Regional innovative schemes of the educational capacity building for the smart specialization in the human settlements in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract

Objectives: This article aims to collect, analyze and summarize the best EU practices in developing digital skills and competencies of target groups of settlements in development regions in the context of smart specialization priorities, in relation to the specifics of the Republic of Moldova. It is also intended to develop recommendations for the successful implementation of the digital transformation of the Republic of Moldova into the European family of digital economy. The work highlights necessary activities to connect settlements to the ecosystems of the digital factory of open innovation and the digital academy of entrepreneurship that promote the development of digital skills. Prior work: The authors of the article are based on their published research in the field of smart settlements development, especially digitalization aspects, as well as best European practices. Approach: Bibliographic analysis, case studies, synthesis, conclusions. Results: Based on a comparative analysis, methods for teaching digital skills and competencies to target groups of development regions are proposed in the context of smart specialization priorities. The concepts of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the Open Innovation Factory and the Digital Academy of Entrepreneurship for the integration of regional educational ecosystems into the European Higher Education Area are also highlighted. The article not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of the concepts of adaptation of digital education in regions of development of smart settlements, but also provides the basis for the further development of a smart specialization strategy aimed at maximizing the social and economic positive results from its application while minimizing negative consequences. Implications: academics, researchers, practitioners. Value: The value of this work lies in identifying and structuring a regional innovative scheme for digital skills development compatible with best practice in the European Education Area related to specific of the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: digital transformation, digital economy, educational renewal.

1. Introduction

Preparing the Moldavian population to successfully master the benefits of the digital economy is of great importance for our today. This is also due to the fact that Moldova is a candidate country for accession to the European Union. As part of its support to the enlargement of the EU and its neighbors, the European Commission's JRC [1] is carrying out smart specialization activities to identify their competitive advantages, opportunities and needs. Enhanced innovation strategies based on the smart specialization approach have the potential to drive technological renewal and broader innovation, providing the basis for creating unique competitive advantages for localities in the EU enlargement regions and neighboring countries.

In order to develop awareness-raising activities, training events and mapping of the economic, scientific and innovation potential already existing in the target regions of the Republic of Moldova, this article summarizes the best practices of the European Higher and Specialized Education Area. In order to design educational programs, it is necessary to discuss with representatives of business, academia and public authorities the potential competitive advantages of rural communities and small towns in the development regions.

The Education Framework for Urban and Rural Resilience Innovation can bring together regional universities and innovation centers in the EU and candidate countries to expand entrepreneurial ecosystems and help students, entrepreneurs and civil servants to find solutions to specific urban and rural problems in digital ages. Within the framework of accelerating the digital transformation of the development regions of the Republic of Moldova, examples of educational and awareness-raising activities are the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) Digital Open Innovation Factory [2] and the EIT Digital Entrepreneurial Academy [3].

The first model of the EIT will support pan-European teams of entrepreneurs in the launch or further development of digital technology projects and products. The work program EIT Digital Open Innovation Factory is guided by the five focus areas – Digital Tech, Digital Industry, Digital Cities, Digital Wellbeing and Digital Finance – of the EIT Digital Strategic Innovation Agenda 2022-2024 [4].

The second model is EIT Digital, which consists of three schools: a master's program, a professional school and a summer school, which together form the EIT Digital Entrepreneurial Academy. In order to participate in these initiatives, it is necessary to have an appropriate innovative educational infrastructure in the regions and groups of localities of the Republic of Moldova, which implies the realization of innovative educational activities.

2. Smart Specialization in human settlements

Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) is an approach that promotes regional development by identifying and focusing on a region's unique strengths, resources, and competitive advantages. Moldova has recognized the potential for smart specialization in the development of its human settlements, which include cities, towns, and rural areas. This involves areas such as urban planning, infrastructure development, digitalization, and sustainable living. To achieve this, educational capacity building is crucial.

Smart Specialization Strategy activities in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region [5] are facilitating interregional cooperation in the thematic priority pillars “Strengthening the Region”, “Connecting the Region”, “Building Prosperity” and “Protecting the Environment” aiming at balanced development, connectivity and enhanced competitiveness through innovative approaches promoting economic and social prosperity and growth in the region.

The Danube Region is a unique and particularly diverse area as it encompasses nine EU countries (Austria, two German regions: Baden-Württemberg and Bayern, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) and five non-EU

countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Moldova, Serbia and South-Western and Southern regions of Ukraine) of which some are accession countries and others are neighborhood countries all together composing a heterogeneous macro-region with some high and low performing countries in the fields of research and innovation.

Smart Specialization Strategy can make a valuable contribution to the better integration of the Danube region through the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), in the sense that it can stimulate the constructive use of regional diversity by avoiding uniformity and duplication in regional investment goals as well as help develop critical mass to tackle major common challenges.

A local smart specialization strategy differs from a regional one by working closely with the local authority (i.e. the municipality) in order to engage community stakeholders in building preparedness to deal with, for example, resource-based industries that benefit from the abundance of natural resources in their area [6, 7]. In this context, preparedness is defined as the ability to plan for local development in a way that addresses territorial challenges and adopts a strategic approach to retaining benefits from resource-based industries operating in the area.

The primary objective of the Higher Education in Smart Specializations (HESS) [8] activities is to analyses how HEIs can be better integrated into S3 policy mixes and how the European, National (in the non-members countries) Structural and Investment Funds can be more effectively spent to achieve localization regional S3 objectives. The benchmarking activities also aims to explore how institutional capacity in regions of Europe's countries can be enhanced by strengthening the role of HEIs within the "quadruple helix" of government, academia, business and civil society or Living lab approaches adopted by the sectors of local economies. HESS can combine targeted territorial support activities, with cross-cutting and cross-border activities, to generate more widely appropriable lessons for EU territories and support to evidence-based policy.

3. The role of education for digital cities and villages

3.1. Innovation needs

By 2050, the global urban population will increase by 75% to 6.3 billion (i.e. two thirds of the world population) [9]. The challenge of developing and maintaining attractive, inclusive and safe urban environments needs to be met on multiple fronts. Stakeholders are local governments, city service providers, industry, and the citizens. Mobility as a service integrates public, private, peer-to-peer, conventional, clean, or autonomous transportation means. It will benefit from the increasing will of citizens to participate in the sharing economy.

Besides their traditional role, cities are increasingly organizing and exposing data, especially in real time. City data along with analytics and machine learning improves engagement and inclusiveness of the citizens and of the visitors. Augmented and virtual reality of the city is another facet of exposing or simulating city data from the past, present or future. A key factor for the attractiveness of a city is the safety of its citizens and visitor's safety of the city and its general resilience to unplannable natural events.

3.2. Focus

In line with the innovation needs, the Digital Cities area will focus on: (I) urban mobility, including autonomous transportation, (II) citizen information, inclusiveness and engagement, (III) city safety and resilience with respect to environmental, economic, and demographic developments. We will develop breakthrough solutions with sustainable business models to cope with the challenges that city governments, citizens and businesses are facing in their roles as stakeholders of the urban environment. The high-level objective is for the governments to manage the cities more efficiently, make sure they are resilient, and include citizens in the life of the city.

3.3. Education needs

Education is an important element in smart city development. Strengths in education, advanced training and certification, universities, e-learning infrastructure, lifelong learning and innovation in education technologies are all part of what defines a smart city. Smart cities recognize the need for educational programmer producing graduates with modern knowledge, practical skills and collaborative attitudes. Moldova has various higher education institutions, such as universities and technical colleges, which play a pivotal role in smart specialization. These institutions provide knowledge and skills needed for various fields relevant to human settlements' development.

Working in complementarity with the pilot initiative to support the development of innovation and entrepreneurial capacity in higher education, the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) [10] contribute to increase the entrepreneurial and innovation capacity of the higher education sector in EIT RIS countries and regions. Universities and HEIs from RIS countries will join consortia and together with EIT's Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KIC) [11] partners will work on the action plan, designing the pathway how to increase their entrepreneurial and innovation capacity in short, medium and long term, benefiting from the EIT know-how [12]. Core elements of the action plan will be supported through the new EIT initiative on HEIs capacity building, however any supplementary and support activities are encouraged through the RIS segment to further amplify desired results and impact, either individually by institutions from RIS countries, or jointly with other KIC partners. It is expected that this will attract and facilitate the inclusion of a significantly higher number of Universities from the EIT RIS countries and regions into the EIT Label Master Programs [13].

3.4. Vocational Training

Vocational schools and training centers provide specialized skills to meet the demands of smart specialization. They offer programs in areas like construction, information technology, and sustainable agriculture.

Education can directly to support vocation of students, workers in different sectors of regional economy. In framework of the EIT, education, innovation, and business creation are always part of the same package. Many of EIT Community's programs [14] will connect shareholders to people who can both help to develop own sustainable solution ideas and teach peoples, how to run a successful business. Courses that bear EIT Label are all

guaranteed, that you are getting hands-on experience across Europe that directly prepares you for your chosen sector and connects you to the right people.

3.5. Lifelong Learning

Promoting lifelong learning through community centers and online courses ensures that the workforce in human settlements remains adaptable and updated in line with the latest innovations [15].

EIT alumni community is a lifelong professional network. The end of your time with Regional innovation hubs EIT as a learner won't be the end of your time with EIT Community. Both during and after your chosen EIT education program, you'll have easy access to a network that includes:

- Investors and Venture Capital firms;
- Businesses and non-profit associations;
- EU institutions and Member State officials;
- Universities and research centers;
- Building engines of innovation: EIT HEI Initiative.

EIT HEI Initiative helps higher education institutions get all the resources they need to teach innovation and entrepreneurship skills. EIT team provide:

- Expertise and coaching;
- Funding;
- Access to our innovation network;
- Help developing innovation action plans to meet institution needs;
- Transforming higher education institution into an incubator for sustainable growth and jobs for partner regions from Europe.

4. Regional Innovative Schemes

4.1. Collaboration with Industry

Manufacturing is the main driver of Europe's industrial innovation, its job creation, and its growth. But our manufacturing sector remains too fragmented and beholden to unsustainable economic models. That needs to end. EIT Manufacturing is working on all fronts to make sure manufacturing industries are keeping up. Through its Knowledge and Innovation Community model, it's empowering ambitious companies looking to make a positive difference on climate and communities. It is speeding up the take-up of sustainable innovations in manufacturing technology. It is most important of all, it's giving power back to the people with the skills to be the workforce of tomorrow, forging a new future on the factory floor. Whether you want to learn what it takes to run the factories of the future or have a bright idea for what those factories could look like, EIT Manufacturing is the place to be. It has no lesser ambition than to dramatically reduce industrial emissions while boosting Europe's growth simultaneously and it will need prepared people. The EIT Manufacturing model [16] can help in the following ways:

- Learn all about new industry skills and where innovation is most needed;
- Develop the skills and business acumen you need to confidently launch your venture;

- Find investors and businesses willing to advise you and support your endeavors;
- Get the support you need to get your new company off the ground in Europe;
- Develop a network in across the manufacturing sector that will last a lifetime.

Educational institutions collaborate closely with local industries and businesses. The EIT brings together organizations working in the field of education, research and innovation (the so-called "knowledge triangle") to form dynamic cross-border partnerships and create environments fostering innovation [17]. This allows for curriculum alignment with industry needs, ensuring graduates have the skills required for smart specialization projects. EIT's Regional Innovation Scheme enables the transfer of good practices and know-how using the EIT's unique approach to boosting innovation across the entire continent.

Through the EIT RIS, EIT Manufacturing can actively engage countries with modest or moderate levels of innovation, allowing wider participation in our activities and programs while helping to close innovation gaps. EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KIC), such as EIT Manufacturing, engage local organizations to serve as RIS Hubs in EIT RIS countries and regions. The primary role of the RIS Hub is to ensure the visibility of the EIT Community and raise awareness of activities and cooperation opportunities for local actors representing education, business and research areas. RIS Hubs also liaise with the relevant national, regional and local authorities, and facilitate the sharing of EIT Innovation Community expertise with them.

4.2. Research and Development

Encouraging research and development activities in educational institutions fosters innovation in human settlements. Moldova has initiated various research, education [18] and infrastructure grants to fund projects in fields like urban planning and environmental sustainability [19].

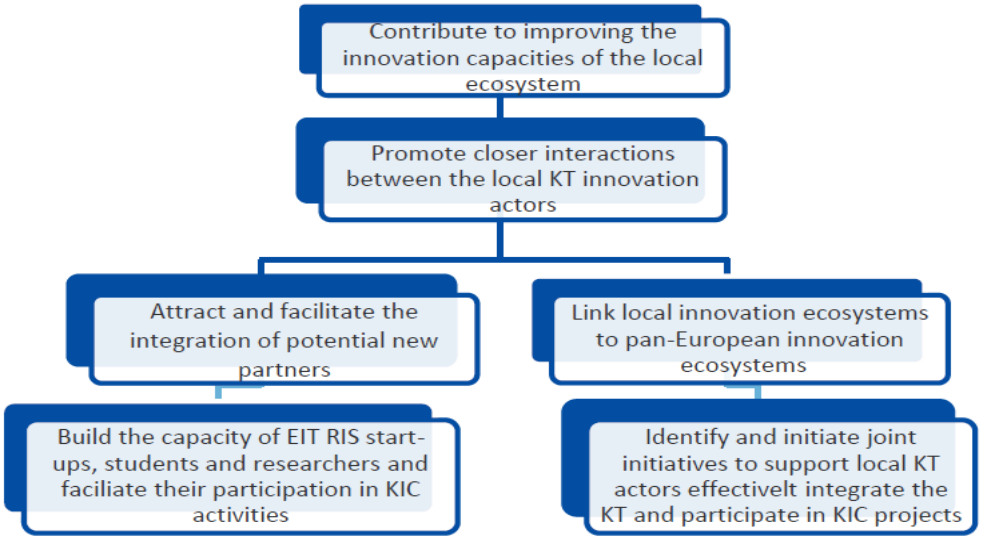

Fig. 1. Intervention logic EIT's KIC in line with the EIT RIS' objectives.
Source: EIT Digital

The schematic below [20] illustrates the intervention logic within which the EIT's Knowledge and Innovation Communities are expected to operate to create the desired impact, in line with the EIT RIS' objectives:

It is recommended that emphasis should be on supporting innovation projects with lead and participation of the entities from EIT RIS countries and regions, including, start-ups. The end result should be more commercializing partners from the EIT RIS countries and regions participate in the EIT Community. The EIT RIS scheme should support start-ups and innovators from the EIT RIS countries to effectively scale-up and elevate the outputs and outcomes of their innovation activities on the pan-European level. The EIT KIC may also wish to involve local start-ups in technology and know-how transfer, fully engage students benefiting from the EIT RIS (such as, by specific scholarships) in innovation projects and run pilots and tests of the outcomes of EIT KIC innovation projects and integrate researchers from the EIT RIS countries in EIT KIC innovation projects. The EIT RIS scheme could support transfer of knowledge and good practices in developing or facilitating growth of innovation ecosystems in the EIT RIS regions and countries and transferring or co-creating new innovation delivery mechanisms.

The EIT RIS could additionally be used to support researchers and innovators from the EIT RIS countries and regions to develop innovative and sustainable products, processes, technologies services and non-technological solutions that address a specific business opportunity or social objective. Some aspects of smart villages are reflected in [21].

4.3. EU Funding

Moldova has access to European Union funding programs to support educational capacity building. These funds are directed towards modernizing infrastructure, providing scholarships, and improving the quality of education.

The EIT's Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KIC) may choose to use their annual EIT RIS dedicated budget allocation to finance EIT RIS activities, as described in this Implementation Framework [22], co-funded up to 100%, as they consider it most appropriate, in line with their strategy and priorities to deliver tangible deliverables including widening participation in the KIC from EIT RIS countries and regions. In this context, the EIT RIS should also be mainstreamed within the KIC' core activities (that is participation in innovation, business creation and education actions) and used to exempt EIT RIS participants from co-funding rates and membership fees, thereby facilitating and attracting a high-level of participation to the EIT Community and boosting its pan-European spread. The KIC need to pre-fix the co-funding rate already at the call stage.

It is pertinent to note that beyond the 15% maximum budget dedicated to the EIT RIS, entities and partners from EIT RIS countries and regions still be fully involved in all activities in line with the co-funding rates delineated in the EIT SIA. Yet, the up to 100% co-funded activities is limited to the EIT RIS allocations which will be capped at a maximum 15% of the overall EIT funding for existing and new KIC. The EIT Governing Board will regularly monitor and evaluate the EIT RIS funding and may issue strategic guidance as appropriate.

4.4. EIT cross-border cooperation

EIT collaborative projects with neighboring countries and regions [23] enable the exchange of knowledge and expertise, enriching the educational environment.

The EIT nurtures entrepreneurial talent and supports new ideas, bringing together the "knowledge triangle" of leading companies, universities and research centers to form dynamic cross-border partnerships called Innovation Communities.

The EIT RIS will create synergies and complementarities with other EU, national, regional innovation initiatives and funding. There are opportunities for mutually reinforcing interaction with the EU's Cohesion Policy by addressing the links between the local and global aspects of innovation. KIC Colocation Centers are well positioned to capitalize on various funding schemes from their respective regions. The Co-location Centers offer platforms for cross-border collaboration playing a major role in strengthening the local-global connectivity of the KIC as a whole, including through close co-operation with regional authorities, in particular those involved in designing and delivering the Regional Innovation Strategies for Smart Specializations.

5. Challenges and future prospects

Analyzing the challenges and future prospects for developing human settlements in the Republic of Moldova, the following aspects stand out:

1. Funding: A major challenge is ensuring sustainable funding for educational capacity building. The Moldovan government needs to continue allocating resources to this critical sector.
2. Quality Assurance: Maintaining high educational standards and ensuring the relevance of programs to smart specialization goals require constant vigilance and quality assurance.
3. Digital Divide: Bridging the digital divide in rural areas is a critical task. Ensuring that even remote settlements have access to online learning and technology is vital.
4. Environmental Sustainability: Moldova must ensure that its smart specialization projects align with environmental sustainability goals, considering factors like energy efficiency and green infrastructure.

The future prospects for Moldova in the realm of educational capacity building for smart specialization in human settlements look promising. By addressing these challenges and continuing to innovate, Moldova can position itself as a regional leader in sustainable urban development and human settlements.

It is essential to note that the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is a macro-regional strategy designed to enhance the quality of life in the Danube region by covering twelve priority areas. It is a vital instrument for executing the EU Regional and Innovation Policy in the regions of the Republic of Moldova. Its purpose is to promote the growth of educational and research capabilities grounded on the invention of entrepreneurial potential within the confines of local smart specialization and regional innovation programs.

It should be emphasized that these activities jointly managed by the City of Vienna and the Center for European Perspective representing Slovenia. The Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF) was established on July 1st, 2011 during the inaugural conference. Over 100 representatives attended from 14 Danube countries and diverse sectors including national, regional, and international NGOs, churches, minorities, academia, and EU institutions such as the EU Parliament, EU Commission, and EU Presidency (Hungary). Technical terms are explained when first introduced and the language is precisely chosen to maintain objectivity and formality with a clear and logical structure. Biases are avoided, and the spelling follows American English conventions. While the DCSF operated in close cooperation and consensus with the responsible EU institutions, the Danube Civil Society Forum [24] is a self-organized and independent NGO structure.

The Danube Civil Society Forum is the platform for civil society dialogue and networking in the Danube basin under the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The Forum is registered under the Austrian law. It has 38 members; 36 regular members and 2 observers as of 1st August 2022. It functions as the interface for structured consultations between civil society and public and private authorities on the regional, national and EU level as well as to international and intergovernmental organizations active in the region. The DCSF is dedicated to support civil society organizations in the Danube basin. It aims to promote and enhance civil society participation and networking in the framework of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region.

Within the framework of our research, the following three priority areas are of the greatest interest:

1. Priority Area (PA) № 7 “Knowledge society (research, education and ICT)” has the mission to develop the knowledge society through research, education and information technologies. It is coordinated by Slovakia and Serbia, with the involvement of a wide network of key players. The Priority Area 7 formulates the following objectives [25]:
    - To support education, research and ICT in the Danube Region by improvement of framework conditions for building a knowledge society;
    - To contribute to an increasing level and quality of network activities, strengthening the existing links and fostering new cooperation in the Danube Region;
    - To strengthen the realization of the European Research Area in the Danube Region;
    - To revert brain drain and foster brain circulation;
    - To further implement Smart Specialization Strategies in all Danube countries
2. The Danube Region Strategy Priority Area № 8 aims to support the competitiveness of enterprises in the Danube Region [26]. An Action is an important issue requiring intervention by the countries and stakeholders involved to meet the objective of the Priority Area. The main Actions of the PA 8 are:

- To foster cooperation and exchange of knowledge between SMEs, academia and the public sector in areas of competence in the Danube Region;
- To improve business support to strengthen the capacities of SMEs for cooperation and trade;
- To support enterprises through high performing training and qualification schemes;
- To prioritize the effective implementation of measures provided for under the Small Business Act for Europe;
- To improve the competitiveness of rural areas and in particular of the agricultural sector;
- To eliminate cross border barriers and bottlenecks to people and business -Seamless Europe for a livable Danube Region;
- To improve framework conditions for SMEs in areas where competitive infrastructure is missing.

3. Priority Area № 10 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region aims at stepping up institutional capacity and cooperation as a precondition for shaping a sustainable, resilient and prosperous future [27]. In doing so, we address institutional capacity-building at local, regional and national level, involvement of civil society in public governance, increasing local development and better spending as well as increasing absorption rates of EU funds. It serves as an information and communication hub for local, regional, national and European stakeholders responsible for as well as working in the field of institutional capacity building, participative governance and spatial development. The activities of PA 10 aim at supporting policy and project development, stakeholder relations and capitalization in the Danube Region.

6. Conclusions

The Republic of Moldova, a small Eastern European country, has been making significant efforts to develop its economy and infrastructure, particularly in the context of European integration and smart specialization strategies. One of the key areas of focus is the development of human settlements and the enhancement of educational capacity to support smart specialization. Country and regional innovative schemes for educational capacity building are essential for achieving smart specialization in human settlements. The collaboration between educational institutions, industries, and international partners, coupled with a focus on research and development, holds the key to a prosperous future.

This infrastructure and human resources are usually provided by regional universities. Such innovation support, embedded in the European ecosystem, could be provided, as an example, by the IT4BA Innovation incubator [28] at the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (AESM) based on the JRC models of the EU Commission. AESM already has created the innovative educational ecosystem that brings together 8 resident ICT companies, teachers, researchers and dual degree students [29]. So, university innovation centers of this type and initiatives of Moldovan business innovation companies contribute

to the integration into pan-European teams of educational, research and business organizations that are the focus of EIT Digital.

Overcoming challenges and ensuring sustainability will be paramount in Moldova's journey towards smart specialization and a prosperous human settlements future.

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