Session Title:
Smart specialisation and regional policy in the EU: fresh thinking or old wine in new bottles?

Organizers:
Fabian Faller faller@geographie.uni-kiel.de (Dept. of Geography, Kiel University, Germany)
Robert Hassink hassink@geographie.uni-kiel.de (Dept. of Geography, Kiel University, Germany)
Pedro Marques MarquesP@cardiff.ac.uk (Cardiff School of Planning and Geography, Cardiff University, UK)

The concept of smart specialisation (S3) has moved quickly from theory to practice to become a major pillar of EU regional policy in the current funding cycle (2014 – 2020). According to one of its main proponents (Foray 2015, 1), smart specialisation is about “the capacity of an economic system (a region for example) to generate new specialities through the discovery of new domains of opportunity and the local concentration and agglomeration of resources and competences in these domains”. Of fundamental importance are so-called entrepreneurial discovery processes (EDP) that build on the knowledge of local actors, including firms, universities, research centres, business associations and other organisations. According to the S3 literature, even though EDP can happen without governmental intervention, a strategy is often needed to foster them, especially in less developed territories.

Conceptually, smart specialisation, or closely related concepts such as clusters, can be seen as being part of broader regional innovation theories, which aim at understanding how endogenous potential is developed in regions. On a wider level, these concepts are also part of discussions in the paradigm of evolutionary economic geography and relate to evolutionary concepts such as related and unrelated variety, path dependence, path creation and lock-ins. This goes beyond the practice of smart specialisation, questioning its potential impact on our understanding of how regional economies evolve.

They key question for a concept such as S3 is whether it leads to better policy making processes and strategies or if it is merely old wine in new bottles. Another set of sub-questions that still need further discussion are: Does S3 promote innovative thinking among policy makers, when compared for example to cluster policies, which have a longer track record among policy makers? Will it be capable of delivering regional growth, particularly in places that have lagged behind in recent decades? Will S3 be effective in promoting new specialisms or will it rely on supporting existing industries? Will S3 strategies be capable of incorporating actors from both high-tech and low-tech parts of the regional economy, and operate effectively in high growth regions as well as in peripheral, structurally weak regions?
The session aims to discuss critically smart specialisation as both concept and strategy and to compare experiences of smart specialisation strategies with older innovation approaches. We welcome abstracts that reflect broadly on the experience of S3 thinking and implementation from an empirical, theoretical, or policy-related perspective. Potential research topics include:

- Smart specialisation in a broader set of regional innovation policies
- Contribution of smart specialisation strategies to structural change
- The quality of regional government and successful smart specialisation strategies
- Power issues concerning priority setting in smart specialisation strategies
- The multi-level dimensions of smart specialisation strategies; the governance of smart specialisation strategies
- Smart specialisations and clusters in relation to path dependence, path creation and lock-ins
- Cluster evolution, cluster life cycle and cluster strategies in times of smart specialisation
- Smart specialisation and related or unrelated variety
- Collective inertia and vested interests in smart specialisation
- Smart specialisation and extra-regional linkages, global production networks and global pipelines
- Smart specialisation and sustainable transitions
- Smart specialisation and creative industries
- Influences of different contexts on entrepreneurial discovery processes


Please send abstracts of no more than 250 words to Fabian Faller faller@geographie.uni-kiel.de, Robert Hassink hassink@geographie.uni-kiel.de or Pedro Marques MarquesP@cardiff.ac.uk by February 12th, 2016.