

Distributed Excellence – a Concept for EU University and Research Policies

Discussion paper

1. Introduction

It is a characteristic feature of the EU 27 that centres and pockets of excellence of research and higher education in certain disciplines and fields can be found in all Member States. This is true notwithstanding a concentration of research capacities and performance in the western parts of Europe. A similar situation can be stated in Member States like Germany and France. Their publicly funded research system consists of universities and other non-university research institutes and has well known centres of excellence in research. Although there remain territorial imbalances, both countries are characterized by a broad regional distribution of excellence often organized around hubs partly supported through various instruments aiming at promoting better cooperation between universities and the non-university research sector. This presents the EU university systems in marked difference to the very hierarchical Anglo-Saxon research structure. In particular in the US, research capacity is focussed on a limited and geographically concentrated number of top universities of world-wide visibility that are successful in popular international university rankings. The bigger part of the higher education system, however, contributes to the overall research performance to a much lesser degree.

2. Distributed excellence as a concept for European university and research policies

The French, German and Polish Rectors' Conferences, in a joint paper of 2018, defined "distributed excellence" as a potential general concept for future EU research and university policies. It would aim at the creation of "a well-balanced and strong higher education and research system in the EU, rooted in all regions and Member States."¹ In that sense, distributed excellence serves as a strategic concept for the thriving of decentralised political and multipolar economic systems such as the EU. In parallel to regional development under the auspices of "smart specialisation" the concept of distributed excellence in research demands and fosters pockets and centres of excellence in specific disciplines, research and innovation areas in all regions and Member States.

A university system of distributed excellence supports complementary place-based innovation with specific scientific and technological knowledge as well as the education of tomorrow's experts on the spot. In this sense, the term is used as an alternative to policy models that aim to promote single world-class institutions in Europe by concentrating funding on them. Thus, the discussion on distributed excellence is directly linked to issues of the relationship between center and regions, as well as between main city hubs and smaller cities, in the Member States and in the EU and to issues of regional policy and "smart specialization".

¹ Position of CPU, HRK and KRASP: Living up to the significance of Universities, 10/07/2018, p.2:
https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-05-Forschung/Position_CPU_HRK_KRASP_18.5.2018/CPU-HRK-KRASP_Living_Up_to_the_Significance_of_Universities-2.pdf

For the three rectors' conferences however, it was important to stress that their policy concept "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, curiosity-driven and applied 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."²

3. Distributed excellence in the context of the future EU widening and sharing excellence policies

The concept of distributed excellence can moreover help shaping European policies that intend to overcome the gap between the innovation leaders and the less-performing innovation actors, such as the spreading excellence program in Horizon Europe.³ Cohesion policies are another peculiar feature of the EU as a supranational union of independent Member States. For economic, political and historical reasons, the Union invests heavily into overcoming the imbalances of socioeconomic development between its members. Many elements of the European cohesion policies are mirrored by similar balancing strategies inside the Member States and even inside their regions, addressing solidarity and acknowledging the need to give all regions a positive development perspective.

In this vein of European solidarity, the term distributed excellence has been taken up by the European University Association (EUA) in its new strategic plan of June 2020 which "embrace[s] the concept of 'distributed excellence' in order to narrow research and innovation gaps in Europe. Distributed excellence is achieved when all regions and member states are capable of participating in global research activity in a competitive way, at least in some selected fields. Achieving this requires public investment and reforms by those with modest innovation performance, and proactive engagement in mentorships and partnerships by those with stronger research performance."⁴

This statement defines an ambitious goal for less-performing regions, which is achievable only in case of a dual concerted effort of the EU on the one hand and of the Member States and regions on the other as well as a commitment of all universities in Europe to mentorships and partnerships with each other.⁵

4. Suggestions for public policies on the EU, Member State and regional level

The model of a strong and well-balanced higher education system in Europe rooted in all regions and Member States reflects the decentralized economic structure of the EU. Small- and medium-sized enterprises profit from higher education systems in their neighbourhood that can provide high quality research and innovation partnerships in certain fields and disciplines. By systematically supporting these networks the EU could strengthen the regional and local ecosystems, as laid out in the paper of the French Rectors' Conference (CPU) for an EU funding program "Territorial connections - Proposal for a European program to work in favor of ecosystems".⁶

The ambitious recovery plan *Next Generation EU* monitored by the EU Commission in order to create a more resilient Union in the face of the current COVID crisis, makes this even more topical in today's and

² See above, p.2

³ [for the innovation terminology, see European Innovation Scoreboard 2020: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/policy/innovation/scoreboards_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/policy/innovation/scoreboards_en)

⁴ Europe's Universities Shaping the Future. EUA Strategic Plan, p. 7: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications.html>

⁵ See the concrete goals for countries lagging behind EU average in R&D investments and highly cited publications proposed in the communication of the EU Commission of 30.09.2020 "A new ERA for Research and Innovation", p. 9

⁶ Position of the CPU, HRK and CRASP: Living up..., see above, p. 3-4

tomorrow's Europe. Obviously, not all Member States have the same capacity to take part in the value chains that will be built or re-established in the years to come. In that respect, one of the plan's objectives should be to create the appropriate conditions for allowing the research, innovation and education ecosystems distributed across Europe to cooperate based on thematic priorities responding to the strategic priorities of the Union. The main task of the EU would thus be to agree on joint priority setting with the Member States and their regions so as to stimulate and deliver mutually agreed and coordinated funding on all three levels.

Overall, the main challenge of successful European university policies will be to maintain the proper balance in the system and ensure a level playing field. The success of the concept of distributed excellence relies on the ability and willingness to engage in intensive international cooperation and pooling of resources of universities and research institutes. The existing complementary strengths of the EU university system have to be supported in their dynamic development. This special culture of cross border cooperation has been nurtured by the EU over decades, as is witnessed by the funding of the EU framework programs for research and innovation and Erasmus+ for higher education. The culture of bottom-up cooperation and also of solidarity in cooperation (e.g. the Tempus program) on the other hand, has to be continuously incentivised and financed in a relevant manner.

The European university system of the future has to stay flexible and competitive lest it petrifies. The success of these instruments will always depend on joint priority setting in multilevel policies, that is to say consultation, cooperation, mutual learning processes and alignment between the EU, the Member States and the regional level. Distributed excellence should be the policy concept not only for the EU and relations between Member States, but at the same time a political leitmotiv for policies inside the Member States and the regions. It intends to balance centralising tendencies and budget distribution favouring the political and economic centres on the one hand with the initiatives of the regions in the framework of smart specialisation strategies on the other.

5. From distributed excellence to distributed innovation – and back?

In a recently-issued report, *A Robust Innovation Ecosystem for the Future of Europe*, an expert group working on behalf of the European Innovation Council evinces similar concerns – the need for concentration of means in big hubs when it comes to strategic sectors such as AI or hydrogen, which require massive investments, and the no less important need for a more distributed or balanced approach through a network of small- to medium-sized actors when other sectors are under consideration (e.g. the digital sector).

Although this proves that distributed innovation is as much a preoccupation of the EU as distributed excellence in research, the main divergence between the two may well be one of focus linked to the role ascribed to smart specialization strategies. Whereas the latter could be used in smaller states or regions to develop close-to-market innovation only, it is clear that scientific research value chains this way will not materialize, because a lack of serious infrastructure and provision in basic research would prevent these states to detect or attract new and promising research talents.

Universities in all Member States have to insist that basic, curiosity-driven research requires publicly-funded resources. Only with this in mind, will the EU be able to nurture the necessary disciplinary research capabilities providing the basis for research-oriented education programs and for doctoral education opportunities at powerful and recognized interdisciplinary research centres.

Any system of distributed excellence will not disregard its centres of excellence that are globally competitive in a broad range of fields. Quite the opposite. Europe's strength consists in the variety of profiles of their higher education and research institutions. A well organised fleet, however, does not only consist of flagships.