

Foreword: furthering the aims and objectives of L'institute

The activities that have resulted in this volume were undertaken under the auspices of L'institute (Institute for Industrial Development Policy), a joint venture sponsored by the Universities of Birmingham (UK), Ferrara (Italy) and Wisconsin–Milwaukee (USA), and designed to provide an institutional base for scholars throughout the world, no matter where they are otherwise employed. Established in 1997, L'institute aims to offer a particular type of focal point for the democratic empowerment of scholars (and others with an interest in the research and learning process). In this context, it seeks to evolve a multinational network amongst those thinking about and concerned with the development of economies. It also attempts to stimulate open, scholarly debate on, for example, the search for policies that recognise and foster locality-specific development goals in the context of 'globalisation'.

The preparation and publication of this volume contributes to the fulfilment of these aims and objectives in various respects. Not least, its subject matter goes to the heart of topical issues that are central to an understanding of processes of economic development and of corresponding policy requirements: the development of economies is strongly influenced by 'globalisation', analysis of which currently leads inexorably to a consideration of local economic processes and therefore of 'clusters'. More particularly, the volume is an explicit outcome both of the multinational networking that has been nurtured by L'institute, and of the attempts L'institute has made to stimulate debate on local economic development. Relatedly, it is a contribution to current and future networking and debate.

THE DEMOCRATIC EMPOWERMENT OF SCHOLARS

L'institute is intended to give a stimulus to dynamic, multinational networking that goes beyond the confines of specific, self-contained projects, opening possibilities for more permanent scholarly interaction and cooperation. Moreover, by creating an organisation that sits firmly

within established universities, vital roots have been provided; they give networking a concrete presence, lifting it beyond comparatively short-run initiatives and abstract theorising.

We see the activities of L'institute as centred on its participants, most especially on the scholarship of the individual people contributing to its research and learning initiatives, rather than on the institutional objectives of the sponsoring universities. Correspondingly, its own (evolving) principles and statutes define L'institute. These are intended to foster positive freedom, openness and unique outputs by providing a minimal, democratic structure that empowers those who participate in its activities. These scholars are drawn from a far wider set of organisations than those that are the formal sponsors of L'institute. One aim is to enable and facilitate their engagement – among themselves, and with others concerned about processes of economic development and the design of public policy.

The emphasis on multinationalism implies a coming together across borders, a process based on and respecting the different experiences, histories, traditions and cultures of various localities. These differences are seen as a source of strength, providing opportunities for mutual benefit, and for identifying and pursuing efficient ways forward. As argued in Sugden (2003, 2004), the benefit of such multinationalism is seen to be in the quality of research and learning, in unique and otherwise unobtainable outputs.

CLUSTERS AND GLOBALISATION

Among the specific initiatives pursued by L'institute has been a multinational project entitled 'The Importance of Clusters to Urban and Regional Prosperity in a Globalised Economy'. This project was coordinated jointly with the Centre for International Business and Management (CIBAM) (University of Cambridge, UK), the Universitat de Barcelona (Spain), the Universitat de Rovira Virgili (Spain) and the Université de Toulouse (France). Its origins lie in L'institute workshops held in Milwaukee (USA) in 2000 and 2001, which resulted in an edited volume focusing in part on 'clusters' as a potential 'solution' to problems of local economic development (Sugden et al., 2003). Building on this experience, the aim has been to learn from different perspectives on clusters and from various cases, in order to better understand clusters' varying consequences for economic activity, including performance and policy.

A result of the project is the chapters that comprise this volume. Each is an outcome of the multinational networking and of the attempt to stimulate debate on local economic development that so preoccupies the participants in L'institute. Not least, each has been variously debated at

dedicated, multinational workshops in Reus (Spain, in 2003) and Toulouse (France, in 2004). More than that, however, the volume is a contribution to current and future networking and debate, its chapters providing a basis for taking forward collaboration on these and related issues among interested scholars.

Indeed, in welcoming publication of this volume we are looking to the steps that will take the analysis and debate to the next level, continuing to learn from the experiences of the last few years. In particular, work on the current volume enables those of us who have been participating in the project to appreciate better our overlapping lines of research, to see where we are proceeding in parallel and where there might be opportunities for convergence. Similarly, it presents possibilities for the identification of new colleagues with common or complementary interests and concerns, and hence opportunities for them (and their associated universities) to join in (and sponsor) the activities of L'institute.

Moreover, we suggest that work on the project over the last few years has highlighted the need to design projects so as to encourage scholars to come together in their research, to feed off each other to mutual benefit and to improve the research outcomes. Specifically, this has prompted a search to identify particular hypotheses around which various lines of research can be pursued, facilitating their coherent amalgamation into a more effective output. It is with such a hypothesis-driven approach in mind that, for example, following the aforementioned workshop in Toulouse, a successful application was made to the European Science Foundation for an 'Exploratory Workshop on the Governance of Networks as a Determinant of Local Economic Development' (due to take place in San Sebastian, Spain, in November 2005).¹ Again infused with the aims and objectives of L'institute, this initiative is expected, among other concerns, to take up the analysis of clusters and globalisation, and to do so with inputs from some long-standing but also many new colleagues. Of course, its fruits must await future publications.

More subtly, preparation and publication of this volume figures prominently among the broad set of L'institute activities over recent years, and accordingly it has been influential on the more general evolution of L'institute as a particular type of academic enterprise. Dewey (1927, p. 250) observes that 'association in the sense of connection and combination is a "law" of everything known to exist. Singular things act, but they act together. Nothing has been discovered which acts in entire isolation. The action of everything is along with the action of other things.' In that spirit, the connection and combination between work on this volume and work on other projects and in other contexts has enabled many of those participating in L'institute to understand better their relationships, to appreciate ways in

which they might work together more effectively and to recognise different forms of joint outputs that might be attainable. In other words, work on the volume has contributed to learning about how best to realise democratic enablement in academic activities and, consistent within that, how best to optimise research and learning outcomes so as to accord with scholars' democratically determined aims.

Similarly, we hope the responses of readers to the volume, and the new ideas, debates and projects that they might stimulate will also contribute to the future evolution of L'institute.

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NOTE

1. For further information, see www.esf.org.

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