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## Embracing the town and gown revolution

Leslie Bank 25 January 2019

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In one of the final events of the University of Stellenbosch's centenary year, the rector of the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, Professor Wim De Villiers, convened a 'town and gown' conference on 29 and 30 November 2018.

The conference attracted the leadership of some of the world's leading college towns and aimed to explore the place-based responsibilities and opportunities for universities in small towns and secondary cities. What emerged from the conference was nothing short of revolutionary.

The list of participating institutions included Bath, Durham and Coventry universities in England, Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland, the University of St Andrews in Scotland, the University of Göttingen (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen) in Germany, Lund University in Sweden, and KU Leuven in Belgium. Three South African universities were represented at the meeting: Stellenbosch, Rhodes and Fort Hare.

Each university presented an assessment and analysis of its relationship to the host town, city or region and was asked to highlight some of the opportunities and challenges that defined that relationship.

The experiences from the Global North all illustrated high levels of cooperation between town and gown on issues like urban management, traffic control, student accommodation, economic development, inner city regeneration, internationalisation, skills development, social justice, sport and technological innovations.

The myth of the ivory tower was shattered. The conference illustrated that there is no longer a zero-sum calculation between civic engagement and academic excellence. In fact, it was revealed that in the Global North the closer the co-operation and the better the understanding of the separated but connected roles of town and gown, the greater the rewards for both parties.

### Shared city vision

Mutual benefit did not accrue from the signing of memoranda of understanding, or simple declarations of common interest, as we often expect they will in South Africa, but through continuous, patient and concerted effort in building trust and responsiveness around a shared city vision, underpinned by a realistic understanding of the capabilities and responsibilities of the participating parties.

The discussion for elite, small town institutions like Durham, Bath and St Andrews focused mainly on the different class backgrounds of students and the complexities of managing campus-city relations, where the student body now often outnumbers the permanent residents. In college towns of 30,000 or 40,000 people, upwards of 15,000 were now students and faculty.

In former industrial cities, like Coventry and Belfast, a much wider range of issues emerged, including the need for urban renewal, strengthened cultural identity and economic regeneration. These were complex spaces with multiple interest groups.



In the English historically working-class city of Coventry, for example, which hosts two large universities, we learnt that the vice-chancellors of Coventry University and the University of Warwick go out for dinner more often than “we do with our wives”. Over the past decade, this process has ensured that the universities are represented as an urban collective and key stakeholder on all the main city development and essential services committees.

The two universities have agreed on their different niche areas and institutional strengths and deliberately opted to make “collaboration the new competition” as they work for the greater good of the city and their connected educational futures.

Coventry and Warwick present joint proposals for institutional support and work closely with the city to run cultural events and compete for national awards. In the past few years, Coventry has won national awards to host major sporting and cultural events through combined proposals.

On the economic front, they have also contributed directly to the growing success and sustainability of the Jaguar Land Rover plants in the city, and have contributed to economic diversification through skills and technology transfer. In the inner city, Coventry University is building new faculties and libraries to provide dignity and stature to the city centre. The CEO of the university stated that: “we are accustomed to thinking like mayors now”.

### **Rebuilding social fabric**

Queen’s University Belfast presented a similar story of co-operation between higher education and the city authorities and highlighted some extraordinary efforts to rebuild the social fabric of the city, which has been degraded by a political and religious civil war. Here, addressing issues of social justice in the city was a primary objective of the city universities, their students and their faculty.

In all these cases, a developed sense of local citizenship, active civic engagement and co-operation in the realisation of common place-based developmental objectives was an overriding concern for the institutions involved. In Gottingen in Germany, where town and gown had been split for centuries, the conference presentation was given, not by the university, but by a university representative in the office of the mayor.

Incorporating representatives and interns from the university within key urban line departments and administrative functions seemed to be increasingly common practice, which served to further collapse artificial boundaries and mistrust between town and gown.

In the discussions that followed it was often acknowledged that these relationships were not without their tensions and complications, and that the implementation of common understandings and objectives was always easier said than done.

It was also clear that students, especially postgraduate students, were critical cogs in the process and that a commitment to excellence in teaching and research was vital to the capacity of the universities and towns to both effect and sustain place-based innovation.

### **The South African experience**

In the South African context, Stellenbosch has emulated these models in an effort to revolutionise the relationship between town and gown. It has done so with considerable intensity and commitment over the past decade, using sport, innovation and social development as anchors for a new relationship between the university and the college city-region. De Villiers seeks to negotiate a middle road between the pursuit of enlightened self-interest and effective civic and social engagement.

It is easy to cast aspersions on these efforts since Stellenbosch is a citadel of white privilege and continues to benefit from the aggregation of white capital and talent in and around the university and the city. A more cynical perspective might even suggest that the

university is merely following a well-trodden path of place-based development, which entrenches the very divisions the university now claims that it wishes to dismantle.

But such an analysis misses the fact that Stellenbosch is no longer an old land-grant university of rural Afrikaner nationalism, committed to state building and agricultural development. It is now a highly sophisticated urban university located in a secondary city with genuine urban ambition far beyond its former commitment to state patronage and the region's wine-land economy.

It is certainly not what it used to be, despite the position it holds as a conservative force in the political imagination. Those who point to the recycling of past privilege underestimate the agency of the university in its own reconstruction and its desire to embrace global best practice.

The relative affluence of the university and its alumni certainly contributes to its achievements. In his address to the conference dinner, Professor Stan du Plessis argued that it has taken economists a long time to recognise that the "world is not flat". There is no such thing as a flat economic space, he argued, because the world is curved in so many complex and place-based ways.

These curvatures are not just a function of market mechanisms or technological capabilities, but are vectors defined by human agency and context. Stellenbosch, it seems, has come to understand its own curves and undulations better than most.

Rhodes University and the University of Fort Hare, by contrast, both appeared to be in dire straits, not only because they are associated with smaller and poorer cities and towns, but also because they have fundamentally misread the curvatures of their contexts. They reacted too late to far-reaching changes on their doorsteps.

Despite their historical engagement in East London's civic life and development and, recently, an acknowledgement by Fort Hare of the importance of producing joint solutions with the municipality to the student housing crisis in the city, neither university has demonstrated much appetite for local engagement, focussing instead on their identities as institutions apart.

For example, Rhodes views itself as an elite research body, while Fort Hare emphasises its legacy as a home of political liberation thought and leadership in Southern Africa. However, this may be set to change as the Buffalo City Metropolitan Development Agency seeks to launch a major inner-city project to foster a "university town" in East London which would bring together the municipality and the higher education sector there.

Missed opportunities in the past have now been compounded by structural and institutional collapse in local government in these Eastern Cape towns, which puts the future of both institutions in jeopardy in an age where the college town has been rapidly surpassed by the city campus.

### **Prospects for secondary cities**

The small-town college road is a rocky path for higher education in contemporary South Africa as the bigger city campuses, including the historically disadvantaged ones like the University of the Western Cape, have flourished. But what of the prospects for secondary cities, like Stellenbosch, East London, George, Port Elizabeth, Nelspruit and Bloemfontein.

Are these not new frontiers of higher education and urban redevelopment waiting for the convergence of town and gown?

The northern experience shows that such centres require institutions of between 20,000 and 30,000 students with around 4,000 academic staff and 5,000 postgraduates. The university should ideally have a full range of academic faculties, including science and technology, and pursue an aggressive internationalisation policy to forge links with globalised research and development opportunities.

The fact that a university like Fort Hare, with 17,000 students, only has around 500 permanent academic staff is indicative of the challenges imposed by austerity. Even Stellenbosch University has about half the staff required for optimal engagement and beneficial results.

Moreover, the limited technical qualifications and capacities of local government officials, including even mayors in the South African case, imposes restrictions on effective planning through collaboration. The executive mayor of Stellenbosch, Gesie van Deventer, stressed this point from the floor to counter the optimism of easy comparison with northern city-university collaboration.

In the English language, the phrase being 'sent to Coventry' is an insult and a mark of social isolation and exclusion. Francis Grose's 1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* noted that: "To send one to Coventry is a punishment inflicted by officers on such of their brethren as are testy, or guilty of improper behaviour, not worthy of cognisance in martial court". It was considered as a form of banishment to a wasteland of little significance. This image of the industrial town re-emerged in Britain after the 1970s when the industrial base of the city started to collapse.

### **Academic alchemy and invention**

The re-emergence of Coventry as a thriving secondary city, anchored by two world-class universities, is a tribute to the city's capacity to reinvent itself. While the college towns of Bath, St Andrews and Durham have always relied on the wealth of the students to support the town, Coventry has made its own way in recent years through amazing acts of academic alchemy and invention. There is a lesson here for South African secondary cities and the role that higher education and universities can play in their reconstruction.

Massive conditional grants should be made to expand the knowledge economy based in these cities through the use of universities as staging posts for urban restructuring. Structured relations with business and local government must be established to ensure that an expanded pool of postgraduate students and staff are drawn into important city and government departments.

Regional research observatories based on close institutional collaboration and evidence-based planning should be created in secondary cities, while the differential roles and responsibilities assigned to different higher education institutions should be aligned to place, rather than stretched across space.

The formation of partnerships for the delivery of infrastructure and services should be encouraged to break down institutional silos and a culture of non-cooperation. The support offered for university research should also be based on considerations of local impact rather than mere issues of global recognition.

A national learning and development platform should be created and funded by the private sector to ensure that best practices can be exchanged and transferred. And, finally, all senior university and city administrators should be 'sent to Coventry' until they learn how to embrace a revolutionary new approach to town-and-gown relations.

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