

Towards a City increasingly belonging to students and citizens

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The issue of the academic city, or of the city of students, is one of those that will probably exist as long as the universities will exist. It is actually a social case that, exploded with the phenomenon of student mobility, will hardly find an end, notwithstanding the crash of national enrolment numbers; it will rather become an openly International phenomenon, given the growing role of international mobility projects like Erasmus, now Erasmus Plus. Student population is, within historically academic cities, a proper community. It has its own districts, its social, cultural and entertainment meeting places. Student community often moves and lives in the old down centre, while residents prefer the advantages of the outskirts and of the economy of market rents. In the cities with a big student community it influences the whole urban set-up, the schedule and services of the city. The question worth asking is: “is the student community only a population in transit”?

To this question, if we took the single story of each individual student, we should certainly answer affirmatively, a part from exceptions, like the commuting and resident students. But if we look at the sociological phenomenon, we realize that the student community is so far an already stabilized part of the civic community, above all in the small-medium cities, often very attractive for non-residential students. The people change, obviously as individuals, but the portion of the community remains in the same places, in the same houses, with the same habits, with the difference that each year in high percentages it renovates itself, bringing together very different territorial realities, mostly from the South to the North. So the core of the discussion has now moved on how these two communities, by now stabilized, can find the right synergies to develop a healthy, and totally fruitful cohabitation. In this bipolar pattern a crucial role can be undertaken by the University as a national institution on a territory reality. Not casually, its peculiarity in the sector of public administration can help overcoming eventual cultural and social barriers against academic students. So it is necessary to advocate for an active role of the universities, to make the student population sensible towards a different vision of the place where they live, following the principle: “Don’t destroy what you love”. Only through a deeper integration of these two shares of the population, it will be possible to look forward to a true model of university city.

So the universities can play a crucial role, but, however, it will be necessary to underline which efforts and good practices the civic administrations can undertake, in order do prevent further tensions between those born in the city and those who decided to live there for study purposes. Starting from some data on the living conditions in the municipalities, analyses will be done of this information with the percentage of student population on the overall population.

Finally it will be necessary to question what academic students might bring in terms of active practices within the city during their short but meaningful staying there, to go beyond the sheer enjoyment of it. An alternative view in which students and citizens live their city in different ways, but with the same respect, is possible and feasible.