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- **The RCE as a framework for university – community interaction in education and research: reflection, evaluation and lessons learned**

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- **Abstract:** Over recent decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been concerned with their “third role” associated with the growing demand for their social involvement, especially with regard to the sustainable development of society – which also redefines the other important university roles of research and education. The concept of sustainability has caused a shift towards more responsible science whose representatives are considered to be one of the “major groups” in decision making; the interface of science and politics has also been fruitful in generating new research questions, elaborating “boundary objects” for interdisciplinary research and defining new, value-based research goals and outcomes. As a consequence, new scientific concepts have emerged (post-normal science, sustainability science) followed by shifts in educational practices. In this field, social learning is widely discussed as a process grounded in a network or system of collaborative learning and associated with relevant socially oriented aims. This concept is also considered to be a basis for regional cooperation where different stakeholders are brought together to share knowledge and information related to sustainable development within a community and enter into a dialogue with the lay public. Having this in mind, the authors analyse models of Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) that represent learning platforms for sustainability oriented regional cooperation to provide appropriate social settings and social conditions for sustainability oriented participative processes in a region. “Construction” of the model was based on sustainability oriented educational theories that call for broad science–community interaction and which were brought into practice in 2004 by the UN University; at the time of writing there were approx. 100 operational RCEs around the world. The article outlines the main principles of regional cooperation among different institutions and the participatory learning process occurring among them, with specific attention paid to the role of universities that are the leading partners in this cooperation aimed at positive environmental and social change. It presents a means of sharing best practices, identification of factors that support learning processes in a region in a practical way, and provides possibilities of evaluating RCEs from different points of view – this is considered to be a rationale necessary for transferal of the model to different learning contexts. The authors argue that development of research methods for reflection and sharing experiences with the regional involvement of HEIs is a pre-condition for double and triple loop learning through which innovation in learning processes, and consequently in the educational sphere (its strategies and insti-

tutions) occurs. They present a case study of research of this kind which redefines the role of researcher and brings democratic principles to the scientific concept itself.