Chapter II

Academic Knowledge and Urban Development: Theory, Policy, and Practice

Beth Perry
The SURF Centre, University of Salford, UK

ABSTRACT

The terrain of knowledge-based urban development currently is confused by a plethora of competing, implicit and unarticulated assumptions that have resulted from differing interpretations of knowledge and the urban, and the relationship between them. This chapter offers a conceptualization of the role of academic knowledge and, by extension, the university in processes of urban development through the lenses of theory, policy, and practice. A distinction between knowledge-based urban development as process-, product- or acquisition-driven is developed. It then assesses the relative balance of these roles in policy and practice through a case study of Manchester, North West England, and, in so doing, distinguishes between the rhetoric and the realities of attempts to do knowledge-based urban development.

INTRODUCTION

In Western economies, knowledge is seen as the driver of economic growth and competitiveness (Bryson et al., 2000). For many, the post-industrial era is said to mark a new phase of capitalism, or knowledge capitalism (Burton-Jones, 1999), in which wealth creation and continued productivity is dependent on harnessing science, technology, skills, and knowledge as the foundations of economic and social development. The urgency with which national governments in Europe are addressing this challenge is compounded by the rapid rise of emerging economies in Brazil, China, India, and Russia, which are now competing not only on the basis of land or labor, but also as high-tech, high value markets.

In different national and sub-national contexts, knowledge is accorded a central role in economic growth and competitiveness. Yet there is no con-
sensus on what is meant by knowledge-based development (KBD), nor its relationship with space in the form of knowledge-based urban development (KBUD). While some scholars emphasize the role of ICTs and knowledge-infrastructures, others highlight entrepreneurial business practices, or product and process innovations, or knowledge management techniques. More recently, a body of literature around academic knowledge and the role of universities in the knowledge economy has developed in which universities have been equated to knowledge factories or bright satanic mills of the 21st century, intricately tied with the economic and social needs of the contemporary world (Harding et al., 2007). The terrain of KBUD currently is confused by a plethora of competing, implicit, and unarticulated assumptions that have resulted from differing interpretations of knowledge and the urban, and the relationship between them.

Despite such conceptual ambiguities, policy is proceeding at an astonishing speed in the race for success in the global knowledge stakes. Knowledge is increasingly conceived within multi-scalar environments where the interplay between sub-national, national, and international frameworks for action becomes paramount (Perry & May, 2007). Urban and regional development is overflowing with conceptual tags and geological imagery: from knowledge corridors, clusters or capitals, to silicon valleys, alleys, glens, and fens. Out of the media glare of well-known examples, such as Boston 128 or Silicon Valley, numerous regions and localities have adopted strategies towards knowledge-based economic development, such as Science Region Bonn in North Rhine Westphalia, initiatives around Provence-Alpes-Cotes-d’Azur in France or 22@bcn in Poblenau, Barcelona.

With this background in mind, the chapter has two key aims. First, it will seek to conceptualize the role of academic knowledge and, by extension, the university in processes of urban development through the lenses of theory, policy and practice. A framework for understanding the different roles attributed to academic knowledge in urban development is developed, distinguishing between process-driven, product-driven, or acquisition-driven views. It assesses the relative significance of the urban scale of action and the implications for the roles of universities as agents of change in KBUD processes.

Second, the chapter aims to assess the relative balance of these roles in policy and practice and, in so doing, to distinguish between the rhetoric and the realities of attempts to do KBUD. A case study of KBUD in England is discussed, with a particular focus on Manchester, North West England. National policy frameworks are examined that create a context for knowledge-based urban policies to develop largely from the bottom-up. The Manchester: Knowledge Capital (M:KC) initiative, which aims to make the Manchester city-region a global pivot in the knowledge economy, is discussed with particular attention given to the relationship between national and local views in interpreting KBUD. The aim here is not to provide an evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the M:KC initiative; but, rather, to better understand different and dominant articulations and aspirations for KBUD in a particular urban context.

BACKGROUND

Studies on the role of the university in urban development have become more frequent over the past decade drawing on a range of interdisciplinary perspectives from economics, sociology, geography to social studies of science and technology. The drivers that are leading to closer engagement between universities and cities are wide-ranging, including processes of state rescaling, globalization, the withdrawal of the state in favor of the market or new public-private partnerships, and budgetary restraints (Harloe & Perry, 2004). The entrepreneurial-networked univer-city is one in