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Universities and Local Communities: Problems and Perspectives of Interaction

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Abstract

This paper examines the correlation between Tomsk universities and local communities under the circumstances of current economic and social situations. Mutual influences (economic, social, cultural, etc.) are considered. The main directions of the development are outlined. Both benefits and problems of these relationships are analyzed. The paper involves the results of the network project “Universities and local communities: perspectives of the innovative development of the territory” (ISE-Center, Moscow, 2012).

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1. Introduction

One of the major purposes of the development of systems of higher professional education globally is an increasing contribution to the development of local communities, cities and regions as well (Hackney, 1986). Under the current social situation, universities are acting as one of the most significant influencing factors for the development of regional economics, as universities are supposed to be exactly the places where new knowledge is produced, which, eventually, results in creating new products or services (van Geenhuizen et al, 1997). Besides, the fact that a region has prestigious high-grade universities gives it an apparent competitive advantage; being a kind of

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guarantee of the regional development, university complexes multiply the region's attractiveness for investors (Florida, 2004).

It should be noted that the mission of the universities is not restricted to their real or potential contributions to the economy of their regions; also, they shape the social atmosphere of the territory, providing their cities with social and intellectual potentials, creating social ladders and new patterns of communication, which, in their turn, may help to overcome regional isolation and provincialism. In our contemporarily "information-oriented" world (Smokotin et al, 2014: 231), where knowledge is of special importance, knowledge management is not only a significant factor of the economy but is also "considered as a general theory of modern management" (Smokotin et al, 2014: 231). Knowledge, "having transformed into information and having become the main source of the social development, takes not only epistemological but socio-cultural meaning" (Smokotin et al, 2014: 231). Therefore, it is obvious that research universities are increasingly becoming a driving force of the regional development as "knowledge and intellect (cogito) management becomes the leading activity in the sphere of social processes in general" (Smokotin et al, 2014: 231). The experience of the Tomsk region, in this sense, lends itself as being very interesting for the analysis of the role of the university complex for the development of the local communities.

Historically speaking, Tomsk has been developing, first of all, as a university town, since the late 19th century. Unlike the administrative centers of other neighboring regions such as Omsk, Kemerovo, or Novosibirsk, Tomsk has never possessed large industrial plants, which is why its universities started to act as town-forming enterprises in the first place. Article 1 of the city's charter says that Tomsk is a municipality with a town-forming university complex. Indeed, Tomsk can serve as a proper field for the investigation of university-local community interrelations, as here we can find six state universities (classical, polytechnic, medical, pedagogical, the universities of architecture and building and of control systems and radioelectronics), also, three non-state universities and six branches of the institutions of higher education based in other cities. According to the official site of the Administration of the Tomsk region, more than 66,000 people receive higher education in Tomsk universities yearly; every eighth resident of the city is a student. The Tomsk region is retaining the third place with respect to registered numbers per 10,000 residents (following Moscow and Saint-Petersburg). The region attracts young people from many parts of the Russian Federation (75 regions) and foreign countries (39 Eastern and Western countries) (the official site of Tomsk Oblast Administration).

This paper seeks to look closer at the role that is performed by universities with regard to the development of local communities.

2. Universities and local communities: actors and problems

2.1. What are local communities?

First of all, we should clarify what we mean by "local community", what structure and features it possesses. The relevant literature (Filippov & Gasssiy, 2004) singles out different approaches for the studying of local communities, among them ecological, sociological, ethnographical, economic and others. Despite some differences, all these ways involve the following characteristic features:

- The fact that this community belongs to one the same territory, the area within certain boundaries (geographical, administrative, economic, informational, etc.)
- The matrix of social interaction, i.e. common rules and norms of behavior, bodies of local authorities, community services, organizations, economic ties and so on.
- Sense of community, socio-psychological identity (communion of values, the sense of belonging, being involved in the community events, bearing responsibility before the community, etc.). It encourages the formation of such qualities as solidarity, mutual trust and duties, communion of interests (Filippov & Gasssiy, 2004).

The next point to be considered regards the constituents of any local community. In order to determine the role of universities for the development of a local community, we need to highlight institutional structures and social groups that make up the major constituents of a particular community. First of all, we shall present those of them that outline the context of interaction with universities. Among them are the following:

- institutions of power and interest groups within these institutions;
- business structures, representing different economic sectors and interest groups;
- universities themselves, both representing institutional structures and communities (being made up of lecturers, researchers, students, young specialists, freelancers, etc.);
- institutions of the civil society, such as non-profit organizations (NPO), mass media and others.

Let us consider the role of the mentioned above constituents in terms of their interaction with universities. We wonder if they are able to act as a driving force of the innovative development of the region.

2.2. Authorities and universities: collaborative potentials

In the recent two decades the government of the Tomsk region has carried out the program of strategic development aimed at innovative economy. The program suggested that knowledge intensive businesses which provided high added value product had to be supported by the local authorities. The purpose was to turn Tomsk into a major innovative centre. Tomsk universities and research institutes, having a prominent potential, performed a leading role in putting the strategy into practice.

On the whole, the relationships between the authorities (both regional and municipal) on the one hand and the university complex on the other can be estimated as fairly fruitful and mutually beneficial. Firstly, there are various informal and institutionalized channels of interaction between universities and authorities. Among the informal ones we should note, in particular, the fact that the personnel of the power bodies are being recruited mostly from the alumni of Tomsk universities. As a rule, they keep tight ties with their alma mater, which, undoubtedly, makes it much easier to solve problems of business using this informal link. Besides, a lot of high-level officials of the regional and city administration as well are engaged in teaching at the universities. Moreover, a number of educational programs for state employees are offered by the universities. All these factors determine not only loyalty in personal relations, but, also, entitle to reach successful cooperations between universities and authorities using interpersonal ties. In addition, they form an extra motivation to lobby the interests of the universities at the federal level.

Another aspect of interaction between authorities and universities is the research projects financed both from regional and federal budgets, being carried out, for example, through the system of regional grants.

As we have mentioned above, the innovative development of the region is possible only if it is based on the university complex, so the regional administration appeals to this recourse. Favorable presentation of the regional universities on the federal level serves both as tactics and a basic strategy in order to achieve the main ambitious objective of Tomsk administration, i.e. turning the city of Tomsk into a major driving force of modernization. To support this intention, the concept of creating an innovative regional center, the “INO-Tomsk”, has been put forward.

The regional authorities do not restrict themselves only to moral support and lobbying interests of the university complex; this fact can be confirmed, in particular, by the statistic data: in 2005-2009 the total financing of the institutions of the university complex was 64.4 billion rubles, in 2010 it reached 21.5 billion rubles, i.e. 8% of gross regional product. The budget expenditures on scientific activities in 2010 amounted to 10.9 billion rubles (6.5 billion rubles from off-budget sources). The value of the fulfilled scientific projects has increased as much as 2.4 times and reached 25.5 billion rubles.

Nevertheless, there are some sufficient barriers for effective interaction between universities and authorities. The point is that, being federal educational institutions, the universities are placed beyond the boundaries of the local community in terms of administration. They are funded, first of all, from the federal budget and their activity is toughly regulated to the smallest detail by the Ministry of Education and Science. It creates an objective obstacle that prevents universities from being integrated into their local community.

It is obvious that there is an urgent need to think of other forms of united attempts of universities and authorities to encourage their region's development. So far they have focused on the sphere of scientific and technological innovations. Indeed, we can see positive results of these activities, both financial and infrastructural. But, above all,

these achievements give the region sufficient arguments for the “political games” played with the federal government.

2.3. Business and universities

The business community of Tomsk is represented by the following interest groups:

- the raw material sector, e.g. oil and gas production, is presented by such companies as “Tomskneft”, “Vostokgazprom”, “Tomsktransgaz”. The influence of this group is fairly big and is mostly likely going to keep on growing.
- the sector of “traditional economy” is represented by a few minor enterprises of machine engineering such as “Sibelektromptor”, “Sibkabel”, “Kontur”, Tomsk electro-mechanical plant and some representatives of the food industry.
- service sector: trade, public catering, consumer services.
- the innovative businesses operating within the sphere of high-tech products (“Elekard”, “Elesi”, and a few small innovative enterprises within the structures of Tomsk universities). The representatives of this sector are rather pessimistic regarding their own perspectives for further development. Frankly speaking, this pessimism can be observed as an attitude all over Russia (Tikhonova, 2006).

The first three sectors are seemingly indifferent, in fact, to either applying innovative technologies or using the scientific potential of the universities. These sectors appreciate higher educational institutions only as sources of trained and qualified personnel for their enterprises. Taking into account all the above, it is reasonable to suppose that regional businesses a priori cannot be equal partners to the six Tomsk state universities, which are oriented not only towards regional employers, but rather other regions' firms and companies. All the actors of Tomsk businesses share one the same opinion concerning the contribution of Tomsk universities to the innovative development of the region in terms of entrepreneurial activities, i.e. the universities train specialists and this is their mission.

Summing up the fears and claims of Tomsk businesses, we can state the following:

- 1) It is quite evident for all employers, especially for those belonging to the hi-tech sector, that level of the applicants is becoming lower. To stop this process, the universities have to recruit students, future tutors and research workers from other regions. According to the experts' opinion, universities and their administrations should be most interested in recruiting activity in the first place.
- 2) Training specialists for industry is being carried out in a bizarre way: universities are not successful enough in preparing students for future careers, so enterprises have to take on this duty and complete the course of training. For example, they accept 2-3 year students for manufacturing practice. Another form of the interaction of business and universities is to invite relative specialists, practitioners to deliver courses at universities. Both forms are traditional and legitimate. Business is not satisfied with the content of the basic professional education. According to the experts, the problem is that the university tutors hardly take part in the research work, if they do, the subject matter of their research is determined by a grant giver, not by the needs of the business community, no saying about local needs. In this connection, such projects possess no attractiveness to the local business. Therefore business structures are not ready to cooperate with universities, the fact that they are reluctant to invest in scientific researches and risk money proves it. On the other hand, business is willing to take advantage of the vast offer on the labor market without guaranteeing proper conditions for graduates. To make matters worse, Tomsk region is completely deprived of large enterprises capable of providing universities with big enterprise-oriented order for specialists.

However, opportunities for effective interaction can be marked as “the University has found itself in a situation when technical engineering designs on orders of industrial enterprises acquire dominant position at faculties that have traditionally been considered linked to fundamental research” (Petrova et al, 2014, p. 248). These opportunities include both diversification and increase in channels of interaction between business and universities, some mediators which are not necessarily connected with universities genetically; we do not mean business-

incubators attached at universities, though their use is out of saying. We mean, first of all, establishing venture enterprises, R&D centers within business structures and organized by them, it could allow to realize the “principle of reality” for university developments. Such initiative should arrive from business community.

2.4. Universities as constituents of social environment

Tomsk is one of the recognized educational centers not only of Russia but the whole world. TSU and TPU are included in the State of the most valuable heritage of the peoples of the Russian Federation (Wikipedia) and have gained the status “National research” and entered the top 15 Russian Universities. Article 1 of Tomsk’s Charter says that the city of Tomsk is a municipal establishment with a university complex forming a company town. At present the regional university complex looks quite prosperous. It is represented by six state universities, three of which got the status “innovative”, and two of them, Tomsk state and Tomsk polytechnic, became “National research universities”. Actually, the university complex plays for Tomsk the role of the enterprise forming a company town and organizes the cultural space of the city. Besides, Tomsk universities have been, at least, until recently, some “magnet” for in-coming migration: the major part of the students are from other cities.

About 60 institutions of the region are involved in scientific research work and development. Tomsk scientific center, Siberian Branch of RAS, consists of 5 research institutes: the Institute of Atmospheric Optics, of High Current Electronics, Strength Physics and Material Science, Petroleum Chemistry, Monitoring of Climatic and Ecological Systems; besides, a branch of the Institute of Petroleum-Gas Geology, two centers –the innovational-technological center of engineering and design and the center of physics of environment and ecology, also, 2 departments – of structural macrokinetics and of problems of informatization. The Russian Academy of Sciences is presented by 6 research institutes: of Cardiology, of Cancer, of pharmacology, mental health, of medical genetics, of obstetrics, gynecology and perinatology. Here works the Institute of Health Resort Medicine and Physiotherapy of the Ministry of Health of Russia. Tomsk keeps the first place in Russia in the concentration of research workers of high qualification (169 researchers per 100,000 residents).

So, another role which universities have to assume is the role of expert community: Mass media, authorities and business representatives turn to the universities for an expert opinion on respective problems.

Tomsk universities are valuable not only as an educational resource but they are also a major constituent of the regional economy. First of all, they provide many residents of the city with job opportunities; they make up a sufficient taxable basis of the territory. In addition, they are customers of different kinds of work (for example, construction). Finally, the universities attract students from other parts of Russia and foreign countries, these people can be considered as “investors” of the region in some kind (Booth & Jarrett, 1976).

In May, 2013 a relevant survey was fulfilled by the members of the departments of Sociology and Social work (Faculty of Philosophy, Tomsk State University) to investigate the economic contribution of the students to the regional budget. The results vividly demonstrated that the contribution might be assessed as rather significant. One of the purposes of the research was the studying of the potential of the money supply that was spent by the nonresident students in Tomsk. The survey was carried out by the method of formalized interview at quota sample on the basis of sex, year of studying, university and region or country where the student came from. Full-time students of six Tomsk universities were interviewed: Tomsk State University, Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk University of Control Systems and Radioelectronics, Siberian State Medical University, Tomsk State Pedagogical University, Tomsk State University of Architecture and Building. All in all, 1060 people were interviewed, after the correction the questionnaires were left 990 in number.

The research revealed that the total sum of money per each student was about 18,000 rubles (17,838 rubles) per month. The largest part was spent on food and drinks – 4,714 rubles (26% of total expenditures), on clothes and footwear – 3,062 rubles (17%) and on housing and utilities payments – 2,391 rubles (13%).

Being asked about their spending on education, most of the respondents were puzzled. Those who could estimate this type of spending (47%) spoke of 1,000-4,000 rubles, and only 6% spent more than 11,000 rubles. Also, most of the students were not able to estimate their spending on health care services and durable goods, 56% of those who answered the question spent 1,000-4,000 rubles per month on health care services; 44% spent the same sum on durable goods. The spending on leisure time made up 1,000-4,000 rubles (75% of the respondents).

Thus, educational and academic migration is of great importance for the city.

More than half of the students come from other cities. After graduation some of them settle down in Tomsk, contributing to cultural and multicultural variety of the city. So, not surprisingly, Tomsk is characterized with tolerant atmosphere. A few years ago the local authorities came up with the idea of creating comfortable living conditions, so-called “creative city” (Florida, 2004), for the most talented graduates to stay and work in Tomsk.

Students of higher educational institutions can be characterized as, perhaps, the most mobile youth group. When it comes to migration, they possess an advantage of academic mobility. Indeed, the largest part of the students have got already the experience of moving to another city: more than half of the respondents (62%) came to Tomsk to get higher education. 28% came from other parts of Siberia, 10% - from other parts of Russia, 22% - from neighboring countries and 2% - from far abroad countries. When being asked, a few graduates were sure of the place to settle down after getting a diploma, every sixth (17%) had no idea about future resignation. The rest, though, were able to answer this question but even they had some doubts: every third hesitated for the place to go to, choosing out of three. About half of them (43%) intended to stay in Tomsk region, they meant mostly the city of Tomsk and the town of Seversk (39%). 52% of graduates were planning to settle in one of the Russian cities (17% chose the cities of the Siberian Federal District). It should be emphasized that a large number of the students (17%) tended to leave Russia for far abroad countries, whereas for neighboring countries (former Soviet republics) only 6%.

To sum up, students' community is a significant factor of economic, demographic and social development of the regional development.

2.5. University as an institute of the civil society

According to the data of the Federal registration service, on the territory of Tomsk region there exist about 1500 public associations. If we exclude trade unions, political parties, national-cultural and religious associations, the number of non-profit organizations will be equal to 600, and not more than 30% of them really work.

Despite a rather big number of public associations and high activity of some of them, at present they operate in a few and rather specific niches. The main spheres they are active in are living arrangement of orphaned children, social rehabilitation of children with disabilities, associations of medico-social profile. Some socio-political and human rights organizations, which were quite active a couple of years ago, had to minimize their activity due to the political reasons.

Taking into account what we have said above, non-profit organizations cannot be accepted as a key element of the civil society on the local level, though such organizations are its conventional sign (Sievers, 2009). Universities and their socio-cultural environment seem more stable and culturally integrated. In this sense, preservation of the university environment as the foot of the civil society depends on the status and character of the university complex itself, its own development and strengthening of its “third role”.

On the whole, the relationships between Tomsk universities and the city's institutions of the civil society can be described as positive. Firstly, the universities are strong constituents of the cultural space; for instance, using their infrastructure, they create a specific atmosphere of “a cultural city”. Moreover, the students of Tomsk universities make up a major part of the volunteer corpus of the local non-profit associations; besides, the universities themselves give birth to different public organizations and some projects of non-profit associations are carried out in collaboration with the universities.

3. Conclusion

The notion of the city is referred not only to its territory with the relevant infrastructure; above all, it is associated with the community of interests. This city is rested on a university city, advanced and cultural, which actively develops and promotes innovations. Its space involves rather large groups of the population: research workers, lecturers and other university staff with their families, students, representatives of innovative business, “enlightened officials”, freelancers and other creative people. They form some virtual unity that shares common senses and values. Exactly these people are potential drivers of the innovative development of the region and breakthrough in the future. It should be also noted that the most part of these people have an access to social lifts, so, they are involved in the process of social mobility and have an enormous adaptation potential. Innovative development for

them is an opportunity for self-realization; possible risks are only the barriers that are to be overcome, therefore, while working out the strategy of the innovative development of the region, we should proceed from the evident fact that the representatives of this community make up its social basis.

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