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GLOBAL CITIES: CONNECTING TALENT, DRIVING CHANGE

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THE CITY AND THE UNIVERSITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR URBAN GROWTH, GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

UNIVERSITIES IN THE 'URBAN AGE'

We are now living in an 'urban age'. In 2006, UN Habitat declared that humanity had crossed a significant demographic threshold: for the first time, the majority of the world's people now live in towns and citiesⁱ. This transition raises unprecedented opportunities for universities to apply their expertise, drive innovation and spur economic development as urban leaders on the global stage. It also presents profound challenges for academic institutions, both in terms of the changing expectations and functions placed on higher education and where in the world – and how in the city – universities need to proactively adapt.

Cities are hubs of prosperity and dynamism. Most industrial societies have long been highly urbanized. The rise of the 'knowledge economy' has reinforced the position of cities as essential seedbeds for social and technological innovation and engines of economic growth. Universities have played a foundational role in attracting, training and connecting highly-skilled workforces in key urban nodes and are critical to their success. It is no coincidence that there is a continued overlap between the concentration of universities in the top-100 of the World University Rankings and established centres in the hierarchy of global cities – with Los Angeles, London, Berlin, Boston, and Hong Kong leading the way.ⁱⁱ

But cities are also sites of risk, insecurity and inequality. The continued agglomeration of knowledge capital in key urban places has been matched by an expansion and fragmentation of city and metropolitan landscapes in social and spatial terms.ⁱⁱⁱ We are seeing not just a growth in the proportion of the world's population living in cities, but the emergence of new and uneven patterns of urbanisation and social transformation. Accelerated urban growth in the developing countries of the Global South, the suburbanisation of race and poverty and the realities of antiquated infrastructures falling into disrepair in more established urban centres will all have an undeniable and immediate impact on the way universities conduct their business as populations relate to space and place differently now than in the past^{iv}.

Universities must engage with the potential and the problems of urban growth globally, and at home. The challenges of contemporary urbanisation – from socio-economic polarisation to global pandemics and climate change – are now unfurling at a global scale and are experienced distinctly in relation to place. As demonstrated by the passage of UN Habitat's New Urban Agenda in October 2016, cities are claiming political leadership in the pursuit of sustainable urban development.^v Universities must assess their ability to contribute to such agendas in the context of their immediate cities and regions and look to inform broader governance debates on urban competitiveness, sustainability, inclusion, and resilience.

SYMBIOTIC, BUT NOT NECESSARILY COLLEGIAL RELATIONS

Cities benefit from universities. Universities contribute to the socioeconomic development of their cities and regions in many ways. They are often among the largest employers in their regional economies and generate economic multipliers through targeted purchasing, employment strategies and the consumption practices of large student populations. Cities depend on universities to provide a steady stream of highly-skilled graduates, and the knowledge, R&D and technologies they generate are essential drivers of local economic growth and resilience. The application of academic analysis offers cities a robust evidence base to tackle social issues and optimise community assets. Cultural and creative activities catalysed by the presence of universities and their student bodies create exciting urban intellectual and artistic scenes. International students and staff contribute to the cosmopolitan vitality of place at the same time as alumni networks articulate cities into regional and global milieu. Universities, as a result, are increasingly viewed as essential elements towards cities competing locally and globally.

Universities benefit from cities. Universities rely on their immediate surroundings to deliver their core teaching and research missions. They often draw heavily from local student and labour pools. As major landholders embedded in local economic and social structures, universities are place-dependent institutions that require a vibrant social environment to attract the best students, faculty and staff. The city itself presents a novel and complex classroom for pedagogical practice. It is a pressing object for academic analysis and a strategic site of engagement. Urban service learning and volunteering provide students with valuable experiential educational opportunities, especially when projects are co-produced with community groups or local governments.^{vi} Universities, for their part, are increasingly cognisant of their need to be present in and responsive to their communities and are involved in deliberate practices of 'place-making' in rapidly changing metropolitan settings.

Sometimes interests align, sometimes they do not. Universities are well placed to support local growth and sustainable communities and there is a growing recognition of the mutually-beneficial relationships universities and cities can forge around regional development. However, there are substantive and long-standing barriers – physical, institutional and cultural – between civic and academic sectors that mean the strategic priorities of the university and the city cannot be neatly folded into each other.^{vii} Universities are encumbered by the bureaucracies typical of large institutions while also playing host to sometimes anarchic cultures of scholarly autonomy. Academic jargon and publishing imperatives present impediments to the popular dissemination of university-generated research. This has led universities to be stereotyped as detached 'ivory towers', even as the financial and political pressures of a shifting higher education landscape compel them to maximise their social impact and more lucrative forms of knowledge transfer. University timeframes – centred on the academic calendar and demands of scientific rigour (e.g. the prolonged periods required for peer review and grant applications) – do not mesh with the faster pace of public policy formation or the needs of community groups dealing with rapid urban transformations.^{viii} Universities' own locational decisions are made with a mix of academic and financial considerations rather than those of city planners. As catalysts for urban development, they promote gentrification more often than they create sustainable communities.^{ix} Town-gown tensions mean

the university has historically been viewed as located in the city, but not of it. This relationship, however, is changing.

NEW ROLES, NEW EXPECTATIONS

Policy makers are now seeking to codify universities and cities as co-dependent custodians of regional development. As countries turn their economies towards knowledge intensive products and services, the OECD has argued universities ought to “do more than simply educate and research – they must engage with others in their regions, provide opportunities for lifelong learning and contribute to the development of knowledge-intensive jobs which will enable graduates to find local employment and remain in their communities”.^x Universities, seeking to demonstrate their relevance in a turbulent political and funding climate, have responded by embracing a number of new roles:

- *...as economic drivers:* The rise of highly-urban knowledge economies has positioned universities as engines regional economic growth. Academic institutions both train competent and skilled workforces and serve as knowledge factories that target the impact of research locally, through bi-directional partnerships with city-based firms. Drawing from the success stories of Stanford and MIT, proponents of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ advocate that universities embrace ‘triple helix’ engagements with government and industry to commercialise research outputs and direct regional development.^{xi}
- *...as city leaders:* ‘Engaged’ universities are asserting institutional leadership in their host communities and aim to be responsive to local development and civic agendas by building cross-sectoral urban coalitions. In the United Kingdom, John Goddard’s work reviving the ‘civic university’ has proved influential in directing university leaders to engage with their surroundings; acting globally but using their location to form and develop their identity.^{xii} In the United States, such approaches have gained traction through policy frameworks leveraging universities as ‘anchor institutions’ supporting the economic and cultural vibrancy of their host municipalities.^{xiii}
- *...as capacity-builders:* In addition to local economic development, universities are assuming increased importance as providers of the data and analysis necessary to address global challenges that directly impact cities. Applied research generates an essential scientific evidence base to inform public policy. The development of interdisciplinary teaching and research, prominent and well-resourced research centres, and cross-campus societal ‘Grand Challenges’ (e.g. urban sustainability) help align the academic interests of universities with the needs of cities, and present a ‘front porch’ to local citizens and policy makers looking to access academic expertise.
- *...as agents of social mobility:* Universities are thinking about new approaches to enhance the impact and efficacy of their education programs. Challenging traditional residential, full-time degree models opens the university in adaptive ways to more people. Advances in digital learning, including massive open online courses (MOOCs), for example, are enabling academic and urban partnerships that can widen participation in higher education (while creating potentially lucrative new revenue streams). And by rendering campuses more porous, universities may open forums for dialogue between diverse urban stakeholders in ways that foster opportunities for collaboration, knowledge exchange and social empowerment.

NEGOTIATING NEW TERRAINS OF ENGAGEMENT

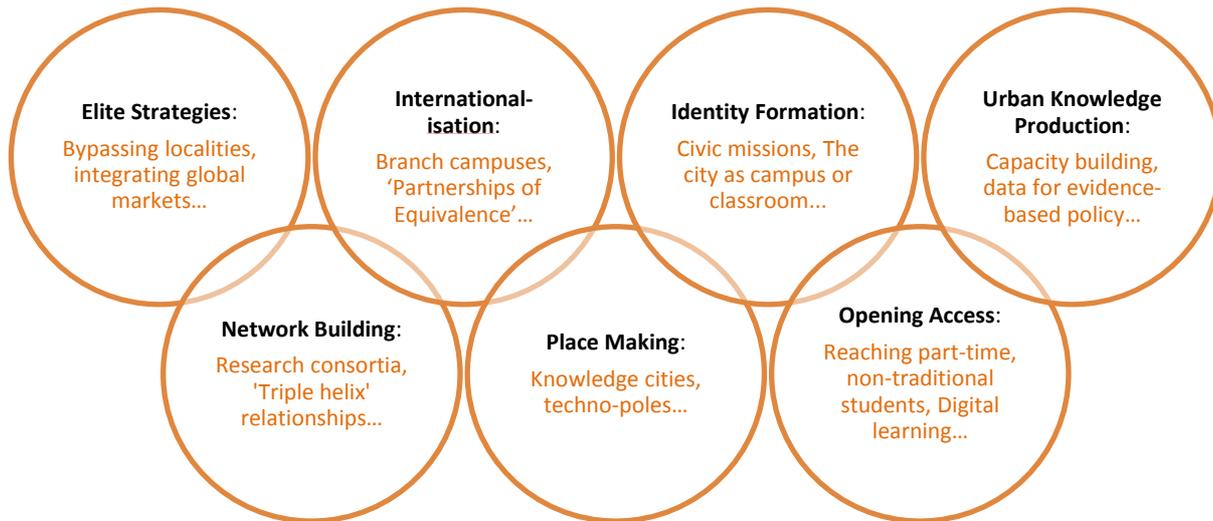


Figure 1. A non-exhaustive typology of city-university terrains of engagement

New roles are complex and yet to be fully-realised. Universities and cities tend to be conceived of as coherent, homogenous actors, but they are multifaceted and ambitious entities negotiating politically complex territorial and networked interests. Universities are home to numerous research clusters, centres, institutes, and individual academics working on multi-disciplinary approaches to urban challenges. At the same time, local government and state agencies house multiple departments that may or may not operate in strategic, functional, or collaborative alignment. And beyond formal governmental structures, non-profit organizations and community groups comprise a dynamic civic society that is itself generative of distinct urban knowledge systems. The relationships between “town” and “gown” and the potential impact of deepening and diversifying the relationship on either side are neither simple, nor fully understood.

Embrace across the university-city divide (be realistic, but also be experimental). Knowledge production is not the same as real life application and strategic partnerships between cities and universities do not always lead to concrete action. However, universities do offer cities a wealth of knowledge, resources, and institutional capacities to help shape more equitable, resilient and sustainable urban futures. This is especially true if university-city linkages can be capitalised upon beyond senior leadership levels. Considering the myriad ways universities operate in and across cities highlights diverse arenas through which novel collaboration and experimentation can be developed (Figure 1).

Understand and capitalise on local actors and institutions: There is no one-size-fits-all model to shape university-city relationships. Universities are highly variegated; from globally-oriented research institutions, through niche technical and arts schools, to community colleges and polytechnics. We can expect both quantitative and qualitative differences between their interactions in global city-regions and in small- and medium-sized university towns. There is clearly scope to learn from best practices, but in doing so, academic and urban partners should build on strategic opportunities that leverage locally-available institutional capacities and human capital to guide engagement, connect talent, and drive change.

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