

Understanding the Regional Engagement of Universities from a Stakeholders' Perspective: The Case of Confucius Institute at the University of Thessaly, Greece

Maria Adamakou¹, George Petrakos¹, Xiahong Wang², Dimitris Kallioras¹

¹ University of Thessaly, Greece, madamakou@uth.gr, petrakos@uth.gr, dkallior@uth.gr

² Central University of Finance and Economics, China, mailto:wangxh@cufe.edu.cn

(to be included in SO8 Special Session: University impacts on the local and regional economy)

Extended Abstract

In the knowledge era, it is evident that universities have acquired a vital role in fostering sustainable regional development. In many instances, universities are seen as capable actors for promoting the goals of the regions where they function, and for this, traditional teaching and research activities are steered towards the fulfillment of local needs and targets. Through knowledge generation, universities can ensure the sustainable development of regions and can affect various instances of the social, economic, and cultural life as well as the environment of their hosting regions. Therefore, there is a shift in knowledge production from the traditional Mode 1 type to Mode 2, in which research is more closely related to regional needs. In order for universities to fulfill their role as drivers of regional development, they should engage with the region and should establish networks and partnerships with other regional actors, both public and private, who are working in the same direction. This more active role in promoting regional targets can be seen as the third mission of universities.

The weight that each university places on various activities and missions, the level of their engagement with the region, and the forms of partnerships and networks that universities take part in shape their role and the type of impacts that they bring to the regions where they are located. Literature is rich in studies capturing the role and estimating the impacts of universities in an empirical context using case studies. Evidently, regardless of the field and targets of university intervention, active cooperation and developing partnerships with local actors are prerequisites for successful engagement. Therefore, it is critical for the role of universities to be clearly defined on par with regional pursuits and goals.

Existing studies can provide valuable information about university contributions to their regions. Nevertheless, some gaps remain regarding the potential of the existing methodologies for shedding full light on the actual role of universities. This is so as the limits among the various conceptual models are not always clear when real case studies are considered. On the other hand, many of the studies based on indicators and quantitative data mostly concentrate on individual aspects of university contributions, be it social, economic, governance, or environmental issues. On the other hand, quantitative approaches become narrow-focused due to the limitations

imposed by the availability of data to quantify all kinds of university contributions. Therefore, more holistic approaches to define university roles and engagement should be developed. Such types of approaches should not only focus on the contribution of universities to regional development, but they should also consider aspects such as the barriers to cooperation so that universities and regional authorities can develop well-informed strategies. To do so, it is critical to incorporate the views of the stakeholders in the regions where the contributions and roles of universities are to be evaluated.

Despite the undisputed significance of stakeholder perceptions and their relationships with the universities, there is still a gap in studies that incorporate stakeholder analyses into evaluating university contributions and the definition of their role. To fill this gap, the present paper builds on the pool of regional stakeholders, and through a dedicated survey, it seeks to record and codify their perceptions regarding the overall engagement of the university with the region. The case study is performed in the region of Magnesia (NUTS III region; Greece) and focuses on Confucius Institute at the University of Thessaly. Confucius Institutes are public educational and cultural promotion programs funded and arranged by the Chinese International Education Foundation, a government-organized non-governmental organization under the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. The stated aim of the program is to promote Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges.

Confucius Institute at the University of Thessaly was established in 2019, under an agreement between University of Thessaly and Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), in co-operation with Central University of Finance and Economics (CUFE) in Beijing. It aims to serve as a bridge between Greece and China in the domain of education, culture, and business. By bringing together the civilizations and cultures of China and Greece, it supports businesses, local governments and community bodies in developing links with China through language training, cultural immersion, and networking. Confucius Institute at the University of Thessaly is located in the region of Magnesia, and in the city of Volos in particular. Volos is a coastal port city situated in the region of Thessaly (NUTS II region), midway on the Greek mainland, between Athens and Thessaloniki. The city of Volos is the administrative center of the University of Thessaly (founded in 1984).

Engagement is examined through a conceptual framework of four different dimensions: the perceived contribution of the Confucius Institute, the type of main beneficiaries, the perceptions of the role of students, and the barriers to cooperation. The survey is based on a range of questions - items, which are considered as relevant to describe each dimension, following the relevant literature and the strategic documents of the University of Thessaly. Then, a principal component analysis (PCA) is conducted to group the questions-items into a smaller number of factors, which could provide a more general categorization of stakeholder views. By doing so,

the paper follows a more bottom-up approach in defining the role and contribution of universities than other studies, following a more deductive top-down approach based on the evaluation of the level of application of general models in the regional context under consideration. In this way, the paper enriches the relevant literature with additional knowledge regarding university roles and potentially complements existing studies with new unexplored features.

Towards extracting common perceptions through various factors, the paper also seeks to explore the level of alignment among the views of different types of stakeholders. Three main types of stakeholders are recognized and are composed of representatives of the Confucius Institute at the University of Thessaly, the local and regional authorities and civil society, and the business sector. The level of agreement is tested based on non-parametric tests based on the factor scores of each type of stakeholder and the mean values of the items being loaded on each factor. Considering the previous remarks, the paper seeks to provide answers to the following two research questions: (a) can stakeholder perceptions be used to provide distinct dimensions of a university's roles and engagement in the region? and (b) are there any differences among stakeholder perceptions regarding the university's roles and engagement in the region?

In methodological terms, the analysis could be considered as the first step for the bottom-up definition of the engagement level of the university. In the present paper, the engagement is conceptualized as a set of various dimensions; therefore, the paper manages to summarize many scattered relevant approaches on the issue that have been considered up until now. This is a very crucial step in conducting applied research on the definition of the role of universities, as it allows the comparison of the results of any future case studies. Even though further research is definitely needed, since the regional engagement of universities is in full swing, especially as regards the particular case study, the paper offers valuable insight into both theory and policy making.

O43

<https://www.aeaweb.org/econlit/jelCodes.php?view=jel#O>