



# The Role of Universities in Innovation and Regional Development

## Engaged and Innovative Universities in Less-Developed Regions: The Case of the University of Aveiro

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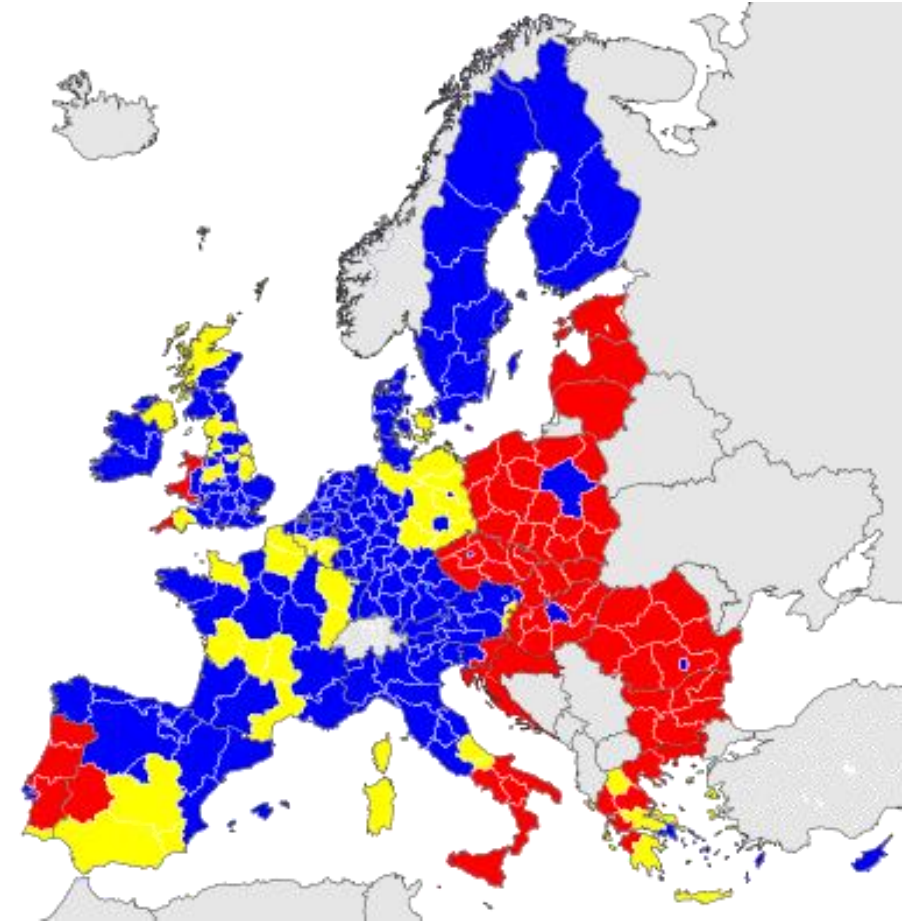
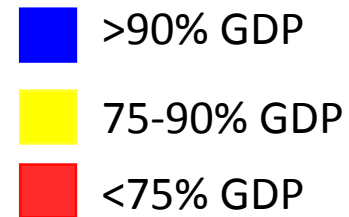
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## What are LFRs?

Less developed, or less-favoured regions, are those whose per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is less than 75% of the EU average.



Source: European Commission, 2011

# Literature Review

- Innovation as triggering factor in development (Rodrigues et al., 2001);
  - Interactive learning process (Edquist, 1997);
  - Highly influenced by spatial features (Feldman, 1994);
  - Determined by regional institutional and cultural context (Cooke et al., 1997; Morgan, 1996)

But LFRs tend to have challenges in (Rodrigues, 2001):

- 1) promoting a high-level of interaction between economic and institutional agents;
- 2) nurturing locally-based R&D activities.

And more funding doesn't always equal more development... (Oughton et al., 2002).

# Literature Review

Universities as regenerators of lagging regions (Healey, 1998).

- 'Pervasive role' with third mission (Rodrigues, 2001);
- Interdependent relation with their regions (Goddard & Chatterton, 1999);

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Universities in LFRs face:

- Lack of absorptive capacity (Arbo & Benneworth, 2007);
- Lack of a supportive policy framework (Rodrigues, 2001);
- Weak institutional landscape (Rodrigues, 2001);
- Diverging views regarding third mission (Geuna & Muscio, 2007; Bercovitz & Feldman, 2007)

Integration of  
the third mission  
implies  
organisational  
adaptation.

# The Case-Study

- University of Aveiro
  - Located in an LFR (Centro) in what is a highly bipolarised country;
  - Path-dependent (Krücken, 2003) engagement trajectory;
  - History of collaborative and experimental approaches to innovation (Rodrigues & Teles, 2017).



Source: InfoRegio, 2017

# Methodology

Qualitative study:

- policy documents, reports and other key statements;
- 7 semi-structured interviews.

Questions:

- a) what specific challenges in the less-favoured region are hindering UA's engagement in innovation activities;
- b) what are the regional economic development and innovation needs UA is trying to respond to;
- c) how can UA overcome the constraints typical of an LFR.

# Findings

## Lack of absorptive capacity

- Composed of mostly SMEs, the region's industry is not often interested in complex cooperation;
- UA's curricula defined by regional economic trends (ceramics, ICT, agro-food, industrial engineering, environment, tourism);
- Focus in entrepreneurialism (knowledge transfer and incubation) led to the creation of high-tech SMEs that absorb UA's available resources and knowledge.

## Weak institutional fabric

- UA seen as playing the role of regional 'animateur', unlocking institutional inertia;
- Central partner in innovation-related initiatives (Urban Network for Competitiveness and Innovation; Triple Helix model experiment; Science and Innovation Park; Smart Specialisation Strategy).



# Findings

## Lack of supportive policy framework

- S3 and Entrepreneurial Process of Discovery viewed as cementing collaborative and concerted actions in the region;
- National education framework emphasises managerial approaches to regional engagement;
- Mechanisms and channels created (Vice-Rector of University-Society linkages, Pro-Rector for Cooperation and Regional Development, IEUA, UATEC).

## Diverging views regarding third mission

- No formal strategy or goal-setting for regional engagement activities;
- Evaluation of regional engagement activities seen as hindering academic career;
- Low profit from third mission activities results in lack of interest.

# Conclusions

- Region benefits from UA as a central institutional actor in nurturing R&D activities and promoting collaborative action;
  - Cultural and institutional context matter, namely in creating the conditions for collaboration to occur;
  - Internal constraints more difficult to manage than external ones.
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## *Further Research*

- More information needed from the productive sector and industry;



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Thank you!

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