

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSITIES FOR SOCIETY AND ECONOMY THE EXPERIENCE OF RESEARCHERS FROM THE VISEGRÁD GROUP**

edited by Bogusława Drelich-Skulska  
Magdalena Sobocińska  
Andrea Tomášková



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## CHAPTER 3

# The Role of the Academic Coordination Centre in the Euroregion Nisa in the Implementation of Sustainable Development

Piotr Gryszel

Sabina Zaremba-Warnke

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the chapter is to characterise the Academic Coordination Centre (ACC) in the Euroregion Nisa and its role in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The chapter presents a unique initiative taken up by higher education institutions, i.e. the association of universities from Poland, Czechia and Germany, which have been operating in the Euroregion Nisa since 1992, and describes selected activities carried out by the ACC contributing to the implementation of sustainable development (among others cross-border projects focused on sustainable development, ACC Forum and the annual Young Scientists Conference of the ACC).

**Keywords:** sustainable development goals (SDGs), education for sustainable development (ESD), higher education institutions, Academic Coordination Centre in the Euroregion Nisa (ACC)



### 3.1. Introduction

Due to the global problems of the modern world, all socio-economic actors should contribute to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Płachciak & Zaremba-Warnke, 2021, pp. 117, 118; Rogall, 2010, pp. 164-170; Yadav et al., 2022, p. 417).

Higher education institutions play a special role in this regard, as they educate future decision-makers. According to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD),

university graduates should be socially responsible in order to care for and be able to implement the SDGs in their professional and private lives (Kryk, 2011, pp. 314, 315; Lorek et al., 2023, pp. 120-123; Sammalisto & Arvidsson, 2005, pp. 18-20). In addition, higher education institutions should act incubators enhancing innovative solutions for the purposes of SDGs, especially in their local and regional environment, in line with the Agenda 21 motto *Think globally, act locally*. The global dimension of the idea of sustainable development (SD) also requires actions across territorial borders, which is particularly evident in Euroregions and similar border structures (United Nations, 1992; Yadav et al., 2022, p. 428).

One of the main challenges faced by education for sustainable development (ESD) in higher education institutions is to develop and put into practice effective educational activities. Effective ESD, in addition to imparting holistic knowledge of the socio-economic-ecological correlations in the modern world, also results in changing behaviour towards sustainability. This requires lecturers to use attractive forms of teaching, appeal to emotions, broaden awareness, ability to teach critical thinking and complex problem solving, encourage 'learning by doing' and 'learning by playing', set examples with their behaviour, and convey to students and other actors in the environment that sustainability is a common global goal which transcends regional or national borders (Borys, 2010, pp. 25-40; Brečka et al., 2022, pp. 727-729; Ernst et al., 2017, pp. 150-153; Ferreira et al., 2013, pp. 2, 3; Ibitoye & Ilesanmi, 2019, pp. 66-72; Marcinkowski, 2010, pp. 47-50). Therefore, effective educational activities aimed at SD often require additional funding and/or expanding beyond the functioning of a single higher education institution. In such cases, it is very helpful for these institutions to form associations that enhance collaboration and an implementation of diverse projects, which was the reason for tackling the problem.

The purpose of the chapter was to characterise the Academic Coordination Centre in the Euroregion Neiße-Nisa-Nysa and its role in the implementation of SD goals along the border region.

The chapter drew on the personal observations made by the authors – ACC coordinators at Wrocław University of Economics and Business who have been active in ACC and for the benefit of SD in the border region for more than two decades.

### 3.2. The Academic Coordination Centre in the Euroregion Nisa

The association of higher education institutions under the name of the Academic Coordination Centre (ACC) in the Euroregion Nisa was established in 1991 to coordinate both educational and scientific activities performed by the teaching and research staff at higher education institutions which operate in the Czech-Polish-German border area in the Euroregion Nisa.

The following higher education institutions are affiliated with the ACC:

- Technická Univerzita v Liberci (Technical University of Liberec),
- Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz (Zittau/Görlitz University of Applied Sciences),
- Internationales Hochschulinstitut Zittau (International Institute (IHI) Zittau),
- Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny we Wrocławiu, Filia w Jeleniej Górze (Wrocław University of Economics and Business, Branch in Jelenia Góra),
- Karkonoska Akademia Nauk Stosowanych w Jeleniej Górze (The Karkonosze University of Applied Sciences in Jelenia Góra),
- Politechnika Wrocławska, Filia w Jeleniej Górze (Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Branch in Jelenia Góra),
- Berufsakademie Bautzen (Vocational College Bautzen).

The ACC has its own website and logo (Academic Coordination Centre in the Euroregion Nisa [ACC], n.d.).

The Centre's activities were initiated by Professor Rudolf Anděl (Technical University of Liberec) and Professor Peter Schmidt (Zittau/Görlitz University of Applied Sciences) when, after the political changes, it became apparent that cooperation between these universities at the meeting point of three countries was almost non-existent. Initially, the main purpose of the ACC was to conduct joint research and publish the results in a scientific journal, *Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen* [Scientific Papers], issued in 1995-2008, which became the English-language *ACC Journal* in 2009 (<https://acc-ern.tul.cz/de/acc-journal>).

The goals of the ACC functioning have evolved over the years. At present, the activities of the Academic Coordination Centre are mainly focused on coordinating international scientific and research projects in the Euroregion Nisa (ERN). The ACC, through its activities, primarily supports cooperation between the institutions of partner universities in the field of teaching as well as scientific and research pursuits, and also cooperates with the socio-economic environment. The ACC also endeavours to establish contacts in the sphere of services with the institutions operating outside the Euroregion Nisa. The ACC creates a platform for the exchange of information and experience in the field of science and research. By organizing international conferences for undergraduate students, PhD students and researchers, workshops and competitions, it activates and motivates students and the academic staff to take a creative approach towards solving research tasks. As part of these activities, it enables the transfer of intercultural and multilingual competencies in addition to supporting the mobility of students and researchers (<https://acc-ern.tul.cz/>).

The ACC also played an important role in establishing such cross-border higher education centres as the Internationales Hochschulinstituts in Zittau (International Institute (IHI) Zittau) (in 1993), Neisse University (in 2000) and the Tschechisch-sächsischen Hochschulzentrums (Saxon-Czech University Initiative) in Chemnitz (in 2003).

The ACC coordinators, appointed at each partner university, meet at least several times per year. The Rector's Representative for the ACC has also been appointed at Wroclaw University of Economics and Business. The ACC Presidium, which is the highest body of the Centre, is held once a year. The ACC presidency lasts three years and rotates among the ACC universities. The Presidium members include university statutory representatives or their deputies and other persons in an advisory capacity, including the ACC coordinators. The ACC low operating costs are included in the budgets of individual universities. Since 2007, the ACC activities have been coordinated by Helena Neumannová PhD – the ACC coordinator and head of the Department of Foreign Languages at the Technical University of Liberec.

### 3.3. Selected Activities of the ACC for Sustainable Development

#### ***Polish-Czech Projects Focused on Sustainable Development***

The implementation of joint teaching and research projects remains one of the ACC's main areas of activity. Since the beginning of the ACC, numerous projects have been implemented and more are planned. The Academic Coordination Centre facilitates university staff to establish cooperation with relevant foreign partners and to apply for funding to carry out various national and international projects. Interreg V-A Czech Republic-Poland is the most frequently used programme, and primarily the Microproject Fund of the Euroregion Nisa. The Interreg Programme takes into account the specific location of the beneficiaries in the border area, whereas support for the sustainable development of the border region is one of the criteria for obtaining funding from the Interreg Programme. Thus, the projects implemented either directly or indirectly are focused on sustainable development of the border region.

The Polish-Czech project 'Cooperation of Higher Education Institutions for Sustainable Development at the Polish-Czech Borderland' is an example of a project directly related to SDG implementation. The project was co-financed from the funds of the Interreg V-A Czech Republic-Poland Programme 2014-2020 (Microproject Fund of the Euroregion Nisa); its Czech part was implemented from 1.10.2016 to 31.07.2017, whilst the Polish part from 27.04.2017 to 26.04.2018. The total value of the project was 30,000 Euro. As a result of the project implementation, students of the Faculty of Economics at the Technical University of Liberec and the Faculty of Economics, Management and Tourism in Jelenia Gora Branch of Wroclaw University of Economics and Business expanded their economic knowledge of sustainable management in regional SMEs (mainly agricultural and in agrotourism) and also intercultural knowledge, with particular emphasis on practical aspects. Students and

research supervisors conducted research on the status of sustainable management in several dozen SMEs in the Polish-Czech border region. The research results were presented during:

- 1) the scientific seminar in Chrastava and Liberec 'Border Region – Opportunity for Entrepreneurship' on 27-28.04.2017,
- 2) the scientific seminar in Jelenia Góra 'Regional Enterprises and Sustainable Development' on 7.11.2017,
- 3) the scientific conference ending the project, held on 19.04.2018 in Jelenia Góra, 'Sustainable Development of the SME Sector at the Polish-Czech Borderland'.

The seminars and conferences were also attended by representatives of the business sector, local government organizations and NGOs from the Polish-Czech border region. Two workshops were also organized for students in Czechia and Poland, covering: quality and environmental management, sustainable management, sustainable consumption and production, environmental financing, SD indicators, sustainable marketing in enterprises, six study visits to six regional enterprises, and a visit to an NGO supporting sustainable development in the region.

The project was summarised in a bilingual (Polish-Czech) scientific monograph *Sustainable Development of the Polish-Czech Border Region – Examples from the SME Sector*, and presented the research results conducted within the framework of the project. Academics, undergraduate students, PhD students, employees of NGOs and SMEs operating within the Polish-Czech border region were the authors of individual chapters published in the monograph.

The project activities were carried out as part of the Eco-business course taught within the specialisation of Quality and Environmental Manager at the Department of Quality and Environmental Management, and constituted an alternative form of obtaining the course credit, exceptionally highly rated by students in their evaluation surveys. Moreover, the students participating in the project demonstrated a higher level of knowledge about sustainable development compared to other student groups. This form of teaching was a developing and extremely rewarding experience for the lecturers as well, and resulted in undertaking further projects for sustainable development.

An example of a project indirectly related to SD problems, also subsidised from the Interreg Programme, was the project 'Assessment of Services and Competitiveness of Tourist Regions in the Czech-Polish Borderland', implemented from 1.07.2018 to 30.04.2019. The Faculty of Economics at the Technical University of Liberec and the Faculty of Economics, Management and Tourism in Jelenia Góra Branch of Wrocław University of Economics and Business cooperated as partners in the project implementation. The Czech partner was simultaneously working on the project 'Analýza služeb v cestovním ruchu v česko-polském pohraničí'. The project implementers followed the assumption that the development of the tourist economy

has a particular impact on the sustainable development of a cross-border region such as the Euroregion Nisa.

Both projects aimed at analysing tourist services offered in the Polish-Czech border area and providing the collected information to tourist information centres, tourism entrepreneurs and local government units in both regions.

The projects covered the following activities.

1. A study visit of Polish students to Liberec, visiting the Faculty of Economics at the Technical University of Liberec (4-5.12.2018) and major tourist attractions in the area, and a trip of Czech students to Jelenia Gora (29.10.2018).
2. Marketing research of the offered tourist services in the Polish and Czech parts of the Euroregion Nisa.
3. Joint conferences of students in Poland and in Czechia. Presentation of the competitiveness study results covering tourist services from the Polish-Czech area of the Euroregion Nisa as well as comparing these results with other regions of Poland and Czechia by inviting students of tourism courses from other universities (in Poland 21-22.03.2019 and in Czechia 4-5.04.2019).

The conclusion of both projects was the publication of two numbers of journal with articles presenting research results on the competitiveness of tourism services in the Polish-Czech borderland.

As a continuation of joint project activities, in 2021 Liberec Technical University submitted another application to the Visegrád Fund entitled 'Services in Tourism in the Czech-Polish Border Area'. The project was implemented throughout 2022 and covered the following activities:

- 1) student seminar related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in border regions (11.01.2022),
- 2) study visit of Czech students to Jelenia Gora (6.05.2022), during which they were introduced to the tourist attractions of the region,
- 3) a similar study visit of Polish students to Liberec (12.05.2022),
- 4) a student-led conference 'Services in Tourism in the Czech-Polish Border Area'.

In addition, as part of the project, the analysis of tourist traffic in the Czech-Polish border area was conducted. The results of this research were presented to the local tourist organization meeting in the Jizera Mountains, and on that basis a strategy for the development of the range of tourist attractions in the Jizera Mountains was prepared.

### ***The ACC Forum***

The ACC Forum is organized every two-three years, in turn, by individual ACC partner universities. The ACC Forum always includes an international conference on the development of the Euroregion Nisa, which is frequently accompanied by other activities dedicated to academics, undergraduate students and PhD students.



For example, in 2023, the ACC Forum, in addition to the international conference, included the ACC Young Scientists Conference and four Autumn Schools for students from ACC schools funded, among others, by the Erasmus+ BIP programme (Technische Universität Dresden, n.d.). The problems covered by two Autumn Schools (i.e. Regionality and Sustainability, and Biodiversity Management) were directly related to the implementation of SDG goals in border enterprises.

Around 90 students from the ACC's six partner universities took part in the ACC Forum. In addition, there were 13 different conference sessions discussing six thematic conference groups, during which more than 40 presentations were delivered. Lively discussions and networking took place, which will help continue promoting research about sustainable development in the Euroregion Nisa (Technische Universität Dresden, 2023).

### ***The ACC Conference of Young Scientists***

For the past 17 years the ACC has been holding the annual ACC Young Scientists Conference dedicated to undergraduate and postgraduate students from the ACC universities. The language of the conference is English. Young scientists present there results of their research, ongoing projects and the activities of scientific clubs. Many of the discussed issues are related to sustainable development of the region, corporate social responsibility and sustainable management. The best papers are published in the ACC Journal. The conference provides a platform for the exchange of knowledge and contacts between academics and students. Lunch and coffee breaks during the conference are arranged based on regional products and catering services of small, family-owned companies. However, since Wrocław University of Economics and Business joined the Fair Trade Friendly University campaign (27.01.2023), Fair Trade certified products (coffee, tea, nuts, chocolates and pastries) are served during coffee breaks. The Jelenia Góra Branch is the first of all ACC universities to earn the title of Fair Trade Friendly University. As part of the next ACC-Forum in May 2025, activities are planned to promote the Fair Trade movement in all ACC higher education institutions.

### ***Trilateral Projects and Projects Beyond the Area of the Euroregion Nisa***

The meetings of ACC coordinators and international conferences organized by the ACC act as multipliers in the implementation of trinational (Polish-Czech-German) projects in the Euroregion Nisa and others beyond the trilateral border region.

The project 'Regional Value Chains in the Context of Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity – Based on the Example of the Czech-Polish-Saxon Project Collaboration' can serve as an example. This involved partners from Czechia, Germany and Poland, including among others: NETSCI Professor Kramer GmbH, Faculty of Economics, Management and Tourism in Jelenia Góra Branch of Wrocław University of Economics

and Business, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, LANU (Saxon Foundation for Nature). The project was supported by DBU (German Federal Foundation for Environment). The main objective of the project was to support economic development in the border areas of the three countries: Czechia, Poland and Germany, by the empowerment of the value chains, including ecosystem services. This form of cooperation brings many economic benefits not only for the individual companies participating in the project, but also for the entire border region, including natural environment. A catalogue of indicators developed during the project provided enterprises with knowledge about their interactions with ecosystems, which helped them to specify steps towards their development and to inform customers about an appropriate way to go about the values of ecosystem services (Zaremba-Warnke, 2016, pp. 57-60).

In addition, the ACC activities include the development of cooperation with Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia), continued for nearly 40 years. The Department of Tourism at Matej Bel University and the Department of Marketing and Tourism Management at Wrocław University of Economics and Business conduct research covering common scientific areas, manifested in the form of scientific publications in, e.g. the journal *Ekonomická Revue Cestovného Ruchu*, participation in the conferences organized, and exchange visits of students and academics.

A similar scope of cooperation is carried out with the Silesian University in Opava and its Department of Tourism and Recreation based in Karviná. As part of this cooperation, an annual scientific conference 'Current Trends in Spas, Hospitality, and Tourism' is organized on a rotational basis. The 12th edition of this conference was held in Slovakia in 2024. The partners participating in the conference organization are the Silesian University in Opava, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, University College Prague in Prague and Wrocław University of Economics and Business.



### 3.4. Conclusions

The establishment of the Euroregion Nisa as the first Euroregion in Poland has resulted in rapid development of cross-border cooperation. The region, affected by environmental disasters in the late 20th century, remains a prominent example of the importance of sustainable development. The great scientific potential inherent in the staff of universities located in the area of Euroregion Nisa, has resulted in the development of cooperation in the form of the Academic Coordination Centre.

Research topics related to sustainable development have been among the most important ones since the ACC establishment, which allowed the ongoing development of research cooperation between the scientific and teaching staff of the

Faculty of Economics at the Technical University of Liberec and Wrocław University of Economics and Business (Jelenia Góra Branch), as well as other higher education institutions functioning in the Euroregion Nisa.

Cooperation of borderland universities within the ACC facilitates exchanging know-how among research and teaching staff, finding a partner in research and teaching projects, and intensifies international mobility of students and academic staff, e.g. within the framework of the Erasmus Programme.

The ACC activities strengthen cooperation not only between universities, but also between universities and the socio-economic environment in the region. Owing to the conducted scientific research, the projects and the organised conferences, it is possible to constantly draw attention of borderland enterprises to the problems of sustainable management. This primarily refers to companies operating in the tourism industry, where sustainability and sustainable management play a particularly important role.

Students entering the job market also greatly benefit from the ACC cross-border university cooperation. The competencies gained through participation in the ACC projects, conferences and other events, facilitate students' exposure to business practice and demonstrate the potential for developing their own sustainable entrepreneurship. This should motivate students to stay in the region after graduation. In addition, contacts with a neighbouring country enable students to expand their intercultural skills.

It can be concluded that the ACC contributes to the implementation of the SDGs in the Euroregion Nisa and, in particular, facilitates the goals of education for sustainable development.

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