



Higher Education and Smart Specialisation in Portugal

Report Summary

Hugo Pinto

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra and Faculty of Economics, University of Algarve

Carla Nogueira

CinTurs, Research Centre for Tourism, Sustainability and Well-being, University of Algarve

John Edwards

Joint Research Centre, European Commission (until August 2020), CICS-NOVA (from October 2020)

Universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) have a fundamental role in the success of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3). They are expected to fulfil several functions - in addition to the “traditional” Education and Research. HEIs are considered factors of territorial regeneration, providers of infrastructure and knowledge-intensive services, local connectors with knowledge and external markets, and even animators of innovation ecosystems. This is probably an excessively optimistic view as HEIs face a wide range of challenges.

This presentation discusses the main results of the HESS project - Higher Education and Smart Specialisation in Portugal. The project, which develops case studies in several European regions, aims to contribute to building innovation capacities by strengthening the participation of HEIs in regional innovation networks, promoting the integration of higher education with research, innovation and regional development in defining and implementing paths for smart specialisation. All HESS case studies adopt action-research principles, carried out with and for the objects of study, in particular, the authorities responsible for implementing the S3 and the HEIs.

The case study of HESS in Portugal was on a national scale, involving all regions, something that contrasts with most other HESS studies, which focused on a single region and on the role of a single university or HE network in the dynamics of smart specialisation. It was developed in the second half of 2019 and 2020. The analyses presented are based on a set of interviews with innovation actors and seven focus groups (one in each region).

The results identify aspects of the innovative and transformational potential in Portugal and its regions, while highlighting contextual and specific problems of universities and polytechnic institutes. Some of the main limitations highlighted to guarantee a more effective role for HEIs in S3, both in interviews and in focus groups, refer to factors external to HEIs, such as: the difficulty in creating policies that reduce regional asymmetries, the limited culture of innovation and collaboration, the excessive bureaucratic burden of thematic and regional operational programs, the risk of losing the dynamics of regional engagement around S3. Several factors internal to the HEIs were also highlighted: the increasing budgetary pressure, the difficulties in attracting and retaining talent, the mechanisms for evaluating and accessing careers that prevent transformative activities and regional engagement vis-à-vis other (more consolidated) such as the scientific publication, or the difficulties in creating the necessary skills to respond to an ambitious transformation agenda like any S3 is. It is also suggested a set of exploratory ideas that can be implemented in the context of S3 policies to mitigate the identified limitations.