

Discussion: Students, Science, Cities: Settings for an increase of knowledge

by rector Helga Fritsch, Medical University of Innsbruck

University cities enjoy an excellent reputation. However, universities and other scientific institutions are capable of developing a more profound effect in terms of shaping their location: A rather new perspective is based on the insight that knowledge and innovation are becoming more and more important to the achievement of economic and social growth. So a scientific context is extremely important for the positive development of a city.

This means that spatial and personal proximity are of crucial importance for the exchange of "not only scientific" information. Here I am thinking about overcoming cognitive distance, formation of trust, the emergence of informal and formal institutional arrangements as well as the formation of new organizational connections.

At the same time, the structure of knowledge as well as the transfer of knowledge have changed (keyword: digitalization). We are shifting from traditional restrictions on scientific activity to new forms of knowledge production, with soft structures in the form of temporary projects, interdisciplinary working groups and teams with flat hierarchies. This can be seen in the increase of young start-ups in scientific environments.

According to an analysis of the "Future of the cities in Nord-Rhein-Westfalen" by the Nord-Rhein-Westfalen state parliament, as early as 2003 people working in such contexts were already tending to form milieu-like networks due to their intensive interaction. These so-called "knowledge milieus" are communities with increased internal communication. At the same time, the participants in these interactive

relationships are also characterized by a certain form of life management, by new knowledge-based fields of action, e.g. through research and application-oriented knowledge cultures and technologies. In addition, they develop specific lifestyles and consumer habits that generate specific requirements for urban residential areas in cities, and influence their structures in the short and medium term, according to their expertise. The future has already arrived.

To cut a long story short: The relationships between universities or research institutions and urban regions are particularly important.

Overall, however, the question of the specific characteristics of the already mentioned knowledge milieu is of interest. Specific spatial needs, with regard to the working situation as well as other aspects of life, ultimately make it necessary to strengthen the spatial integration of central players and so to avoid the migration of highly qualified people.

The spatial dimension of cultural and epistemological processes unfolds between the poles of reinforcing and loosening spatial boundaries: Modern means of transport and communication technologies now promote temporal and spatial decoupling processes. Under certain circumstances knowledge is accessible all over the world and within one minute. This may lead to the detachment of these (urban) players from globalized lifestyles.

So a definite binding when it comes to the location is required. It is expressed by attractive locations - places that allow encounters and invite students and scientists to communicate in a certain home-based lifestyle (such as families). For a knowledge-based urban development from a spatial perspective, for example, there is a two-way approach: In order to limit the process of "deterritorialisation", facilitated

access to information and knowledge must be provided by personal networking and an urban quality of life. In order to address all groups within a city, it is important that knowledge can be acquired without great effort and that it is linked to the knowledge-based environment. On the other hand, it is important to create the political context in order to make space bonding processes possible.

The increase of knowledge places new demands on the economic and social processes in cities and regions. The interaction between urban life and knowledge not only changes the working, but also the living environment and, of course, everyday life.

Both the promotion of knowledge-based developments in cities as well as coping with the social consequences require a new form of thinking and a new form of acting in holistic contexts.

Political awareness should be raised with regard to the demands of working and residential environment in terms of communication processes. The promotion of accompanying structures plays a decisive role in the success of knowledge-based urban development.

To summarize: In order to link so-called knowledge milieus, there is an absolute need to create attractive places. Innsbruck, for example, with its beautiful inner city and enchanting surroundings has a good chance. However, the attractiveness of a location is not always predictable, but the result of a dynamic process. There must be open space for regional binding and international communication. Locally this is more than just the city of Innsbruck, this includes the immediate surroundings.