

The keys and the mortarboards

what happens when cities and universities work together to shape local cultural policies?

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Abstract

Today, a university is very much a part of the city it's in, and universities and cities can work together to build a better urban future. Both are locally rooted, globally aware, responsive and pragmatic, willing to work with communities to transform themselves and their environment.

If cities are taking on a far more important role as breeding grounds for new ideas and generators of wealth, locally rooted universities have an increasingly important role to play in their community and in all aspects of the city's economic and social evolution. Universities have the power to create exciting, connected and inclusive cities and influence the development agenda of cities in which they reside. Local authorities recognise this influence, competence and role, and partner with their local universities through shared spaces, partnerships, university-led public symposia, grassroots projects and media conversations.

In planning for the future city, universities and city leaders need to work together. As cities stand at the forefront of innovation in policy making and shoulder more responsibilities when it comes to global challenges, universities can support them by being their partners, their think tanks, their talent suppliers, and their knowledge producers.



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Universities carved out their early identities as cathedrals of prestigious learning and knowledge. For a long time they stayed detached in impressive buildings surrounded by green fields behind stone gates. They became a city in the city, with its own rules, its own communities, its own land without measuring the impact they had on the city living next to them.

But universities have an increasingly important role to play in their community and in all aspects of the city's development. Today, a university cannot but be very much a part of the city it's in, and universities and cities can work together toward the future. As stated by Sir Alan Langlands vice-chancellor of the University of Leeds during the EUROCITIES culture forum in October 2019, "Great cities need great universities and great universities need great cities". Why are cities and universities so deeply connected at local level? What is their potential for collaboration and how do they shape the city together?

Cities and universities are deeply connected at local level

Both institutions are locally rooted, globally aware, responsive and pragmatic. Cities have long been breeding grounds for new ideas and generators of wealth, but what's new is the idea that cities shoulder more responsibilities on a global stage and hence should take on a far more important role. Cities are the front line in responding to new challenges such as climate change or welcoming migrants and newcomers. And they are responding bravely and innovatively.

With the greater role of cities comes the greater need for centres of knowledge within these cities, and universities have a long history of supporting cities with the analysis of local needs and the provision of evidence and policy insight. The relationship is mutually supportive, with universities providing education and training, supporting local businesses and undertaking world-leading research, and cities home to workforces, students and vibrant

communities, and attracting international businesses and researchers. As anchor institutions, universities also play a key role in urban development:

- Universities are deeply embedded in the local economy and play a critical role in the coordination and support of economic activity;
- Universities have an important social connection with the local community;
- Universities provide skills, and for companies, the skills of the local workforce are a key factor influencing where to set up;
- Universities are often the largest employer in their region (e.g. the University of Leeds is the third biggest employer in Leeds with 7,500 staff), and students even though temporary, tend to support a vibrant culture of bars, music venues, coffee shops etc.
- University campuses offer testing grounds for new technologies. These can be developed on a smaller scale before they are rolled out to cities.

Universities have a good understanding of the complex systems that make up a city. They work with communities, cultural stakeholders, businesses and other parts of the education system, and they provide evidence and analysis on city assets and needs. Thanks to their anchorage, universities have the power to create exciting, connected and inclusive cities. There is a strong correlation between cities with more skills and higher levels of human capital, and local employment growth. And this is underpinned by the provision of high-level and creative skills.

Universities co-creating local culture

Leeds City Council and University of Leeds have a long history of collaboration and strong cultural links from the start. Illustrating this, it is to be noted that the Leeds Playhouse, a major local theatre, started its life on the university campus: the theatre opened in 1970 in premises loaned to the Leeds Theatre Trust by the University of Leeds. Hence Leeds culture-makers and researchers have been interlinked for a while. The University of Leeds made the choice to provide opportunities for the society of which it forms part, i.e. the city of Leeds, the different communities living in Leeds and the institutions that are part of Leeds cultural landscape.

This is reflected in the [Cultural Institute](#) that was launched in 2016 to better connect the university with cultural partners. The objective of the Cultural Institute is to build sustainable partnerships with cultural and creative industries, in order to strengthen the university's position as a global centre of research and teaching excellence in culture. The Cultural Institute offers a single gateway for information, support and practical advice to connect external partners and researchers across all disciplines. It promotes and integrates the university's cultural attractions, creative resources, performances and exhibition spaces. Finally, the Cultural Institute is a contact point for cultural and creative organisations wishing to work with students. So far, thanks to the Cultural Institute, 45 projects between researchers and external partners have received funding and new modules have been developed in collaboration with organisations active in the local cultural scene. The role of the Cultural Institute is to facilitate partnerships and research collaborations. One tool they have developed is the Leeds Creative Labs programme. The programme matches creative professionals with researchers from the university: by providing funding

and spaces without targets or deadlines, artists and researchers can explore, innovate and take risks together



Light Night 2019 on the University of Leeds campus: The Nectary a collaboration between arts and environmental science as a result of a Creative Lab, by Alison Smith and Chris Hesse.

This example shows the role assumed by the University of Leeds: it decided to strongly engage as a whole with its surroundings; it partners with other universities and colleges as well as with the city council and local cultural institutions. While the university operates on a global scale, it realises that its location forms its identity and provides opportunities for it to grow and help others: students, individual learners, businesses and of course public institutions, including cultural ones. The University of Leeds is aware that its traditional research and teaching roles have changed. Working with local communities and encouraging students to volunteer is not considered a 'third mission' activity anymore, and the University of Leeds is investing to develop young leaders and future creative innovators that will be able to engage and participate in Leeds' cultural life once their studies are over.

Working with students to shape the future heritage city

Universities are physical sites and nexuses of regeneration projects that connect economic issues and community engagement. They educate the workforce of tomorrow. This could not be truer than in the Alma Mater University of Bologna, the oldest university in Europe (opened in 1088), where the university district lies at the heart of Bologna's historic centre. Since 1994, public engagement actions have been the subject of agreements between the university and the municipality. In 2007, a protocol that mutually recognised each institution was signed, aimed at enhancing university citizenship. The concrete actions stemming from this agreement were materialised thanks to the involvement of both institutions in the [EU-funded ROCK project](#).

ROCK is looking at how cultural heritage can lead regeneration strategies for historic city centres, transforming them into creative, cultural and sustainable districts driven by a research-action-research methodology. Bologna chose as its ROCK pilot a highly dense artistic and historic district: [Zona-U](#), the main university district situated in the medieval city walls and composed of a major street, via Zamboni, hosting important material and immaterial heritage (palaces, libraries, the main theatre, several important museums including 11 university museums).

The city of Bologna decided in the last century to leave the university inside the city centre instead of creating a university campus outside the city. The aim was to foster knowledge sharing among education, institutions, employment and urban life, as well as among users (students, workers, citizens). This situation has positive and negative aspects. On the one side, the growth of the student population in the city (about 80,000 students) brought vivacity and attractiveness to the city centre. On the other side, some conflicts with residents and other city users emerged.

The city and the university together in the ROCK project are leading several experiments in the heart of the historic centre, to work on the negative perception of students among the 'Bolognese' citizens and tap into the creative potential of students. In September 2019, one of the experiments provided Piazza Rossini with a temporary installation, designed and built with students who transformed part of the area usually used for parking into a green space, proposing an unexpected perception of the area and restoring the trace of the ancient churchyard of the San Giacomo Maggiore Church. The temporary experiment was successfully embraced by the citizens, leading to the decision from the municipality to turn it into a permanent solution for the pedestrianisation of the space. This is just one of many examples of the mutual learning produced by this collaboration.



Despite some organisational, normative and spatial challenges, the collaborative process between the city of Bologna and its university produces many positive outcomes. The municipality benefits from a mutual exchange of knowledge and is able to bring new skills to local projects fed with research. The temporary actions designed with the university students have transformed into stable setups (such as in the example of Piazza Scaravilli, another parking lot used by university teachers and permanently transformed into a green public space accessible for everyone). These experiments in the end lead to more codified procedures that facilitate future cooperation. Collaborating with the municipality is for the university an opportunity to draw knowledge from real-life experimentation and do research in a more transdisciplinary way. Both benefit from this arrangement and the ROCK project in particular has been an occasion to provide the laboratory-city with a stable research & development component.

Smart universities make smarter cities

Eindhoven is the fifth largest city in the Netherlands, located in the southern part of the country, at the heart of the Brainport region - which is among the most innovative regions worldwide. The city has been the hometown of Philips the electronics' company since 1892. The founding of the company was actually the main factor that developed the city since it attracted many investors to the area, especially hi-tech companies, making Eindhoven a major technological and industrial hub.

Considered today as a knowledge based and innovation-oriented city, Eindhoven strongly focuses on creating the needed support structures in the domains of innovation, labour market, technology development and business development. An important asset of Eindhoven is the triple helix management structure the city has been developing for a long time. Local government, universities, and business are cooperating on a daily basis.

The Technical University of Eindhoven was born out of the triple helix concept back in 1956 when it was founded by industry, local government and academia together. From the start TU/e fostered an open culture where everyone feels free to exchange ideas and take initiatives. The hands-on mentality to design solutions is what drives the university: understanding things by making them and making things by understanding them. As a result, 81% of graduates find or start up their first job in North Brabant.

The municipality is closely involved in the research done by the university. This collaboration brings a lot of positive outcomes for both institutions, who can exchange knowledge on policies, data and information on a daily basis. The university is for instance a large contributor to and user of the open data system of Eindhoven municipality. This platform is used for research purposes, and the results of the research feed in the end into the platform: all in all, it is a win-win situation for both partners.



Strijp-S during Dutch Design Week © Paul Raats

Eindhoven has become a testing ground for tools and technologies developed inside the university walls. The proximity of the city and its eagerness to benefit from research creates an ideal experimental setting for action research¹. Citizens, entrepreneurs, governmental bodies and knowledge institutes can study, co-develop, test and evaluate real life and pressing urban issues and solutions such as noise pollution or crowd management. For instance, as part of the ROCK Project, TU/e worked with GPS trackers to better manage the flow of visitors during large events organised by the municipality. These tools were tested during the Dutch Design Week 2018 and facilitated the location selection of certain activities for the 2019 edition. Another example is that the city is monitoring the noise levels that different sources generate (i.e. large events, transportation) and giving real-time feedback to citizens on the measurements.

Bringing the old wicked issue of the development of innovative technologies and systems in accordance with the real needs of users and society at large, and putting their interests, perceptions and values at the centre considerably increases the chances of public acceptance of new innovations. As such, TU/e Smart Cities Programme is currently active in four Living labs in the Eindhoven area and in several on the TU/e Campus.

At the heart of smart cities are smart institutions of higher education. As TU/e does, these institutions prepare students to live, work and innovate in a smart city. They can also act as

¹ Action research is a philosophy and methodology of research generally applied in the social sciences. It seeks transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which are linked together by critical reflection (Wikipedia)

testing grounds for new ideas, projects and experiments. By seeking out certain opportunities, universities can play a pivotal role in the success of any smart city.

In planning for the future city, universities and city leaders need to work together.

The twenty-first century is the age of cities, but they do not stand alone. They must work with each other and must draw on universities. As decision-making becomes more local, universities can be brokers, coordinators, ideas machines and leaders. As cities shoulder greater responsibility, universities can be their think tanks, their talent suppliers, their co-investors and their knowledge producers.

Equally, universities cannot stand alone. They must cultivate strong local support, and they must also work with other universities - locally, nationally and internationally. They have to proactively engage with their city and are ideally positioned to do so. Universities play an important role in their local area, but they can also be the glue that brings cities together and they can help to introduce a new era of partnerships.

Cities and universities working closer together will mean a greater chance of tackling the challenges of the future. It will mean better international links and opportunities, and ultimately providing a home to happier citizens.

Final comments and recommendations:

- Cities need to know the impact from research for better planning
- The university's involvement in strategic development of the city is largely dependent on the vision the city has for itself ('what city do you want to be?')
- Important to find the right linking pin, the right contact: start from a one off project to create a connection and then integrate it into a more codified structure
- Important to assess the local perception of the student population to design the best actions together

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