OPENING THE “BLACK-BOX” OF PLACE-BASED LEADERSHIP.
DECONSTRUCTING THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY SENIOR LEADERSHIP IN
CITY/REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Recent inquiries have brought together the concept of institutional entrepreneurship with the study of change within regional innovation systems (Sotarauta and Mustikkamäki 2011). In so doing, they have shed light on the potential for addressing unanswered queries regarding broader regional development processes by looking at the ‘micro foundations’ (Powell and Colyvas 2008) of city-regions and regional development. Seminal studies following the “old” institutionalism tradition remind us that leadership and power are intertwined (Selznick 1984). One area where these foundations remain to be adequately addressed pertains to the role of leadership and power in local economic development, particularly in the tensions between collective regional leadership (Sotarauta 2007) and ‘happy family stories’ (Lagendijk and Oinas 2005). To address this issue, we therefore seek to: (a) explicate how actors constellate within particular regional contexts to create strategic leadership capacity; and (b) explore how these competitive and co-operative tensions play out in practice. Some scholars conceive of institutional entrepreneurship as a strategic relay of power and knowledge in time (Sotarauta and Mustikkamäki 2011). What is more, power is salient in situations involving a constellation of social actors/networks (Owen-Smith and Powell 2008) either within a given organizational field (DiMaggio 1991) or a specific geographic/governance setting (Charles and Benneworth 2001). Hardy and Maguire (2008: 201) contend that “actors do not ‘have’ power, instead they occupy (or fail to occupy) subject positions that, in turn, allow them to exercise power in – and on – a particular field or regional governance setting.

In this paper, we frame our analysis around one particular set of regional development actors, university senior managers (rectors, vice-rectors, etc.), and explore the roles they play in the construction and evolutions of power fields within particular regional development contexts. In particular, we focus on the subject positions played by university senior managers both in their own internal (university) networks, but also within regional policy and corporate governance processes.

The empirical material is drawn from recent qualitative studies on the regional role of universities in Northern Europe – Norway (Tromsø), Finland (Oulu) and the Netherlands (Twente). In each of the three cases, universities have historically been called upon to play an active role in regional
development *inter alia* by help preventing negative ‘lock-in’ and contribute to regional upgrading by contributing to path- extension and/or creation (Garud and Karnoe 2012). Yet, such processes are politically and normatively laden thus raising conflicts and volitions (Pinheiro et al. 2012). Due to the multiplicity of roles that universities play – within and beyond the region (Benneworth and Hospers 2007) – they are both part of the problem and part of the solution to some of these tensions. Hence, the paper address the following research problem: *What role do senior university managers play in shaping regional coalitions and power networks, and what effects (if any) do these have in processes of regional development and upgrading?*

Conceptually, we adopt the *Strategic Relational Approach* (SRA) devised by Jessop (2001) and further developed by Lagendijk and colleagues (Lagendijk 2007; Varró and Lagendijk 2012). SRA assumes that macro-level structures are inherently relational (i.e. rooted in space and time) and, thus, are subject to strategic manipulations by certain agents who, in turn, embark into collective initiatives to (re-) shape such structures at various levels (macro/meso/micro). According to SRA, strategies and practices are the result of ‘structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity’, i.e. they are both a reflection of past events (*path-dependency*) as well as future trajectories (*path-shaping*); with actions and solutions becoming discursively mediated and understood against the backdrop of individuals’ natural cognitive limitations or information asymmetries (see Simon 1991). More importantly, this process leads to the rise of new discursive and hegemonic (i.e. uncontested) practices which, over time and as they diffuse, are adopted and legitimated by other powerful agents and organizations, hence becoming regularized and institutionalized in new forms of (local and regional) governance. More specifically, the paper illuminates the kinds of roles that university senior managers play, and interprets them in light of the territorial developmental, regional upgrading and institutional entrepreneurship literatures.

**REFERENCES**


