Regional Universities and the Capital: The Geography of Opportunity

What a University Outside the Centre Can Do for Its Own Province

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Higher education systems are concentrated in capitals, and the universities outside them are expected to serve a region while competing with an institution that has the resources of a centre. This article examines the position of the regional university: the four functions it performs, the disadvantage it carries in a national competition, and the policies that have allowed some regional institutions to become the centre of their own province. It argues that the decisive resource is not money but the relationship between the institution and the regional administration, and that the relationship is built through a small number of joint commitments.

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1. A System and Its Geography

Almost every national system of higher education is concentrated in one or two cities, and the concentration is a product of history rather than of policy.

A capital accumulates the ministries, the academies, the libraries and the employers that a university needs, and a regional institution is founded later with fewer of each. The difference is reproduced through the labour market: a graduate who wishes to work in a ministry, a research institute or a multinational moves to the capital, and the regional university trains people for a departure.

The regional university trains people for a departure and is asked to develop a region

The concentration is not a defect that a policy can remove, and it is a condition that a regional institution must work with. The condition has two faces. On one side the regional university has a monopoly of access in its province, and the students who cannot move are its students. On the other it has no margin for error, because the students who can move do.

2. The Four Functions

A regional university performs four functions, and the national policy discussion recognises only the first.

The first is the supply of graduates, which is the function that a ministry measures: the number of students, the number of graduates, the fields in which they qualify. The second is the supply of teachers, doctors, engineers, agronomists and lawyers to the institutions of the province, and this function is the one that a regional university performs and a capital institution does not.

The third is the improvement of local enterprises, through advice, testing and the solution of a technical problem that a firm cannot solve alone. The fourth is the representation of the province in the national conversation: a university is frequently the only institution in a region that can produce an argument with evidence, and the argument is a public good that the region does not pay for.

The four functions are not equally funded. The first is funded by a formula, the second is funded through the first, and the third and fourth are performed by staff who are paid to do the first.

3. The Disadvantage in a National Competition

A regional university competes with a capital institution in a competition whose rules are set nationally and whose terms favour the centre.

The first term is the research funding, which is allocated by competition and which rewards a track record that the centre has accumulated over decades. The second is the student's choice, which is informed by a ranking that measures visibility and by a labour market that rewards a capital address. The third is the staff market, in which a capital institution can offer a laboratory, a library and a school for a child.

The fourth is the administrative capacity, which is the term that a policy can address most easily and that regional institutions most often lack: a project office, a legal service, a data unit. A regional university that cannot write a competitive proposal loses the competition before it is judged, and the loss is attributed to its research.

4. The Relationship With the Region

The resource that a regional university can build and a capital institution cannot is a relationship with the administration of its own province.

The relationship is not a favour and it is a series of joint commitments: a forecast of the skills that the region will need, a programme designed with the regional employers, a service that the university provides to the regional health system, a study that the administration commissions. Each commitment is small, and the accumulation is what makes the university a party to the region's decisions rather than a supplier of graduates.

The instrument that builds the accumulation is a standing agreement between the university and the regional administration, renewed annually, with four or five commitments and a named person on each side. The agreement is not a contract and it has no legal force; its force is that a commitment made in public is a commitment that a rector and a governor must answer for.

Function	Funded by	Usually unpaid
Graduates	Formula funding	Yes
Public professionals	Formula, indirectly	Yes
Enterprise advice	Occasional contracts	Mostly
Regional evidence	Nothing	Entirely

Table 1 Four functions and who pays for them

5. The Programme That Belongs to the Province

The instrument that has most effect on the relationship is a programme that belongs to the province: a curriculum designed with the employers, the administration and the professions of the region.

A programme of that kind has three features. It is designed by a committee that includes the users, and the committee meets at least annually. It contains a placement that is organised by the employers rather than by the university, so that the placement is a commitment and not an option. And its assessment includes a task that a regional organisation has set, so that the graduates have solved a real problem before they graduate.

The features are unremarkable and their effect is not. A programme that a region's employers have helped to design is a programme that those employers recruit from, which changes the graduate's calculation about moving. The retention of graduates is the indicator that a regional university should be judged on, and it is improved by a relationship rather than by a subsidy.

6. The Case for Specialisation

A regional university that attempts to cover every field competes with the centre on the centre's terms, and it loses.

The alternative is a specialisation that the region can justify: the fields in which the province has an industry, a landscape, a problem or a tradition. A university in an agricultural province that becomes the national reference for irrigation, soil and storage has a position that a capital institution cannot take, because the position depends on the fields and the farms that surround it.

The instrument is a decision about three or four fields, taken by the senate and sustained for a decade, with the appointments, the laboratories and the partnerships aligned to it. The decision is difficult because every department wishes to be one of the fields, and it is the only decision that gives a regional university a claim that the centre cannot match.

7. The Student Who Cannot Move

The regional university's most important constituency is the student who cannot move, and the institution's obligation to her is a matter of design rather than of sympathy.

A student who works, who cares for a relative or who cannot afford a room in the capital requires a timetable, a scholarship and a support service that a residential model does not supply. An institution that of-

fers a programme in the evening and a grant that covers the commute has removed two obstacles; one that offers a programme at nine in the morning has removed none.

The instrument is a part-time route with a modular calendar, and its cost is administrative. The institutions that have built it report a cohort that no national policy had reached, and the cohort's completion rate is the measure of whether the design was real.

8. What a Region Owes Its University

A region that expects a university to develop it owes the institution three things, and none of them is money in the ordinary sense.

The first is a forecast: a statement, produced by the administration with the university, of the skills and the problems that the province will have in ten years. The second is access: to the region's institutions, its firms and its data, without a negotiation for each request. The third is a preference, in the procurement of studies and services, for the institution that belongs to the region, which is lawful in most systems when it is written into a procedure rather than granted as a favour.

The three are cheap and they are the conditions under which a regional university can perform the functions that the second and fourth of its four functions require. A region that asks for development and provides none of the three has asked for something that the institution cannot supply alone.

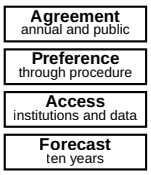

Figure 1 What a region can give

9. Conclusions

The geography of a system is a condition and not a policy error, and a regional university that competes with the centre on the centre's terms will lose. Its advantage is the province, and the province is a resource that requires a relationship rather than a subsidy.

Three conclusions follow. A standing agreement with the regional administration, with four or five commitments and a named person on each side, is the instrument that makes the university a party to the region's decisions. A programme designed with the region's employers, with a placement they organise and an assessment they set, is the instrument that retains graduates. And a specialisation in three or four fields that the province can justify is the only claim that a capital institution cannot take, which makes it the decision that a regional university's senate most needs to take.

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Biography:

Nodira Yusupova writes on regional higher education systems and on the relationship between universities and regional administrations.

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