



# Connected universities, connected cities

Education



Last year, a Londoner got a new job. He had big boots to fill, but quietly started to build relationships and personal connections. He met his French counterpart for coffee at St Pancras. He made a case to the UK government for his organisation to receive greater power and autonomy. A few weeks later the UK voted to leave the European Union. Sadiq Khan and Anne Hidalgo, mayors of London and Paris, publicly vowed to work closer together. In a joint statement, they said that if the nineteenth century was the age of empire and the twentieth century the age of the nation state, the twenty-first century is the age of the city.

Cities need to work together. 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.

Last year, the University of Essex and Essex County Council appointed a Chief Scientific Adviser to help bring academia and local government together and use data science to support economic development and cultivate new models for health and social care. In January 2016, the University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University published a detailed report, explaining how they will work with local partners to help the city compete economically with the best performing cities around the world.

## Universities and the rise of cities

Two ideas are gathering force.

The first is cities taking on a far more important role. Cities have long been breeding grounds for new ideas and generators of wealth, but what's new is the idea that cities shoulder the responsibilities of nations. Challenges such as climate change, disease and mass migration effortlessly cross national borders. Cities are the front line in tackling them.

Inspired by a few progressive cities around the world, mayors have become the embodiment of this idea. A Global Parliament of Mayors met in The Hague in September 2016. A good mayor – like an effective city – is locally rooted, globally aware, responsive and pragmatic. The devolution of powers from central government to regions in England, some of which will have elections for mayors in May 2017, sharpens the focus on cities.

The second idea is the critical role of universities in their local area. Universities are often the largest employer in their region, and for many years have seconded staff to local planning bodies and helped to shape policy. However, the traditional research and teaching roles of a university have changed. Working with local businesses and encouraging students to volunteer used to be labelled 'third mission' activity. For many universities, industry placements and research designed to meet business needs are now part of their core mission.

Many universities are founded with the purpose of helping their community. National policy hasn't always recognised or encouraged this. However, a renewed focus on localism, social mobility and skills has led to a growing realisation universities play a key role in local development. Higher level and degree apprenticeships are evidence of partnerships in action; continued concern over graduate retention is a symptom of work still to do.

These two ideas have moved forward on separate tracks. But they are converging, and this will bring opportunities.

## New connections needed

Cities need to work together to tackle the problems of the future. The good news is we are seeing this more and more on an international scale. Jakarta has studied Rotterdam's work on flood prevention. Rotterdam itself learns about adapting to risks from other cities across the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a network of cities committed to addressing climate change. Back in the UK, the premise behind the Northern Powerhouse is that cities should work closer together.

Cities are unique but interdependent. We need to take into account the different strengths of cities and the different challenges they face. We must consider their opportunities, knowledge and physical assets, and how these can complement each other.

Sadiq Khan and Anne Hidalgo may lead cities that are well-resourced to support international collaboration. For other leaders, this might be new territory, however.

How can universities help? Universities already have strong links across regions. In particular, they have international links that aren't solely between one capital city and another. They link important second-tier cities that are growing faster and are more innovative, but have a lower profile.

Universities have the research, alumni, staff and institutional networks to broker these connections. For example, Coventry University has a Confucius Institute, focusing on social and economic development and international trade with China. Aston University has led the development of a new university in Vietnam, working with the UK and Vietnamese governments, and drawing on sponsorship from alumni working in industry.

The focus on cities and their connections magnifies the importance of universities in cities, and the connections they can help broker.

## Society's new super labs

Universities have a good understanding of the complex systems that make up a city. They work with communities, businesses and other parts of the education system, and they provide evidence and analysis on city assets and needs.

City REDI, a research institute based at the University of Birmingham, is an example of this. It gathers information from cities around the world to offer insights as to how regional and national growth can be encouraged.

Universities are experts in a wide range of areas, and these often mirror the strengths and challenges of the region in which they are based. Many of the challenges cities face cross into different disciplines. However, universities are ideally positioned to help by bringing together different departments to generate new ideas. Cardiff University have set up a Social Science Research Park (SPARK), which will bring external organisations and researchers from different disciplines together to develop solutions to societal problems. SPARKs are described by Nesta – an innovation foundation – as ‘society’s new super labs’, and focus on collaborative research activity that leads to tangible results.

## Smart cities and skills

The new dynamic of universities and cities working together both locally and more widely will play out in many ways. Two examples show the range of activity.

The first is skills. When considering regional investment in the UK, the skills of the local workforce is a key factor influencing where to set up. Siemens – an engineering company with employees in more than 200 countries – and the University of Lincoln created the first new Engineering School in the UK for 20 years in 2012, and since then major international companies have moved in nearby.

A compelling offer for inward investment requires long-term collaboration between cities and universities. Local skills must be planned and delivered, the city should be carefully marketed, and key connections need to be made at home and abroad. Work should be considered as both local and international. The April 2017 apprenticeship levy will require employers with a pay bill over £3 million each year to help fund apprenticeships, and will open opportunities for meeting skills needs as part of a wider conversation on the direction of the city.

The second is the university campus. We are a long way from seeing the full potential of ‘smart cities’, but the university campus offers a testing ground for new technologies. These can be developed on a smaller scale before they are rolled out to cities, while fostering close working ties between universities, local businesses and city officials. The University of Glasgow is expanding its campus by 25% and is developing a ‘smart campus’. The campus will learn from and adapt to the needs of its people and environment.

Although collaboration on smart cities and campuses is often local it may have an international element, for example Bristol and Manchester have signed smart city partnerships with the Chinese cities of Guangzhou and Wuhan.

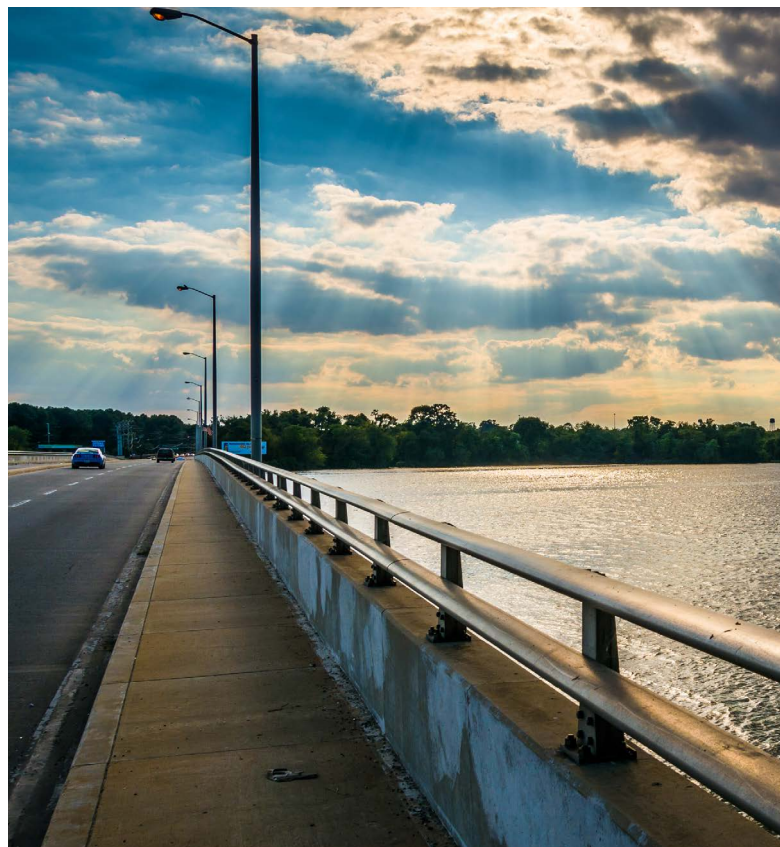
## Standing together

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 and devolution becomes reality, 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 – in most cases – ideally positioned to do so.

Universities continue to adapt to challenging financial circumstances. Students choose where to study based on job prospects and quality of life. Local and international partnerships determine university competitiveness. Cities can be the ally, co-marketer, and partner in economic development for universities.

Cities and universities working closer together will mean a greater chance of tackling the challenges of the future, such as ageing populations and climate change. It will mean better international links and opportunities, and ultimately providing a home to happier residents.



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