

A Network of Excellence Shaping the Identity of University Cities

The recent recession in industrialized countries and consequent crisis of many urban regions have called for the formulation of economic strategies based on innovative institutional and social partnerships. As the potentialities of a fruitful relationship between cities and universities (often dating centuries back) has been brought to the foreground, a number of policies at local, national and supranational level have been introduced.

In Europe the Lisbon-Gothenburg Strategy (2000-2001) and later Europe 2020 (2010) have given rise to programmes such as URBACT and its 26 projects, among which Eunicities, REDIS, Creative Spin, ESIMEC, and UNIC. Their goal is to promote and support experiences of joint city-university actions in order to enhance local creativity and innovation leading to economic development. In addition, in 2013 the programme CREATIVE EUROPE (replacing the previous MEDIA, MEDIA Mundus and Culture programmes) has been launched to promote creativity in the domain of the humanities.

While some of these projects have been successful, others have only partially met the expectations. Almost two decades of experiments have not been sufficient to substantially improve the relationships between cities and their universities. Cities have yet to undergo a productive, long-lasting process of change and universities have been slow in taking advantage of their new role to introduce basic innovative transformations. One of the reasons for this partial failure has been an excessive emphasis on economic aspects.

Important issues such as public support for innovation and creativity, the introduction of new forms of partnership, the supply of new services, students' participation in the life of the community were regarded more as functional to economic growth than as valuable opportunities to formulate new development strategies. Furthermore, the lack of financial resources has never been seen as an incentive to introduce new structural and long-lasting forms of partnership and management. Unless a further joint effort is made by cities and universities, the present emphasis on potential town-gown interactions will continue to produce short-lived outcomes. Identifying ways in which

university education and its environment can empower each other is now of the essence, considering the strategic role attributed to culture by the UN Millennium Development Goals and by the 2013 UNESCO Hangzhou Declaration.

While assessing the impact of experiments and achievements over the last decades, it is important to appreciate that many issues are yet to be explored and discussion of concerns and accomplishments, malfunctions and potentialities is crucial to envision feasible, sustainable projects.

The following questions invite a closer scrutiny:

- Are the relationships between city and university (and other institutions of higher education and research) regulated by institutional agreements or are they based on customary forms of cooperation that can change in time?
- Is the university regarded by its host city as a privileged counter-part in relation to the elaboration of strategies of social and economic development, spatial planning and social services?
- In turn, does the university consider its host city as a privileged partner when designing its development projects or planning students' housing, social services and training activities? Is the location of new university facilities chosen also taking into account the specificities and demands of the urban context?
- Over time, have the relationships between city and university been generally good? Have they just tolerated each other? Have they been in conflict?
- How is the presence of several thousands of students perceived by the city? Is it considered as an inevitable inconvenience? Is it regarded as a positive resource? If so, how is it utilized, supported, enhanced? Are there any programmes, possibly in cooperation with the host city, that support and promote the creativity of university students?
- Does the university have programmes that promote and support spin-offs and start-ups? Does the university have placement strategies for its students?
- Do the university and its host city offer joint programmes funded either by UE or national governments?

Unitown - *University town network*

University of Ferrara | International mobility and education office
via Savonarola, 9 44121 - Ferrara - ITALY
tel: +39 (0)532 293200
mail: ntg@unife.it



Unitown

UNIVERSITY TOWN
NETWORK

- Have city and university collaborated in case of outstanding events such as a nomination for European Capital of Culture or the inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage list?

Unitown aims to scrutinize these and other questions involving the many facets which form a city and its academic community, each of which summoned to contribute in defining and practicing the identity of an urban community as a whole.

Unitown - *University town network*

University of Ferrara | International mobility and education office
via Savonarola, 9 44121 - Ferrara - ITALY
tel: +39 (0)532 293200
mail: ntg@unife.it