

For citation, this paper will be published in *Higher Education and Regional Green Transitions: Navigating Tensions, Complexities, & Solutions*. Pinheiro, P., Drejer, I., Bienkowska, B., Sotarauta, M. & Laterza, V. (eds) Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge.

## A place leadership role for universities?

Markku Sotarauta  
Tampere University  
Urban and Regional Studies Group (Sente)

Paper presented at:  
The 19<sup>th</sup> regional innovation policies conference:  
Twin transitions, ecosystems, and disruptive innovation.  
October 23-24, 2025.  
Venice, Italy

### **Abstract**

This article argues that universities' potential to assume a place leadership role in regional development depends on how we see change itself. The question is not only about finding a proper mode of governance and engagement. If change is understood as transformation, universities are expected to act as disruptors; if framed as transition, their role shifts toward steady guidance and orchestration. Drawing on different theories of change, the article develops a conceptual map that situates universities' place leadership roles within differing notions of change. In doing so, it shows that any search for university place leadership remains incomplete without scrutinising the very assumptions through which we understand change.

# 1 Introduction

Green transformation and related theories, models and policy recipes have risen among the key targets of attention in many disciplines and policy spheres - and for good reason. It is essential to reconsider our actions and restructure our systems to transform societies. Simultaneously, universities are increasingly engaged in societal and economic activities, and the third stream has become a norm at most universities. The expectations towards universities have risen in line with the complexity of the challenges. As Fonseca and Nieth (2021) put it, various collaborative modes of innovation, related policies, and interactive regional governance structures and processes have heightened expectations for universities to engage in regional strategy-making and assume new roles and functions. Furthermore, the scholarship around place leadership has gained traction, reaching beyond structural explanations and policy programmes, aiming to provide new insights into change agency and regional development processes.

Bringing together the three rapidly expanding research strands reflects a conviction that universities and leadership are among the key determinants in the search for a brighter future. All these points towards the importance of change agency, and place leadership as one of the key modes of it (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). This call is enhanced by the numerous governance and innovation-related policy models, suggesting a stronger role for universities in transformative efforts and, in turn, a stronger role for stakeholders in their internal affairs, management, and decision-making (Goddard, Hazelkorn, and Vallance, 2016). Therefore, the question of whether universities have a role to play in place leadership for green and other kinds of transformation inevitably arises. Connecting place leadership studies to universities and the transformation agenda complements our understanding of why significant changes are progressing smoothly in one place but not in another.

This chapter focuses on the potential roles universities could play in the transformation of regions, or, more broadly and boldly, societies, and sets aside the actual policies and measures to the background. The point of departure is that how we see and understand change affects place leadership strategies and, thus, also what roles universities could take. Consequently, the language used in this chapter is process-oriented, with the numerous substantial issues related to the transformation relegated to the background. The primary objective is to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of change, rather than the potential results, systems, or policy instruments. Consequently, the focus is on the theory of change, place leadership and universities.

The triangle of change, leadership and universities is a highly dynamic and complex platform. It is influenced by incoherent and discontinuous forces ranging from transnational regulation to national/regional/local governance settings, local, regional, national and international political mandates, business interests and so on and on. The transformation agenda is, by necessity, characterised by power asymmetries and a myriad of interests and intentions. Pinheiro, Langa and Pausits (2016) remind us that while universities play a significant part in nurturing entrepreneurial thinking and actions, their role extends beyond technology development, spin-offs and start-ups, pointing towards contribution to wider societal agendas. This signifies an apparent shift for universities, which were previously mainly responsible for knowledge production and dissemination and had a designated role in various innovation systems (see Gunasekara, 2006, for more). The innovation systems

approach has increased our systemic understanding of knowledge production, the utilisation of knowledge, and the interaction between core players. Still, the innovation systems discourse ended up limiting universities' roles to economic impact (Pugh et al., 2016). Marques et al. (2019) argue that this began to work against the universities' potential to adopt more versatile developmental roles and contribute to regional development strategies.

Connecting (a) demand to advance in societal transformation, (b) demand for universities to take a central role in regional development and governance, and (c) our enhanced understanding of place leadership raises the question whether universities have a role to play in place leadership for transformation. From this set-up, this chapter's main aim is to identify premises to frame the future studies on universities' roles in place leadership, thus providing an analytical starting point for a more in-depth understanding of universities' contribution to the transformation of regions.

This chapter builds, in a series of conceptual steps, a framework for thinking and studying about universities' role in societal transformation or other fields of interest in regional development. The main argument is that universities' capacity for place leadership cannot be grasped without theoretically clarifying what we mean by change, and, therefore, this chapter provides the conceptual map to study how universities may lead depending on how we think change happens. The construction of the conceptual map begins by focusing on the concept of place leadership and, also, contrasting it with that of orchestration. Section three takes a quick look at what we know about universities' roles in regional development, also providing a view on the internal dynamics of universities. It is not possible to frame the potential leadership roles without understanding the peculiar nature of university governance and management. Thus, the question of whether loosely coupled organisations may assume a leadership position beyond their immediate turf is relevant. One of the main conceptual arguments of the chapter is that a search for universities' place leadership roles remain incomplete without an adequate understanding of change, not the content of it but our deeply held convictions about it. They are discussed, first, by using the concepts of transformation (big change) and transition (reorientation), and second, by examining the dynamics of change by introducing four different theories of change. Finally, the five premises are conclusively discussed pulling the many conceptual strings together.

## 2 Place leadership and orchestration

Place leadership studies focus on the actions, roles, positions, and functions of various actors, aiming to identify whether local and regional actors have the capacity to lead 'mindful deviations' (Garud & Karnøe, 2001). These studies have explored leadership by examining the subtle influences and social, economic and political processes that contribute to local and regional development efforts (Nicholds et al., 2017). Place leadership is a multi-actor and place-driven way of influencing to make a place somehow a better place (Boorman and Jackson, 2025) and providing, for example, insights on navigating the controversies and complexities when industries are emerging (Morrison & Gong, 2025). Place leadership is a role and not a position. As empirical studies reveal, leaders may be found in the public, private, academic, and community/voluntary sectors. According to Hambleton (2015), these reflect different sources of legitimacy, stemming from political leadership, public

managerial/professional leadership, community leadership, business leadership, and trade union leadership, as well as from academic spheres of activity (e.g., Fonseca and Nieth, 2021). What unites different types of place leaders is their ambition to reach beyond institutional, organisational, and sectoral limits and work to influence decisions across sectors and organisational boundaries (Collinge et al. 2011). Place leaders often lack the institutional power, budgetary authority, and decision-making to exert direct influence on issues they aim to influence. Consequently, place leadership has evolved in recent decades from hierarchical governance towards a processual understanding of mobilisation and coordination in dispersed networks.

Place leadership is exceedingly sensitive to the context (Murphy & McDowell, 2025), shaped by both the place-specific, national and supranational contexts (Hu & Hassink, 2017). Place leaders depend on the capabilities to mobilise, convene, and persuade stakeholders, such as businesses, public entities, community organisations, and universities (Hambleton, 2015). For these reasons, leadership processes and power are approached as relational rather than absolute (Beer et al., 2019), functioning through processes of influence (Hu & Hassink, 2017). The concept of place leadership directs our attention to influencing instead of controlling regional development policies (Bowden & Liddle, 2018). Hu and Hassink define place leadership as follows:

“Place leadership is a group action for the purpose of either achieving short-term tasks or developing leader–follower relationships for far-reaching dynamism. It is often characterised by both emergent and shared action, formal and informal processes/styles, as well as influenced by multilevel governance interaction between variegated types of agencies.” (Hu & Hassink, 2017, p. 226)

Applying Sotarauta (2009) and Hu and Hassink (2017), place leadership’s three main categories can be summarised as follows:

- *Interpretive leadership* is about influencing actors’ perceptions and mindsets. It draws on novel thinking patterns, models and concepts, calling for actors to see things differently, thus convincing the decisive resource and power holders of needed changes.
- *Formal leadership* is exercised by actors with the institutional and authorised power to demand that other actors act differently. Additionally, they often have the power to change institutions guiding development work, authority to organise official strategy processes or decide how local/regional development funds are used (Sotarauta, 2009; see also Potluka, 2021).
- *Network leadership* is about directing the activities and resources of a network in the desired direction and securing a common goal and direction.

Crucially, place leaders do not directly work to transform their localities or regions but they endeavour to mobilise and coordinate the activities of dispersed and independent actors to create a conducive environment for other actors to work for transformation of a place. Due to the indirect nature of influence, in the context of regional development, it has become fashionable to refer to *orchestration* when discussing and analysing the deliberate coordination and management of initiatives, policy programmes or complex actor constellations, commonly called ecosystems (Thomas, Faccin & Asheim, 2020). Intriguingly, the concept of orchestration has adopted as central a position in innovation and business studies, even

though, according to The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language Dictionary, it initially referred "to a plan or coordination of elements of (a situation) to produce a desired effect, especially *surreptitiously*".

Whether surreptitious or not, it is crucial to differentiate between place leadership and orchestration, both emphasising alignment, coordination and pooling of resources. Place leadership is essentially about challenging what already is and seeking futures and thus focusing on the novel and the unpredictable (Sotarauta & Beer, 2021), while orchestration is more about executing goals and fine-tuning what already is and therefore concentrating on the visible and the predictable. Orchestration primarily focuses on tactical coordination of activities and stakeholders here and now to achieve specific social outcomes. It emphasises the integration of resources and efforts across various initiatives. Orchestration calls for project management, strategic planning, and stakeholder engagement capabilities to ensure cohesive efforts among diverse groups, while place leadership requires capabilities to identify, explore and contemplate many futures and the abilities to inspire and mobilise people and communities toward action. Of course, orchestration may lead to renewed roles, with orchestrators assuming a leadership role inspiring and guiding individuals or groups towards vision-setting, thus pushing transformational changes instead of mainly navigating existing markets or institutional arrangements. While orchestration and place leadership are assumed to play vital roles in collective efforts in green transformation, reducing agency to orchestration and place leadership is an utter simplification.

This section provides us with the *first premise*. Place leaders mobilise and coordinate activities of independent actors to achieve local, community or regional aspirations. They also work to influence the ways collective interpretations of global/national/local phenomena emerge (Sotarauta & Beer, 2021).

### 3 Driving change – notions of place leadership and universities

#### 3.1 Universities as place leaders?

In this chapter, the focus is on universities' contribution to regional strategies and governance, engagement with regional development efforts. Many other contributions are left aside. Recent research has increasingly emphasised that universities play strategic and multifaceted roles through place-based leadership. Goddard et al. (2013) stress that universities are central players in regional strategies for several reasons. First, they actively participate in Economic Development Plans (EDPs) by generating knowledge and working alongside regional partners. Second, they offer valuable academic support to regional development officers and other practitioners as they develop strategies. Finally, they utilise their international connections and expertise to bridge local initiatives with the global landscape. As Aranguren, Canto-Farachala and Wilson (2021) demonstrate, influential universities can help to address the gaps in capabilities that regional governments often face.

Fonseca et al. (2021) argue that effective university engagement in place leadership hinges on two interrelated dimensions: *agency* - the capacity of individuals within the institution to act - and *alignment* - the coordination between internal university structures and external regional stakeholders. Fonseca et al. show how universities navigate institutional complexity through intentional alignment strategies that empower actors at multiple levels. Benneworth,

Pinheiro and Karlsen (2017) offer a more theoretical perspective, positioning universities as strategic agents capable of initiating institutional change within regional innovation systems (RISs). They critique traditional RIS frameworks for overlooking universities' dynamic, intentional actions and instead propose a model that foregrounds strategic agency and institutional entrepreneurship. The two studies mentioned here show that universities indeed transcend traditional educational roles to take leadership roles in shaping regional futures.

On its part, the “civic university” model pushes these notions further by emphasising the role of place leadership (not using its vocabulary) and the university's responsibility to engage with societal and ecological challenges beyond economic development (Goddard & Vallance, 2014). The civic university model discusses universities as anchor institutions that are deeply embedded in their localities and regions, with a mission that includes social inclusion, cultural enrichment, and environmental sustainability. In a normative fashion, Goddard et al. (2016) argue that civic universities must align their teaching, research, and engagement activities with the needs of their communities, thereby institutionalising place-based leadership as their core function. Goddard's approach differs from the agency-alignment framework, for example, by embedding leadership in the core of the universities' strategic mission and governance structures. Goddard also emphasises that stakeholders should be given an established role in formulating civic universities' strategic missions. In a way, Goddard's views resonate with Benneworth, Pinheiro and Karlsen's call for universities to act as institutional entrepreneurs, as civic engagement often requires navigating complex political and social landscapes to produce institutional changes. The three frameworks suggest that effective place-based leadership is about individual or organisational agency, institutional commitment, and systemic integration. Drawing on the literature beyond the three discussed models, it is possible to conclude that:

- Universities often take the lead in initiatives aimed at regional governance and development (Bonaccorsi, 2016; Fonseca et al., 2021; Gunasekara, 2006; Marques et al., 2019; Pugh et al., 2016; Raagmaa & Keerberg, 2017).
- Universities play a pivotal role in building connections, nurturing networks, launching learning initiatives, and enhancing the abilities of various institutions (Aranguren et al., 2012, 2019; Fonseca, 2019; Gunasekara, 2006).
- Universities contribute to regional strategies by exploring new pathways and assisting with designing, implementing, and managing strategic efforts (Fonseca, 2019; Pugh et al., 2016; Raagmaa & Keerberg, 2017).
- Universities' role in regional development often includes participating in governance and advisory boards, offering research-based insights for regional development (Goldstein & Glaser, 2012). Universities help bridge local and global academic and business communities, fostering collaboration and innovation (Goddard et al., 2013).

In practice, the influence of a university in regional strategy-making and governance often depends on key individuals both in the university itself and the surrounding community, one or more voices emerging from the cacophony of voices. Champions willing to take the lead are vital for fostering strong connections between universities, regional industries, and other sectors and actors (Garlick, 1998; Santoro & Chakrabarti, 2002). Santoro and Chakrabarti (2002) point out that having experienced and skilled champions from the university and local businesses is crucial for forming and implementing research partnerships and collaborations

with regional governance, especially concerning the university's research activities. Garlick (2000) shows how the growth of regional leadership in Australian universities has been related to the contributions made by universities. He found that active and effective university engagement was usually seen in regions with clear strategies that acknowledged a broader role for universities in managing regional affairs (Garlick, 2000, pp. 108–109). Local stakeholders supported university participation, often involving university staff in developing regional strategies through formal and informal avenues. To cut a long story short, despite being multi-voice complex entities, usually represented by small group initiatives, universities may play a strong institutional role in directing regional development, its effectivity in many cases relying on individual efforts.

The *second premise* is: Universities may assume an indirect place leadership role.

### 3.2 University - a loosely coupled assembly leading a place?

Regional development, whether emphasising economic growth or green transformation, is dynamic and fluid, subject to change over time, and, of course, any effort to boost regional development is about changing something in a region toward a desired direction. Fundamentally, regional development strategies aim to construct conditions for something new to emerge or be created. However, actors cannot fully assess their circumstances or the surrounding environment or formulate a perfect strategy based on such assessments. Our limited capacity to strategize does not imply that we would not be able to guide collective actions, shape local and regional conditions, or influence the chain of events. When aiming to do so, as Sotarauta and Beer (2020) emphasise, it is important to discuss whether the required changes or the desired future are 'good' or 'bad' and to whom they are good or bad. This again calls for metrics and well-established sense-making capacity to continually monitor where a region or an entire spatial system is going, and, thus, we end up differentiating the concept of 'development' from that of 'change'.

Change signifies that something differs from period T1 to period T0. The identification of collective values, intentions, interests and purposes is a significant part of regional development, even more so on the green transformation agenda. It is not possible to determine the 'goodness' or 'badness' of a change without understanding the values and ambitions behind change efforts. Superficially, it would be easy to propose that universities, drawing on their scientific research, are excellently positioned to show what is needed to take steps towards a greener future – what is good and desirable. Universities also analyse the values the societies are built on, strengthening our societal and ecological awareness and thus showing the right direction.

Another question is, what kind of, and whose, declared values universities impose on the stakeholders, when university leaders collaborate with local partners through various engagement mediums. The involvement in policymaking gives universities a formal and representative position, demonstrating that top management is committed to the community and aims to create consensus among diverse stakeholders. All this is, in principle, doable and desirable, as universities operate with and in formal hierarchies, allowing universities to have an organised position in wider networks and clearly expressed propositions for regional development. Managing a hierarchy of deans and heads of discipline-based departments gives universities a sense of control and certainty (Goddard, 2009), overseeing various



activities from teaching and research to support services, aiming to respond to external demands. Because of their formal governance structures, many stakeholders overlook universities' full capacity to contribute to regional development (Fonseca & Nieth, 2021). In principle, universities might be well positioned to say what is 'good' regional development and what is not – in practice, the situation is more complex.

As universities are “loosely coupled” organisations, indicating that their internal structures can be intricate and somewhat fragmented (Goddard & Vallance, 2014), much of the academic work is non-hierarchical by nature, and the personal ambitions and goals of faculty members divert to many directions. They do not necessarily align with those of the top management. Therefore, the commitment of top management to regional development efforts does not necessarily trickle down effectively within a university, or the core of the academic research work does not trickle up to the top management and through it to regional development strategies. In many countries, individual investigators often contribute to regional development directly without paying attention to their universities' declared positions in development coalitions. University leadership is thus required to navigate internal and external demands, which range from pressures to have one strategic voice in development coalitions to shepherding communities of independent-minded individuals and groups focusing on their interests. Consequently, university leaders' messages and directives often become unclear or ignored within a university and among stakeholders. This may lead to confusion among stakeholders and those at the ground level, making it challenging to fully understand the university's intentions behind strategic messages. As a result, academics often navigate the regional strategic process independently, managing most of their activities with little guidance from upper management (Fonseca & Nieth, 2021).

In all events, universities contribute in many ways to the search and creation of a better world and to boosting regional development, but they do not provide coherent answers to well-defined questions about the common purpose and related regional strategies and development measures or what is good change and what is bad. Instead, they offer a whole spectrum of questions and answers, institutional, individual, and group based.

This section provides the *third premise* for studying universities' roles in place leadership: Universities are not strategic actors with one voice. All the above leads us to ask how we deal with change—in what ways does our understanding of change impact the ways we aim to direct change processes, to add value and direction to them?

## 4 How to approach change?

### 4.1 Transformation and transition

Transition and transformation are among the most used words of the first three decades of the 21st century. The rapidly expanding concern about climate change has also pushed regional development scholars and practitioners to reach beyond economic concerns and find ways to integrate economic growth and ecological problems in the concept of 'green growth', among others, and use it as a core organising category, as advocated by OECD and many countries. Many universities have subscribed to the grand strategy of green growth that offers the only shared strategy uniting many nations, their public and private actors, and universities. And, of course, the green growth agenda is also an abundant funding source.



Green growth refers to economic growth that lays down an alternative to traditional economic growth models by emphasising that natural resources must be used sustainably while aiming at economic growth (UNEP, 2011; OECD, 2011). Of course, critical voices at universities argue that green growth is nothing but lip service and that values guiding policymaking have remained the same. The political landslides in the 2020s shake the political value base and feed into the political debates about green transformation and green growth. What is good or bad is once again debated, dividing the academic communities. While others develop technologies to boost green growth (Cosme et al., 2017), some stress the importance of finding green directionality for regional innovation policies (Fromhold-Eisebith, 2024), and more than a handful of scholars call for stopping economic growth and creating a ‘de-growth’ society (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

As crucial as it is to understand the nature and direction of changes, it is to understand the time horizon of desired change. It has become habitual to refer to ‘green transition’ when emphasising the efforts to drive for green growth. Interestingly, the concepts of ‘transition’ and ‘transformation’ are often used interchangeably without realising that in doing so we lose the conceptual precision on change, which would be important for understanding the expected effects of various development efforts. Both transformation and transition refer to change but have different implications and meanings (Hölscher et al., 2018). According to the root definition of the words - a dictionary – “transition is a gradual change process from one state or condition to another” (The New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, 1996). Transition does not necessarily necessitate the result being fundamentally different from the starting point (Sotarauta, 2025). The Webster’s (1996) defines transformation “as a complete and fundamental change of state, the passage from one way of being to another”. Thus, the result is fundamentally different from the starting point. Geels (2002), for example, loses something crucial when defining technological *transitions* “as major technological *transformations* in the way societal functions such as transportation, communication, housing, feeding, are fulfilled” (p. 1257, emphasis added). Aiming to achieve a regional transformation is significantly different from working for transition, the former emphasising institutional changes and the latter incremental ones, reorientating a system.

Crucially, even though we stress the importance of conceptually differentiating between transformation and transition, we need to be sensitive to the interlinked nature of events causing systemic changes and ask how gradual changes may, in time, lead to abrupt changes and, thus, the transformation of institutions (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Accumulating presumably minor and subtle changes over longer periods can lead to notable interruptions in the flow of events that may surface beneath a stability that appears misleadingly stable. ‘Creeping change’ (gradual transformation) suggests no ideal state of affairs but highlights the importance to understand that a constant search is an elemental part of institutional change processes (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). When studying change and agency (including universities as place leaders), we need to be sensitive to incremental and abrupt changes, continuity and discontinuity, and their combinations and not lump them all together under a rubric of change. In other words, we must reach beyond the green transition concept.

When conceptually discussing place leadership and universities in the context of green transformation, there is an imminent danger of falling into a radical change trap and focus

mainly on identifiable abrupt changes and their potential impacts. In other words, it would be tempting, from an instrumentally rational perspective, to think it might be possible to formulate a plan for how to reach the desired end state and then implement it. Alternatively, it might be more analytical to approach creeping change and see it as the normal state of all kinds of systems (Pettigrew, 1992; Weick & Quinn 1999; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), and simply ask: How do place leaders direct change at local and regional levels, is it possible?

The *fourth premise* is: Change is not an anomaly but a normal state of systems, and the best way to situate place leadership in the course of time is to understand the nature of change, and acknowledge that there are several ways to think about change.

## 4.2 Four views on change

In this section, four different change theories are introduced to specify the view opened to change so far and provide examples of how university roles in place leadership can be approached against differing understandings of change. The four views are teleological, life cycle, dialectical, and evolutionary views on change. This categorisation is based on the work of Van de Ven and Poole (1995) (see also Weick & Quinn, 1999) but is applied to the context of place leadership.

Formal regional development strategies and policies primarily draw on *teleological change theories* (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), in which strategic planning, foresight and instrumentally rational policies are based. The basic idea of teleological theories is that the purpose, strategies and policies guide change. Change is seen to progress from visions and goals to preparing and implementing a plan. Of course, the implementation may fail, or the vision, goals, and plans may no longer correspond to internal or external needs. Dissatisfaction leads to a search for a new vision and setting renewed goals, so the process continues. As generative mechanisms, teleological theories emphasise the goal-driven creation of policy frameworks, the social construction of past, present and future scenarios, and the pursuit of goals, alone or in cooperation with other actors. Goal-oriented action and cooperation thus become the core of change. In sum, teleological theories boil down to a preconceived end state and the social construction of a route to it.

When regional development policies are built on teleological theories of change, universities could take a lead in increasing the strategic consciousness guiding strategic planning. Additionally, they could offer training programs and courses that equip policymakers, practitioners and their stakeholders with the capabilities and knowledge to formulate, implement and evaluate development strategies. In other words, universities could play a strong role in interpretive leadership and capacity building, supporting plan-making and implementation. They also could lead networks for planning and implementation by bringing together various stakeholders, such as government, businesses, non-profits, and the community, to ensure that multiple voices would be heard and considered in the strategy processes. Teleological theories emphasise that reaching a consensus on what is good and bad already in the planning phase is central for success.

Unlike teleological theories, *life cycle theories* see systems having a pre-identifiable path, an internal logic, along which change is assumed to proceed (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Life cycle theories are based on an idea that an inherent development characteristic guides regional development. Hence, a region would be seen to follow, for example, a life cycle

typical for clusters (Menzel & Fornahl, 2010), characteristic for a type of a region in question (fragmented metropolitan, old industrial, rural, for instance [Tödtling & Trippel, 2005]). In this kind of understanding of change, universities could take a strong interpretive leadership role, as they basically would be able to institutionalise life cycles based regional and economic development theories and related empirical evidence to form the backbone of all the development efforts. Universities are better positioned than any other organisation to provide knowledge where a region is progressing in relation to its theorised life cycle, thus informing appropriate strategic interventions for the next phases. Universities could offer fine-tuned insights and recommendations on how a region potentially will experience the future development phases, helping formal leaders to design appropriate strategies in advance, aligning the recognised future needs with their specific actions of today. Moreover, universities could train regional development policy makers and practitioners on the principles of life cycle theories, equipping them with the capabilities to recognise and predict development phases and adapt policies accordingly. Universities could ensure that development is 'good' by monitoring and evaluating whether a region is following the "right path" and whether the development measures have been adjusted to stay on that path. Universities might also promote pilot projects to test suitable approaches for anticipated life-cycle phases, thus fostering proactively adaptive regional strategies.

In life-cycle theories, the core metaphor for change is organic growth, which is used heuristically to explain how the development path will unfold from its birth to its demise. At the heart of life-cycle theories is a pre-identified chain of events and proactively adaptive adjustments to the identified path.

The *dialectical theories* see change as a tension between a thesis and an antithesis, from which a conflict leads to a synthesis (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Identification of what is good or bad is not self-evident in regions operating in a pluralistic environment characterised by conflicting visions, goals and values that compete for dominance and control. Such forces may be internal to a region or emerge from external pressures. While life cycle and teleological models, according to Weick and Quinn (1999), focus mainly on a limited number of actors so that a shared vision can be constructed, dialectical theories assume a heterogeneous bunch of actors with differing aspirations, challenging each other about the direction of change. Change occurs when new emerging values, ideas and/or actors become so powerful that the status quo is challenged, creating tension between thesis and antithesis. Dialectical theories emphasise pluralism, the juxtaposition of things, events and people, and conflict as generative mechanisms - opposing forces challenge the status quo and each other, leading to change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 517). However, there is no guarantee that the dialectical process will produce a creative synthesis; it might also lead to worsening conflicts and development stalemates.

By adopting a dialectical view of change, universities could act as catalysts for transformation by mediating tensions, navigating conflicting interests and fostering creative synthesis that advances regional development and green transformation. By encouraging open debate and critical thinking, universities could also make contradictions visible and search for innovative solutions, positioning them as dynamic platforms. Alternatively, universities could direct development efforts by recognising social, economic, and institutional tensions and constructing an antithesis to hegemonic thinking and discourses.

The basic idea of *evolutionary theories* - a generalised Darwinism version of it - is that change is a continuous process of variation, selection and retention (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Its generating mechanisms are competitive selection and scarcity of resources, as well as the selection among competing agents in a population. Any deviation from routine, competencies, or tradition is viewed as a variation. It is essential to recognise that variation can be intentional or unintentional meaning it may be a deliberate alternative and solution to a problem, or an independent occurrence driven by environmental selection pressures (Aldrich, 2001, p. 22). The emergence of new ideas and products depends on the dynamic interplay between entrepreneurial skills and specific environmental factors (Lambooy, 2002, p. 1021), along with the various forces that influence the selective retention or elimination of variations. The competition occurs within and between organisations and other actors, as they strive to achieve individual goals; within economies, as different organisations pursue their objectives; and between economies, each with their ambitions. The contest over limited resources can lead to: new variants, sometimes resulting in intense competition; struggles between agents; and/or the fostering of new forms of collaborative entities as agents seek to enhance their position in the competitive landscape (Sotarauta & Srinivas, 2006). Retention occurs when certain variations are preserved, duplicated, or otherwise reproduced, ensuring that the chosen activities are repeated in the future or reappear over time (Aldrich, 2001).

From an evolutionary point of view, universities could assume leadership by navigating, enabling, and amplifying evolutionary dynamics within their regions. Universities, therefore, could act as reflexive agents - sensitive to local trajectories and external pressures yet capable of nudging a region toward desired futures. This is not about top-down control but co-evolution with other actors, working with them in a fragmented governance landscape to align visions, build capacities, and stretch institutional constraints for variations to emerge. Consequently, universities could create spaces for experimentation and co-creation aimed at fostering variations. In this view, place leadership is about learning, sense-making, and navigating ambiguity, not just implementing predefined plans or identifying predefined patterns of development. Universities might, perhaps, cultivate and nourish narrative capacity in a region for collective shaping and sharing compelling stories to mobilise collective action to ensure the fertile landscape with many variations, their selection and retention. And, of course, through teaching activities universities are among the key players in the retention of variations. In other words, universities are among those actors, who construct selection environments and institutionalise selected variations.

The evolutionary approach has often been criticised for not considering the strategies and intentions of actors or for taking them for granted. On its part, the teleological approach tends to ignore evolutionary forces and overemphasise actors' intentions and intended strategies. Life cycle perspectives reduce strategies to serve the pre-identified path and fail to consider evolutionary dynamics potentially redirecting cycles. Dialectical approaches easily turn a blind eye on everything else but conflicts - to simplify some of the differences. Still, the four views of change are not mutually exclusive; they overlap in research and practice. We need to be aware of different views on change and how their practical implications may add analytical leverage to our efforts to understand place leadership and university roles. Place leadership strategies can rely on several conceptions of change, and combinations of them.

Therefore, the *fifth premise* is that when studying universities' roles in place leadership we should be aware of various theories of change and not assume that all actors share the same view of change and development. The way we see change guides our presumption on how to boost green transformation.

Table 1. University roles in place leadership and the four theories of change – a tentative summary (applying Van de Ven & Poole, 1995)

<i>Theory of change</i>	<i>Basic assumptions</i>	<i>Message to regional development</i>	<i>Message to universities' role in place leadership</i>
Teleological	Change is seen to progress from visions and goals to preparing and implementing a plan.	Strategic planning, foresight and instrumentally rational policies are central.	Assume a role in strategic planning and implementation and building related capacity.
Life cycle	Regions have a pre-identifiable path, an internal logic, along which change proceeds.	Identification of region's development path from life cycle perspective and planning interventions accordingly is central.	Assume a role in institutionalising life cycle theories and related empirical evidence to form a backbone of the development efforts.
Dialectical	A tension between a thesis and an antithesis, from which a conflict leads to a synthesis and, thus, change.	Acknowledging a pluralistic environment characterised by conflicting visions, goals and values that compete for dominance and control is central.	Assume a role as a catalyst for change, mediate tensions and foster creative synthesis, thus helping to navigate conflicting interests.
Evolutionary	Change is a continuous process of variation, selection and retention.	Adding to variation, customising a selection environment and rooting the best variations is central.	Assume a role in navigating, enabling, and amplifying evolutionary dynamics within a region.

## 5 Conclusive discussion

Universities' role in shaping their regions is not fixed, it shifts with the way we understand change itself. If change is seen as transformation, an institutional change, universities may be called upon to spark breakthroughs and disrupt existing development paths. If change is approached as a transition, a reorientation, their task becomes one of steady orchestration. If we probe deeper, drawing on different theories of change, the leadership roles we expect from universities multiply and take new forms. This chapter argued that before we begin assigning place leadership roles to universities, we must first recognise that our assumptions about change are limited. However, they still define the scope of those roles.

Regional development studies have commonly approached change and thus also regional development from the distance, focusing on structures, industries, social capital, higher education institutions, political institutions, etc.; change in regions and related policies often appearing more structured than how it reveals itself when adopting a micro-perspective with an interest to scrutinise the dynamics of muddling-through (see Lindblom, 1959). It usually is difficult for researchers to understand the significance of small changes and emergent actions as part of institutional and structural changes (for gaining small wins for grand

challenges see Bours et al., 2021). This may be due to scholars' difficulties in approaching regional change and development as an open and continuously evolving normal state of affairs. We still need to continue working on the theory of change to strengthen place leadership theories and specify our ontological assumptions on agency, change and development, thus supporting the identification of causal powers.

Applying Lindblom's view of 'muddling through policies' (Lindblom, 1959), Sotarauta and Mustikkamäki (2015) refer to institutional change processes being characterised by competing visions, strategies, and networks continually evolving with situations; belief formation, and knowledge justification being essential for translating intentions into influence and action. However, as Gertler (2010) reminds us, digging too deeply into micro-level actions and change, and studying only the minutiae of everyday events would prevent us from differentiating economically, societally and ecologically significant micro changes from trivial ones. To truly understand green transformation in regions, for example, we must connect micro-level changes and actions to the "big picture" and back. For that purpose, we need a more nuanced theory of change to scrutinise how change is consciously transformed into development or how change happens in regions.

The teleological concept of change often is assumed the one for leadership, the question of who stretches the constraints, defines the goals and takes change processes in new directions being elemental part of leadership. However, the assumption here is that leadership crossing organisational and sectoral boundaries plays a significant role in evolutionary and dialectical processes, and those processes frame and shape leadership strategies. Consequently, future research on place leadership should find a way to combine evolutionary and dialectical conceptions of change with models that emphasise teleology. The following questions, among many others, would play a central role: How do leadership, intentionality, and future-defining sense-making efforts affect the processes of variation, selection, replication, and retention? How do conflicts and confrontations affect the processes of variation, selection, and retention, or our assumptions on life cycles? What is the role of the teleology in enabling or hampering evolutionary processes? For searching answers to these kinds of questions, and many others, five premises were identified:

1. Place leaders mobilise and co-coordinate activities of independent actors to achieve local, community or regional aspirations.
2. Universities may assume an indirect place leadership role.
3. Universities are not strategic actors with one voice.
4. Change is not an anomaly but a normal state of systems, and the best way to situate place leadership in the course of time is to understand the nature of change and acknowledge that there are several ways to think about change.
5. When studying universities' roles in place leadership we should be aware of various theories of change and not assume that all the actors share the same view of change and development.

The five premises construct a framework for studying universities' roles in place leadership. They paint a picture of the multifaceted roles of universities in place leadership and their interaction with change. The first premise reminds the basics of place leadership, and the second suggests that universities can assume a place leadership position in their regions, emphasising their indirect influence. However, the third premise complicates this view by

reminding us that universities are not centralised strategic actors, as they inherently comprise diverse perspectives and interests. The fourth one connects the premises to a systemic perspective, arguing that change is a continuous rather than an anomaly, thus advocating the importance of studying changes as “creeping” rather than abrupt. Lastly, the fifth premise highlights the importance of theoretical perspectives in understanding change, warning against assuming uniformity in actors’ views. Recognising various theories of change allows for a more nuanced analysis of how universities contribute to place leadership amidst transformation processes.

Ultimately, the question of universities’ leadership in regional development, including their roles in green transformation, is inextricably linked to the question of change itself. If we view change as radical and disruptive, we look to universities for breakthroughs; if we see it as gradual and cumulative, we turn to them for patience and continuity. Each conception opens different opportunities for action and sets other limits. Thus, the search for universities’ place leadership roles will always remain unfinished, because it evolves with our changing convictions about what change really is.

## References

- Aldrich, H. (2001). *Organizations Evolving*. 3. painos Sage Publications. London.
- Aranguren, J. A., Canto-Farachala, P. and Wilson, J.R. (2021) Transformative academic institutions: An experimental framework for understanding regional impacts of research. *Research Evaluation*, 30(2), 191-200 <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvaa030>
- Beer, A., Ayres, S., Clower, T., Faller, F., Sancino, A. & Sotarauta, M. (2019). Place leadership and regional economic development: a framework for cross-regional analysis. *Regional Studies*, (53)2, 171-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2018.1447662>
- Benneworth, P., R. Pinheiro and J. Karlsen (2017). Strategic agency and institutional change: investigating the role of universities in regional innovation systems (RISs), *Regional Studies*, 51 (2), 235–248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2016.1215599>
- Bonaccorsi, A. (2016). Addressing the disenchantment: universities and regional development in peripheral regions. *Journal of Economic Policy Reform*, 20(4), 293-320 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17487870.2016.1212711>
- Boorman, C., and Jackson, B. (2015) Multi-actor and place-driven leadership in city-based efforts to improve well-being: a transnational perspective. *Regional Studies*, 59(1), article: 2469620 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2025.2469620>
- Bours, S., Wanzenböck, R. and Frenkne, K. (2021). Small wins for grand challenges. A bottom-up governance approach to regional innovation policy. *European Planning Studies*, 30(11), 2245-2272 <https://doi:10.1080/09654313.2021.1980502>
- Bowden, A., & Liddle, J. (2018). Evolving public sector roles in the leadership of place-based partnerships: From controlling to influencing policy? *Regional Studies*, 52(1), 145–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1346369>
- Collinge, C., Gibney, J., & Mabey, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Leadership and place*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Cosme, I., Santos, R., & O’Neill, D. W. (2017). Assessing the degrowth discourse: A review and analysis of academic degrowth policy proposals. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 149, 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.02.016>



- Fitzpatrick, N., Parrique, T., & Cosme, I. (2022). Exploring degrowth policy proposals: A systematic mapping with thematic synthesis. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 365, 132764. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.132764>
- Fonseca, L. (2019). Designing regional development? Exploring the University of Aveiro's role in the innovation policy process, *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2019.1584050>
- Fonseca, L., & Nieth, L. (2021). The role of universities in regional development strategies: A comparison across actors and policy stages. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 28(3), 298-315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776421999743>
- Fonseca, L., Nieth, L., Salomaa, M. and Benneworth, P. (2021). Universities and place leadership: A question of agency and alignment. In Sotarauta, M. & Beer, A. (eds.) *Handbook on City and Regional Leadership*. 226-247. Cheltenham; Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Fromhold-Eisebith, M. (2024). How can a regional innovation system meet circular economy challenges? Conceptualization and empirical insights from Germany. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economuc and Society*, 17(3) 637-648 <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsae024>
- Garlick, S. (1998). Creative associations in special places: enhancing the partnership role of universities in building competitive regional economies, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, DEETYA.
- Garud, R. and Karnøe, P. (2001). Path creation as a process of mindful deviation. In Garud, R. and Karnøe, P. (eds), *Path Dependence and Path Creation*. 1–38. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.
- Gertler, M. (2010). Rules of the Game: The Place of Institutions in Regional Economic Change. *Regional Studies*, 44(11), 1-15 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400903389979>
- Goddard, J. (2009), *Reinventing the Civic University*, London: Nesta.
- Goddard, J. and Vallance, P. (2013). *The University and the City*. Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge.
- Goddard, J., Hazelkorn, E., Kempton, L. and Vallance, P. (2016). *The Civic University: The Policy and Leadership Challenges*. Cheltenham; Edward Elgar.
- Goddard, J., Kempton, L. and Vallance, P. (2013) Universities and Smart Specialisation: Challenges, tensions and opportunities for the innovation strategies of European regions. *Ekonomiaz: Revista vasca de economía*, 83, 82-101 <https://DOI:10.69810/ekz.1166>
- Goldstein, H. A. and Glaser, K. (2012). Research universities as actors in the governance of local and regional development. *The Journal of Technology Transfer*, 37, 158-174 <https://DOI:10.1007/s10961-010-9193-4>
- Grillitsch, M. and Sotarauta, M (2020). Trinity of change agency, regional development paths and opportunity spaces. *Progress in human geography*, 44(4), 704-723. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519853870>
- Gunasekara, C. (2006) Reframing the Role of Universities in the Development of Regional Innovation Systems, *The Journal of Technology Transfer*, 31(1), 101-113 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10961-005-5016-4>
- Hambleton, R. (2015). *Leading the inclusive city. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet*. Bristol University Press
- Hölscher et al., (2018). Transition versus transformation: What's the difference? *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 27, 1-3 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2017.10.007>

- Hu, X., & Hassink, R. (2017). Place leadership with Chinese characteristics? A case study of the Zaozhuang coal-mining region in transition. *Regional Studies*, 51(2), 224–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2016.1200189>
- Lambooy, J. G. (2002). Knowledge and Urban Economic Development: A volunary Perspective. *Urban Studies*, 39(5-6), 1019-1035. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980220128435>
- Lindblom, C.E. (1959). The science of ‘muddling through. *Public Administration Review*, 19, 79–88
- Linde, L., Sjödin, D., Parida, V. and Wincent, J. (2021). Dynamic capabilities for ecosystem orchestration A capability-based framework for smart city innovation initiatives. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 166(May), 120614 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120614>
- Marques, A. V., Marques, C., Braga, V. and Marques, P.D. (2019) University-industry technology transfer within the context of RIS3 North of Portugal. *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, 17(4), 473-485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14778238.2019.1589397>
- Menzel, M.-P. (2010). Cluster life cycles—dimensions and rationales of cluster evolution. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 19(1), 205–238. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/dtp036>
- Morrison, A. and Gong, H. (2025) Place leadership in emerging industries: navigating the controversy and complexities of blockchain technology. *Regional Studies*, 59, Article: 2426990. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2024.2426990>
- Murphy, J. and McDowell, S. (2025) Dilemmas, limitations and challenges of place leadership: instability and transitional dynamics in post-Brexit Northern Ireland, *Regional Studies*, Article: 2490024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2025.2490024>
- Nicholds, A., Gibney, J., Mabey, C. and Hart, D. (2017) Making sense of variety in place leadership: the case of England’s smart cities. *Regional Studies*, 51(2) 249-259 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2016.1232482>
- OECD. (2011). *Towards Green Growth*. OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264111318-en>. Accessed 2 February 2023.
- Pettigrew, A. (1992). The Character and Significance of Strategy Process Research. *Strategic Management Journal*, 13, 5-16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250130903>
- Pinheiro, R., Langa, P. V & Pausits, A. (2015) One and two equals three? The third mission of higher education institutions, *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5(3), 233-249, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2015.1044552>
- Potluka, O. (2021). Roles of Formal and Informal Leadership: Civil Society Leadership Interaction with Political Leadership on Local Development. In Sotarauta, M. and Beer, A. *Handbook on City and Regional Leadership*, 91–107. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Pugh, R., Hamilton, E., Jack, S. and Gibbons, A. (2016). A step into the unknown: universities and the governance of regional economic development. *European Planning Studies*, 24(7), 1357–137 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2016.1173201>
- Raagmaa, G., & Keerbergh, A. (2017). Regional higher education institutions in regional leadership and development. *Regional Studies*, 51(2), 260–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2016.1215>
- Santoro, M. D. and Chakrabarti, A. K. (2002). *Firm size and technology centrality in industry-university interactions*. MIT IPC Working Paper 02-001. Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Cambridge

- Sotarauta, M. & Srinivas, S. (2006). Co-evolutionary Policy Processes: Understanding Innovative Economies and Future Resilience. *Futures*, 38(3), 312-336. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2005.07.008>
- Sotarauta, M. & Mustikkamäki, N. (2015). Institutional Entrepreneurship, Power and Knowledge in innovation systems: Institutionalization of Regenerative Medicine in Tampere, Finland. *Environment & Planning C: Government and Policy*, 33(2), 342 – 357 <https://doi.org/10.1068/c12297r>
- Sotarauta, M. (2025). A plethora of transformative innovation policy tensions. In Karlsen, J., Rypestøl, J-E., and Trippl, M. (eds.) *Sustainable Regional Restructuring: Insights from Economic Geography and Regional Innovation Studies*, 27-42. Cheltenham; Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Sotarauta, M. (2009). Power and Influence Tactics in the Promotion of Regional Development: An Empirical Analysis of the Work of Finnish Regional Development Officers. *Geoforum*, 40(5), 895-905. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.06.005>
- Sotarauta, M. & Beer, A. (eds.) (2021) *Handbook on City and Regional Leadership*. Cheltenham; Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Streeck, W. and Thelen, K. (eds) (2005). *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, E., Faccin, K. and Asheim, B. T. (2020). Universities as orchestrators of the development of regional innovation ecosystems in emerging economies. *Growth and Change*, 52(2), 770-789. <https://doi.org/10.1111/grow.12442>
- Tödting, F., and Trippl, M. (2005). One Size Fits All? Towards a Differentiated Regional Innovation Policy Approach. *Research Policy*, 34, 1203–1219. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2005.01.018>
- Tsoukas, H. & Chia, R. (2002). On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking organizational Change. *Organization Science*, 13(5), Sept.-Oct., 567-582. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3086078>
- UNEP Year Book 2011: *Emerging Issues in Our Global Environment*. Nairobi United Nations Environment Programme.
- van de Ven, A.H. & Poole, M.S. (1995). Explaining development and change in organizations. *Academic Management Review*, 20(3), 510-540. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258786>
- Weick, K. E. & Quinn, R. E. (1999). Organizational Change and Development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 361-386. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.361>