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Centre of Excellence in Smart Specialisation and Regional Policy

## Supporting cooperation in regional research

### Report on the first Regional Research Roundtable

April 2019

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## 1 Centre of Excellence in Smart Specialisation and Regional Policy—Regional Research Roundtable

The Centre of Excellence in Smart Specialisation and Regional Policy (the Centre) aims to:

- facilitate international cooperation between researchers and policy-makers working on initiatives to support innovative economic and social development in regions
- broaden understanding of the role of EU regional policy, and
- support the implementation of smart specialisation initiatives and the development of regional innovation systems in countries beyond the EU.<sup>1</sup>

The Centre hosted a research roundtable at RMIT University on 27 February 2019 with 17 participants.<sup>2</sup> Lars Coenen (University of Melbourne) offered a provocation on the state of regional research in Australia, drawing on the contrast between his two years in Australia and his extensive experience over two decades in Europe. Reflecting on the provocation, participants then described their current regional research projects, research questions and the principal direction of their work. Following these presentations, participants discussed the possibility of a more coherent approach to regional research and policy and considered the role of the Centre.

## 2 Supporting cooperation in regional research—SWOT analysis

This report focuses on the first of the Centre aims: to facilitate international cooperation between researchers and policy-makers. Discussions at the Roundtable raised a number of issues around the coherence of regional research and policy and the relationships between researchers and

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see the Centre flyer at Appendix A or <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-education/global-outlook/european-union-eu-centre/research-programs#regional>

<sup>2</sup> The participants at the February Roundtable were: Lars Coenen (University of Melbourne), Peter Fairbrother (RMIT), Kate Farhall (RMIT), Fiona McKenzie (DELWP), Emsie Arnoldi (RMIT), Andrew Butt (RMIT), Marco Amati (RMIT), Robyn Eversole (Swinburne), Brian Coffey (RMIT), Leo Goedegebuure, Michael Timpano (Latrobe Valley Authority), Lauren Rickards (RMIT), Sally Weller (ACU), Kim Houghton (Regional Australia Institute), Bruce Wilson (RMIT), Emma Shortis (RMIT) and Anna Hyland (RMIT). Thank you also to Fiona Haslam McKenzie (University of Western Australia) for her feedback on an early draft.

policymakers. EU regional policy was raised often as a comparator although the discussion centred on cooperation within Australia as a basis for international cooperation. Future events and publications will explore the role and relevance of EU regional policy more explicitly.

With this in mind, the Centre has reflected on the outcomes of the Roundtable using a SWOT framework. The question for the Centre is, how can our program of activities foster a more coherent and cooperative approach to regional research and policy-making?

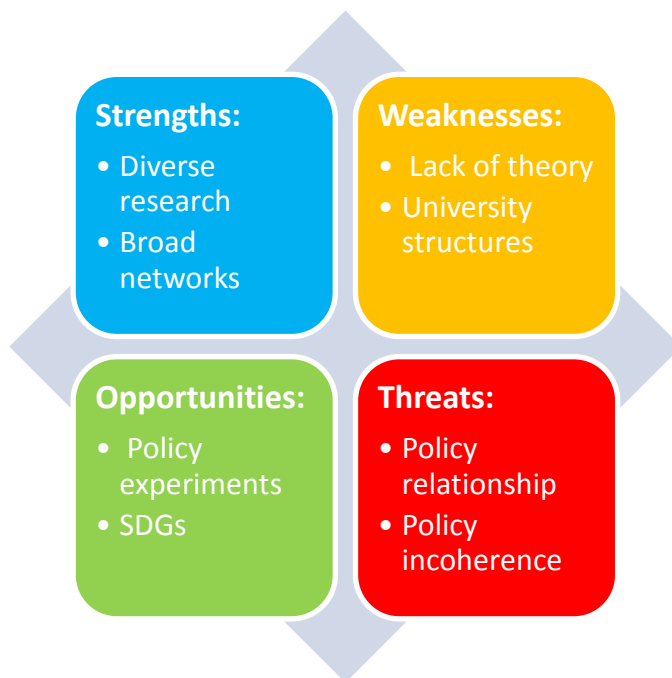


Figure 1 SWOT analysis: key themes from Regional Roundtable

## 2.1 Strengths

### 2.1.1 Diverse research interests and expertise

Roundtable participants described a broad range of research interests. They bring diverse knowledge and perspectives to the question of 'innovative economic and social development in regions'. This is a strength as it offers the opportunity to broaden understandings of regional issues and provoke creative problem-solving approaches.

As raised by Lars Coenen, diversity also creates the risk of eclecticism. A challenge for the Centre is to support 'meaningful conversations across disciplines'. For example, Fiona McKenzie and Sally Weller both raised the necessity of exploring key terms that can have contested meanings.

*Opportunity 1: Provide opportunities to explore key terms and develop clarity in language around regional policy*

### 2.1.2 Broad networks of people, projects and places

Participants described a range of collaborative projects and varied networks. These include:

- [CRIMT \(Interuniversity Research Centre on Globalization and Work\)](#)

- [Regional Studies Association \(RSA\)](#)
- [Australia New Zealand Regional Science Association International \(ANZRSAI\)](#)
- [Sustainable Regions Applied Research Network \(SRARN\)](#)
- [Gippsland Smart Specialisation Strategy](#)
- [RAI Intergovernmental Shared Inquiry Program/ Regional Research Connections](#)
- [AusMob – Australian Mobilities Network](#)
- Policy@RMIT

Participants bring existing collaborative relationships with a range of places including Latrobe Valley, Wyndham (Victoria), the Mallee, Greater Bendigo, Buloke Shire, Tsuwano and Geelong. In addition, the Centre has strong relationships with the Smart Specialisation Platform in Seville, and through the Platform, with the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, DG Regio and several other DGs.

These projects and networks represent existing cooperative work. The Centre should not duplicate these initiatives but could aim to support communication amongst networks and about projects.

*Opportunity 2: Develop the ‘observatory’ function to foster information sharing between people, projects and networks*

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## 2.2 Weaknesses

### 2.2.1 Lack of engagement with regional theory

In his address, Lars Coenen identified a key provocation: that regional research in Australia has insufficiently exploited its potential for contextual analysis. An element of this is a lack of engagement with regional theory.<sup>3</sup> This is a weakness that can undermine meaningful international cooperation among researchers. For example, Coenen argued that engaging with the question of ‘why theoretically are regions interesting’ would allow Australian researchers to participate in comparative and international debates. Participants raised other concepts that might benefit from theoretical clarity—including the definition of regions, regional governance, relationships between urban and non-urban and interactions amongst economic development, inclusiveness and sustainability.

Engagement with theory might be best focused on ‘internal’ coherence amongst researchers, with a focus on enhancing ability to translate, share understanding and stimulate discussion across disciplines. Lauren Rickards mentioned the utility of cooperative writing projects as a way to explore different scholarly perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

*Opportunity 3: Promote cooperative exploration of theoretical questions in future roundtables or cooperative writing projects.*

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### 2.2.2 The role of universities in regional development

Leo Goedegebuure raised the issue of the role of universities in regional development giving the example of the [University of Twente](#), Netherlands. He described the Australian university system as metropolitan, hierarchical and destructive in narratives and financing. These factors represent a

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<sup>3</sup> This can be contrasted with work on urban theory: for example, Allen J. Scott and Michael Storper, ‘The nature of cities: the scope and limits of urban theory’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2014) <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12134>

<sup>4</sup> See: Special issue: Regional Futures *Australasian Journal of Regional Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2017

weakness because they undermine the contribution that regional universities and researchers can make to regional innovation ecosystems. Participants discussed this as an issue of Australian geography, but also drew attention to efforts by regional universities and hospitals to specialise or to work differently across campuses.

This discussion raised some perennial issues such as university funding structures that are beyond the capacity of the Centre to address. However, it may be worth considering how the Centre might support the work of non-metropolitan regional researchers and/or researchers conducting engaged community-level research, as well as exploring broader questions of impact.

For example, Robyn Eversole described SRARN which links around a dozen regional research centres in Australia, Chile and Argentina. These Centres face some common challenges and the network allows them to share knowledge and approaches. The network has conducted shared projects, academic exchanges and fellowships. (<https://www.facebook.com/SRARN/>). Robyn is also currently recruiting centres for a research project into the role of regional centres in regional development.

It is worth noting that the European Commission Joint Research Centre has launched an S3 Platform project called Higher Education for Smart Specialisation. The JRC has conducted 'action research' and capacity building in selected European regions (see <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/hess>). This research program might provide some insights for universities outside the European community.

*Opportunity 4: Explore the role of universities within S3 and regional development processes; explore the concept of relational impact*

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## 2.3 Threats

The main threats discussed at the Roundtable concern the nature of regional policy in Australia, as well as the quality of relationships between researchers and policy makers.

Lars Coenen contrasted the 'ideal' of smart specialisation with the fractured state of regional policy in Australia. He pointed out that policies have focused on regional deficits and/or crises rather than opportunities. They give priority mainly to infrastructure investment at the expense of innovation capabilities, while Australian innovation policies have ignored place-based dimensions (both regional and urban). In addition, participants raised Australia's federal system as a key constraint. The lack of formal recognition of regions impacts opportunities for research translation.

Several participants described threats relating to the quality of relationships between researchers and policy makers. These included:

- Absence of critical conversations between academics and policy-makers<sup>5</sup>
- Cycles of interest in or lack of interest in research (including due to electoral cycles)
- Increasing pace of policy work undermining engagement with research
- Suspicion, lack of regard and/or lack of budget for research within local government
- Competition from consultancy firms which deliver what government wants at speed
- Fear within government of evaluation or 'being found out'
- Predominance of policy 'implementers' with limited tools for change

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<sup>5</sup> Feedback indicated that this relationship may vary between states.

These factors can be regarded as threats that undermine the possibility of positive collaboration with government. However, it is worth noting that the Roundtable involved two current policy-makers. In addition, participating researchers described a range of current links with government at all levels.

*Opportunity 5: Draw on both the research and policy expertise of Roundtable members to strengthen communication with government*

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## 2.4 Opportunities

### 2.4.1 Policy experimentation and engagement

Despite the threats described above, participants described a number of projects that are experimenting with new ways of linking research and policy. Brian Coffey described the *Policy at RMIT* project which aims to strengthen links with DELWP. Kim Houghton described the Regional Australia Institute's shared inquiry program (Regional Research Connections) and the positive process of collaborating with government to agree on research themes. A number of participants also observed an appetite (at least within State government) for addressing more complex regional issues and engaging with new (or rebranded) ideas.

The Gippsland S3 project was put forward as an example of institutional experimentation, a crystallisation of transition issues and a multi-actor, multi-level approach. S3 was also described as a way to avoid the Anglophone echo-chamber. Sally Weller raised concerns about the relationship between new regional institutions and democracy—an area that could be explored further with a focus on S3 and governance.

*Opportunity 6: Promote learning amongst projects around policy experimentation and engagement, and democratic processes*

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### 2.4.2 Sustainable Development Goals network

Emma Shortis described the EU Centre's SDG network that is exploring the possibility of using the SDGs as a framework for regional policy. The Gippsland S3 project provides an accessible case study to test this idea, including questions around data, baseline assessment and the adequacy of indicators and targets. The SDG Network is also hosting monthly seminars on each SDG. Bruce Wilson noted how the EU's focus has also shifted from 'innovation for growth' to 'regional wellbeing'. There are efforts within the EU to link innovation to problem solving for SDGs. This provides an opportunity for cooperation both between these two projects and with the S3 platform in Seville.

*Opportunity 7: Promote learning and shared projects between SDG Network and Centre of Excellence*

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## 3 Conclusion

The Centre can play a significant role in enhancing the contribution of researchers to improved regional policy, and to the debates about innovation. It can assist also in bringing Australian researchers more coherently into the international debates on these issues. The report of the Centre's first Research Roundtable provides a clear foundation for this work, drawing as it does on the expertise of leading researchers on regions in Australia. The Centre seeks to engage all Australian researchers and policy makers interested in regional issues and regional policy, and welcomes their response to the opportunities identified here.





## JEAN MONNET CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE ON SMART SPECIALISATION AND REGIONAL POLICY

The Centre of Excellence on Smart Specialisation and Regional Policy aims to promote international cooperation between researchers and policy makers working to support innovative economic and social development in regions.

The Centre seeks to broaden understandings of the role of regional policy in the integration of the European Union, recognising the EU's current emphasis on smart specialisation strategies. A key theme is the effectiveness of regional policy in assisting with integration. This has global relevance, as it offers an approach to addressing problems such as regional disparities, climate change and cultural cohesion that are found in all parts of the world, not least in Australia.

The Centre aims to strengthen RMIT's capability to improve the quality of teaching and research in the regional development and policy fields. It will strengthen the linkages with EU regional policy researchers and policy makers, and enhance understanding in Australia and in Asia about the contribution which regional policy makes to EU integration processes.

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co-funded by the  
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Programme Jean  
Monnet Activities**

### The Centre's objectives are to:

- share best practice and promote dialogue about regional policy and smart specialisation processes
- undertake comparative research on the implementation of smart specialisation and implications for regional development and policy
- promote policy dialogue about the economic, social and environmental contribution that smart specialisation processes can make
- enhance the depth and quality of teaching subjects that address the EU experience, and
- attract students to postgraduate studies on smart specialisation and regional policy, and support early career researchers.

### Partners

- Prof Bruce Wilson
- A/Prof Lauren Rickards
- Prof Peter Fairbrother
- Dr Meagan Tyler
- Mr Todd Williams

### Key actions include:

- Undertake new research to support policy recommendations
- Annual roundtables and policy dialogues bringing together researchers and policy makers to share insights and debate issues
- Web-based communication, sharing details of research and activities of interest to regional policy-makers and researchers in Australasia
- Review of learning resources for students, ensuring that the content reflects current debates and research outcomes;
- Support for early career academics at roundtables and conferences

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