

# **Hard facts for the vision of a young and innovative city**

## **- Empirical analysis of students' living preferences –**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

Cities and regions are increasingly competing to attract students and qualified recent graduates, who create something of a "fountain of youth", enhancing the region's capacity for innovation and competitiveness and offering a collegiate flair to cities (Yigitcanlar 2012; Anholt 2010; Ashworth und Kavaratzis 2009; Murie und Musterd 2010).

The younger generation in Germany exhibits a strong tendency for migratory movements upon starting the education and career entry phase of life. They tend to result in concentrations ("swarms") towards certain cities, while other cities and in particular rural districts tend to empty out (Simons et al. 2015). The root cause for this swarming is not the presence of (potential) job opportunities but rather an increase in the importance of the quality of life, for which distant commute are even accepted (Braun 2016). Young people appear to seek out those places where many of their generation have already settled. In light of demographic change, if the absolute number of younger people continues to decrease, these polarising tendencies will also continue to be exacerbated.

In general, there is little knowledge about the specific requirements that students and young career entrants are looking for in a place to live and study (Brown 2015; Tippel et al. 2017; Buenstorf et al. 2016). While the basic criteria proposed by Florida (Florida 2006, 2009) have offered key hints about these requirements, they nonetheless apply only to certain circumstances and are not specific to students (Haisch und Klöpper 2016; Russo et al. 2016).

This study therefore addresses this gap in the research; the analysis is based on a survey of 2300 students at the university city of Osnabrück. Located in northwest Germany, Osnabrück (160,000 residents, 22,000 students) became a university centre only recently, in 1970. Consequently, its perception as a university city is not yet as firmly established as it is, for

example, in the nearby city of Münster (300,000 residents, 60,000 students, university founded in 1780). Higher education institutions play a key role in the city's successful structural change and branding process. Being perceived as a university city is an important vision of urban development in Osnabrück. Insights from the empirical survey can help both in the analysis of factors important in students' decision-making as well as in providing information about potential influences on the part of the city's stakeholders.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

Following extensive qualitative preliminary studies (Wesselmann 2016; Wesselmann et al. 2012), a survey of close to 2300 students in the university city of Osnabrück was conducted at the end of 2016. Students were differentiated according to the type of higher education institution (university or university of applied sciences), subject area and degree; a proportionality quota procedure ensured that the sample reflected the overall target population adequately. Integration of the Sinus-Milieu indicator facilitated conclusions about everyday life factors as well. The survey is currently (November 2017) being continued at two universities in Berlin, in order to generate data for comparison. Additional cities are also planned.

The focus was on the following research questions:

- What requirements do students have in terms of the place in which they live and study? What does their "ideal" city have to offer?
- How do students rate these criteria for the city of Osnabrück? In which areas are the greatest discrepancies found? In which areas can the city exercise an impact?
- What influence does the city's attractiveness have on the choice of higher education institutions?
- Where and how (with parents, student dormitory, communal residence etc.) are students currently living?
- How satisfied are they with their currently living situation?
- Can they imagine themselves remaining in Osnabrück after they complete their study programme?

- According to which (Sinus-) Milieu do students classify themselves?

### **Findings (sampling)**

*Central- safe –clean and with affordable housing:* this sums up students' core expectations for a city. This is a surprising insight because the demand for safety and cleanliness are more often attributed to an older milieu. Cultural offers, an exciting night-life and a multicultural population were not important factors among our survey participants; this result was in stark contrast to the findings of Richard Florida (Florida 2006; Krätke 2010) regarding the creative class. Further study is required to determine the extent to which this result applies only to Osnabrück. A follow-up is already underway in the city of Berlin.

### **Practical implications**

The knowledge of the specific decision-making and satisfaction factors should increase the ability of politicians, administrators, universities and the real estate industry to exert control.

Further surveys planned for additional cities should create a dataset that will facilitate a better understanding of the target/performance comparison of a city's qualities in terms of locale from the point of view of students.

The survey can be a kick-start for processes of dialogue that could help improve living quality in the context of design thinking processes. Depending on the field of study and milieu, the students who participated in the survey offered some diverse demands for cities. An interesting option may therefore be to consider in greater depth these social and cultural factors in the competition for qualified specialists. Today, as a part of their branding processes, many cities already address the issue of which offers and assets to highlight and with which they hope to be associated both external and internally (Kavaratzis et al. 2015; Anholt 2008). The results of the survey offer a differentiated approach to individual student groups. Specifically, the question could be phrased in the form of a matching: which student milieus fit best to the strengths of our city?

### **Originality/value**

To date (as of September 2017), there have been no comparable empirical surveys of a

German-speaking populace to investigate the living place preferences of students. In the context of higher education marketing, there are a number of studies that examine the decision-making process of foreign students for a particular university. However, the focus lies on the university and less on the city. (Padlee et al. 2010; Cubillo-Pinilla et al. 2009)

Keywords.

- 1: Mobility decisions of students and skilled professionals
2. Place branding
3. Location factors
4. Urban development
5. Location competition
6. Knowledge-based urban development

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