

# University-Employer Cooperation

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## Abstract

**University-employer cooperation is one of the most important forms of cooperation in the economy, needed for economic development and sustainable growth and has become a key emphasis in higher education policy in recent years. The main goal is to achieve an equal partnership between universities and employers aimed at strengthening of economic development at the national, regional and local level. This goal can be achieved through active support (in information and knowledge) of local businesses and entrepreneurship in developing and realization of their ideas, and by linking students with their future employers, through various employer-seeking students associations and employers associations. Authors will analyze the university-employer cooperation in Poland, United Kingdom and Croatia and try to give an answer if the current cooperation is satisfying, and if is not, how it can be enhanced.**

## Keywords

**University, Employers, Students, University-Employer Partnership, Law, Economics, Higher Education**

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## 1. Introduction to the University-Employer Engagement

University-employer cooperation is one of the most important forms of cooperation in the economy, needed for economic development and sustainable growth (European Commission, 2007, 2010, 2010a; European Council, 2012; European Parliament, 2010; European Parliament and Council, 2013; European Union, 2008). Higher educational institutions (HEI)<sup>1</sup> can interact with employers and their local community in a number of different ways: through graduate recruitment, as sources of labour demand and lifelong learning, as suppliers of research and development, as players in a variety of economic development related networks and partnerships, mostly publicly funded (Government, EU) (Hogarth, Winterbotham, Hasluck, Carter, Daniel, Green, & Morrison, 2007).

<sup>1</sup>HEI is a broad term that, apart from universities, encompasses scientific institutes and research centers. Though, in this paper, the focus will be placed on universities as the main partners in a cooperation with employers.

In recent years, major emphasis in higher education policy has been placed on the university-employer engagement. This issue is perhaps more salient than ever as the public funding for universities continues to reduce and graduates face high unemployment rates in the current economic climate (Jensen, 2011). The importance of HEI is established in several societal spheres besides the economic: cultural, social and educational. The idea is that universities become employers' equal partners in economic development of the area in which they operate. This can be achieved by actively supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs with information and knowledge so that they may develop their ideas, and by helping them in the realization of their plans. Finally, students should be introduced to their future employers through various employer-seeking student associations and employer associations.

The focus in this article will primarily be placed on the economic perspective of the cooperation. In order to understand the cooperation between HEI and the employers we need to observe the HEI and employers (i.e. corporations) as systems. A system is most commonly defined as an entity observable as a whole constituted out of elements and in interaction with the environment (Bertalanffy, 1968; Pusić, 1997). The HEI are systems constituted out of faculties and departments and they are in interaction with the environment and with each other. This interaction is the propellant force for self-alternation of the HEI. This means that the adaptation to changes is the natural course in the development of the HEI. However, it is preferable that HEI take the initiative in introducing changes in the environment along with the employers as partners. The introduction of such changes in the environment can be achieved through innovations, new educational programs and better responsiveness of the HEI to the labour market needs.

However, the most important change to be made lies in the way the HEI are perceived. In order to clarify the matter, the authors will compare states to corporations as organizations quite similar to states. In a modern state, the HEI play the part entrusted to departments of research and development in corporations. They are practically the departments for research and development of the state. The government can be observed as top management (includes the highest ranking executives responsible for the entire enterprise), the state administration (local and regional as well) as middle management (intermediate management of a hierarchical organization, being subordinate to the senior management but above the lowest levels of operational staff), and sports and culture, amongst other things, can be considered as powerful marketing tools of the state. Therefore it is not erroneous to perceive the HEI as departments for research and development of the state or to conceptualize states as organizations similar to corporations. It is in all probability advantageous to do so, as it may facilitate a simpler detection of problems.

The analysis of university-employer cooperation in Croatia reveals that it lacks a systematic approach. There are some bright examples that will be presented later in the article. In search of relevant information, authors observed the university-employer cooperation in two countries, Poland and United Kingdom. Croatia currently has seven universities, ones in Dubrovnik, Osijek, Pula, Rijeka, Split, Zadar and Zagreb. The universities are differently integrated in the local economies and are heavily financially dependent on the state budget, with the exception of the University of Dubrovnik.

The specific objectives of the article are:

- 1) Defining the role of HEI in economic development;
- 2) Defining how employers use and view graduate skills, and how do they use scientific research in commercial purposes;
- 3) Ascertaining whether the current cooperation is satisfactory, and, if not, how it can be enhanced.

Furthermore, authors will analyze Leeds Metropolitan University (UK), student associations and Universities in California (USA), universities and various employer associations in Poland as examples of successful university-employer cooperation.

## 2. The Role of HEI in Economic Development

In order to understand the need for a relationship and cooperation between HEI and employers, we need to be acquainted with the long-term strategy for the economic development of the country and the position of HEI in it. California (USA) is probably the best example of the integration of HEI in the strategy for economic development. The universities in California are regarded as an important part of the economy and play a most significant role in ensuring growth. In addition to the University of Berkeley and the University of Stanford, which primarily attract bigger corporations (employers), examples include the other smaller and locally oriented universities.

In the economies of developing countries like Croatia, the role of HEI is crucial. The importance of HEI stems from several basic facts:

- 1) Depopulation,
- 2) Tendency of urbanization,
- 3) The necessity of diversification and the development of new and specialised professions and industries,
- 4) Global competitiveness.

## 2.1. Depopulation Facts

After the World War II, Croatia has continued to mark a negative population growth rate with minor oscillations due to a number of general and specific factors (Wertheimer-Baletić, 2004). According to the last census, the population of Croatia is 4,284,889, meaning that has a small population with tendencies of negative growth rate continuing in the future. Demographic ageing as a consequence of continuing negative growth rates throughout many years has brought changes in the economic structure (Akrap, 1995). This requires one to be specialised in their economic activities and moreover, to be highly specialised in high-income industries which guarantee low unemployment rates and economic growth.

To clarify, the small population directly affects the orientation towards quality rather than quantity, meaning that Croatia will not be able to compete with large economies with massive markets, despite its accession to the European Union. For such countries the production costs are significantly lower, particularly the labour force, and that makes them comparatively more attractive for investments in industries which are not specialised and are oriented towards mass production. The projections estimate that labour force will continue to be more expensive in Croatia than in other countries in the region and that this will produce a serious need for a cheaper labour force. This will ultimately lead to importation of foreign work force which will in the long run stimulate the Croatian economy. The role of the HEI is instrumental in reducing the need for importation of foreign labour force and depopulation of some areas of the country.

Regarding the problem of depopulation, the HEI ought to be observed as a centrifugal force. Namely, the HEI already existing in Croatia are positive factors helping the struggle against depopulation of some areas in Croatia. This means that higher education is no longer one of the main reasons why young people are moving to the cities. That is due to the founding of new Universities in Pula, Dubrovnik and Zadar. The centrifugal force is to some degree causing the return of a certain number of students who previously started and finished their studies in other cities. These students are often starting businesses in their hometowns and are causing repopulation of some areas which were having serious depopulation trends. However, the businesses started at their hometowns are not indigenous to that area. The solution is to encourage the HEI to diversify their courses to include those which are indigenous for some areas of the country. This would produce a double positive effect. The first is that the HEI would have an active role in the prevention of depopulation while the second is the preservation of the local culture and tradition.

## 2.2. Tendency of Urbanization

Depending on the degree of the socioeconomic development and other factors, urbanization as a historical phenomenon could manifest in different ways (Vresk, 1987). One of the main reasons behind negative population growth rate in the past few decades is the tendency of urbanization. Especially in the period following the Second World War, industrialization, led to massive urbanization and bigger cities (Blažević, 2010). This had devastating consequences on the Croatian agrarian community, the so called “Croatian village”. With the new technologies characteristic of the industrial society, the process of increasing administrative activities and organizations became more intense and somehow global (Pusić, 2002). The cities soon became scientific, industrial, social, cultural and political focal points. These circumstances and facts became instrumental in deciding whether to found new universities. The Universities were following the rise of cities and soon they were producing new courses and training for new professions, namely those related to industries which were blooming in industrial areas of the cities. However, the urbanization has a negative impact on population growth and family financial structure. Today, the modern family is certainly an urban family because of the weak economic potential of the Croatian village and the more attractive way of life in the cities (Dobrić, 2014; Koprić 2010, 2013, 2013a). There are also many problems with transportation and access to medical care on the islands. Putting it all together, one realizes that the fairest chance for a family to prosper economically is to move into urban areas.

The urbanization tendency is continuing to cause depopulation of some areas in Croatia (Lika, Gorski kotar, Dalmatinska zagora etc.). This can ultimately lead to disappearance of local entrepreneurship and crafts, in themselves a part of the historical legacy in those areas. The HEI can help resolve the problem by integrating those entrepreneurship and crafts into new specialised learning programs. They can ultimately stimulate the economic recovery of those areas by fostering the return of graduates with plans to start their own businesses. Additionally, depopulation may be combated by establishing faculty affiliates in areas closer to heavily depopulated zones, as was already mentioned.

### 2.3. Necessity of Diversification and Development of New and Specialised Professions and Industries

The necessity of diversification and the development of new and specialised industries and professions is the next step needed in order for Croatia to progress economically and achieve sustainable growth. Education for sustainable development in a lifelong learning perspective is essential for the achievement of a sustainable society and is therefore desirable on all levels of formal education and training, as well as in non-formal and informal learning (Council of the EU, 2010; European parliament, 2010). The world's economy is changing rapidly, and the answer to the changes can be no other than enhancing the economical elasticity to global economical changes (Memedovic, 2010). The HEI have the task of ensuring elasticity through innovations and finding answers and solutions in a more proactive way (Croatian Science Foundation, 2011; Marić, Anić Antić, Vugrek, & Dragović-Uzelac, 2013). The proactivity consists in initializing of the cooperation with the employers and the government as well as being the institutions that provide information and solutions to employers and the government at their request. The development of new specialised industries and professions is a *conditio sine qua non* for the long-term eligibility of foreign investments. Diversification of our industries and professions may, among other things, lead to an increased interest of foreign investors. Well-educated workforce and innovations are particularly important in this regard. The innovations by themselves cannot produce economic growth without investments in their development for the internal EU market (European Commission, 2014). The responsibility for providing the funds for their development lies specifically with the Croatian government, universities (which attract corporations that fund their research projects) and individual researchers with their ability to lobby for their projects. As mentioned earlier, there is a serious lack of a systematic approach in cooperation between HEI and employers and also in the Government policies regarding science and innovations. The fact remains that the Croatian expenditures for science and innovations are disappointing 0.75 percent of the GDP, one of the lowest in Europe (Hungary 1.8%, Slovenia 2.11%) (EUROSTAT, 2013).

The best example of the importance of innovations is elaborated in the Lambert Review of Business-University collaboration (United Kingdom), which emphasizes the need for a better flow of innovations between universities and businesses. In Croatia, Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act (MZOS, 2013), National Strategy for Innovations (MINGO, 2012) and Entrepreneurship Development Strategy (MINPO, 2012) are most certainly going to establish better appreciation of innovations. The text of the proposal contains several basic outlines regarding innovations:

- 1) Enhancement of creativity and innovations, including small and medium enterprises on all levels of education;
- 2) Development of transversal skills;
- 3) Development of teaching methods and mechanisms for creativity and innovations;
- 4) Development of partnerships among researches, field of teaching and the labour market.

### 2.4. Global Competitiveness

According to the Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014, Croatia ranked 75<sup>th</sup> (World Economic Forum, 2014). The reasons for this ranking include slow bureaucracy, paperwork overload (many permits which are needed in almost every stage of the investment realization) and an overflowing abundance of regulations. The measure of involvement of HEI in finding solutions to these problems must be carefully determined. The primary responsibility for finding solutions lies on the government. However, HEI can provide recommendations and methods as to the goals which need to be achieved. The main tasks of HEI in the process of the enhancement of global competitiveness are: 1) the necessity of diversification and the development of new and specialised industries and professions; and 2) the enhancement of economical elasticity to global economical changes

and well-educated work force.

The tasks mentioned above alongside with the advisory role of the HEI constitute the very essence of the future Croatian economic success. The misuse of these powers in Croatia is generating serious problems at the level of local administration. The time needed for certain permits, the abundance of paperwork and other problems are causing the significant downturn in global competitiveness. The investors will come where they are able to make money and make it fast, without significant inconvenience. With the previously mentioned problems in mind, the European Commission developed the competitiveness and innovation framework programme (CIP) (European Commission, 2011). The central role in the enhancement of the Union's competitiveness will be the financial stimulation of small and medium size enterprises as well as a reduction of administrative obstacles.

### 3. Modes of University-Employer Cooperation

Universities are regarded as sources of highly qualified and skilled labour for the employers (Hogarth, Winterbotham, Hasluck, Carter, Daniel, Green, & Morrison, 2007). Nonetheless, universities have not been able to provide adequate responses to the needs of the labour market in the past few decades. The HEI have a crucial role in the diversification of professions and development of new and specialised industries. Thus, as the global economy is shifting rapidly into the mass production east and specialised and highly innovative production at the west, Croatian universities must keep up with the changes. The demand for graduates with skills which are needed in the more traditional industries has significantly decreased. On the other hand, the demands for labour in the new and developing industries are high and in some areas the labour demands are satisfied with the importation from countries in the region (i.e. industries connected with tourism, organic food industry, restaurant industry, hotel industry).

One of the main problems which occur in the HEI-employer relationship is the obsolescence of the educational program. The employers are often not satisfied with the amount of knowledge which graduates present in their workplaces and their complete lack of practical knowledge. The solution is to reorganize the programs of higher education and ensure that students are more involved in joint projects with their future employers during their studies. The lack of practical work in the HEI is especially noticeable in two following tendencies. The first is the tendency of low productivity of graduates at their workplaces with projections of a continuing decrease and the second is the rise of private HEI in Croatia.

Low productivity is noticeable in various aspects of the employees' work, e.g. time needed for each assignment, quality of work and quantity of work. Moreover, employers' feedback suggests that the productivity decrease is resolved when employers intervene by providing additional education for their employees, such as seminars, additional educational courses etc. Work-based learning has also been identified as a significant factor in this regard. The term work-based learning logically refers to any form of learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace needs (Brodie & Irving, 2006). It includes learning that takes place at work as a normal part of the employees' professional development. Employers aiming for higher productivity rates may find it advisable to employ graduates from private HEI. In transitional countries such as Croatia, private HEI are widely believed to be "less valuable" educational institutions.

However, it is safe to affirm that nowadays private HEI are a better partner for employers than public HEI in the employer-university cooperation. This affirmation finds its basis in employers' feedback as well as that provided by graduates once they are employed. The latest trends are also going in the direction of employer orientation and preference for graduates from private HEI. The reasons for this are many. The first is that the practical work is more noticeable in private HEI and that the connection and cooperation between students and employers is often established during their education at the private HEI. There are manifold types of connections both in private and public HEI, such as job-seeking organizations consisting of members of the student body and also of the employers. Examples of such organizations may be observed in Poland and Austria. An additional advantage are the connections that enable student internships without the long wait for an open spot, which is more than a frequent problem in Croatia, especially in some areas of law and medicine. Naturally, there are also other connections which are very useful for both students and employers. As far as Croatia is concerned, the connections between students and employers are scarce.

But, there are some bright examples such as the eStudent association<sup>2</sup> linking employers to students not only for the purposes of finding employment after graduation, but also in joint projects, competitions such as the Case

<sup>2</sup>eStudent association, accessible at: <http://www.estudent.hr/csc>.

Study Competition (CSC is a competition in solving real and challenging business cases through which the eStudent connects students with their future employers) and other activities that are to build closer ties between students and employers. As mentioned earlier, there are many problems in the employer-HEI relationship but perhaps the most important one is the lack of a systematic approach. The occurrence of this problem is often connected to the lack of cooperation between the government (Ministry of science, education and sports), HEI (university rectors and the university administration) and the employers.

The importance of the governmental role is apparent from the need to re-evaluate the current educational program and incorporate more practical work, and also in increasing the responsiveness of the program to the current and future needs in the economy, primarily needs of the labour market. The elasticity is very important and will consequently produce stronger ties between HEI and employers. The basic idea is that HEI become mirrors of the current labour market needs. The elasticity is needed both in the educational program and in the admission systems of the HEI. The admission quotas must be strongly related to the data and demands emerging from the labour market. Of course, some faculties may have financial problems should the quotas be made as flexible as this. This means that some faculties would be facing a serious lack of financial means to sustain their educational activities. In such a case, the financial support from the government is inevitable until the movable quotas achieve their purpose, and that is to balance the needs of the market with the “production” of graduates from the HEI.

In the next two subsection (3.1. and 3.2.) the authors will present the university-employer cooperation in Poland and UK as examples of a good practice that Croatia should apply.

### 3.1. Poland

The University of Wrocław, a research university, is an example of a successful cooperation between HEI and employers. The emphasis here will be placed on the Wrocław Centre for Technology Transfer (WCTT) as a bridge linking scientists with the ideas and capital coming from entrepreneurs and businesses. Since WCTT beginnings, its main activity has been focused on making connections between research potential of the Wrocław University of Technology and companies’ needs in the area of new technologies and innovations. WCTT is also a member of the biggest Polish business-supporting network called National SME Services Network (KSU). KSU groups are approximately 200 non-commercial organisations cooperating with each other. KSU provide advice, information, training and financial services for micro, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs and entities undertaking business activity. WCTT is one of the main players in the process of regional innovation strategy elaboration and implementation (in the Lower Silesia region). WCTT is presently also a member of the biggest initiative on commercialisation in Poland, called “Effective Support for Innovative Business” from the Polish Agency for Entrepreneurship Development. Its overall aim is to analyse and improve the commercialisation processes and procedures in Poland. This initiative aims at supporting development of centres of innovation, i.e. technological parks, centres of excellence, centres of technology transfer, academic enterprise incubators, technological incubators as well as networks of business angels and seed-venture funds.

The main aim of WCTT’s activities is to foster effectiveness and competitiveness of enterprises through innovations. WCTT operates as an intermediate between science and business, supporting both academic-based organisations and enterprises. WCTT also supports technology transfer by promoting innovative technologies as well as finding, acquiring and implementing the right solutions (from technology audits to the assistance in negotiating the agreements and also providing legal counsel). Another important activity consists of assisting organisations in getting access to various R&D programs and sources of research financing. The centre facilitates commercialisation of scientific results and development of academic entrepreneurship. Some of the WCTT’s activities are focused on international cooperation, i.e. finding verified and reliable research, business and technology partners (**Figure 1**).

The justification for making such an organization in Poland is established in the achievements that have been made so far:

- over 30,000 people trained,
- over 15,000 consultancy hours,
- supported approximately 350 research proposals applied to the EC,
- over 300 technology audits completed,
- 126 innovative start-ups supported,

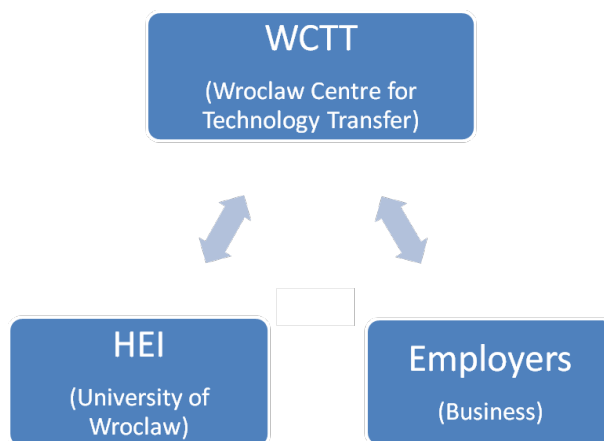
- 41 international technology transfer agreements signed.

Negative factors that could have prevented success are firstly linked to periodical problems with finding financial sources. For instance, one's own financial contributions are required in many national and international projects. The second problem is the lack of financial sustainability in the case of many valuable initiatives when external funding comes to an end. Apart from financial obstacles, there are also problems with mental and motivational barriers concerning UBC in Poland. Another factor is an insufficient number of staff members with practical experience in commercialisation of research outputs. WCTT is a bright example of how to be successful in building bridges between academic centres and business-industrial partners. The centre can be regarded as a model organisation for those institutions which initiate and run activities in the field of technology transfer or plan to set up special units, offices etc. responsible for cooperation with business partners and external stakeholders.

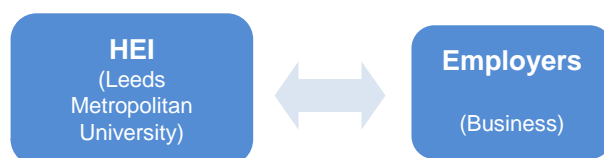
### 3.2. UK

The next example is the Leeds Metropolitan University (**Figure 2**). This University is an example of the importance of Government-University cooperation and the presence of political will to engage in a massive project such as this University. The [Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration \(2003\)](#) stated that concerted action of business, universities and Government will be required in order to grasp the opportunities for the UK economy.

The Leeds Metropolitan University is an information providing University. Information are specifically directed to the small and medium sized businesses which are in the process of founding and development. The main idea is that the University provides the local businesses with detailed analysis of the local market, the funds needed to start a business and the information relevant to the local administrative process, such as permits, subventions etc. The result of this practice is astonishing. The University became the circulatory system of the small and medium sized businesses in the greater Leeds area. This had many positive consequences on the local administrative service which may be seen as a "taking the weight off" effect on the local administration. Administration was relieved of incomplete claims, job overloads and inconclusive information in the paperwork presented. A practice like this has positively affected the effectiveness and promptness of the administration process to start and develop a business. This practice is more than needed in Croatia as the main problems of the local administration are related to the centralization of powers and the weak financial capacity. The University



**Figure 1.** University-employer cooperation in Poland.



**Figure 2.** University-employer cooperation in UK.

has similar organizations as Wrocław does. The start-up incubators' as a new form of entrepreneurial infrastructure, helping entrepreneurs in development and realization of their ideas, are regarded as an institutional advantage for the university as opposed to the practice of many other Universities in which the start up incubators are more of an *ad hoc* activity, meaning that they are often established when a high unemployment problem or a temporary political initiative occurs.

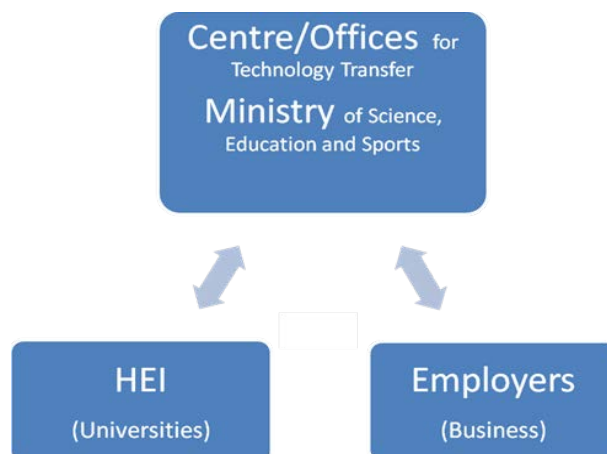
#### 4. The Cooperation between HEI and Employers in Croatia

The current cooperation is not satisfying and needs to be enhanced on many levels. The first level is the central one. The central government needs to develop a strategy for close cooperation between HEI and the private sector (which is run by private individuals or groups usually as a means of enterprise for profit and is not controlled by the state) (MINGO & MZOS, 2012). In this strategy, the “transmitters” should play a crucial role. The transmitters represent organizations/offices similar to the one previously mentioned in the case of Wrocław (Poland). Their main purpose is to link the HEI with local economies and to significantly increase the economical flexibility of the countries in which they operate (Committee of Regions, 2002; European Commission, 2008; European Parliament, 2007). Moreover, the reform of the local self-government is needed in order to develop a capacity for resolving public problems and improving democratic institutions (Committee of Ministers, 2007; Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2012; Council of Europe, 1985; European Commission, 2013; Hrženjak, 2009; Jurlina-Alibegović, 2009; Koprić, 2010, 2013, 2013a; Kregar, 2011; Musa, 2011).

At the moment, there are several specialised organizations/offices in Croatia acting as a bridge between academic centres and businesses: the offices for technology transfer at the Universities of Rijeka, Split and Osijek and Centre for research, development and technology transfer at the University of Zagreb. The whole circulation of measures enhancing scientific researchers and innovations is carried out between the HEI and the ministries, primarily the Ministry of science, education and sports. These measures are often not aimed at making a more systematic mechanism of cooperation between HEI and employers, and in most cases the employers (businesses) are not even a part of the research project.

The role of the Croatian employers association (a voluntary, non-profitable independent employer association protecting and promoting its members' rights and interests) is ineffective in terms of the efforts taken to ensure cooperation between academic centres and businesses. This is understandable given that it is an organization with the primary goal of protecting the interests of the employers and that ensuring cooperation between researchers and businesses is not its main concern. Therefore, more organizations/offices similar to WCTT is a *conditio sine qua non* for the future economic development of Croatia. The Ministry of science, education and sports (in charge of administrative and other activities relating to the following: preschool education, elementary school, secondary education in the country and abroad, scientific-research activities and scientific and technical information), the Croatian chamber of economy (an independent professional and business organization of all legal entities engaging in business), the Ministry of entrepreneurship and crafts, the Ministry of economy and the Ministry of labour and pension system can significantly contribute to organisational effectiveness of such organizations/offices by providing information and knowledge (Ministry of Economy, 2012). They may also provide funds with the European partners and European Union funds, supporting the essential projects which present the very basis for the future HEI-employer cooperation in Croatia (Figure 3).

There are many advantages of establishing “transmitters”. Firstly, the organizational and operational advantage is apparent. The work being done at these organizations and the quality of information provided by them to local businesses and entrepreneurships is a big step forward for enhancing competitiveness of the country's economy and a big incentive for future economic development and growth. There is also the educational side to such an organization. The employees working there would be highly specialized in their activities and, depending on the results of their work, would make a good foundation for the future changes in educational program for such class of employees. From this perspective we could observe such an organization as a well-elaborated experiment for the Croatian educational system. At the regional and at the local level, the main objective of the regional and local authorities is to develop close and productive ties to the transmitters while forming a well organized structure of powers on each side and the cooperation in further education of the local and regional administrative clerks (Committee of Ministers, 2007; Guderjan, 2011, 2012; Huggings, 2011; Marshall, 2005). These steps will produce a more effective way of participation of HEI at the local and regional level. The great burden lies on the faculty members of the University and also on the University administration and their will-



**Figure 3.** University-employer cooperation in Croatia.

ingness to cooperate with private investors, local businesses and entrepreneurs and, most importantly, with the regional and local authorities. This synergy is at the very core of the future economic progress.

## 5. Conclusion

The objective of this article is to provide basic outlines of the current university-employer cooperation in Croatia. Moreover, the authors compared the current situation in Croatia (regarding university-employer cooperation) with the situation in Poland and the UK. The idea was to detect weaknesses of the relationship and to provide solutions by presenting examples of successful collaboration in Poland and the UK. Furthermore, the authors pointed out the importance of HEI in the Croatian society and the vital role of HEI in preventing depopulation, downturns in global competitiveness and negative economic trends. The article emphasized the need for a better appreciation of innovations and the formation of more centres/offices for technology transfer which would make the cooperation between the HEI and employers more vibrant and productive. The HEI have a great responsibility for the future of the Croatian economics. Their role is primarily based on economic, social, cultural, political and demographic development of the areas in which they operate. In order to grasp the (financial) opportunities given by the upcoming EU membership, the formation of close bonds between the Government, HEI and employers is much needed. However, HEI are also a reflection of the general state of a society. If the society is not welcoming the changes and if the faculty members are reluctant to accept reforms in higher education, the HEI will not be able to produce much needed results and that could lead into much greater problems in the future.

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