

Knowledge Institutions and Innovation Districts in City Revitalisation: a Case of East London and its Development Strategies

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Abstract

The symbiotic relationship between institutions of higher education and cities is well documented in the Global North. The development and growth of city spaces and regional economies have been spurred through triple-helix partnerships and innovation nodes. This paper contends that such development and growth models can be adopted and adapted in the Global South. Using the city of East London, South Africa, a former industrial city, a qualitative approach was employed to explore how an innovation district can propel the revitalisation of urban cores and their peripherals. The plausibility of such a relationship between institutions of higher learning and the city of East London was contextualised through a literature review on innovation districts and interviews with key informants.

Keywords

Innovation district, higher education, city, development, growth

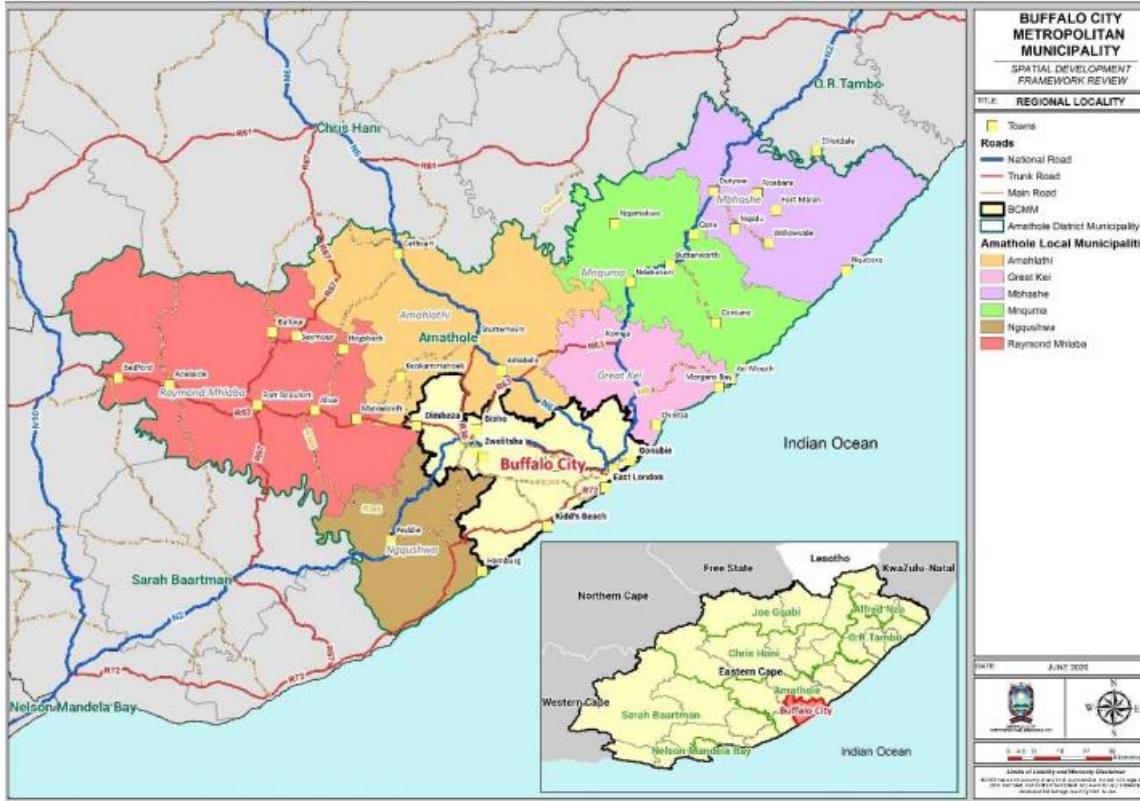
Introduction

In the contemporary world driven by the knowledge economy and innovation, institutions of higher learning have acquired a critical role in driving the growth and development of the cities in which they are located. There is evidence from across the world of the co-existence and symbiotic relationships between universities and cities. The cities of Oxford, Cambridge, Barcelona, Massachusetts and Boston are examples of universities partnering with cities in innovation. Most of these cities established innovation districts to propel



urban and regional growth. This paper argues that such initiatives can be adopted and adapted in cities in the Global South and uses East London, South Africa, for its explorative discussion.

Figure 1: East London, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality



Source: Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipal Spatial Development Framework 2019-2024

Conceptually, innovation districts are compact hubs of economic activity where innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity and placemaking intersect (Belussi & Sedita, 2019). Generally, they aim to revitalise blighted urban spaces. Innovation districts connect the scholarship of innovation to the theory and practice of economic development, real estate investment, urban design and land use planning (Read, 2016), which is the new growth strategy for developing cities. Instead of initiating city-wide projects, development practitioners argue that initially concentrating on a specific geographic area has more impact. The main attraction of such an area should be leading-edge anchor institutions and companies that cluster and connect with start-ups and business incubators and



accelerators (Katz & Wagner, 2014:1). This type of drive is relevant to the city of East London particularly and Buffalo City Metropole in general.

As a former industrial city that had relied on heavy industry for its sustenance, the relocation and closure of most industries in the 1990s led to its decline (Bank & Sibanda, 2018). This was a setback for the region but also an opportunity to explore new avenues for economic growth. The metro diversified its focus to include development enablers such as agriculture, the ocean, service and automobile economies, although the latter was relied upon to a greater extent. An over-reliance on the automobile sector poses a new threat and challenge to the city's growth, hence the call to explore an innovation district as an alternative, as a conducive environment is already in place within the city. The initiative can be built on the existence of several institutions of higher learning, businesses and government departments.

The partnership between these sectors can propel growth and development in places ripe for revitalisation such as the city of East London. Webster, Pringle, Wilkins, Thuriaux-Aleman, and Khoury (2021) contend that collaborative ecosystems and networks, forming “uncommon partnerships” between previously unrelated industries, lead to new growth paradigms. As these focuses on a specific geographic space, they are compact and foster innovation through proximity and co-location but are also flexible. Katz and Wagner (2014) describe innovation districts as physically compact, transit-accessible, technically wired and connected.

This paper argues that with the promise of a technological infrastructure coming to the city, there is a greater opportunity to utilise an innovation district to propel city-wide growth and development. The internet sea cable landing in the East London Industrial Development Zone (ELIDZ) and the introduction of a 5G network offers a significant window of opportunity for an innovation district in the city. An exploration of some of the world-known innovation districts will assist in understanding how these contribute to the growth and development of cities and regions.

In the post-COVID-19 world, innovation districts are likely to thrive despite the increase in virtual working. According to Webster et al. (2021), with their ability to enable serendipity and foster innovation through the intensive co-location of different businesses and organisations, innovation districts are resilient and well-equipped to grow. Even if personnel are not always located on-site, Webster et al. (2021) argue that companies continue to benefit from an innovation ecosystem and supply chain concentrated in a single location.



Two models of innovation districts are used in this paper to illustrate how similar approaches may be adapted for East London's redevelopment. The dynamics between the examples may be diverse but the fundamental principles remain the same – innovation districts have the potential to revive declining cities. In this paper, Barcelona and Boston are used to illustrate how innovation districts transformed city precincts that were on a downward spiral into world-class zones. Before commencing the discussion of the stated examples of innovation districts, the methodology that was utilised must be discussed.

Methodology

As the city of East London does not have an existing innovation district, this paper uses the exploratory method – a posteriori hypothesis of the feasibility of an innovation district in the city. According to Stebbins (2011:3), social science exploration is a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximise the discovery of generalisations leading to the description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life. He further states

Such exploration is, depending on the standpoint taken, a distinctive way of conducting science – a scientific process – a special methodological (as contrasted with confirmation), and a pervasive personal orientation of the explorer (Stebbins, 2011:3).

A qualitative approach was utilised for this exploration, where literature on innovation districts was scoped and analysed and parallels were drawn for applicability and possible adaptation to the case study. Interviews with key informants and role players enabled a better understanding of the planning trajectories in city development. In the wider study, of which this article is only a part, several interviews across the city were conducted. Selected views shared by the participants are included to strengthen and contextualise the discussion and provide a concrete outlook of the area under investigation.

The city of East London in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality is a classic case of a post-industrial city facing various challenges yet endowed with competitive advantages for a knowledge-based economy. With three major universities and other tertiary education institutions, the right urban mix and a vibrant young population, the city has the potential for growth and development. Hence, East London was an ideal case study for exploring how innovation districts can propel new strategies for growth.

East London City Development Strategies (CDS)

A brief history of some of the development initiatives and strategies employed by the city of East London will assist in shaping the discussion. The main question concerns what the city has done to recover from the effects of deindustrialisation and apartheid and redevelop itself as a post-industrial and post-apartheid city. The first major initiative



involved the conceptualisation and drafting of the 1996 East London City Framework Plan (ELCFP), which addressed issues around the preferred spatial form of development for the previous East London Transitional Local Council (ELTLC) area. The document identified areas of spatial development potential as well as points (or nodes) where higher density, mixed land use development and corridors should be encouraged (ELCFP, 1996). This was followed by the CBD and Sleeper Site Urban Design Framework (1998) which contained spatial proposals for the Transnet land known as the Sleeper Site as well as the East London CBD. These precedent charters were instrumental in coming up with the later spatial development frameworks and other initiatives.

Some of the city's undertakings to revive itself are contained in the Buffalo City Municipality Spatial Development Framework (BCMSDF) which was derived from the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). The first BCMSDF for the city of East London, derived from the ELCFP of 1996, was drafted and finalised in 2003 after the formulation of the IDP in the same year. After the approval of the SDF in 2003, a series of Local Spatial Development Frameworks (LSDFs) were developed (BCM IDP, 2015/2016:78). The specific LSDF for the inner city was named the East London Beachfront Local Spatial Development Framework (ELBLSDF, 2007). This document incorporated the development of areas such as the Esplanade, Quigney, the Sleeper Site, the CBD and Marina Glen (*Ebuhlanti*). The ELBLSDF contained specific proposals that were listed as fundamental in setting the city off on a recovery trajectory. Some of the infrastructural initiatives included corridor and nodal developments, beachfront development, road and other transport links, housing within the inner city, an industrial development zone (IDZ), the Sleeper Site and Quigney and Southernwood. These precincts and projects were regarded as prime zones, crucial for city-wide renewal and redevelopment. So, what has gone wrong, one may ask. What lessons can be learnt from the seemingly limited achievements of these strategies? A look at some examples could provide valuable insights for cities in the Global South in general and East London in particular.

22@Barcelona Innovation District

The work towards an innovation district in Barcelona began in 2000 when the dilapidated waterfront district was rezoned and transformed into the present 22@Barcelona precinct. The main objectives of the innovation project were to refurbish the urban core and revitalise the economy and the social aspects of the city (Sharma, 2012). The city, universities and the private sector were key stakeholders in the success of the 22@Barcelona innovation district. Through rezoning and incentivising the private owners of the land to redevelop their spaces in innovative ways, the city was a key role player in the process. The city also used government funds to invest in the local economy thereby boosting the creation of jobs and incubators and attracting businesses into the innovation district (Yigitcanlar & Inkinen, 2019).



Many universities were located in the precinct before the inception of the innovation district. This was an advantage for the location of the innovation district and many more universities relocated to the district. Training, research and development centres were created as offshoots of the universities. These provided internships for graduates to keep their knowledge base and attract graduates from other learning institutes such as MIT (Sharma, 2008).

The third key stakeholder, the private sector, collaborated with the city through companies that provided and promoted relevant projects and developments. Sharma (2008) opines that business leaders and volunteers worked together to improve the district with support from the city and other public sources. Thus, the city, universities and the private sector collaborated to make 22@Barcelona a success. The Poblenou innovation district — transforms two hundred hectares of industrial land of Poblenou into an innovative district offering modern spaces for the strategic concentration of intensive knowledge-based activities. This initiative is also a project of urban refurbishment and a new model of a city providing a response to the challenges posed by the knowledge-based society (www.22@Barcelona.com).

The city of Barcelona set an excellent precedent for how to grow and transform an obsolete and run-down part of a city, Poblenou, into a vibrant, successful neighbourhood. The foundation of the transformation was the triple helix relationship between universities, industry and government. This relationship drove innovation in three areas, namely society, the economy and the city. Poblenou is, therefore, an innovation hub, or district, that is re-inventing Barcelona as a globally competitive city. It is an example of how economic factors, social conditions and urban space, when integrated into the planning process, can establish an armature for recursive and organic growth (Mills, 2013). The essence of Poblenou is that it is an urban laboratory, driven by the Barcelona City Council, to foster competitiveness, innovation and the internationalisation of companies in this cluster (Charnock, Purcell & Ribera-Fumaz, 2013:200).

The innovation hub in Poblenou established an enabling environment that supports participating universities that have links to companies in the district. It is this triple helix (universities, companies and city government) that creates the pre-conditions for innovation, which, in turn, propels economic growth, social development and urban regeneration. A key aspect of the triple helix approach is that it is not about the formulation of separate strategies for each of these sectors. Rather, all three are considered simultaneously, where one cannot be seen in isolation from the other two. In so doing, the Poblenou innovation district is closely associated with the hybrid model of



the triple helix where neither the government nor business takes the leading role but all three become equal partners with equal input and benefits.

Boston Innovation District

The innovation district in Boston was inspired by the 22@Barcelona initiative. Work towards the establishment of the Boston innovation district began in earnest in 2010. Sharma (2008) sums up the objectives of this initiative in the extract presented hereunder.

The purpose of the Innovation District is to create an environment and an atmosphere in which entrepreneurs can "work, live, and play," thereby promoting collaboration and consequentially fuelling economic development and job growth. In short, the idea is to create an "urban lab," where the landscape will encourage testing new technologies and will foster community and business engagement (Sharma, 2012).

In other words, the creation of innovation districts provides an opportunity and a spatial area where new technologies are created, not in isolation by experts alone but where the wider community is involved, supported by business and other role players. This is possible because innovation hubs are meant to break the traditional boundaries that make it impossible for non-experts to access these zones.

In Boston, the key players were the city, the university and the private sector. The city took the leading role by communicating the progress and all the benefits that could be achieved through the innovation district. It took the role of public relations seriously and thereby drew interest from investors, non-profit organisations, universities and those interested in the development of the hub. The mayor of Boston announced that 1000 acres of derelict land on the Boston waterfront was to be made available for companies and universities to set up premises and projects to drive urban renewal.

The city also provided support through a special purpose vehicle known as the Boston Redevelopment Agency (BRA), which assisted in planning, rezoning the area and encouraging development projects, economic activities and incubators. Incentives were offered to businesses in the form of rent-free zones or through loans to those that wished to conduct business within the hub. Where land was privately owned, the BRA negotiated with the owners so that their developments were aligned with the greater vision of the city and the district.

Babson College – which is the only university in the district – offered relevant programmes related to local businesses, such as the MBA. According to Sharma (2012), the university also hosted events for the city and thereby extended networks for students, thereby



increasing the bonds between the stakeholders. The private sector supported the initiative by moving in and investing in the precinct. The advantage of the Boston Innovation District is that companies had already started to move to this area after the ‘big dig’ (a road development project) that was completed in 2007 (Sharma, 2012). The government sponsored, supported and funded several of these private initiatives, thereby contributing to the Boston Innovation District’s success. Over two years, 480 companies entered this district, 1000 new jobs were created and more than a trillion dollars was invested. The innovation district converted a warehouse and storage area into a mixed-use precinct that encouraged open access.

The Boston scenario illustrates how innovation districts can be used as development strategies for city growth. Although all cases are unique, much can be learnt and perhaps applied to African cities in general and East London in particular. As this paper seeks to explore and illustrate plausible ways and strategies that the city of East London can employ to promote its redevelopment and economic growth, such examples offer insights into what is possible and what may be impossible. Numerous innovation districts can be referenced. Some provide valuable lessons and others are useful for comparative purposes, but they all provide a framework that struggling cities can consider for utilisation.

Innovation Districts in East London

As in Barcelona and Boston, there is a significant possibility that the growth and development of East London can be spurred by innovation districts or “third spaces”. The greatest opportunity is that there is a vast piece of land within the city that has been lying idle for several years, namely the Sleeper Site. As discussed hereunder, this precinct offers East London a competitive edge for driving its redevelopment agenda and presents the least challenge in the setting up of an innovation district.

Innovation districts, as described before, are geographic areas in which leading-edge institutions and companies cluster and connect with start-ups and business incubators and accelerators (Katz & Wagner, 2014). They are zones created to promote and nurture business ventures that will lead to employment opportunities, economic growth and social transformation. These districts thrive on the various stakeholders’ proximity and collaboration to maximise sharing the knowledge spill-overs (Dever et al., 2014). These innovation districts are best situated in “third spaces” and not within spaces associated with any particular stakeholder. For instance, in the case of East London, if the innovation district was to be located within one particular institution’s grounds, for example, the University of Fort Hare (UFH), the first challenge would be to adapt the UFH institutional culture to such a concept – which may take time and/or encounter stiff resistance. The



second challenge would be that the other partners may find it difficult to enter a space that is already designated as belonging to a particular institution and that may stifle or hinder any meaningful engagement to accomplish the agreed outcomes and objectives. A neutral zone or a new space is, therefore, ideal for the development of an innovation district. The Sleeper Site (see Figure 2 below), in this case, is the ideal site for an innovation district in East London. It is a neutral zone and partners would move from their occupied spaces to a new precinct upon which no particular claims have been made.

By employing either the triple or quadruple helix process, higher education institutions (HEIs) can take a lead in the setting up of the innovation district or hub on the Sleeper Site in the East London CBD. Innovation hubs have the potential to promote the growth and development of a city and region. As these are usually mixed-land use precincts, various enterprises, through their proximity, collaboration and agglomeration, stimulate growth and benefit the city, HEIs, the business sector and the wider community. Universities benefit because they can align certain research projects with real-world ventures and collaborate for joint problem solving thereby increasing their capacity. Firms benefit because they receive a flow of new knowledge, skilled graduates, information and expertise that increases their competitiveness and innovativeness (Van Heyningen, 2013). The city gains through a revived economy that attracts further investment, revitalises the city and reverses the urban decay.

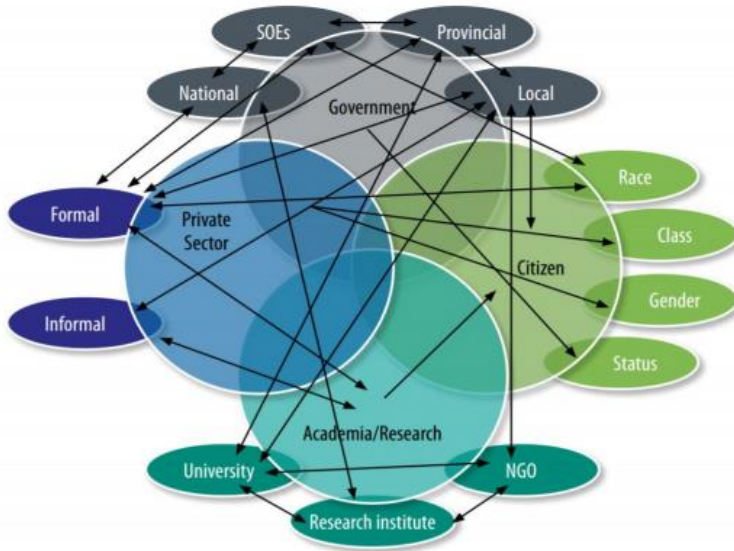
Figure 2: Location of the Sleeper Site



Source: BCMM Urban Investment Conference, 2015

The socio-economic benefits to the community include the creation of employment opportunities, reduced poverty and crime and improved, sustainable livelihoods for residents. Figure 3 hereunder illustrates the dynamics of an innovation system within a city space.

Figure 3: City spaces and innovation



Source: SA Cities Network, 2016.

Innovation districts are often preferred over industrial development zones (IDZs) as the latter are located in secured precincts. The East London Industrial Development Zone (ELIDZ) is modelled along several of the innovation district concepts but is more inclined to the science park models that are located in exclusion zones with boom-gate-controlled entrances. IDZs are defined as purpose-built industrial estates that are geared for the duty-free production of exports and perform an important role in South Africa’s macro-economic policy. They provide transport, logistics and business services tailored for export-oriented industries (ECDC, 2017). Their focus is not on the areas or regions in which they are located but have a national outlook and mandate. They can be located anywhere in the country and still perform and fulfil their mission. The mission statement of the ELIDZ states that its goal is to provide investment solutions and to attract and develop strategic industries that strengthen South Africa’s global competitiveness through the development and operation of a thriving, specialised industrial complex (ELIDZ, 2017).



There is no reference in their *modus operandi* to partnerships with local stakeholders or institutions of higher learning. They are hubs that are planned by the Department of Trade and Industry at a national level before they are placed in regions to operate. Because of this, they can be considered top-down interventions by the central government as opposed to the proposed innovation districts. Unlike innovation districts that apply the place-based approach which assumes that geographical context matters, the context here is understood in terms of its social, cultural and institutional characteristics (Barca et al., 2012:138). IDZs are spatially blind and designed without explicit consideration for space (World Bank, 2009:24). Innovation districts thrive on the characteristics of place and draw on these to form inclusive partnerships. The outcomes are not only tangible products such as cutting-edge technologies but also social innovations and economic developments.

The innovation district on the Sleeper Site can be modelled on the 22@Barcelona Innovation District. The strength of 22@Barcelona was the presence of several institutions of higher learning within that particular precinct. It had numerous universities already located in the zone and others relocated to the hub. In East London, three universities, namely the University of Fort Hare (UFH), Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and the University of South Africa (UNISA) are located within the city and in proximity to the vacant piece of land known as the Sleeper Site. Other tertiary institutions in the city include the Buffalo City TVET College and other private colleges. All these educational institutions can be leveraged to spearhead partnerships within the Sleeper Site and play crucial roles in development coalitions through training and research and creating centres of excellence that result in knowledge spillovers to other firms. Offshoot companies can be created by the HEIs that offer internships to maintain the knowledge base and attract graduates and skills from elsewhere. This occurred in the case of Silicon Valley and MIT which, through their R&D, formed companies that not only retained their graduates but attracted experts and specialists from far and wide (Safford, 2004). The challenge for local HEIs would be to offer programmes that are aligned with innovation, business and other market demands to drive growth and development.

For the innovation district to succeed, HEIs need to collaborate amongst themselves and with the city and the business sector. The city needs to invest in the local economy so that jobs are created and investment is attracted to the innovation hub. The city must draft zoning plans that promote a dynamic physical realm that strengthens proximity and knowledge spill-overs (Katz & Wagner, 2014:2). In the 22@Barcelona case and other cases, the city had to rezone the land and incentivise private landowners to refurbish their properties so that the entire district became attractive but in the case of East London, the advantage is that the Sleeper Site is pristine land that must be developed from scratch. The city does not need to rezone the land or incentivise any private owners, thereby giving the whole development an added locational advantage.



The only challenge we had as a city was that the land was owned by Transnet and the transfer to the city was long and cumbersome. But now that the process has been finalised, the development of the site should be smooth and equitably zoned through stakeholder engagements (City Planning Official, 20/10/2020).

Unlike elsewhere where the land was owned by institutions and the development thereof was initiated by the owners, the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) needs to take leadership in the development of the innovation district as the land belongs to the municipality. HEIs cannot implement their designs and plans on the Sleeper Site unless the city buys into the development initiatives. In the Boston Innovation District, the city took the leading role and drew interest from all those that wished to invest in the district. Through its special purpose development vehicle – the Boston Redevelopment Agency (BRA) – the city encouraged, assisted and incentivised economic actors and activities and negotiated with all stakeholders so that their developments were aligned to the greater vision of the city and district. Similar partnerships are evident in Manchester in North West England where universities work together with other stakeholders in regional development (May & Perry, 2006). The North West Universities Association (NWUA) works closely with the North West Development Agency (NWDA) in stimulating growth and development for the region (May & Perry, 2006:266). In the case of East London, the BCMM authorities need to take the initiative, as the HEIs and the business sector will not otherwise be able to implement and invest in the innovation district that has the potential to promote growth and development for the city and wider BCMM area. The resuscitation of the Buffalo City Metropolitan Development Agency (BCMDA), which was disbanded in 2009, can be reinstated as a tool to drive both the inception of the innovation district and other city-wide development plans and strategies. The BCMDA has, in the past, taken the initiative to revitalise city spaces, for example, the Water World Recreational Park development project at Court Crescent. However, it remains to be seen what the plan is for the Sleeper Site and the innovation envisaged for the city.

It is the nature of the business sector to seek returns for its investments and for businesses to invest in the innovation district, they must be convinced of its viability. The private sector or business community must be assured of other stakeholders' commitment, especially the city and to some extent, the HEIs that are required to be innovative in the creation of new products and technologies.

We expect our investments to be protected and thrive in a proper business environment. That atmosphere can be created, but we need others to join in. We need universities with the right kind of training and research that complement and work with us (Chief Executive Officer, Tech Company, 05/10/2021).



Businesses expect policies and city strategies that are conducive to a business environment to attract and protect their investments. Once guarantees are made, the firms need to collaborate with the city and universities to promote specific projects and developments. Within these innovative clusters in which local groups of companies develop creative products and services within an active web of collaboration that includes specialised suppliers and service providers, universities and research institutes and organisations – higher levels of economic growth and competitiveness can be attained. The Sleeper Site in the inner city of East London can function as a central catalytic agent for growth and development, not only for the CBD and inner-city but for the metropolitan municipality and the region. In all these endeavours, the district should remain open to the community and wider society and avoid the exclusionary nature of science parks and industrial development zones that are usually shut off from the surrounding city. The implementation of innovation districts is not without risk, barriers and challenges. Certain prerequisites are necessary for the take-off of innovation districts and partnerships between key stakeholders in city development.

Overcoming challenges to partnerships

As the anchors of development, HEIs, through relevant knowledge production, propel innovations that become significant when implemented in conjunction and close collaboration with other players, especially in zones of economic activity such as innovation districts. However, the challenges that exist in the city of East London with its HEIs include the lack of capacity of the latter to transform in meaningful ways to contribute to the city's economy. Large companies such as Daimler Chrysler (Mercedes Benz plant) often operate independently of HEIs in the city, not because their internal sources are considered sufficient but because of weak institutions within the city and the lack of university capability. Local firms and industries perceive that local universities and other HEIs within the city have little to offer in terms of meeting their expectations and needs. According to Kruss et al. (2012:8), firms often perceive the quality of research in the universities to be low, with the majority reporting that universities do not understand firms' lines of business.

There is no skills match between the education institutions in the city and our operations. We are therefore compelled to do in-house training for our employees. If agreements can be made for curriculum development that aligns to industry needs, that might be helpful and benefit all stakeholders (Daimler Chrysler official, 15/09/2021).

This gap between what universities produce and what the industry requires is problematic for East London and other cities and requires universities and HEIs to transform their curricula so that they are aligned to the demands of the economy but this should not be



done in such a way that it compromises the quality of university outcomes and qualification standards and promotes an instrumentalist view of the university and the knowledge produced therein.

Another challenge is defining collaboration – collaborating with whom and for what? There must be a mutual interest other than sharing space that should spur the need for partnerships, such as a common vision and goals. Does the city of East London, or the BCMM then share these with its HEIs and vice versa? According to Williams et al. (2008:7), it is important to recognise that different universities have different missions and that different cities have different visions of their economic and social future. Local universities may be striving to be globally competitive and therefore concern themselves with creating and building their status in the league of international HEIs through such activities as research and students' output and publishing, without paying much attention to their location. The city may depend on knowledge assets besides HEIs for their development strategies. It is, therefore, important that cities and universities ascertain what the other's mission and goals are so that they develop working relationships that reflect their distinctive missions and circumstances. By identifying their distinctive strategies, cities and universities can then find common ground where they have shared goals so that collaboration can take place.

The BCMM aims to make East London globally competitive to attract investment and expand its productive sector and industrial base, thereby improving the quality of life for its people by reducing poverty, creating employment opportunities and reducing inequality (BCMM, 2020). The universities aim to attract quality students and faculty, retain staff, produce quality research and outputs and expand their operations and their campus locations. These are broad objectives for both the city and the universities. Narrowing these down to mutual objectives such as neighbourhood revitalisation, reducing crime and attracting investment, quality faculty and students, among others, both the city and university benefit. By identifying and working on these objectives and niche areas, it will become possible for these institutions to work together and with other stakeholders to promote city growth and development.

Communication is another barrier hindering productive partnerships between city authorities, HEIs and the business sector. The best communication models for engagement are described as having a two-way flow of knowledge facilitated by the presence of motivators at the institutional level (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008:95) but this two-way communication can only succeed if there is full disclosure among the parties, which rarely occurs where there is a fear of losing competitive advantage over others. Firms are not fond of sharing information lest competitors use privileged information to upstage them. Universities at times view themselves as the only think tanks, thereby leading to unrealistic



expectations and resentment from other stakeholders (Jinkins & Cecil, 2015:164). In this process, communication breaks down and mistrust develops, hindering the benefits that could be accrued through cooperation and engagement. The former vice-chancellor at the University of Fort Hare provided insight into the relationship between the university and the city.

We had common forums where we discuss various issues with other stakeholders. We tried to push and reach common targets. But we could only do as much as because of different mandates and constituencies. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it did not. So that is reality...but we had good relations (Former UFH VC, 23/11/19).

In one of the workshops organised to bring together the Buffalo City authorities, HEIs in East London, the business community, leaders from civil society and other research organisations, tensions arose as the city, represented by the municipal manager, felt that the university had already made and completed physical plans for the innovation district at the Sleeper Site without the city's involvement. The University of Fort Hare, in particular, had drafted the plans in the belief that its planning knowledge and insights could take the lead, while the city felt it had the sole right and mandate to plan for any infrastructural developments because the land for development belonged to the municipality. Although these conflicts were resolved, this example highlighted several barriers and challenges encountered in forming alliances and partnerships in development projects involving various institutional authorities and governance structures.

The ongoing changes in city leadership have also been cited as a barrier to long-term development aims, as the BCM has the most unstable city leadership in South Africa. The office of the mayor and that of the city manager have gone through turbulent times in the past few years with a high turnover in senior municipal positions. When new leadership comes into office, programmes and plans are often shelved and new strategies formulated, some of which are in direct opposition to previous strategies. For instance, the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in East London was at an advanced stage of implementation in 2010 but the plans were discontinued when new city leadership came into office. These disparities, uncertainties and lack of continuity can lead to a city's decline and collapse.

To safeguard against such occurrences, several cities have utilised or proposed the utilisation of intermediaries in development partnerships. An example of these intermediaries is the U3 Advisors in the US that bring together various stakeholders for the common purpose of city development (Flaherty, 2016). According to its mission statement, U3 Advisors provides real estate and economic development solutions to the universities, medical centres, foundations and non-profit organisations that anchor communities. In Cape Town, South Africa the Economic Development Partnership (EDP) works to improve



the performance of the city and the province's economic development system through facilitated solutions (Boraine, 2016). As these intermediaries are independent of the other players and are not limited by terms of office as are those in the city or university, they can carry out long-term plans to their conclusion. Besides intermediaries, there is also a need for a stronger, more independent municipal civil service with fixed-term positions that are insulated from political interference. These could be helpful in East London in driving development projects to their logical conclusion despite political instability.

The nature and character of the universities in East London have contributed to the challenge concerning location. The three major universities in the city are satellite campuses. UFH has three campuses, the main one located in the rural town of Alice; another in peri-urban Bhisho and the other in urban East London. WSU has its main campus in Mthatha, with others dotted around the Eastern Cape in places such as Queenstown, East London and Potsdam. UNISA has branches in cities across South Africa with a significant presence in large cities. This leaves the Buffalo City area without a uniquely metropolitan university and this poses several challenges to the city's growth and development. This has negative implications for the city of East London. Some of the sentiments expressed during interviews with city officials, business representatives and members of the public alluded to dissatisfaction with the status quo. They all expressed the need for a metropolitan campus with its headquarters within the city. This, they believed, would enable effective partnerships between the city, university and the business sector. They identified the problem as a lack, on the part of these universities, to make commitments to the city in which they are located without first satisfying the needs of their main campuses. For instance, it was stated that the UFH often prioritises the Alice campus instead of expanding its base in East London. Within the UFH itself, some feel that investment and expansion, both physical and academic, should be directed towards the main campus in Alice. These tensions leave the city and businesses without a dependable university to drive the city's growth and development. A business sector representative opined that the UFH should either prioritise its urban campus or completely move out of the city so that a city university can be introduced. East London needs a university based and controlled within the city so that the two can work with common interests and goals (Business Executive, 14/10/2021).

This challenge of multi-location universities based in East London can be solved; not by relocating these universities but by devolving and decentralising their power bases and making each campus semi-autonomous. In this way, locational needs can be prioritised and partnerships formed to address issues of mutual interest. Budgets for different campuses can, for example, be separated. This may give rise to other problems but the main objective of having institutions that are responsive to local needs may be attained (Gunasekara, 2007; Chatterton & Goddard, 2000; Gordon, 2012). It is through mutual



dialogue, trust and determined efforts that beneficial relationships are created between various stakeholders within the city for the realisation of growth and development.

Without mutual trust between cities, universities, the business sector and the community, the attainment of growth and development can prove elusive. Different from social responsibility and philanthropy, the notion of trust and shared values implies that when institutions work together to overcome challenges and disinvestment, they can realise tangible and often economic benefits (Viveiros & Sturtevant, 2016). An innovation district can be the point of departure for city-wide development and regeneration, with all stakeholders working together.

Conclusion

The Sleeper Site within the inner city of East London provides an opportunity for the implementation of an innovation district. An innovation district differs from a science park, with the latter focusing on hi-tech products in secluded zones while the former is multi-dimensional and offers more diversified outcomes. The characteristics of innovation districts are summarised by Katz and Wagner (2014) in the passage presented hereunder. At a time of sluggish growth, they provide a strong foundation for the creation and expansion of firms and jobs by helping companies, entrepreneurs, universities, researchers and investors—across sectors and disciplines—co-invent and co-produce new discoveries for the market. At a time of rising social inequality, they offer the prospect of expanding employment and educational opportunities for disadvantaged populations given that many districts are close to low- and moderate-income neighbourhoods. And, at a time of inefficient land use, extensive sprawl and continued environmental degradation, they present the potential for denser residential and employment patterns, the leveraging of mass transit, and the repopulation of urban cores (Katz & Wagner, 2014: 2).

The development of the innovation district within the city of East London can facilitate a partnership between the municipality and HEIs to complement the ELIDZ in the development of the city and help integrate stakeholders excluded from industrial development zones. The introduction of a fast-speed internet connection to the city can propel and enhance the impact of the innovation district on both the city and region.

Cultivating a symbiotic relationship between the triple-helix partners, where knowledge institutions anchor the development process, presents an opportunity for growth, both for the city and the region. Through knowledge production and innovation, HEIs working with Buffalo City authorities and the business community in translating ideas into practice can redefine both space and place. The Sleeper Site offers a unique opportunity to create an



innovation precinct that can turn challenges afflicting the city into growth and development opportunities.

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