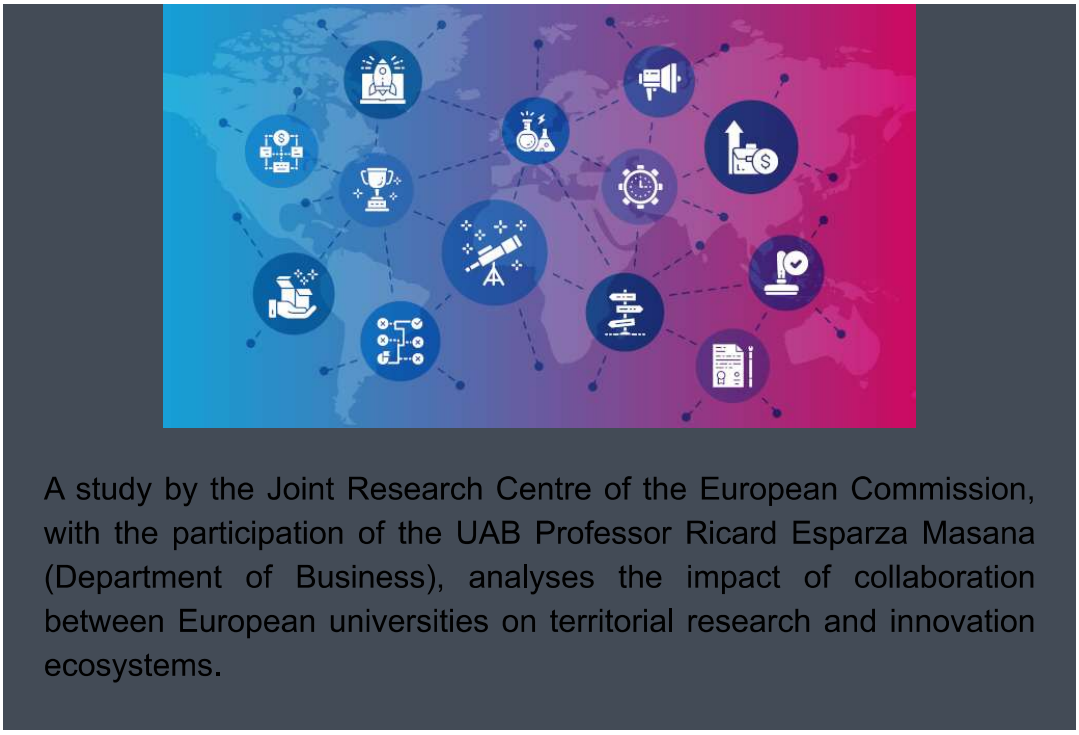
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How university networks drive territorial innovation



A study by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, with the participation of the UAB Professor Ricard Esparza Masana (Department of Business), analyses the impact of collaboration between European universities on territorial research and innovation ecosystems.

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In recent years, universities in the European Union have received funding to facilitate collaboration between them through different instruments that enable them to achieve common objectives. Three of these instruments, identified as particularly representative, are: (i) alliances under the “European Universities” initiative (the UAB is part of the ECIU alliance); (ii) projects under the HEI Initiative of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) (the UAB was part of the BOOGIE-U project); (iii) Erasmus+ Alliances for Innovation projects (the UAB has taken part in several projects at faculty/department level).

Between 2021 and 2023, a group of experts from the European Commission, with the participation of Professor Ricard Esparza Masana from the Department of Business, analysed how projects funded under these calls have an impact on the development of new, or deeper, collaborations with actors in the research and innovation ecosystems of the participating territories. The results of this study were published in two technical reports of the European Commission, as well as in a research article in *Tijdschrift voor Economische*

en Sociale Geografie (Journal of Economic and Human Geography), co-authored by Professor Esparza Masana and European Commission economist Jayne Woolford.

The analysis, based on qualitative and quantitative data obtained from more than 100 European universities, focused on four dimensions. First, the educational impact in terms of developing skills and competences in higher education students that match the needs of business and innovation stakeholders. In this respect, the results show that participation in projects is an important catalyst for universities to develop new teaching practices and methodologies, as well as support services, that help reduce the gap between academic training and labour-market needs.

Second, strengthening collaboration with actors in the local innovation ecosystem. Here, the results are mixed; they show that projects have a greater impact on universities that, up to now, had interacted little with their environment, and on those that participate in projects with a specific thematic focus (for example, neuroscience) rather than a cross-cutting one (for example, digitalisation).

Third, the extent to which universities take into account the innovation needs and challenges faced by their territory. Although in most cases universities have made a significant effort, within their projects, to gain a better understanding of these challenges and needs, the results also show that the impact is more significant when projects address specific fields of knowledge or when there is strong collaboration between universities and the public sector, which is not always easy.

Finally, the institutional development of the participating universities. As would be expected, there is clear evidence of a strong impact here, showing that institutional collaboration between universities generates major positive externalities in terms of internationalisation, staff skills development, reputation, commitment and quality improvement.

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