

EUROPEAN COHESION POLICY AND STRUCTURAL FUNDS IN SPARSELY POPULATED AREAS: CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OULU

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Abstract:

Regional policy is one of the European Union's main investment policies to support regional equality and convergence. In particular, cohesion policy is one of the key policy areas aiming to support job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth, sustainable development and citizens' quality of life. Cohesion and structural funds comprise almost a third of the total EU budget, 351.8 billion euros during 2014–2020. Education and innovation are among the main objectives of cohesion and regional policy, educational and research institutions are considered to play an important role in regional development.

European cohesion policy forms the core of Finnish regional policy and development, in which universities are key players, especially in northern, sparsely populated areas. This study examines how universities participate in cohesion policy and regional development and how they utilise structural funds to fulfil their 'third mission' - their participation in and contribution toward society. The Oulu Southern Institute (OSI) of the University of Oulu is our case study unit.

The case study data were collected using an adapted Delphi method in a workshop with OSI staff, from an online questionnaire to OSI's closest stakeholders and from in-depth interviews to examine the themes that arose in the questionnaire answers. In the findings, the importance of the university unit for regional development is clearly evident. Structural funds are the main tools for universities to stimulate development, and OSI was seen as a crucial actor, knowledge creator, collaboration partner and regional developer as well as a fundamental part of the regional innovation system.

Keywords: European cohesion policy, regional development, structural funds, sparsely populated areas, third task of universities