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IL CAPITALE CULTURALE

Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage

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Research, education and co-creation: the university in place

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Abstract

Nelle strategie di sviluppo regionale le università stanno assumendo un ruolo sempre più decisivo, quale generatore di conoscenza e facilitatore nel dialogo tra gli attori locali. Questo contributo ha l'obiettivo di capire il ruolo che può ricoprire l'Università di Macerata nel

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processo di interazione tra imprese, settore pubblico e mondo accademico. A seguito di una serie di eventi organizzati da parte dell'Università di Macerata con questo obiettivo, in questo contesto verranno analizzati i risultati emersi da un focus group all'interno di un evento di *Entrepreneurial Discovery Process*. Gli stakeholders partecipanti hanno individuato l'università come il centro di un ecosistema regionale dell'innovazione, all'interno del quale poter generare e trasmettere una conoscenza diffusa.

In regional development strategies, universities are playing an increasingly decisive role as a knowledge generator and facilitator in the dialogue between local actors. This paper aims to understand the role that the University of Macerata can play in the process of interaction between business, public sector and research. Following a series of events organized by the University of Macerata with this objective, in this context will be analyzed the results of a focus group within an Entrepreneurial Discovery Process event. The participating stakeholders identified the university as the centre of a regional innovation ecosystem, where knowledge can be generated and transmitted.

Introduction

In a globalised world, universities are asked to play a more significant role as stimulators and facilitators of knowledge transfer within business and society¹. The interplay between research, business, policy makers and civil society forms the crux of the well-established Quadruple Helix Model². The helix is seen as a universal innovation model that can assist students, researchers, managers, entrepreneurs, and policymakers to understand the roles of university, industry, and government in forming and developing “an innovative region,” which has self-renewal and sustainable innovative capacity³. From the collaboration between local actors and the academic world, physical spaces of innovation can often be created, managed by HEIs, within which to generate processes of co-creation and exchange of knowledge⁴.

This paper explores the role that the university can play in the process of collaboration with local stakeholders in a rural area of Italy. First, a brief review of the literature points to the importance of the university-business cooperation to develop knowledge and generate innovation and the role of the universities in rural areas. Second, it describes the position of the University of Macerata (UNIMC) and the methods used in recent years to collaborate in local development. Third, through the organisation of an Entrepreneurial Discovery Process focus group, it seeks to understand what kind of physical form the collaboration between the academic world and the business world can take on.

¹ Cavicchi *et al.* 2013.

² Carayannis, Grigoroudis 2016; Miller *et al.* 2018.

³ Etzkowitz, Zhou 2017.

⁴ Reichert 2019.

Theoretical framework

The regional role of universities

The role of universities has been constantly evolving: together with teaching (first mission) and researching (second mission), a third concept was suggested to identify interactions between universities and the rest of society⁵. Engaging with external stakeholders constitutes a third mission of universities in their innovation systems. According to the OECD report⁶ on universities and regions, entrepreneurial innovation is closely linked, although not exclusively, to the research function of the university as it is capable of producing creative knowledge and know-how⁷; the human capital development is directly linked to the teaching function and community development is linked to the public service role of universities. The contribution it can make to the institutional capacity of the region through the commitment of its management and its members to local civil society is also important.

The knowledge development capabilities are increasingly associated with the systems of innovation, both national and regional: universities are considered a part of these systems together with firms, R&D laboratories, training agencies, etc.⁸. As the role of universities in bolstering knowledge communities and shaping innovation cultures has become more widely recognised, regional engagement and innovation capacity have become core themes in university mission statements⁹.

The University-business cooperation (UBC) is understood as any sort of interaction between HEIs and business for mutual benefit¹⁰ and is considered an essential driver of knowledge-based economies and societies. This means that UBC not only helps individual organisations to address some of their most pressing challenges, such as the need of funding and innovation, high unemployment rates, lack of competitiveness, ongoing economic and social problems or increased competition, but it can also have a significant impact upon the regional economy in which they operate¹¹. This form of cooperation can connect different policy areas: innovation, higher education, enterprise, entrepreneurship, social development, globalisation and economic recovery.

The concept of the Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government relations, initiated in the 1990s in some studies by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, represents

⁵ Molas-Gallart *et al.* 2002.

⁶ OECD 2007.

⁷ Reichert 2019.

⁸ Freeman 1987.

⁹ Huggins, Johnston 2009.

¹⁰ Davey *et al.* 2011.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

a shift from the industrial-governmental dyad model to a triadic relationship between university, industry and government in the knowledge society¹². Further, the model evolved toward the quadruple helix model, which includes civil society players.

The quadruple helix, therefore, contains the following four sub-systems¹³:

- Education System, refers to academia, universities and higher education systems;
- Economic System, consists of industry/industries;
- Political System, formulates the direction in which the country is heading in the present and future (political and legal capital);
- Civil Society, combined by two forms of capital: social capital, based on the culture of traditions and values, and information capital, based on the media.

Civil society, the end-user of regional processes, is seen as potentially involved in a co-creative way throughout the innovation process, rather than simply passive end recipients, as they are representative of the needs of society¹⁴.

According to the Lambert's Report¹⁵ also «companies and universities are not natural partners». This lack of affinity has resulted in tension and conflict throughout the history, which is likely to increase in a quadruple helix context due to the increased involvement of the societal based stakeholders often with diverse agendas. It is, therefore, necessary to put in place ways of cooperation that facilitate collaboration between partners of a different nature, toward co-creation of new knowledge for local development.

Links and co-creation

First of all, relational skills are essential elements to start a collaboration from which to draw knowledge. De Silva and Rossi¹⁶ proposed three facets of relational capability that may influence a partnership, so knowledge acquisition and co-creation:

- structuring capability, which refers to the ability to devise a mutually acceptable type of framework for both parties as to how the relationship is expected to carry out;
- alignment capability, which refers to the ability of the two parties to align their goals, objectives and routines/practices;
- communication capability, which denotes the ability to maintain dialogue

¹² Ranga, Etzkowitz 2013.

¹³ Carayannis, Grigoroudis 2016.

¹⁴ Miller *et al.* 2018.

¹⁵ Lambert 2003.

¹⁶ De Silva, Rossi 2018.

with the partner by promoting effective and efficient communication. Dialogue implies interactivity, deep engagement and the ability and willingness to act on both sides. It is difficult to envisage a dialogue between two unequal partners. So, for an active exchange and the development of a shared solution, the actors must become equal and joint problem solvers.

Interactions and collaboration between different groups of actors, especially entrepreneurs, researchers and users, are one of the key characteristics of entrepreneurship and innovation activities. The requirement to involve a vast range of stakeholders in major policy decisions is one of the critical implications for innovation policy¹⁷.

For co-creation to emerge, and for the translation between academic research and its application in innovation processes to work smoothly, bridges have to be built between the knowledge, problems and challenges that emerge from the business context and those that arise from academic knowledge¹⁸. We can define co-creation as «a management initiative, or form of economic strategy, that brings different parties together (for instance, a company and a group of customers), to jointly produce a mutually valued outcome»¹⁹. The term “co-creation” was initially used in marketing to define the relationship between producers and buyers, in which the customer participates in the innovation process and thus becomes co-innovator²⁰. Over time, the research has moved from co-creation between business and customer to a co-creation of increased value and determined in a social context by a wide array of actors²¹.

Co-creation in rural areas

Historically, rural areas have been defined as areas characterised by uncertain and often contradictory modes of decision making, influenced by heterogeneous stakeholder groups marked by a distinctive set of values and ideologies²². The lack of training and business planning, due to limited time, finances, personnel, skills, and experience²³ is a relevant issue in rural regions, characterised by an economy driven by a myriad of SMEs with low levels of knowledge²⁴ and highly dispersed²⁵. Universities could play an essential role in overcoming these limits.

¹⁷ Mieszkowski, Kardas 2015.

¹⁸ Reichert 2019.

¹⁹ Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2004.

²⁰ Payne *et al.* 2008.

²¹ Perks *et al.* 2012.

²² Holmes 2002.

²³ Cavicchi *et al.* 2013.

²⁴ Potter *et al.* 2010.

²⁵ Garrod *et al.* 2006.

Networking between rural stakeholders and universities might support rural regions dealing with globalisation and knowledge economy requirements. In the smaller and less developed regions, often universities represent a unique heritage of knowledge and thus take a vital position for the success of particular policies and projects²⁶. Universities can be crucial for the development of rural networking activities for at least three reasons: they provide scientific knowledge, able to recognise and enhance the cultural and social peculiarities of the territory; they facilitate dialogue between local actors and to be able to involve stakeholders in joint planning; they provide courses and lessons to update and extend the knowledge of local operators²⁷.

Networking among different actors is needed to build a comprehensive picture of the rural region. This cooperation allows policy makers to analyse both strengths and weaknesses, define opportunities and threats to develop sound initiatives²⁸.

In many contexts, the increase of experience, trust, exchange and cooperation between public and private actors, between independent actors and institutional cultures²⁹ have turned into real common spaces of innovation at geographical, social and cultural level. In these spaces, universities play the role of providing vital research infrastructures³⁰. However, the presence of all sectoral, regional and national actors is required³¹.

Background context

The described process has been carried out in the Marche Region, a central region of Italy where rural areas account for 95% of the territory and host 81% of the population³². The regional economy is characterised by a high number of small and medium enterprises, with the presence of 28 industrial districts, based on traditional craft products (e.g. the shoes district). According to regional statistics 2018, there were 148,858 active companies in the region, and the 94,35% of them employed less than 10 persons. The entrepreneurial density of the region (97.5 active companies on 1000 inhabitants) is well above the national average (85.3). As many of similar peripheral areas, the economy is therefore characterised by low knowledge-intensive companies and low innovation. Collaboration among universities and enterprises can contribute to

²⁶ Rinaldi, Cavicchi 2016.

²⁷ Rinaldi *et al.* 2011.

²⁸ Rinaldi, Cavicchi 2016.

²⁹ Mazzucato 2016.

³⁰ Reichert 2019.

³¹ Mazzucato 2018.

³² Cavicchi *et al.* 2013.

speed the economic development process toward a more knowledge-based and innovative economy, which is a key focus area of concern in the future policy of the region³³.

Cooperation between the UNIMC and regional enterprises counts on a long-lasting relation, implemented through joint projects and initiatives, particularly in creative and cultural industries and food and tourism fields. The UNIMC's goals for regional innovation include³⁴:

- Promotion and support of youth entrepreneurship.
- Strengthening of relations with the territory and local businesses.
- Creation of culture for innovation and entrepreneurship among students, doctoral students, graduates, research fellows and researchers.
- Promotion of projects that involve the territory and stakeholders.
- Creation of synergies between university and high schools of the Marche Region and other Regions that have specialisations in science and technology.
- Promotion of incubators.

The UNIMC thus assumes the roles through which universities can support and enhance capacities needed for designing and implementing RIS3³⁵, namely generative, absorptive, collaborative and leadership roles. *Generative* since it is not limited to research, but welcomes all the opportunities that come from the networks and collaborations; *absorptive* as it can help actors absorb the supply of innovation and research, and avoid the “innovation paradox”; *collaborative* through the development and maintenance of relationships with stakeholders in each sector; *leadership* as capable of co-creating a shared vision based on the uniqueness of the location³⁶.

Methodology

The methodology used for this study was the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) focus group. The EDP «could be defined as a process in which the entrepreneurial actors are discovering and producing information about new business and innovation activities and the government is collecting, assessing and transforming this knowledge into policy action»³⁷. It is the main technique in the implementation of the RIS3 to design developmental strategies at regional levels, and typically involves the stakeholders involved representing the

³³ Potter *et al.* 2010.

³⁴ Rinaldi *et al.* 2018.

³⁵ Kempton *et al.* 2013.

³⁶ Rinaldi *et al.* 2018.

³⁷ Foray *et al.* 2012.

quadruple helix³⁸. The approach embeds many of the concepts of Participatory Action Research methodology in its planning, development, and follow-up process³⁹. According to Gianelle *et al.*⁴⁰, one of the most recurrent participatory models and analytical tools used for EDP includes the focus groups method. Santini *et al.*⁴¹, in their exploratory study, defined the EDP focus groups as a set of sectoral events, aimed at generating innovative ideas through interaction between business, public and research sectors.

Two EDP focus groups were organised by the UNIMC, to answer the following research questions:

- What role does play in the university this process?
- Which implications have this type of events for the university's regional role?

Specific aims of the participative event were:

- To open up a discussion place addressed to food and gastronomy as leverage for local development;
- To increase the dialogue between the university's students, companies, and other regional stakeholders;
- To further deepen discussion and co-creation on specific topics identified during previous meetings and events.

The event was open to anyone wishing to participate. However, it was launched through an invitation e-mail addressed to the stakeholders' network of the university, and to the students of the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism. Participants were asked to register to the event through an online form and to express preferences on a list of proposed topics for the focus groups.

The event, which took place at the universities premises in November 2019, counted on 32 participants, of which: 14 higher education students, 1 PhD student, 4 food producers and professionals, 3 policy makers, 1 dean of a upper secondary school in the field of agriculture, 7 local stakeholders/start-up, 2 other citizens interested to the topics. Groups were organised in order to have all different profiles represented.

According to the preferences, the participants were divided into two groups according to the themes under discussion, namely:

- Internationalisation & Rural Branding
- Professionalism and hospitality

A moderator facilitated each group; a rapporteur took note on emerging issues and conclusions. At the end of the event, two instant reports were produced, and they constitute the findings of this research.

³⁸ Gianelle *et al.* 2016.

³⁹ Santini *et al.* 2016.

⁴⁰ Gianelle *et al.* 2016.

⁴¹ Santini *et al.* 2016.

Findings

Internationalisation and rural branding group

The focus group highlighted a list of issues related to branding and communication activities of the “destination Marche” and its resources.

Results of the focus group pointed out the following needs:

- More significant and more specific training for professionals in the sector, in particular figures involved in territorial promotion, territorial development strategies and communication, such as, for example, tourist guides.
- More specific training for professionals able to deal with the international market.
- Shared and coherent regional imagine (brand) and communication. Among proposals, a higher level of consensus was the idea to diversify the offer, exploiting “the plurality of the region”.
- A thorough study of the market and a subsequent segmentation of the consumer profiles.
- The opportunity to create the profile of the “Marche manager”, an expert of the territory, both of the private (i.e. all the companies present at a local level) and the public aspects.
- The organisation of events to support local producers by creating seasonality-adjusted activities. This organisation implies an increased cooperation among producers. Type and size of events should also promote the visitors’ experience through a better understanding of the destination and its specific excellence.

The university was identified as the potential “Marche manager” organisation capable of keeping open the dialogue and coordinating the network. Also, the university should take into consideration the idea to provide further training to operators of the food and gastronomy field, and to create specialised learning pathways, also degrees, according to the needs of the territory.

Professionalism and hospitality group

The focus group highlighted two main themes: the importance of the training of professionals in the tourism sector and the network of local actors. As far as training is concerned, the most important points that emerged are:

- the need to train students of hotel and tourist institutes, university students and operators in the sector to welcome tourists. This welcoming ability would require knowledge of the foreign language, knowledge of

the territory, its resources, typical products and recipes. A special focus was made on the importance of the relationship, humanity and empathy in dealing with visitors;

- the proposal to create new professional figures to support companies in communication and marketing;

The following points emerged to encourage the creation of a network:

- the university takes on a facilitating role among the various local operators. The presence of a “neutral organisation” would favour the overcoming of individualisms, due to the fragmented nature of initiatives in the territory, and could support consultation and cooperation between the parties;
- to recover the traditional concept of “lu’ rajutu” (that means cooperation in local dialect), for which between operators in the agricultural and tourism sectors a spontaneous relationship of exchange of favours as a basis for the network;

Consensus was reached in the idea to create a regional network. The identified starting point was to create a single database, ideally based on a multilingual App, including all the regional offer for potential tourists.

Discussion and conclusions

Similar concepts emerged from both focus groups, as follows:

- the network was considered the basis for any development of the future tourism of the region;
- communication, both at regional (brand) level, and at local (hospitality) level is weak;
- there is a lack of skills related to tourists hospitality and management;
- the university is conceived as the key player, able to manage the network, both for its capacities and its profile (neutral, since out-of-competition).

The participants were positively involved in the process: the impression was of that open debate, and constructive exchange was taking place during the focus groups’ work. Consensus was reached in several of the debated issues, and this also implies a diffuse awareness about the problems hindering the development of the addressed field from different points of observation.

It is relevant to our aim to observe how the university has played its role within the process: representatives of the university were not active participants, but facilitators of the process. However, students, who are both part of the university (cultural heritage and tourism degrees) and the local community, actively participated. Their role was equal among other stakeholders, and in most cases, they openly discussed proposed topics.

Results highlighted issues encompassing education, training, and tourism development. The role of the university, in the stakeholders’ view, was crucial

to all the identified proposals of intervention. Further, the university deals at 'vertical' level by always keeping contacts between the community and the policy makers. For this, and for the capacities and the fact that the institution is perceived as 'neutral' (not-market) player, stakeholders believe that the university should coordinate development processes at the regional level.

In this way, the university has been confirmed by the local community as the centre of a regional innovation ecosystem, within which widespread knowledge can be generated and transmitted. This is the direction that the UNIMC has taken in its regional role: thanks to the initiatives, collaborations and dialogues created with all local stakeholders, both economic and social, has managed to become a reference point, an ecosystem of knowledge.

The experience of the EDP allows a further reflection: by organising and managing the event, the university has fulfilled a third mission activity. However, the focus groups highlighted a remarkable contribution to the first mission, both through students participation and through the collection of insights in terms of skills mismatch in food tourism. Finally, the process of co-creation supported the second mission, in terms of reflection on the regional role of the university in a rural area.

On the basis of this and previous co-creation experiences, the UNIMC plans to act through the creation of a Hub, a physical place of interaction between local actors: entrepreneurs, public authorities, citizens. A space of dialogue and exchange of ideas and knowledge on issues of sustainability, rurality and territory. A useful tool to continue to play the role that the University of Macerata has been playing for many years⁴² and to boost its effectiveness and impact.

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⁴² Rinaldi *et al.* 2018.

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