how universities align education and research on the one hand and how they navigate the tensions between local demands for relevance and global aspirations towards excellence on the other. Firstly, the chapter identifies these tensions and dilemmas, and secondly, it investigates how they are being handled with regard to strategic planning (including resource allocation) at both the central (university) and sub-unit (faculty) levels. The study adopts a qualitative case study design and compares developments at two distinct HEIs in Norway. The findings suggest that relevance and excellence are intertwined dimensions associated with the multiple pressures facing HEIs. These findings provide critical insights into how the strategies and daily practices of actors at different levels within HEIs address the demands posed by a dynamic and increasingly complex and turbulent environment.

Chapter 10, by James Karlsen and Rómulo Pinheiro, titled "Emergent strategies and tensions between decoupled university structures and strategic management initiatives: a case study of a strategy process", investigates the ways in which a Norwegian university located in a region facing a series of socio-economic challenges devised and implemented a new strategy centred on the co-creation of knowledge as a vision. More specifically, the authors examine the dilemmas and tensions faced by university actors in articulating a shared strategic platform bridging internal (university) aspirations with external (regional actors and ministry) demands and expectations. The chapter adopts a historical institutionalist perspective using institutional logics as the conceptual lens through which the case data are interpreted. The findings provide fresh evidence of the complexity associated with strategic processes within highly

institutionalized organizations such as universities. Strategic orientations were found to adopt emergent rather than deliberative patterns. Challenges associated with the institutionalization of the co-creation of knowledge vision resulted from the clashes between the different logics and behavioural postures associated with the main actors involved in the strategy process.

Chapter 11, by Anna Dąbrowska, Wojciech Dziemianowicz and Magdalena Cybulska, is titled "Towards the strategic cooperation of "two worlds": university-local government relationships in Warsaw". In this chapter, the authors address the issue of the relationships between universities and local governments by asking the research question: (How) can universities contribute to the design and implementation of public policies at the local level? Based on the case of the city of Warsaw (Poland), this study provides a comparison of the role of university stakeholders in the process of design and implementation of the city's development strategy. The study provides a comparison of two strategic plans for two time periods and concludes that the role of academic stakeholders has changed from formal involvement towards guiding the process of decision-making. The authors identify factors hindering the involvement of universities within the policy process, namely a lack of systemic solutions for cooperation, a lack of incentives for academics to put special focus on activities not related to publication results, low understanding of the third mission among the academic community and limited trust between the representatives of the "two worlds".

Chapter 12, authored by Laila Nordstrand Berg and Kristin Lofthus Hope, titled "Keeping talents in the region? Educational internships and their impact on regional development", highlights how internships within higher education contribute to place-shaping and regional development. It addresses how employees and students engage with regional partners to develop education by co-creating internship projects. Strategies concerning regional development are set into play when HEIs and the private and public sectors collaborate to provide education. The focus is on academic disciplines in Norway that have quite recently established student practice through internships, namely sociology, history, and business administration. The authors are following up on this practice element by analysing the perspective of educational fields and different public and private actors within a regional setting to provide internships for students.

The last empirical chapter of this volume, Chapter 13, by Elin M. Oftedal, Emily Dick Ford, and Luz Longsworth, titled "Activist leadership in the Caribbean: the case of the University of the West Indies", investigates how a cross-national university in a transitional region such as the Caribbean implements its third mission, defined broadly as engagement in society, including entrepreneurial and innovative efforts. Conceptually, the chapter uses the entrepreneurial architecture framework and discusses how systems, structures, strategy, leadership, and culture form a unique mandate to engage in national, regional but also international challenges.

The book concludes with Chapter 14, "Universities and regions: new insights and emerging developments", authored by editors Laila Nordstrand

Berg, Elisa Tomas, Tatiana Iakovleva, Rómulo Pinheiro, and Paul Benneworth. This final chapter summarizes the findings of the volume across the four dimensions mentioned earlier: macro, meso, micro, and temporality. In doing so, the editors propose a refined framework to address the role these dimensions play in addressing HEI-regional interactions, and sketch out a roadmap for future studies in the area.

In a nutshell, this edited volume offers fresh evidence and compelling examples of how the macro environment, composed of political, economic, and sociocultural value, affects HEI-regional relationships; how the everyday engagement of core agents within HEIs and the region forms and shapes those interactions; and how these activities can be seen in a historical perspective over time. These phenomena are observed in different situations and varieties and within different international contexts. The volume's take home message is that mundaneness, or the everyday activities of agents involved with regional engagement, serves as a key tool for unpacking and better understanding HEIs and their regional engagement.

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