

Detached and Attached Universities: Developing the Dublin and Shannon Regions

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Introduction

How do universities contribute to their region's development? This question was the main subject of a EU Fourth Framework Targeted Socio-Economic Research project called UNIREG or the role of universities in regional development. The project ran for two years from December 1998 to the end of 2000 and was coordinated by Dr. David Charles of the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies at the University of Newcastle. The project included research teams from eight countries: Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, The Netherlands, Spain, UK and an associate partner from Australia.

The contribution of universities to their region's development can be positioned along a range from the unintended and indirect to the intended and direct. Normally the more unintended and indirect is a university's contribution, the more regionally detached is the university from its region's development. Regionally attached universities are those that most intentionally make direct contributions to their region's development. The terms detached and attached universities represent the relative positions of universities along this range, indicating different levels of unintentionality, indirectness, intentionality and directness.

Unintended and indirect contributions result from the fact that a university happens to be located in a region. These contributions include the economic multiplier effects of paying wages to employees, buying from local suppliers and enrolling students who spend money in the region. They may also include the supply of graduates to employers in the regional labour market or the creation of campus companies and spin-off firms from academic innovations.

Yet even these contributions can be intended and direct. Thus a state may purposively locate a university in a less developed region as a driver for its development, intending indirect or direct multiplier, labour supply and firm effects. Universities may also intentionally direct these effects in their regions by fostering university-firm linkages through science parks, research, student internships and graduate placements.

The most intended and direct contributions usually involve the active participation of universities in regional systems of innovation or RSIs. Ideally RSIs link the major regional economic, political, social and cultural actors and institutions into a network that informally or formally guides its region's development. In this sense, RSIs become part of regional governance structures.

Regional governance has two meanings here. First it refers generally to the network of formal and informal ways that regions are organized. Second it refers to the particular ways that regions are organized to contribute unintentionally and indirectly or intentionally and directly to their region's development. We are more concerned with the latter: identifying the ways that regional governance contributes or does not contribute to regional development.

RSIs can be generated internally by local actors and institutions within a region, externally by national, European or global actors and institutions or by a mixture of both. Internally generated RSIs tend to be more stable and durable than those that are externally generated. At the same time, internally led RSIs can be strengthened and broadened by external links with national, European and global institutions and actors. Further, externally generated RSIs can over time become internally led if it encourages and supports regional institutions and actors to participate in and maintain their own RSI.

This mixture of local, regional, national, European and global institutions and actors may be viewed as an expanding network of concentric circles. Strong internally led RSIs focus on the linkages and governance structure within the regional network, while using linkages to institutions and actors in national, European and global networks to further their region's development.

In general, peripheral regions tend to need internally led RSIs more than core regions, whose development is often less dependent on the actions of regional institutions and actors. This is not to say that peripheral regions with internally led RSIs necessarily outperform other peripheral regions or catch up to core regions, even in the same country. Instead the benefit of an internally led RSI for a peripheral region may be shown in less dramatic terms, such as in the emergence of an industrial cluster, specialisation in a service sector niche and a significant reduction in out-migration for particular social groups in the region.

This is also not to suggest that core regions lack a need for internally led RSIs. A strong RSI in a core region may contribute to increased regional development or to better managed development in the region. This is particularly the case for core regions that have a devolved regional governance structure. This provides core regional actors and institutions with the potential power and resources to guide the region's development in the interests of the region's citizens, sometimes against the wishes of the national state or external actors like MNEs. The fact that many core regions tend to be national capital regions or near the capital region accentuates the importance of devolved regional governance structures for these core regions.

The role of universities in these forms of regional development often depends on interactions between the type of university and the type of region. Broadly speaking, single universities of a technological or vocational nature in peripheral regions are more likely to contribute to their regions development. These universities are usually more attached to their regions as shown by their active involvement in fostering the linkages, building the network and participating in the governance structure of their regional innovation system.

Single traditional universities of an academic nature in peripheral are less likely to directly contribute to their regions development. Multiple universities of academic, technological and vocational natures in a core region are also less likely to contribute to their regions development. These single traditional universities in peripheral regions and multiple universities in core regions are usually more detached from their regions as indicated by their tendency to contribute to their regions development in mostly unintentional and indirect ways. Overall, traditional academic universities in both peripheral and core regions are the least likely to contribute to their regions development and are the most detached from their regions.

The Shannon Region's Attached University

Within Ireland, the University of Limerick in the Shannon Region is a good example of a university attached to its region. UL was founded in 1972 as the National Institute of Higher Education or NIHE Limerick after a long campaign by regional institutions and actors. It was legally transformed into the University of Limerick by the state's enactment of the University of Limerick Act, 1989 as further amended by the Universities Act, 1997.

The Limerick University Project Committee spearheaded the campaign for a regional university in the Shannon Region. This committee was composed of leading regional institutions and actors in the then named Mid-West region.

The committee struggled against the state's reluctance in the 1960s to establish more universities in Ireland. Instead the state preferred to create a second tier of regional technical colleges across the country to meet the expected demand for skilled third level graduates. This policy, enacted from the late 1960s, dispersed non-university third-level educational institutions to the regions as part of Ireland's economic development strategy.

NIHE Limerick was instituted as part of the state's new national higher educational policy. Its status as a national institute of higher education served as a compromise between the internal regional pressures for a university and the national state's preference to locate a single regional technical college in the area.

This national-regional compromise was reflected in the institute's educational objectives. The institute's regional and national character was explicitly expressed in these objectives. Its regional role was also clearly defined to include providing higher education for the region, promoting its regional identity and playing a leading role in the region's development. In practice, the institute pursued European and American roles too, adopting European studies as one of its five original degree programmes and an American style system of modules and credits.

From its establishment, UL has actively participated in the building of a regional system of innovation with other institutions and actors. Of particular importance have been the linkages between UL and Shannon Development, the devolved state company with a mandate to develop the region.

Shannon Development has been one of the main drivers of the Shannon region's development since its foundation in 1959 as the Shannon Free Area Development Company. The existence of a separate development agency for the Shannon region is unique in Ireland. All of the other regions have to rely exclusively on the national development bodies: IDA Ireland to attract foreign firms and Enterprise Ireland to build up indigenous companies. Thus Shannon Development provides the Shannon region with a regional economic governance structure not available to other Irish regions.

The links between Shannon Development and the institute/university began with the company's participation in the Project Committee's regional initiative for a university. Since the university's establishment as an institute, Shannon Development and the university have over time created a dense network of inter-institutional linkages to promote the region's development. The institutional expression of these linkages is perhaps best exemplified today by their partnership in the National Technological Park for science and technology companies. The NTP was established in 1984 and is located on UL's campus.

From the early 1970s, UL has also built up formal and informal linkages with other regional institutions and actors including the local authorities, industrial, economic and agricultural organizations, trade unions, businesses and other educational institutions. Many of these linkages have become formalised or even legalised over time. Thus the Universities Act, 1997 mandates that UL's Governing Body must include the Mayor of Limerick and the council chairperson of the administrative county of Limerick. Further UL is currently involved in a number of formal cross-representational linkages with regional organizations including a town/gown committee, the City Enterprise Board, the Grants Committee and the Hunt Museum in Limerick City.

As such, UL is arguably a paradigmatic example of an attached university, directly contributing to the Shannon region's development through its active participation in the Shannon regional system of innovation. At the same time, the university continues to pursue its national, European and global institutional linkages and roles. This suggests that attached universities are not simply reduced to the single institutional role of regional universities. Instead these universities prioritise their region's development within their simultaneous pursuit of multiple institutional roles. Similarly, attached universities maintain multiple identities, identifying themselves primarily as regional universities but also as national, European and international universities.

However, UL's active participation in the Shannon RSI has not overcome the cumulative disadvantages of peripherality for the region. Regional statistics from the 1960s to the mid-1990s suggest that the Shannon region has largely completed a transition from an agrarian to a post-agrarian regional economy based on a mixture of industry and services. Yet this type of transition can be applied to a number of Irish regions, especially those around Dublin and those driven by other Irish cities such as Cork and Galway.

Further, the Shannon region has by no means outperformed these other Irish regions on a number of statistical indicators such as regional economic growth, regional GDP per capita or employment growth. The Shannon region has also by no means caught up to the Dublin core region, which has largely completed a transition to a post-industrial service sector based economy begun in the late 1980s.

Yet there are Shannon success stories such as the retention of UL graduates linked to the region's cluster of electronic engineering companies. HEA figures show that on average 45 per cent of 1997 UL graduates were employed in the Dublin region in 1998. This figure rises to almost 55 per cent for graduates in business studies and computer systems, feeding into the Dublin region's financial services and computing clusters.

On the other hand, this Dublin attraction effect is significantly reduced for graduates in electronic engineering. Of these 1997 UL graduates, 48 per cent remained in the Shannon region in 1998 with only 30 per cent in the Dublin region. The difference here is explained by the success of the Shannon RSI in creating a Shannon speciality in the electronic engineering industry. These cluster of firms are linked to UL through its linkages with regional companies including its programme of student placements.

Overall, the UL case suggests that one should not expect developmental miracles from even highly attached universities in peripheral regions with strong internally led regional systems of innovation. Yet there are clear and positive developmental outcomes that result from having an attached university in a region with a strong RSI, even if these outcomes are fairly limited.

The Dublin Region's Detached Universities

The Dublin region's explosive growth during the 1990s has largely driven the country's economic boom. This rapid development has been led by state policies to attract foreign high-tech firms and the continued provision of EU funds. Specifically, the Dublin's regional development has been driven by external actors, principally American MNEs in a few high technology sectors like computing and pharmaceuticals. These MNEs have been enticed by national political actors such as IDA Ireland that promote Ireland's low corporation tax rate and availability of a young, well educated and mostly non-unionised workforce.

Further Dublin has become Ireland's growth pole without the institutional infrastructure of a regional system of innovation. While there is an informal network of actors from the main institutions located in the region, there is no formal governance structure for the region. This severely limits the ability of regional institutional actors to govern Dublin's development in the interests of the region and its residents.

This lack of a Dublin regional governance structure and system of innovation impacts directly on Dublin's three universities: Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and Dublin City University.

Thus outside of mass producing a pool of graduate labour for firms in the Dublin region, it is difficult to find many direct connections between Dublin's three universities and the region's development. As a result, Dublin's universities are largely detached from the Dublin region, unintentionally and indirectly contributing to the region's development.

One striking example of this detachment from the Dublin region is the almost total lack of participation by Trinity College Dublin in the extremely successful cultural development of the Temple Bar area: a few minutes walking distance from the college's front gate.

Overall, the Dublin region is not a central priority in the institutional plans of the Dublin universities. All three of the universities perceive themselves primarily as national institutional actors competing on a European and global arena with respect to funds, staff, students and status.

Of the three, TCD portrays itself most as an international university consciously comparing itself to Oxford and Cambridge in England and to Ivy League and other elite, exclusive universities in the USA. To some extent, this self-portrayal harks back to Trinity's older British internationalism, a perception that was heightened during its period of post-independence isolation in Dublin and Ireland. TCD's current focus is to be seen by others, particularly these other peer universities, as a world-class university in Ireland.

UCD also strives to be included in this select category of world-class universities. At the same time, its institutional emphasis is more self-consciously Irish and national if not nationalist. This may reflect the residual influence of the traditional nationalist ethos within the university.

DCU, the newest university in Dublin, has the same academic international ambitions of its older institutional neighbours. Relative to its neighbours, though, DCU is more directly involved in the Dublin region, or more accurately its local community area of Ballymun and its sub-region of north Dublin. This may be due to its common

institutional lineage with UL as a technological-vocationalist institute with a mandated regional focus.

Part of the universities general detachment from the Dublin region stems from their inter-institutional rivalry within the Dublin national core. The roots of this rivalry extend back to the traditional conflict between supposedly 'Protestant Unionist' Trinity and 'Catholic Nationalist' UCD from the 1850s.

While the ethno-nationalist basis of this traditional rivalry have abated, there is still a pronounced modern institutional rivalry between the now three universities. Thus the universities are often more interested in competing among themselves on national, European and global stages than in using these platforms to further contribute to Dublin's regional development. Even DCU's sub-regional northside strategy can be interpreted as a means to stake an institutional claim the growing north and west sides of Dublin from Trinity in the City Centre and UCD on Dublin's southside.

The Dublin universities detachment from the Dublin region is all the more interesting given that between 44 to 48 per cent of full-time students enrolled in the three universities in 1997/98 came from Dublin county. Further if one includes three of Dublin's surrounding counties – Kildare, Meath and Wicklow – the proportion of students from the Dublin 'region' rises to between 57 and 61 per cent at the three universities for 1997/98. This suggests that, at least in terms of their students, Dublin's universities are primarily regional institutions.

There are some exceptions to the Dublin universities general detachment from the Dublin region. As noted above, DCU's sub-regional strategy is a partial exception. Specifically, DCU has created formal and informal linkages with a number of local and sub-regional organizations. These include the North Dublin Development Coalition, Ballymun Regeneration Limited, the North Dublin Chambers of Commerce and the North Dublin PLATO and URBAN programmes.

Second, all three of the universities have fostered links with business and industry in the Dublin region through university-industry programmes. These involve a variety of linkages including technology transfer, research, campus companies, spin-off firms or student placements in DCU's case. However, these university-firm linkages are not necessarily rooted in indigenous Dublin regional firms and are more likely to involve links with national, European or global firms located in the Dublin region.

Third, Dublin's three universities have created access programmes for a limited number of disadvantaged students from their local community areas. In a rare act of regionalism, the universities agreed on a regional division of labour with each university focusing on secondary students in disadvantaged local communities in their Dublin sub-region. Yet this agreement has recently been nationalised with six of the countries universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology setting up a separate entry system for about 700 students from 150 disadvantaged communities across the country.

Finally, DCU's governing authority must include one representative from the four local Dublin authorities, while UCD's governing authority must include the Lord Mayor of Dublin and eight people elected from the General Council of County Councils. However, these eight members can be from any region in the country. As such, this provision institutionalises UCD's claim to be a national university. Alas, Trinity has not had a local or regional representative on its governing board since the Lord Mayor of Dublin last sat on it in 1637.

Conclusion

The evidence from the Shannon region shows that attached universities such as the University of Limerick are more likely to directly contribute to their region's development. However, the UL example also indicates that there are clear limits to the developmental contributions of attached universities even in peripheral regions with strong internally led regional systems of innovation. In this case, peripherality is more significant for regional development than a regional system of innovation and a university attached to its region.

The Dublin example suggests that core regions do not necessarily need either an RSI or attached universities to successfully develop. In this case, the Dublin region's externally driven development succeeded in spite of the Dublin universities' detachment from, and their competitive rivalry within, the Dublin region. Instead, national political actors such as IDA Ireland and foreign firms relied on the universities' indirect contribution of a graduate labour supply to develop the Dublin region.

With a devolved regional governance structure, such as the planned Greater Dublin Authority, this rapid development might have proceeded at more controlled pace, enhancing the quality of life for the residents of the Dublin region and stabilising the long term viability of the region's development. Thus core regions may not need an RSI or attached universities to develop, but a regional governance structure including its universities may make for a better managed region and better region in which to live.