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**Abstract**

Universities should place delivering societal benefits centrally within their strategic decision-making. But this comes at a time when universities face extensive pressures to transform every aspect of their institutional existence, raising questions about whether the third mission can ever truly be a strategic objective for higher education. To understand this tension, this paper explores the ways in which national higher education policies frame the strategic latitude that universities enjoy to engage with regional partners in teaching and research activities. Presenting case studies from the Czech Republic and Norway, the paper reveals that the space for regional engagement is squeezed at every stage as universities seek to implement national directives whilst remaining true to their regional roots. We conclude by arguing better understanding the regional mission requires better understanding the processes by which regional engagement is framed as un-prestigious by wider policy fields. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)