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The Learning Region Initiative – a Challenging Concept for Higher Education to promote Regional Development

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give a thorough insight to the evolution of the learning city-region initiative and connect it to the changing roles of higher education institutions within a frame of third missions of universities so as to promote regional development. Accordingly, this study bridges the conceptual approaches to some recent European researches and initiatives which have aimed at promoting concrete developments in the field with particular involvement of higher education and its third roles so as to promote learning communities and learning economy.

The result of research and development in the field resulted in partial projects, like LILARA, PENR3L, and EuroLOCAL and the recent HEAD-project (Opening Higher Education to Adults) in which the author participated as expert on adult learning and education with a perspective on university lifelong learning.

Keywords

Lifelong learning, outreach programmes, community education, learning city, learning region, regional development.

A Description of the Evolution of Learning Regions

The evolution of learning regions started right in 1972, when the OECD initiated a seven city project which it called *Educating Cities*. Vienna, Edinburgh, Kakegawa, Pittsburgh, Edmonton, Adelaide and Gothenburg would undertake to put education at the forefront of their strategies and policies with a view to developing economic performance. And that experience would then be translated into an example for other cities around the world. There have been many positive results from that project but perhaps it's a comment on the fate of all projects, or perhaps it's the nature of politics, that, in the 1990s, only in Gothenburg did the city officials even know about the project 20 years later.

Surprisingly, it was in the early 1990s that things started to develop in a much broader (Longworth, 1999). Longworth labelled it as *the age of innocence* – when researchers recognised that something was afoot but not quite what it was. A couple of accelerating conferences took place in the first half of the decade, both of them helping to push back the limits of knowledge and action. The Gothenburg gathering in 1992, also sponsored by OECD, was a follow-up from the *Educating Cities* project. It initiated The international association of educating cities, based in Kaunas, and now with a membership of more than 400 cities worldwide.

The Rome conference was organised by the *European Lifelong Learning Initiative* and the American Council for Education in 1996 and this, in its turn, created the *World Initiative on Lifelong Learning*. Sadly both ELLI and WILL are now defunct but they contributed a great deal to the advancement of learning city knowledge during the 1990s. ELLI was instrumental in developing some of the early *charters for learning regions* – charters that spelled out the commitment of a region to improving learning opportunities and methodologies for all its

inhabitants It looked like this – the basis for a widespread discussion on improving the local culture of learning. Cities as far apart as Adelaide, Halifax in Canada, Espoo in Finland and Dublin took this charter template and adapted it for their own use.

And then the middle of the decade came with the European year of Lifelong Learning in 1996 – it was taken very seriously by ELLI and most universities – perhaps because there was a funding stream attached to it – yet, its significance was unfortunately largely ignored by many of the organisations that matter - cities, regions and schools and business and industry and most of the population of Europe. In spite of this, there can be no doubt that the provenance of today's work on learning cities and regions lies in the early work on lifelong learning given an impetus by the European Year.

And 1996 did lead to a renewed awareness of the importance of education and more particularly to the idea that a world of rapid political, economic, technological and environmental change in turn leads to rapid changes in the practice and delivery of education.

Most critical thinkers on education and learning understood that the late 20th century world of education and training in which teacher's wisdom was delivered top-down to those who were thought worthy of it was giving way to a much more open lifelong learning world of personal learning continuous throughout life, while most of the educational world was still immersed in its own version of the dark ages. Most of them believed that education was not available to all citizens but also with an imperative to persuade whole populations that learning is a good thing for their economic, social and intellectual health and well-being and for social stability in general.

This was a 180 degree change of focus from top-down education delivery - to a bottom-up satisfaction of the needs and demands of the learner. Using the tools and techniques of lifelong learning such as personal learning plans.

Requirements audits, mentors, coaches and guides and access to electronic networks. The cynical view of course is that it hasn't lasted – that politicians, in their search for measurable indicators to persuade the voters that education is improving, would take the easy top-down utilitarian option – and so it has proved in some countries, but there are still some idealists who see learning cities and regions as the natural location for the practical application of lifelong learning, transforming it from a vague concept into a workable reality and who still think that it will be possible to see people of all ages indulging happily in – to quote the title of the Finnish National Lifelong Learning Policy Document – the joy of learning, what an excellent title for a Government paper.

Unfortunately, by ignoring a great number of excellent initiatives, the process moved on to *the age of experimentation*. In the later part of the 1990s National Learning City networks began to appear – firstly in the United Kingdom and followed later by those Finland and Sweden. The North European focus by the way reflects very much the centre of gravity of lifelong learning and learning city interest.

With several notable exceptions Southern, Central and Eastern Europe have taken much longer to embrace the very real benefits of creating learning cities and regions.

In this new age of experimentation, Learning Region projects began to be funded – 16. one of them 'TELS Towards a European Learning Society' developed what it called a Learning Cities Audit Tool and studied the performance of 80 European municipalities. In ten domains of learning activity from access to participation, from leadership to commitment, from wealth creation and employability to celebration and social inclusion.

Unsurprisingly, it found that the words ‘Learning City and learning Region were not well known – indeed in more than two thirds of those 80 cities, they were completely unknown – but the surprise is this – once the audit tool had been used and the concept had become known, a large number of them asked themselves why they were not more active in these domains, and became converts to the cause. Perhaps this was the first recorded use of an academic questionnaire as an evangelical tool. At this time too, there were conferences and learning city launches – places like Liverpool, Espoo, Edinburgh and Glasgow and several other cities, many of them in the UK came out, as it were. *Learning Festivals* celebrated the joy of learning in Glasgow and in Sapporo, Japan.

And so Europe drifted into the new millennium and what may be called *the age of advance* propelled principally by the European Commission’s Lisbon agenda, which has put lifelong learning at the forefront of European policy. The development of learning cities and regions was one key strategy of that policy – and so the European policy paper on the local and regional dimension of lifelong learning was born in 2001. This important document was based on the results of TELS and written by Norman Longworth. The document clearly stated that ‘Cities and regions in a globalized world cannot afford not to become learning cities and regions. It is a matter of prosperity, stability, employability and the personal development of all citizens’ They were clear and forward looking words indeed, and a striking challenge to every local and regional authority that has read – them – which, because of the nature of information transmission, is unfortunately, very few.

But later, the OECD also geared up the process in 2001 with its learning regions project in 5 European regions – Jena in Germany, Oresund in Sweden and Denmark, Vienne in France, Kent in UK and Andalusia. Among its findings was the perhaps surprising statement that secondary education appears to be the most important for regional development and the more predictable one that there is a need to encourage creativity at all levels of education. And that’s a theme that crops up time and time again in learning region folklore – *creativity, innovation, vision* at all levels of education - Would that it were so in reality.

CEDEFOP, the European Vocational Training Agency also joined in the party in 2001. The results of its own project between regions of Europe and USA urged regional management to develop a means by which educational and other organizations have a common purpose – each one learning from each other and each one learning with each other – in planning and implementing social and economic innovations. Those are significant words - because now we seemed to be making a real advance in our understanding of what a learning region is – cooperative, multi-faceted, creative, innovative, communicative, - different.

And despite the fact that many cities and regions are still well behind the mark, in the new millennium the movement to create learning cities and regions threatened to become an avalanche – as a couple of examples among many, Germany established around 76 learning regions, while every city, town and municipality in Victoria Australia became a learning entity. moreover, the Chinese government has now decreed that every large city in China should become a learning city by 2010 and beyond.

Not too late from this, the IDEOPOLIS was born, described by Tom Cannon and his collaborators as ‘ A City or Region whose economy is driven by the creative search for, and the application of, new ideas, thinking and knowledge, and which is firmly rooted to the creative transfer of ideas, to opportunities, to innovation, and eventually to production.’

There are those words again – *creative, innovation, new ideas and thinking*. These initiatives moved most researchers into what might be called *the age of understanding* – and many of them finally thought they got it – or knew, or thought they knew - what being a learning region entails and, simultaneously, the number of European projects increased. From every

part of the Commission – Learning Cities and Regions are now included in the Framework research programmes and a lifelong learning element now has to be included in the vast majority of the Commission's Social and development Funding. There became a great need for tools and materials that would help cities and regions to get that understanding. Therefore, particular Socrates projects developed those learning tools for city and regional management and learning materials to help them propagate the message to others. And yet the OECD would have you believe that *all regions seek to sustain economic activity through various combinations of lifelong learning, innovation and creative uses of information and communication technologies* (OECD, Learning Regions project - 2000).ⁱ

Some theoretical frames on learning and the learning economy

In order to promote an understanding of the concept of learning cities, learning regions, it is worth indicating that there are four major related but different impact for the idea itself. The first impact for the reconceptualisation of learning and learning economy (and indeed learning organizations) can be traced to what now must be seen as a seminal paper by Lundvall and Johnson (1994) on the *learning economy*. Its importance of different types of learning and the difference between codified and tacit learning is well articulated – something not new to those in the fields of education and adult learning. What is of special interest however in the paper by Lundvall and Johnson is the explicit connections made to economy. While *the role of learning in production and work is not new*, generally it was largely 'assumed' and occurred invisibly (Razavi, 1997). What Lundvall and Johnson (1994) and others (Edquist, 1997; OECD, 2000) have identified and stressed *in newly emerging knowledge economy is that learning is now a fundamental process and resource*.

A second impact for learning cities, learning regions arrives from *the application of learning within and across organisations* (Senge, 1990). Economic geographers too, have underlined in what forms *the transfer and sharing of knowledge and ideas across informal networks within industry clusters* (sometimes referred to as collective learning) *seems to be a critical aspect of creativity and innovation* (Keeble et al., 1999). Since innovation is a basic element in the knowledge economy, ways to promote, support and enhance innovation are important (Edquist, 1997). As for *case studies of technopoles and industrial complexes in Europe* (Cooke & Morgan, 1998), the United Kingdom (UK) and the USA and Canada (Wolfe & Gertler, 2001), there is growing evidence and awareness that *learning is the fundamental process at work in the new knowledge economy*. Far from a presumed and hidden force, it needs to be made explicit, strengthened and backed up.

Apart from matching clusters and communities of practice *the work of economic geographers signalled* a third important aspect for the conceptualisation of learning cities, learning regions – *the spatial context*. Florida (1995) set the idea of learning regions and others (Bokema et al., 2000) described as the basis of *regional innovation systems*. A very special idea was framed here that in particular locales learning, which was fostered and supported through *good learning infrastructure* (i.e. a regional innovation system) *enabled the locality to compete in a global economy*.

This recognition of the regional scale provides *an important link to local economic development and the importance of learning, social capital and human capital in community development*. By setting this link, it is open, thereby, to move beyond a potentially narrowly defined regional innovation system which watches on on business and industry alone *to take a wider whole-of-community approach where increasingly learning and learning processes can be the vehicle to equip and empower whole communities* (Amin & Thrift, 1999). Allison and Keane (2001) has broadened the spheres of activities and influence for learning *to underline a learning communities approach to local economic development*. In this approach *an explicit*

link between learning initiatives, partnerships and governance, social capital and building local capacity together with capabilities and economic prosperity is developed.

This lies at the centre of local economic development and several community case studies in urban and rural areas demonstrate how this approach may promote local economic development.

Parallel to this special approach to local economic development is the work of scholars in the field of education research. Tooke (2000), for example, argues that the broader value of learning has been recognised by those who work in and focus on education, lifelong learning, adult and community education. Obviously, this scholarly tradition brings in *a timely and useful critique to the concept of learning regions provoking an effort to embrace wider social and community development issues*. The TELS (Towards a European Learning Society) Project (Longworth, 1999) and the UK Learning Towns Project (Yarnit, 2000) clearly present *four critical objectives for learning and learning initiatives which encompass (i) economic prosperity; (ii) social inclusion; (iii) sustainability; and (iv) governance*.

These objectives resemble with those most frequently indicated in local economic development strategies. It is the interconnection of these *different dimensions of "learning" which result in a framework for a whole-of-community approach to learning cities, learning regions* to underline the economic and social life of communities in the global economy. In this *broader conceptualisation*, the scope of actions and *value of learning goes well beyond a limited definition of industry clusters and issues of competitiveness, innovation* (as important as these are). As the flow of learning initiatives by Yarnit (2000), Longworth (1999), Longworth & Franson (2001), Allison & Keane (2001) and others describe, learning makes its way through the community in many ways.

With each of these activities, the community may learn and develop sustainably. Learning enables communities to face change, adapt and transform on their own. *When the concept of learning cities, learning regions is understood in a broader framework, it opens up exciting potential and possibilities for many communities, particularly, when considered against reductionist narratives on exclusively economy-centred structure, by turning to more balanced models*.

European Background of the Lifelong Learning Initiative

It is essential to look back upon the European starting steps in the theme of lifelong learning to have been influencing the scope of new roles for higher education. The first step towards lifelong learning within the context of the European Union was taken through the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) in Rome in 1995, when researchers in education opened a public forum at a conference for promoting learning and the development of quality of content, process of education (ELLI 1995 described by Longworth, 2003.).

The emerging role of higher education institutions in the development of lifelong learning is obviously essential for making lifelong learning a reality as universities and colleges, since the late 1990s, contribute to the realisation of that initiative and Lisbon-goals, together with the aims of the *Education and training 2010* working programme. The latest document clearly pointed out the role of higher education (EC, 2003). Also, the working programme was strongly attached to the goals outlined in the concrete future objectives of the education and training systems of the member states of the European Union and reflected three strategic dimensions which explain the roles of higher education in developing lifelong learning:

These are: (1) The development of the quality and efficiency of the education and training systems within the European Union; (2) The development of opportunities and access to the education and training systems; (The two points are both reflected in the well-known

Bologna-process to highlight the steps forward the European Area of Higher Education) (3)
The development of forms external partnership of education and training systems.

(This point was embedded into the framing of *learning cities and regions of lifelong learning* initiatives in and after 2001, namely, into the development of learning cities, regions and related good practice in some of the member states.)

The third point of the working programme explains that higher education, as part of the education and training system, must be open and act as a partner in local and regional partnerships to develop communities!

The indicated points underline the initiative of the European Commission which, since 2002, has been supporting the establishment or change and modernisation of local and regional spaces of lifelong learning. The aim is so as to get formal, non-formal and informal learning closer to each other, referring to the partnership of public administration, higher education, chambers of commerce and industry, sectors of economy, culture and civic society by forming regions of lifelong learning (EC, 2002).

The functional reconstruction of higher education

After the turn of the millenium, scientist dealing with the functional changes in higher education indicated that the co-operation of universities and colleges with the economy is primarily influenced by changes occuring within the organisations of higher education. In case they recognise the meaning and role of partnership-based, innovation-centered approaches referring to lifelong learning, they will have the motivation to construct new forms of local and regional co-operation in order to develop learning opportunities, methodology and content. That is to indicate the corporate role of universities (Jarvis, 2001).

Universities and research institutes as centres of science have become important stakeholders in regional development to expand and disseminate knowledge of innovation and to change capacities. The valuable attraction of a region depends today on ballanced networking of higher education institutions, companies and community organisations (NGOs). Partnerships amongst universities and companies, according to Gál (2005) make regions develop their innovative potentials through knowledge transfer mechanisms, therefore, innovation, in my approach, must be considered as an interactive and systemic process which has a spatial format to host co-operations of organisations of transferring knowledge in a network.

Social/third role of higher education

It is a very accurate and relevant question of reconstructed university roles to open up for a third mission for universities and that is to help the community change and develop through special actions which are not related to education and training. This problem affects the cultural roles of universities too. Doyle pointed out that HEIs activities on the cultural front are subsumed within other policies and strategies and areas of enquiry. A peculiar impact according to this issue is that HEIs do not research themselves as often and as effectively as they do everyone else, particularly the third role they have as a cultural presence and cultural resource, Doyle remarked (2007).

In Hungary, higher education institutions have recognised a role for lifelong learning, adult learning, yet they are means for raising the number of students and to change structure through the Bologna-reform. Another narrative of lifelong learning is to work closely with the community, but mainly with economic organisations and institutions. On the other hand many universities have also come to the conclusion that a change in public attitudes are really challenging higher education. Lifelong learning made missions of universities and colleges taking up corporate roles and a constraining factor to search for new models of partnerships.

I personally think that higher education is in a crisis of finding new tools and methods of education for new, or changing clients with changing learning needs (Németh, 2007).

Interestingly, a very unique Scottish example brought in the value and status of academic knowledge and expertise as something to be understood as public property for deployment so as to enriching the social and cultural contexts in which they born (Crowther, Martin & Shaw, 2006). That is an essential realisation of knowledge and expertise being connected to social and community platforms which today need higher education to take more responsibility and action, I think, in Hungary has also become a reality. Universities and colleges have not yet explored, in required dynamism, new tools available for such new public policy of higher education to serve and to co-perate with their communities. The underrepresented status of forms of blended-learning and e-learning is a key indicator of emergence and impact of higher education's new roles in Hungary.

Also, there must be a stronger position of higher education in Hungary for education of citizenship and active citizenship. That direction has also been neglected in many universities and colleges in Hungary over the last fifteen years, however, some schools of adult and continuing education, like the Department of Adult Education of the University of Pécs, opened up education and research on active citizenship and governance influencing adult education and learning. (RE-ETGACE, a Framework V. Project, 2004) Johnston suggests a same model Hungarian university adult education should consider (Johnston, for connecting adult learning and citizenship (learning about citizenship; learning through citizenship and learning for citizenship, 2005) when we try to influence university management to develop partnership with its community outside higher education. Dobay argues, therefore, that a new and „regionally anchored” university charter/mission would be needed (Dobay, 2007). It is another symptom of searching for answer for a changing learning environment, as clear signal of new community directions and connections need for higher reeducation in Hungary.

On the other hand, the content and current implications, narratives of lifelong learning may be misleading in case higher education does not get actively involved, especially in Hungary, in the process of constructing the national strategy of lifelong learning. Higher education ought to indicate that it has a strong role in lifelong learning not only at a national level, but also through local and regional innovation, knowledge transfer (OECD, 2007).

The role of higher education should not be narrowly focused to the Bologna-process and its implications in structural reforms of education and training of higher education institutions. That is why a more holistic understanding of university lifelong learning should appear in a new national strategy of lifelong learning!

In that respect, it is essential to underline, according to major trends in explaining lifelong learning in Europe, the relevance of a joint presence of employability and active citizenship to represent an European approach upon learning. The framing of lifelong learning by the European Commission (EC, 2000) and the UNESCO standpoint clearly indicate that the roles of higher education to combine economic and societal impacts and dimensions (UNESCO, 2001).

Higher education in Hungary must take a special societal function which exceeds the dissemination of knowledge. While it tries to reconstruct the contents and methods of its traditional work, it enters into a process of innovation that influences not only economic structures, but also individuals and communities in searching for partnership-based activities in local and regional settings facing challenges. At the same time, higher education institutions join many kind of models of innovation which require a capacity of innovation and change an university can represent and make use of.ⁱⁱ

Summary

PASCAL Observatory and its former projects, like LILARA, PENR3L, and current ones, like PURE, R3L+ and EUROLOCAL, have given a major push to the implementation and start of the learning city-region model and, more concretely, to help universities recognize the importance and initiate issues and projects on local and regional development, focusing mainly on economic, social affairs and challenges. On the other hand, it must also be noted that higher education is to signal a need for balancing the economic with more social orientation, therefore, help shifting more attention to good governance, sustainable development, equitable education for underrepresented social groups, literacy campaigns, community development with active citizenship and civic engagement, intergenerational learning, etc. in city-region co-operations of people. That is what the latest Hong Kong conference of PASCAL underlined by focusing on cities learning (PASCAL, 2013.) Also, UNESCO has also accelerated such dimensions of community development around learning in cities through its Beijing event and call in late October, 2013. so as to put learning cities into a new scope of understanding (UNESCO, 2013).

The European adult learning initiatives may incorporate actions for inclusive and more tolerant community actions to involve individual and group work for development by collecting and sharing quality knowledge and skills which, I believe, is in the interest of city-region programmes to rise participation and performance both in economic production and social terrains. I do hope that dominant economic orientations will need a more sophisticated community vision by which stability, open society and development may be given priority instead of violence, hopelessness.

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^{i i} One can find more on learning cities and regions at www.eurolocal.info

ⁱⁱ The former 3L, now 'Learning for Life' (TÉT) Commission of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS/MTA) accelerated the debate over university lifelong learning!