

Cross-border integration of universities as a possible research topic in border studies

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Abstract:

The text deals with the cross-border cooperation of universities as a possible new research topic in border studies. We identified two important associations of universities operating in border areas in the EU core and two associations gathering universities from Czech, Polish and Slovak areas. Then we tried to identify the areas in which these universities cooperate. It turned out that the principal difference is in a significantly higher number of joint study programs. This has probably a link to the high cross-border integration in the EU core. We believe that the topic is promising and deserves much higher attention, as it probably points at new and not really exploited cross-border integration potential for universities located in border areas of V4 countries.

Keywords:

cross-border cooperation, universities, joint study programmes, functional integration

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Introduction

Around one-third of the EU citizens live in border areas. In geography and regional development, scientists believe that borderlands are affected by plentiful negative phenomena, which are linked to the barrier function of the border (Scott, 2019). Cross-border cooperation has therefore become a tool,

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which tries to assist in removing those barriers (Brunnet-Jailly, 2005, Dokoupil, 1999). Since and as a reaction to World War II, approaches aimed at promoting cooperation between actors across existing national borders in Europe have been receiving particular attention in both science and practice (Beck, 2019). Cross-border cooperation realized by public actors at subnational and levels, and the implied change in function from a closed to an open border, was from a very preliminary stage understood as a micro-foreign policy/paradiplomacy (Duchacek, 1988), deliberately differentiated from other forms of cooperation that had been intensified at the nation-state level after the World War II across Europe.

The cross-border co-operation has been for a long term the playground of actors representing local and regional administration bodies, which constructed the first cross-border co-operation entities, which had various legal and administrative forms. Most of them named themselves “Euroregions”, and this term became one of the most frequent keywords of border studies (Dura et al., 2019).

However, the “monopolist” position of local and regional actors in cross-border cooperation has been somewhat eroded by other actors, who decided to join the forces across national borders. In the areas of higher cross-border integration, mainly in the Upper Rhine Valley (Franco-German-Swiss border) and the Greater Region (Franco-German-Belgian-Luxembourg border), the cross-border associations gather other actors started to appear from the 1970s. (Decoville et al., 2013). The association of universities was created in both above-mentioned cross-border territories.

In 1989, the wave of democratic revolutions brought along the changes in the political organization of the states of Central and Eastern Europe. These states declared their ambitions to come back to Europe, which was materialized in their EU accession after 2004. Public actors and later on also universities started to be involved in cross-border cooperation too.

Goal and research methods

This paper aims to open a way towards more proper research focusing on the mutual cross-border cooperation of Czech, Polish and Slovak universities. In this very text, we have rather modest ambitions, because we would like to verify whether this topic deserves further deeper attention and eventually formulate research questions/hypotheses for future work.

To do this, we plan to work with four cross-border associations of universities, two from the EU core (the quadrilateral

German-French-Belgian-Luxembourgish Greater Region and the trilateral German-French-Swiss Upper Rhine), and two from the Czech-Polish-Slovak context. The choice of these very border contexts was purely instrumental: studying university associations from the “EU core”, where the level of cross-border integration is expected to be the highest one in the entire EU (Durand and Decoville, 2019) should bring the impulses also for the daily work of the authors of this paper.

We will study their main cooperational ambitions and activities and analyze cooperation in the provision of joint study programs. We would like to identify whether this area deserves deeper scientific attention. If the answer is positive, we would like to name future research directions in this field. We want to underline that we will study only cooperation of universities from the same borderland – regions adjacent to the national border (the international cooperation between universities from Prague, Bratislava, and Warsaw is not cross-border cooperation for us).

Given the limited goal of the paper, desk research was the principal method applied at this stage. We mainly analyzed the web presentations of studied associations of universities, we also worked with their annual reports. However, obtained outcomes were still somewhat limited. Hence, we decided to complement them by a series of (phone or online) short semi-structured interviews with the representatives of all associations. These interviews were short. We informed interviewed experts about the identified numbers of joint study programs in both studied border contexts and asked them, how they interpreted those findings.

Theoretical and methodical background

Freedom of movement of the EU citizens across borders in Europe is a cornerstone of the EU and has become an object of continuous scholarly attention. Free border crossing and developed cross-border cooperation became one of the principal EU narratives (Scott, 2016). Multi-level governance, EU regional cohesion policies, the Europe of Regions discourse, and an increase of para-diplomatic activities of sub-nation state authorities supported a consensus on rescaling Europe with an increasing influence of regional and local actors from a cross-border perspective (Klatt, 2019, Keating, 1998; Scott, 1999; Telo, 2007; Warleigh-Lack and Rosamond 2011, Hooghe and Marks, 1993). The CBC belongs, next to the Erasmus, to the most tangible successes of the European integration process, which is based on mutual interdependence (Scott, 2016).

In the last 20 years, the number of cross-border cooperation structures has exploded in Europe (Zumbusch and Scherer, 2019). Researching cross-border cooperation presents a cornerstone of border studies as a specific sub-discipline, which is based on studying the interplay of 1) market forces and trade flows, 2) policy activities of multiple levels of governments on adjacent borders, 3) the particular political clout of borderland communities and 4) their specific culture (Brunnet-Jailly 2005). Böhm (2020) argues that cross-border cooperation has its five principle roles: 1) multi-level governance role, 2) regional development tool, 3) paradiplomacy, 4) reconciliation and 5) Europe-building role. Generally speaking, research on de-bordering has dominated border studies until recently.

However, manifold barriers, ranging from legal and administrative barriers complicating creating or developing cross-border labor or healthcare markets to the often neglected cultural and mental barriers, have persisted in European border regions (Klatt, 2019). The border crossing and cross border cooperation moreover significantly differ in various parts of Europe (Capello et al., 2017).

Durand and Decoville (2019) highlighted similarities and discrepancies between the different European regions with regards to the intensity of three approaches/dimensions, as identified by van Houtum (2000): cross-border practices (the functional dimension of cross-border integration), the level of mutual social trust between border populations, and the involvement of stakeholders in cross-border cooperation projects (the institutional dimension). This analysis allowed for a definition of (six) different cross-border integration models in the EU (see table 1).

Table 1: Territorial models of cross-border integration

Model	Characteristics
East-European and Baltic countries, Romania, the northern and southern borders of Poland, the eastern borders of Hungary and Slovakia, and the Greek borders	Low mutual social trust between populations living on either side of the border, low interpenetration of neighbouring border territories by the populations (few cross-border activities are observed) and by the implication of numerous actors in the Interreg
Northern European (Scandinavia)	Fairly strong CBC dynamic, with emblematic cases such as Copenhagen-Malmö, but the low population density complicates the cooperation.

Model	Characteristics
Maritime model - Interreg A program areas located on the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Adriatic	Low levels – on both sides of the border – of cross-border activities, of trust toward foreign neighbors, and involvement in CBC
Western Continental- the Rhineland countries Belgian, Luxembourg, and French border territories (north and east) as well as the German-Austrian borders	Strong functional symmetric integration, high level of confidence on both sides of the borders, low number of actors involved in CBC
Central European model contact zone between the former Soviet bloc countries and the eastern regions of the German-speaking world	Relatively low mutual propensity of people to have social mutual trust in their neighbours, strong mobilization of European cooperation tools and density of actors involved in CBC projects
Southwestern Europe (Portugal, Spain, south of France, western Italy, Croatia)	Weak cross-border activities, significant divergences on both sides of the borders with regards to the indicator of mutual social trust

Source: Durand, Decoville (2019)

Durand and Decoville (2019) exploited for their typology also the outcomes of the Eurobarometer poll of 2015, which revealed very different levels of cross-border practices and mutual social trust among border region residents in the EU, which is much higher in the EU core than between new member states, with an exception of Czech-Slovak border (Klatt, 2019).

This lower level of cross-border trust results also in low mental preparedness of students to study in the country of neighbor, as it was evidenced on the Czech-Polish border with the target group of high school students (Böhm, Opióła, Drosik, 2019), again with an exception of Czech-Slovak border.

It seems that combining cross-border cooperation with the world of tertiary education makes sense: the universities in the EU conduct international, including cross-border, cooperation. The definition of the internationalization of Knight and Witt (1995) is accepted: the process of instilling an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or provision of post-secondary education. According to Elingboe (1998), internationalization is a process of instilling international views into the higher education system. It is a future-oriented, multidimensional, interdisciplinary vision promoted by university leadership that includes several actors seeking to change the internal dynamics of higher education to adapt appropriately to the growing diverse, globally focused and constantly changing external environment” (KREDO 2015). The process of

European integration has had a very intense impact on the nature of internationalization, introducing many possibilities in the context of mobility and exchange programs within Europe and later other aspects of the Bologna process related to quality assurance. Internationalization has become a means of competitiveness with the world, especially with the US and, more recently, with China (cf. Campbell and van der Wende 2000). In this form, it is supported by new programs such as Erasmus Mundus (Janebová, 2009). Universities have not omitted to use for their internationalization also other external financial sources, including those promoting cross-border cooperation, such as INTERREG programs.

Research results

Joint international study programs of higher education institutions have the potential to implement the idea of a Common European Research Area and the principles of the Grand Charter of European Universities (Magna Carta Universitatum, Bologna 1988) also in Central Europe. One of the leaders of the internationalization of Czech universities, Masaryk University in Brno, defines

jointly accredited study programs as those based on cooperation between two or more institutions on a joint study program. However, the study ends with the award of a joint degree or multiple degrees, and all cooperating institutions are responsible for the whole program, not just for separate parts. Such study programs are always newly accredited and the participating institutions are bound by a cooperation agreement. Furthermore, these programs can be distinguished as double or multiple degrees, which lead to the award of two or more nationally recognized diplomas officially awarded by two or more institutions incorporated in the joint program, or a joint degree in which a single joint diploma is awarded issued by at least two of the institutions offering the joint program (Masaryk University, 2020).

In addition to studying at the parent institution, such studies also include a long-term study stay – usually at least a semester, but more often at least one year – at a partner foreign university. These joint study programs don't have any geographical limitations; they can be implemented in the partnership of two or more universities from the whole world. Naturally, they can be used by universities that are geographically close but divided by national borders. Students of such cross-border study programs can thus really benefit from the concept of the frontier as a space of mediation (Jeřábek, Dokoupil, Havlíček, 2004), which can help them to graduate from two institutions during one university degree. The next

part of this text will deal with a comparison of the degree of mutual integration of higher education institutions and their study programs from the tripartite German-Franco-Swiss upper Rhine valley, the cross-border area of the German-Franco-Belgian-Luxembourg Grand Region, and the Czech-Polish-Slovak border area - two from the “old” and two from the “new” EU context.

The University of Greater Region

The University of Greater Region confederation was established on 24 November 2015 as an association incorporated under Luxembourg law. Members of the association are the six founding universities: the Technical University of Kaiserslautern, the University of Liège, the Université de Lorraine, the University of Luxembourg, Saarland University, and Trier University (University of Greater Region, 2020).

The partner universities of the University of the Greater Region offer a wide range of cross-border study programs in various domains such as social and human sciences, natural and engineering sciences. Students can benefit from a jointly chosen teaching offer leading to a double diploma or a joint degree at the end of certain study programs. At the moment there are seven bachelor and twelve master joint or multiple degree programs within the framework of the University of the Greater Region. Seventeen out of all those (19) programs are based on the Franco-German co-operation, where the University of Luxembourg comes into a trilateral partnership in multiple or triple degree programs. Two flagship programs are the trilateral Master programs in Germanistic and Border Studies.

Moreover, the University of Greater Region allows students of all fields of the six universities to attend lectures in any other partner university within the framework of the “UniGR student status”. This also includes access to language lessons at the partner universities.

European Confederation of Upper Rhine universities

The trilateral Franco-German-Swiss Upper Rhine Valley is also often described as one of the regions with a higher level of cross-border integration and flows (Beck 2018). This has also found its reflection in the cooperation of universities, which are based there. Five of the – University of Strasbourg, University of Freiburg, University of Basel, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, and University of Haute-Alsace – have started to cooperate more closely. This resulted in the creation of the European Confederation of Upper Rhine Universities

(EUCOR) in 1989. The cooperation was institutionalized in 2016, as the partners founded the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) to administer the EUCOR partnership.

The federation offers currently four joint degree master courses based on trilateral cooperation, two double degree bachelor and eight double or multiple degree master programs.

The high number of joint study programs in both above-mentioned associations comes thanks to the support of Franco-German University (DFH). DFH is an institution founded by Germany and France in 1997, financed under the same conditions by both states and with its legal personality. Its mission is primarily to initiate, evaluate and financially support Franco-German educational programs. A wide range of disciplines is represented, from engineering, humanities, and social sciences, to natural sciences, law, and economics, to teacher education.

The programs are offered by a network of 208 universities, technical schools, and Grandes Écoles in more than 130 cities in Germany, France, and third countries. Currently, about 6,400 students and 300 Ph.D. students participate in DFH-funded cooperation projects. Nowhere in the world, a comparable bilateral project can be found.

Together, German and French students take integrated courses in both university systems. This high degree of integration distinguishes integrated joint DFH study programs from simple exchange programs or stays abroad. The basis is a common curriculum developed by German and French university lecturers. The offer includes both university and postgraduate courses, which continue in Franco-German doctoral programs and scientific events for young scientists in the field of research. DFH financially supports study programs and doctoral colleges that cooperate on their behalf and pays students and Ph.D. students monthly mobility grants (EUR 300 for students, EUR 600 for doctoral students) during the study phase in the partner country.

Cross-border associations of universities in the Czech-Polish-Slovak context

Associations of universities can be found in the Czech-Polish-Slovak borderland area too. However, it must be said that the level of cooperation between them in the implementation of joint study programs is much lower – in comparison with two associations from the “old” EU. There are currently only three accredited joint study programs between the Universities of Ostrava and the Silesian University in Katowice (University of Ostrava 2019) among the universities of

the Czech-Polish-Slovak border region. However, according to data from Ostrava University's annual report, virtually no students were involved in these programs. Therefore, it will be necessary to examine more closely the associations bringing together Czech, Polish and Slovak universities and to focus on their cooperation priorities – as the joint programs are not such a priority (at the moment).

Polish-Czech Association of Universities

This organization builds on the activities of the Conference of Rectors of Silesian Universities, which still brings together six universities on both sides of the Czech-Polish border in the area of historical Silesia (the University of Wrocław, University of Opole, Silesian University of Katowice, University of Economics Katowice, University of Ostrava and Silesian University of Opava). In November 2019, it expanded with four new members and transformed into the Polish-Czech Association of Universities (the Technical University of Liberec, University of Hradec Králové, University of Pardubice, Palacky University). The Association aims to develop all-round cooperation in the field of science, teaching, and culture and to strengthen Czech-Polish friendly relations (the list of co-operation fields is in appendix 1). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the implementation of planned activities.

Consortium Progres 3

The core mission of the PROGRES 3 Consortium was to create links among the universities of the Moravian-Silesian Region, the Žilina Region, the Trenčín Region, Banská Bystrica Region, and the Silesian and Opole Voivodeships concerning scientific research and innovation. The goal of these links was to generate a concentration of research and innovation capacities; this concentration should have facilitated more effective planning, management, and practical implementation of research projects and their technical applications. The Consortium declared ambitions to create necessary conditions for intensive sharing of research outcomes and experiences of innovation-based activities, which should have complemented the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) TRITIA. More detailed ambitions of the consortium can be found in appendix 1.

It should be mentioned that the ambitions of partner universities were met just partially and the whole consortium was functional mainly in the first four years when it was financed from the external EU sources, which has helped to establish topical research groups. Mutual relationships, which were created thanks

to the first years of the consortium's functioning, have sustained and contributed to some successful research initiatives. The first period of the functioning of the consortium recorded also growth in the number of its members, which increased from the initial 11 up to the current 14 member universities.

Table 2: Members of the Consortium Progres 3

Czechia	Poland	Slovakia
Technical University of Ostrava, University of Ostrava, Silesian University of Opava	Opole University of Technology, University of Opole, Silesian University of Technology, Gliwice, University of Silesia in Katowice, University of Economics in Katowice, Technical-Humanities Academy in Bielsko-Biala, Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice, WSB Academy, University of Applied Sciences in Raciborz	University of Žilina, Alexander Dubček University of Trencin, Matej Bel Univ. in Banská Bystrica

Source: own elaboration based on the information from Progres 3

However, at the moment of writing this text, the consortium seems to be active at a very limited scope. The only joint activity seems to be an annual competition looking for the best master and dissertation thesis of Progres 3 partner universities. As mentioned earlier, the consortium has helped to create three joint degree master study programs (two of them trilateral Polish-Czech-Slovak, one of them Czech-Polish), however, these programs don't have any students enrolled in them (Ostrava University 2020).

Conclusion: west-east gradient still valid

If we admit that the number of joint study programs indicates a higher level of cross-border integration/cooperation then we must conclude that it is – in line with the findings of Durand and Decoville (2019) – much higher in the cross-border regions of the „old EU” than at the Polish-Czech-Slovak border. It stems probably from the overall higher level of cross-border integration in the “Rhineland”, as confirmed by the experts from this region. Moreover, the symbolic importance of Franco-German cooperation overshadows other bilateral borders

in Europe. This symbolical importance is underpinned by the existence of the Franco-German University, a financial tool supporting the cooperation of tertiary education providers in both countries.

Given the high number of the joint programs in both studied “old EU” cross-border regions we can speculate that the universities of the Polish-Czech-Slovak border space can play in cross-border cooperation in this territory much more active role than they have performed until now. Their increased cooperation should significantly facilitate greater integration of the territory. However, universities seem to need an external impetus to „move in that direction”. The external financial sources can be such an impetus. There are some potential financial sources at disposal, such as INTERREG or International Visegrád Fund, but the special one-purpose program supporting joint study programs – as the Franco-German university – is missing.

The interviews with the representatives of all four studied associations offered one more interesting observation, linked to the previously-mentioned West-East gradient: it seems that the cooperation is much more important for the universities in the “EU core” than for their Polish, Czech, and Slovak counterparts. They see cross-border cooperation just as welcomed external funding. The interviewed experts from the Polish, Czech, and Slovak universities also think that their students are not interested in their eventual study abroad experience in the country of neighbors, which is not the case in the EU core.

This text showed that the cross-border cooperation of universities could be a topic deserving deeper scholarship. The future research questions should in more detail explore the existence and nature of (eventual) links between the level of general cross-border integration in already studied cross-border regions and the intensity of cross-border cooperation of universities from these regions. This should be also based on more extensive qualitative research covering stakeholders responsible for the cross-border cooperation of universities in all four studied contexts and their students, with a special focus on those involved in the joint study programs. From the institutional point of view, the links between all four associations and cross-border cooperation entities of public actors – Euroregions, EGTCs, and other units – should be studied too.

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Appendix 1:*List of co-operation priorities of Polis-Czech Association of universities*

- to inspire, organize and carry out joint scientific research, particularly in the field of the specificities of the Polish-Czech border and Polish-Czech relations, as well as regional structures in the wider European context,
- jointly raise teaching standards and the quality of education, including through cross-border forms of teaching and exchange of academics and students,
- cooperate with the local authority, its Euroregional ties, with the Polish-Czech Scientific Society and other organizations operating in the field of Polish-Czech cooperation,
- contribute to the mutual promotion,
- participate in the Polish-Czech cultural exchange,
- to process and present opinions and opinions on important issues of the development of science and education in the Republic of Poland and the Czech Republic and on the cooperation of the two countries in the field of science and teaching,
- jointly implement the III. the mission of universities, including the presentation of the scientific picture of borderlands and Polish-Czech relations,
- establish permanent tools for the exchange of information, experience, and fundraising for the implementation of common objectives.

List of co-operation areas of Progres 3 Consortium:

- Cooperation on the implementation of joint EU projects.
- Provision of data, information, knowledge, and experience of essential importance for the implementation of joint science/research and educational projects and the development of science/research activities.
- Planning of innovation-driven programs for the industrial application of research results.
- Participation in projects (staff, materials, technical facilities).
- Proposals for specific joint measures for cooperation.
- Organization of workshops, conferences, and seminars.
- Cooperation in workshops, conferences, and seminars and sharing of information on these events.
- Organization of joint language courses and summer schools for doctoral students.

- Joint cultural events for doctoral students to support intercultural awareness and understanding.
- Joint provision of interdisciplinary doctoral studies at Consortium member universities.
- Exchange of academic and research staff and administrative staff as part of the management of joint research projects.
- Exchange of students in accredited Bachelor, Masters, and doctoral degree programs.
- Distribution of promotional materials at other member universities; creation of outlets for this joint promotional activity.



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