S24 Higher Education Institutions and regional (sustainable) development

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The influence of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on the economic development of their surrounding regions is a topic of special interest and a prevalent object of studies and discussions in regional sciences. Regions benefit from HEIs and their students’ expenditures, from university graduates improving the human capital endowment or from university spin-offs and spill-overs. Furthermore, there are many discussions about the HEIs’ “third mission” dealing with a myriad of different transfers from universities to the region and about the HEIs’ engagement as well as co-responsibility for regional development. Generally, HEIs are expected to be a key competitive advantage for the regions in which they are located. But in addition to the mentioned economically oriented effects, there is a starting discussion whether and to what extend HEIs can influence the regional transition path towards sustainability. It is supposed that HEIs can have impacts on the ecological, economic and social sustainability of the region where they are embedded. However, there is still a lack of research and evidence concerning these contributions of universities to sustainability-related regional development.

The special session at the 58th ERSA congress in Cork wants to bring together research dealing with various impacts of HEIs on their surrounding region. This implies research on the effects of knowledge transfer (via graduates, research cooperation, spin-off foundations), regionally focused teaching and research activities (as well as the management thereof), stakeholder interaction and engagement and also contributions to regional problem solving and sustainable development.

Contributions regarding basic research as well as case studies on the topic ‘Higher Education Institutions and regional (sustainable) development’ are welcome. Presentations and discussions during this special session could embrace the following topics or questions:

- Regional economic impacts of HEIs’ knowledge transfer activities (e.g. graduates, spin-off foundations, HEI-industry cooperation)
- Regional social effects of HEIs (e.g access to higher education, further education opportunities, lifelong learning opportunities)
- Regional ecological effects of HEIs (e.g. HEIs as role model for sustainable management practices and operation, expertise/consultation/knowledge transfer in fields of climate change, energy transition)
- Contribution of HEIs to regional sustainability transition paths
- Stakeholder engagement for regional sustainability projects headed by or with participation of HEIs
- Regional governance structures that enable contribution of HEIs to regional sustainable transition
- Are HEIs generally able to trigger transitions towards sustainability in the regions in which they are located?
- Can HEIs play a role as ‘change agents’ towards a sustainable transformation?
- Which tools/indicators/frameworks can be developed/ are appropriate to measure and evaluate HEIs’ contributions to economic, social, ecological and sustainable regional development?