

MECHANISMS TO INVOLVE “FOURTH HELIX” IN SMART SPECIALISATION STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF FINNISH REGIONS

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Motivation/Objectives

Smart specialisation policy emphasizes the importance of quadruple helix approach (research, business, public sector and civil society) to identify regional opportunities for innovation through a bottom-up entrepreneurial discovery process. Discovery is the outcome of the interaction between these different regional actors, each contributing according to its function in society. While the conceptual framework for triple helix approach is clearly defined in prior research (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995; Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2012), the quadruple helix approach is far from being considered a well-established concept in innovation research and policy with several definitions for fourth helix such as civil society, innovation users and media- and culture-based public (Cavallini et al., 2016). The central objective with the inclusion of fourth helix is to foster the demand-side perspective in innovation and mark the shift from technical to societal innovation (Foray et al., 2012; Yawson, 2009). The mechanisms to involve the fourth helix in research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation (RIS3) has received scarce attention in prior research, thus leaving the regional authorities across Europe with little guidance how to implement quadruple helix approach in practice. In fact, according to two recent European wide surveys, the participation of civil society actors in RIS3 has remained on unsatisfactory level (Kroll, 2016; Marinelli & Perez-Forte, 2017). Our paper aims at contributing with increased understanding about the mechanisms through which to involve the fourth helix in RIS3 development.

Main Research Questions

Our main research question is “What are the key mechanisms to involve the fourth helix in smart specialisation strategy development?” This main research question we have addressed through several sub-questions such as:

- How to motivate different actors to engage in smart specialisation strategy development?
- How to facilitate stakeholder interaction in smart specialisation strategy development?
- What are the challenges to involve stakeholders in smart specialisation strategy development?

While we explored quadruple helix stakeholders and their involvement in smart specialisation strategy development as a whole, our paper focuses on the involvement of the fourth helix.

Methodology

Our paper is explorative in nature and utilizes a grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Gioia et al., 2013). We investigated stakeholder involvement in smart specialisation strategy development through 18 interviews with 23 RIS3 facilitators in Finnish regions, covering 17 out of 18 Finnish mainland regions. Our semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or by phone from August to October 2017 and lasted approximately 45 minutes. We also used regional smart specialisation reports and presentations to validate our findings. We recorded all interviews, transcribed and analysed them in Atlas.ti.

Results

As key findings, we identified three types of mechanisms used for involving the fourth helix in RIS3 development – information exchange, feedback compilation and collaborative co-creation. Two first mechanisms are common in Finnish regions, while the third one is still rare, mostly performed in health and

environment related issues, which are close to the interests of citizens and civil society associations. In order to facilitate the quadruple helix interaction, we found necessary the direct participation of the fourth helix in regional RIS3 thematic workshops. As a key bottleneck for the involvement of fourth helix, we identified the additional effort for regional authority to initiate this interaction without clear guidelines. While triple helix collaboration has long tradition and experience in Finland, the existing model cannot be directly utilized for reaching the fourth helix, as it is more fragmented group and in general lack the knowledge and competence in RIS3. Our case study suggests that the involvement of fourth helix in RIS3 would require the division of RIS3 work into specific themes for which it is possible to identify interest groups within fourth helix actors and direct discussion with the identified actors to introduce the RIS3 concept and motivate them to participate in RIS3 process.

Implications/Discussion

Our paper provides an initial step towards better understanding the mechanisms to involve the “fourth helix” in smart specialisation. Our qualitative-driven methodology and the focus in Finland is not without limitations, as institutional context influences the implementation of entrepreneurial discovery process. We urge further studies to validate our findings and explore the mechanism for the involvement of fourth helix in other European regions.

Resources/references

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