

Towards a civic university and academic cities?

Results and recommendations from the peer review meeting in Norrköping/Linköping of the EUniverCities network, 24-27 November 2015





1. Introduction

In the last couple of years, Linköping University, the City of Linköping and the City of Norrköping successfully have developed a number of collaborations, strategic and practical, in a range of fields. The two cities and the university are deeply convinced that their fates and futures are linked, and that collaboration brings crucial benefits. But where do the three parties stand from an international perspective, and where can improvements still be made?

A peer review meeting was organised in order to learn from other European university-city tandems and obtain recommendations. The visitors were representatives of the EUniverCities network (from the cities/universities of Aalborg, Delft, Ghent, Magdeburg, Lausanne, Lublin, Parma, Tampere and Trondheim), who, back home, work on similar issues and challenges. They were invited to reflect on the hosts' collaboration strategies and practices, and to share their experiences. In particular, they were asked to think about the question whether Linköpings university is on its way to become a Civic University (as defined by John Goddard), and whether Linköping and Norrköping are on their way to become Academic Cities. During a 2 ½ hour workshop, the participants discussed these questions. As "expert outsiders", they also shared their views and observations on the collaboration, and provided suggestions for improvements. This report contains a synopsis of the discussions.

2. Observations and praise

Many participants noted that, compared to other European cities, there is a culture of high trust between cities & university. University and cities are deeply convinced, on all layers, that they depend on each other and that effective collaboration is essential for both sides. Interestingly, the university management considers the city level not just as “enablers” (providers of amenities, accommodation and infrastructure) but as strategic partners with whom to co-create a competitive and balanced knowledge-based environment.

From the cities’ perspective, the importance of collaboration with LiU is widely recognized, or even unquestioned, and beyond political controversy. This is not just reflected in strategic documents (Lyskraft and Linköpings’ cooperation strategy, the regional smart specialisation strategy) but also in ongoing strong support for a number of concrete collaboration initiatives: the municipal PhDs, the municipal research fund, the high numbers of internships/thesis assignments offered by both Linköping and Norrköping, and substantial investments (for example in the visualisation centre). One participant coined it a “Yes We Can” attitude.

Moreover, there was a lot of praise for the many concrete collaboration projects that were presented during the plenary meeting, the most mentioned ones being Lumink (where university students motivate and help college students), the municipality PhD programme, the Norrköping Fund for R&D, Society Quest (where societal challenges are matched with academic competences), and the visualisation centre and the cluster around it. These projects have a clear rationale and seem to work well. They are all tokens of an academic city and a civic university.

LuMink got praise for its social character, and the clear win-win for students and city; the Municipal PhD programme was named by one delegate “simple but clever” by bringing university research and city needs closer together and establishing longer term relationships. Society Quest was also seen as a unique way how academia can reach out to urban challenges. The very impressive visualisation centre epitomizes the power of collaboration of all sorts (between technological and medical university departments, business&university, city and university etc.). The cluster combines top-notch academic research, business, entertainment and education, it is a showcase of urban design and management, and it has started to attract talent from all over the world. It also shows what can be achieved when key people from city and university trust each other, are ready to take risks and share a vision.

Another observation concerned the high level and degree of student participation compared to many EUniverCities members. Students are being taken seriously, and they are well endowed (in terms of time and resources) to do so. Special mention was made of the deep and enthusiastic student participation in the science park management, that was considered rather unique.



Finally, the two cities-one university context is considered rather unique. A good collaboration mode has been developed in this triangle, despite clear differences and age-old rivalries between the two cities.

White spots, questions and challenges

The delegates also had questions regarding the collaboration, and detected a number of white spots (though some of them may be due to the fact that projects were presented only briefly, given time constraints).

Several participants noted that there are many collaboration projects, but it is not always clear what their yield is in terms of output and results. For example, what exactly were the benefits from the PhD programme or the Research Fund? What are the goals/ambitions of the municipality, and how are they reflected in the research agendas and the PhD topics? More clarity on these issues would help EUniverCities partner cities to propose similar schemes in their home towns.

Related to this, it seems that many projects and their results are being taken for granted and considered as “normal”. There is a lack of documentation, marketing and communication towards non-insiders about the projects and their outcomes. A similar point was made earlier by John Goddard as well, who stressed the importance of analysing and documenting good practices and making them publicly available, so that lessons learned can be applied by others as well. As one delegate put it, “the municipality is poor at documenting the work they do and show/market their results, on a local, regional, national and international scale”.

More can be done to capture the learning from projects and collaborations. A delegate from Norrköping put it clearly: “people connect with people they know, and do new things together. But when the projects end, we lose the learning from that project”. A more systematic capturing of lessons would be helpful and could be of great use for others. Some delegates missed a critical approach, and wondered where are the challenges? Where do interests conflict?

A point of debate was the strategic alignment of the collaborative initiatives. There are many strategies and initiatives in the region, the strategic, political documents are of great importance – the do get legitimacy to work with the collaboration and also to address money/resources to different things/activities – which is vital for collaboration in the long run. But what lacks is a systemic overview: how does it all fit together, what is the vision on the ecosystem as a whole (if there is one). Some participants missed the link with national and European policies. Others asked the question if “so much strategy is really needed”, criticising the amounts of strategy paperwork full of good intentions.

Some stressed the need to further broaden and deepen the collaboration. Top level support is great but how about the lower levels in the municipalities and the university? How to engage and seduce them more to find common ground? A delegate from LiU remarked that “not enough researchers/staff members are engaged” also because of a lack of incentives. Moreover, it was asked where the civil society fits in the picture. We hear much about collaboration in the triple helix (government, business, university), putting the citizen in the centre, but what about the intermediate civil organisations like sport clubs, cultural institutions and so on? What could collaboration with the university bring in the large and important domain?

As said above, there was a lot of praise for the student participation in many respects, including in the revision of the collaboration strategies.

Towards an academic city?

The delegates discussed the transition path of Linköping and Norrköping towards academic cities, also reflecting on practices in their home towns and universities. Unlike places with a century-old university where academic life is embedded in the city for long, Linköping and Norrköping (even more) are relative newcomers as university cities.

Having said that, the discussions started around the question what an academic city is or should be, and whether or not this is the right wording to stress the two cities’ ambitions. Some delegates doubted whether to speak of an academic city: it carries the risk of hiding other key elements of the city. To phrase one of them: “We do not want to be an academic city, we want to be an innovative city. Only the academic part is not enough to describe the city we want to be.”

In other groups, the delegates discussed more normative aspects that an academic city should have. Unlike the concept of civic university, which is well defined, the term academic city is less unambiguous. The following elements were mentioned:

-In an academic city, there is a positive interaction between citizens and the academic community (including students). Citizens recognize the profit the students bring and appreciate them rather than complain.

-In an academic city, the city has an “academic” approach of policymaking: it allows for experimentation and failure, it evaluates rigorously if policies work or not,

-In an academic city, the municipality makes use of the academic competences in the city. Rather than always hiring consultants, it uses local scientists or students for analyses. It has mechanisms to engage the academic community in urban challenges. When the research concerns people or groups, they are preferably

involved in the research process. As one delegate formulated her principle for research about disabled people: “nothing about us without us”.

-In an academic city, the academic community, including the students, feel attachment to the city and are active in urban civic life. Here, some differences were noted between the two cities, related to the campus locations. In Linköping students tend to live outside the city, on or nearby the campus, which hampers their connection with the city. In Norrköping the participation of students in everyday life is more common.

Many delegates stressed that a transition towards an academic city takes time, patience and long-term view. But all agreed that Norrköping and Linköping are definitely heading in the right direction, based on all the examples that were presented. At the same time, in each of the four aspects mentioned above, progress can still be made.

Civic university

The groups also discussed whether LiU is on its way of becoming a civic university. In the definition of Goddard, a civic university has the following characteristics:

- A sense of purpose – an understanding of not just what the university is good at but what it is good for
- Actively engaged with each other at all levels – the engagement is achieved through dialogue and collaborations with individuals, institutions/departments and groups
- A strong sense of place - the university’s location helps to form its and the municipality’s unique identity
- A holistic approach to engagement
- Willingness to invest in objectives and activities that have an impact beyond the academy or municipality – like releasing resources to projects or activities – or to together go for external funding
- Use of innovative methods and models

Based on the (limited) information, most delegates would see LiU as a civic university. Nevertheless, they made some notable nuances and remarks.

First, many scientists see themselves as part of an international research community rather than citizens of Linköping or Norrköping, or even member of the local academic community. The growing international mobility of research staff reinforces this tendency. Moreover, the most important parameter to judge academics is still publications and citations in peer-reviewed academic journals. Active stimulation is needed to anchor scientists more to the region.

Second, the engagement of students with city issues could be improved. It might help to encourage students to do more work/studies/internships in social organisations, and to promote research on local issues and challenges. One delegate spoke of “turning students into citizens” by actively collecting their ideas and mobilising them to implement them. Again, this might be more difficult to realise in Linköping because of remote campus.

Other suggestions were to involve lower educated people in the university, i.e. in events, sports, cultural activities, and also to look more for the quadruple helix, involving citizens and civil society more in research design and implementation.

In conclusion

For the cities of Norrköping and Linköping, the Linköping University evidently is a key driver of economic, social and cultural development, an attractor of talent and business, and an engine of innovation of all sorts. The leadership of both cities recognizes that strategic collaboration with the university is essential to realise this huge potential. In turn, the leadership of Linköping University recognizes that a strategic link with both cities is important to excel in research, education and innovation, and to attract the best brains. From an international comparative perspective, we observe a rather unique and well-functioning “triangle” with the three partners as cornerstones.

This report, being a result of a peer-review by other city-university tandems, offers praise for this, but also identified some weaker spots and challenges that might be taken on. To become more academic cities, both cities (together with the university) might “innovate” more systemically in each of the four dimensions that were identified in this report: improving the interaction between scientific community and other urban communities; adopting a more academic approach to policymaking; making more use of the available academic competences in addressing urban challenges, and improving the attachment of (international) scientists to the cities and the region. Also, city and university could do a better job in documenting, highlighting and marketing their innovative collaboration projects, and describe their outputs and results.