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## THE CITY OF ESPOO DEVELOPS AS A SUSTAINABLE LEARNING CITY

### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents Espoo as a sustainable learning city, recognised by UNESCO as one of twelve pioneering Learning Cities in 2015. The vision of the city states that Espoo is a good place to live, learn, work and do business, and where residents can have their say in matters. Dynamic co-creation processes with residents, partners, universities, and enterprises have helped create and implement the Espoo Story and to find sustainable solutions for the city and its residents. The city of Espoo is preparing its citizens for the future by empowering all kinds of learners to be at the centre of their own learning processes. Espoo provides continuous learning paths leading from early childhood education, to capacity building in the workplace, and to learning in later life. Flexible learning spaces and digitalisation are expanding opportunities to participate and have fun when learning.*

**Keywords:** inclusion, co-creation, sustainable development, continuous learning paths

### ESPOO SE RAZVIJA KOT TRAJNOSTNO UČEČE SE MESTO – POVZETEK

*Članek predstavlja mesto Espoo kot trajnostno učeče se mesto, ki ga je leta 2015 Unesco prepoznal kot enega od 12 pionirskih učečih se mest. Vizija mesta je Espoo kot odlično mesto za življenje, učenje, delo in poslovanje ter kot mesto, kjer imajo prebivalci svoj glas pri odločanju. Dinamični postopki soustvarjanja, v katere se vključujejo prebivalci, partnerji, univerze in podjetja, so pomagali ustvariti in uresničiti zgodbo mesta Espoo ter poiskati trajnostne rešitve za kraj in njegove prebivalce. Espoo pripravlja svoje prebivalce na prihodnost s tem, da opolnomoča vse učeče se, da so sami v središču svojih lastnih učnih procesov. Espoo jim ponuja učno pot, ki se razteza od izobraževanja v zgodnjem otroštvu do krepitev zmogljivosti na delovnem mestu in končno tudi do učenja v poznejših življenjskih obdobjih. Poleg tega fleksibilni učni prostor in digitalizacija dajeta vedno večje možnosti za sodelovanje in zabavno učenje.*

**Ključne besede:** vključevanje, soustvarjanje, trajnostni razvoj, neprekinjene učne poti

## **THE LEARNING CITY AS A MEANS FOR A CITY TO GROW AND DEVELOP IN A SUSTAINABLE WAY**

Cities play a central role in how the world is developing and how big global challenges are tackled. More and more people are moving to cities and through urbanisation the power of cities keeps growing. From the perspective of a particular city there is a need to find a competitive edge compared to other cities in order to attract more people who would be an asset to it. Therefore, how cities choose to grow and brand themselves and to deal with sustainability is important.

When Richard Florida introduced his notion of the creative class, he introduced the “Three T’s” of economic development to be considered in strategic planning. The 3 T’s are technology, talent, and tolerance. Later Florida discusses his theory in relation to cities and points out that all three are needed for a city to be successful. He argues that people are the key economic growth asset and that cities need to tap and harness the full creative potential of all people. As an open question of the creative age he points out that the creative economies must deal with rising social and economic inequalities in order to succeed (Florida, 2005).

Charles Landry (2000) argues that in the future the “learning city” will be a more powerful metaphor than the “creative city”. A true learning city in his mind is one which develops by learning from its experiences and those of others and where self-evaluation is a defining feature. The key characteristic of the learning city is the ability to develop successfully in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment. He also points out that any city can be a learning city. Even so, the fewer natural or historical advantages a city enjoys, the more important it is that it should re-think itself as a learning city. There is an opportunity to turn weaknesses into strengths by looking at its potential resources in a more comprehensive way (Landry, 2000).

As Landry’s mission is to help cities make the most of their potential, he elaborates later on the opportunities of a digitised city (Landry, 2016). We are currently in the midst of redesigning the world and all its systems – legal, moral, political – together with the economy and the infrastructures for a digital age with ICT as one backbone. The digitised city needs ethical values to guide its progress with human beings placed centre-stage. Cities need to remain alert to ensure their priorities and values are acknowledged as the digital industrial complex has discovered the city as a major new market. Collaborative models based on openness are key to surviving well in this emerging world. New governance models on disruptive co-creation effects, for example, the effect of Uber on taxi companies, are required (Landry, 2016).

City development experts look at cities from a design perspective. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is advocating a more humanistic approach. The idea of the learning city from this perspective has been driven by educators: lifelong learning experts and those in adult and community education. In the founding meeting of the global network in 2013, the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities defines a learning city as a city that effectively mobilises its resources in every sector to:

- promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education;
- re-vitalize learning in families and communities;
- facilitates learning for and in the workplace;
- extends the use of modern learning technologies,
- enhances quality and excellence in learning; and
- fosters a culture of learning throughout life.

In so doing, it will create and reinforce individual empowerment and social cohesion, economic and cultural prosperity and sustainable development (UIL, 2014, p. 6).

According to Valdés-Cotera and Wang (2018), the UNESCO learning city approach is a practical, holistic, and comprehensive way to implement lifelong learning in all sectors and at all levels, from families, communities, and municipalities, to national levels. Learning cities foster inclusive and sustainable learning systems that provide broad and flexible lifelong learning opportunities through formal and non-formal pathways. They thereby help create inclusive, sustainable, creative, and entrepreneurial societies that promote the health, wellbeing, prosperity, and civic engagement of their citizens. Successful learning cities all add a well-organised lifelong learning dimension to sustainability in all its aspects: social, economic, cultural, and environmental.

### **The Espoo Story**

Espoo is the second largest city in Finland and consists of five city centres. It is a continuously growing city which makes it necessary for the city to organise more and more services. This has pushed the city to rethink how to organise its operations and act in many new and innovative ways.

The Espoo city strategy is in the format of a story. This story is only a few pages long and explains the city's beginnings, where it is now, and where it is going, i.e. the history, the current stage, and the future of the city. The story was created together with multiple stakeholder groups as illustrated in Figure 1. The main bulk of responses were received through an internet tool that helped gather and sort the information. City employees were asked to fill in the survey as well. In addition, the mayor toured the city and held meet and greet events. He met children in day-care and asked them what they would do if they were to be the mayor for one day. Children expressed ideas from their own perspectives. He met with the elderly and collected wisdom from them as well. In total almost 20,000 comments and suggestions were received. All the material was discussed and reworked for the Espoo Story. The sectors and units of the city derive their own stories and goals from the main Espoo Story. According to the mayor, the Espoo Story has been very successful. The story has inspired the residents and stakeholders to partner with the city. It is not merely a publication that is forgotten when it is done but it lives with the city in its everyday life (City of Espoo, 2018d).

Figure 1: The Espoo Story was created together with citizens and stakeholders



Source: City of Espoo, 2018d.

A special effort to implement the Espoo Story goes through cross-administrative development programmes which identify the major challenges that the city is facing today and will face in the future. The development programmes are led by groups of the top five politicians and the top five civil servants from different fields. Agile co-creation processes and innovative experiments are the main ways of finding sustainable solutions for improvements (Erkkilä, 2017).

### **Espoo Innovation Garden**

Espoo has claimed to be a responsible pioneer. Pioneering refers to broadmindedness, creativity, openness, a desire to question the status quo and courage to do things in a new way. It also includes the will to use research and international experience, experimentation as well as being prepared to deal with the possible failures related to them. The main strength of Espoo is that it is calling on its citizens, organisations, including universities and other educational institutions and businesses to develop and make things happen together.

Espoo Innovation Garden refers to an innovative way of working based on a culture of collaboration and co-creation (City of Espoo, 2019b). It promotes a communal way of thinking and doing things. The city's mission is to find and formulate the right questions, to create platforms for collaboration, and to encourage its citizens and all other

stakeholders to get involved – at every level and everywhere. This way they form an ecosystem for working together to develop innovations. The goal of this collaboration is to create new jobs and wellbeing for the companies, communities, and citizens. Espoo Innovation Garden also shares and implements the Espoo Story. The city of Espoo is a facilitator. It is responsible for providing the Innovation Garden with the best possible environment and grounds for growth. The city also provides tools to create networks and shared platforms (City of Espoo, 2019b).

### **Espoo Becomes a Learning City in the UNESCO Network**

The Espoo Local Development Plan for Education 2020 is based on the vision that Espoo aims to be a competent municipality known for its fairness, its commitment to residents and clients, and its pioneering approach with responsible leadership. The plan was initiated by the Finnish National Agency for Education and was put together with various educational partners in capacity building workshops organised by the city authorities (City of Espoo, 2014).

In Espoo, its citizens can fulfil their own potential and participate in developing their communities. By providing learning opportunities and resources, Espoo encourages its citizens to be competent and creative residents who can succeed even in an uncertain future with the help of a learning spirit. These principles are included both in the Espoo Story and in the Local Development Plan for Education, which have been co-created with the citizens and partners (City of Espoo, 2018b).

Both of these plans together with the notion of Innovation Garden were a good start for developing an understanding of what building a learning city involves. When UNESCO called for cities to attend the first Conference on Learning Cities in Beijing in 2013, Espoo responded. At the Beijing meeting it became clear that Espoo was headed in the same direction as the Global Network for Learning Cities (GNLC). Espoo joined the network as soon as it was possible.

### **BUILDING A LEARNING CITY**

The main thing a city needs to consider when becoming a learning city is its motive for becoming one. Espoo's goal is to be a good place to live, learn, work and do business, and to be a place where residents can have their say. Ensuring the wellbeing and inclusion of all its citizens is the key objective. Providing every citizen with opportunities for lifelong learning plays an important role in achieving this objective (Erkkilä, 2015).

In order to join the GNLC Espoo had to create its own definition of a learning city and the rationale for its activities. This coincided with Finnish national budget cuts in education. It was a good reason for the local education providers to unite. The idea was not to go to barricades against the budget cuts but to show how important the right for lifelong learning is for everyone. The strength of Espoo as a learning city lies first and foremost in that the city recognises the importance of learning for the wellbeing and growth of its citizens,

organisations, companies, and the city itself, but also in the fact that Espoo is a growing city and wants to be a forerunner and to find new ways of doing things. The joint slogan was formed: “In Espoo learning is valued.” It has three subthemes: (1) “Everyone has an opportunity to learn”, (2) “The joy of learning grows”, and (3) “Collaboration is power”.

The consistent learning paths had already been on the agenda as part of the Espoo Local Development Plan. The concept also includes the idea of learning happening anywhere, at any time, and at any age. The city of Espoo is preparing its citizens for the future by empowering all kinds of learners to be at the centre of their own learning. It provides continuous learning paths leading from early childhood education, to capacity building in the workplace, and to learning in later life. Flexible learning spaces and digitalisation are expanding opportunities to participate and have fun when learning.

Information and communications technology (ICT) as an enabler has been imbedded in this notion. International studies had shown that kids in Finland did not enjoy themselves in schools. At least they did not express that. Other studies showed that when there is joy in the learning process and when learning happens together with others, one learns much better. This way the joy of learning became the second emphasis. The third point was obvious in Espoo, but it needed still to be stated. Espoo had been built as a city in a way in which partnerships mattered. As the city was growing so rapidly it had teamed up with third sector organisations and institutions to fulfil part of its duties (City of Espoo, 2014, 2018b).

## **WHO IS BUILDING THE LEARNING CITY?**

In Espoo the interest for lifelong learning started in the early 90s, if not earlier, in the sector of Education and Culture with the leadership of the Deputy Mayor. Then there was an active network in Espoo, in Finland and internationally. Longworth and Davies (1996) mention Finland and actors from Espoo being involved in the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) and the World Initiative on Lifelong Learning. The European Commission designated 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning. OECD, UNESCO, and G7 Nations were all active on the subject as well.

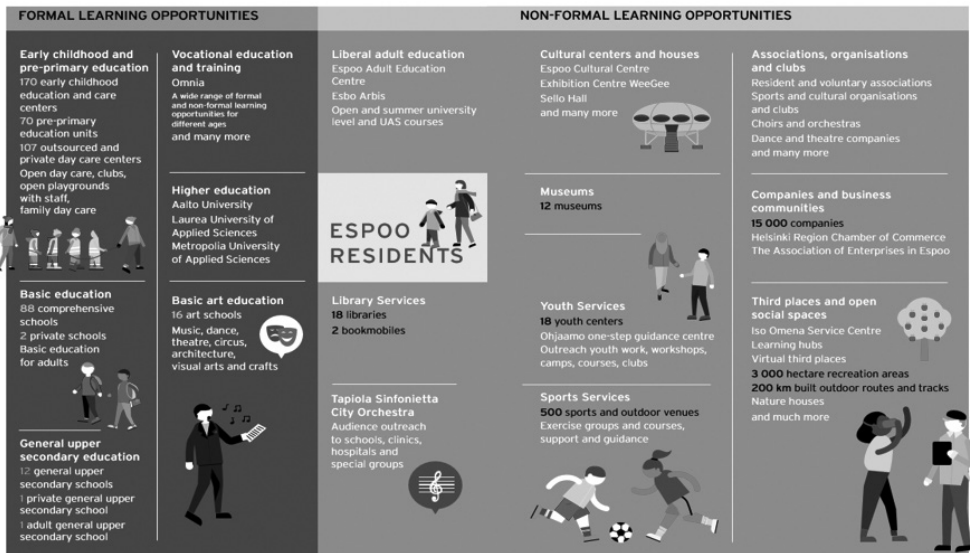
However, when people change, ideas and activities can easily be forgotten for a while. The beginning of the UNESCO GNLC in 2013 provided a new opportunity for the Lifelong Learning agenda to surface in Espoo. It is necessary to have a spokesperson or persons for an agenda. It was again the leadership in the Education and Cultural Services in the city organisation who took initiative in this. The same group that had been involved in drafting the Local Development Plan was gathered to make an action plan to become a learning city. The beginning was organised on a rotating basis. In the autumn of 2017, the Learning City Advisory Board was established to support the development. The Advisory Board consists of city officials from different sectors, political decision makers, leaders for key educational partners and representatives of the business community. The Advisory Board meets twice a year. Its key task is to set the goals of learning city work for a four-year

period. It is also an important group for lobbying the importance of lifelong learning in their own organisations, local society, and beyond. A Learning City Steering Group from the central organisations was formed to plan, prepare, and lead the implementation. This group meets 6 to 8 times a year (City of Espoo, 2017, 2018b).

When setting the objectives for Espoo Learning City, the Advisory Board did not start from scratch. They connected their objectives with the Espoo Story and with the directions of the Guide for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Learning Cities (UIL, 2017) and the three areas of emphasis there: (1) Equitable and inclusive learning cities, (2) Green and healthy learning cities, and (3) Decent employment and entrepreneurship in learning cities. The Espoo Learning City Objectives for 2018-2021 have a total of eight goals. The implementation of these goals is set and monitored annually by the Advisory Board (City of Espoo, 2018b).

In the end, it is the people themselves who make up the Learning City of Espoo as illustrated in Figure 2. Only a small part of it is happening under the umbrella of formal education. So much can come from different groups, organisations, clubs, and societies within culture, sports, and other fields. It is the Espoo residents in different contexts such as libraries, museums, events and activities, be they physical or virtual, who are all building the Learning City of Espoo starting from their own interests. The local entrepreneurs and businesses are participating as well (City of Espoo, 2018b).

Figure 2: People in Espoo are building the Learning City



Source: City of Espoo, 2018b, pp. 5-6.



## **EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Espoo has been recognised twice as the most sustainable city in Europe. This recognition is based on a study conducted by the Telos Institute, which is related to the University of Tillburg, Holland (Zoeteman, Muldder, Smeets, & Wentink, 2016; Zoeteman, Paenen, Mulder, & Wentink, 2017). The study showed that while constantly growing, Espoo has been able to keep the city sustainable as measured by economic, sociocultural, and ecological indicators. The main strengths of Espoo, according to the study, are nature, safety, and participation. The goal of Espoo is to keep its leading position as the most sustainable city. This calls for direct action in many different fields and commitments from various stakeholders. The most striking goal for Espoo is to be a carbon neutral city by the year 2030 (City of Espoo, 2018c).

In addition, it is important to realise that remaining one of the most sustainable cities also calls for systematic education and training on sustainable development and working to fulfil the SDGs. This is needed in all stages of life, including adulthood (cf. Evans, 2019). In Espoo the concept of a sustainable lifestyle is used to talk about the attitudes and actions for making more sustainable choices in everyday life. The city can promote a sustainable lifestyle in many ways by organising services to support this. One example is providing good conditions for sorting rubbish, making it easier for users to do that. Espoo has also compiled a programme called Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Espoo 2018-2021. It is directed at the city officials but also at Espoo residents. It brings ESD onto everyone's agenda and inspires the readers to act themselves. It includes three goals, gives examples of good practice, and makes the SDGs and ESD better known in the city. Espoo has a set leadership structure to lead this work and to track the implementation of the programme. One very important factor is that based on this programme good practice can be found, get recognition, and it can be scaled (City of Espoo, 2018a).

## **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ADULT LEARNERS?**

There is a saying that one is never too old to learn. Learning activity depends on attitude but also on opportunity. Lifelong learning encourages the learners to learn at any age, but it helps if there are programmes, forums, platforms, and information available for adult learners.

It was decided a few years ago to concentrate the central educational services for adults in Espoo at the Adult Learning Services Centre. This centre unites the Community College, the General Upper Secondary School for Adults, the Apprenticeship Training Centre, and the Vocational Adult Education Centre. The idea is to have all the services under one roof or on the same virtual site in order to support the creation of a personal lifelong learning path, which can combine both professional and leisure time goals (Erkkilä, 2015). Liberal adult education also includes open and summer university services from traditional universities and the universities of applied sciences (i.e. more practice-oriented studies). Together with young people, adults can of course also learn in other non-formal and informal contexts.



Learning as part of the working life has long been the norm in Finland. For example, teachers generally have three days a year minimum for further training, but it can be many more based on the needs of employees and on what the employer can afford. The recent societal debate has been about seeing lifelong learning as an asset in working life in order to keep up with technological changes. It has not been easy to find an entity who is willing to pay for it all. There are initiatives that it should be a citizen's right for everyone to update their skills in a systematic manner to reach the competence needed. Several blogs, working groups, and committee reports are discussing the development of skills and competences as a long-term investment in working life and as a source of wellbeing for the individual. There is currently a call to develop a new cross-sectional policy for lifelong learning in Finland (Sitra, 2018).

Espoo is known as the Finnish city with the most highly educated adults (more than 50% of adults have a higher education degree) and the healthiest elderly in the country. They are highly motivated to continue learning even when they get older. The Espoo Adult Education Centre provides open studies for lifelong learning and for personal growth. The centre offers a variety of subjects to study and the choices are available online together with other metropolitan area adult education organisers. There is also an opportunity to get a printed catalogue of education providers. Instruction is given at least in Finnish, Swedish, and English. Most of the classes take place in the evenings so that people who work in daytime can join them as well (City of Espoo, 2019a).

Valadas, Vilhena, and Fragoso (2019) studied Portuguese men at the transition stage to retirement and found out that education and learning have an immense impact on the lives of older adults. Education had shaped the life paths of men, but it also affected directly and indirectly their motivation and ability to continue learning in later life. For some of the men in their study informal learning was the central instrument for changing community life. They also noted that informal learning is often invisible, unnoticed by both researchers and educators.

In Espoo, there is evidence that particularly highly educated elderly women are the most active segment in taking courses at the Adult Education Centre. In general, those from a more educated background seem to be active in lifelong learning, be it from formal or informal sources. In Espoo many organisations, clubs, societies or businesses have noticed the rising demand in elderly population. Particularly sporting opportunities tend to also draw senior men to participate. The city of Espoo offers free sports and exercise services to Espoo residents aged 68 and over with the +68 sports wristband. In terms of culture, the elderly can get a volunteer companion to escort them to cultural events. It should also be pointed out that in Espoo only the evidence which is measured systematically can be shown.

## **CELEBRATE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE JOY OF LEARNING**

The Guidelines for Building Learning Cities call for cities to initiate and maintain the process of developing a learning city with celebratory events. It suggests organising a

learning festival or holding a conference and inviting the media to cover it. It is important that these occasions are regular to keep up the interest (UIL, 2015).

The first Learning City Festival in Espoo was held in September 2016. It consisted of an invitational conference and a fair open to the public. The conference was meant for Espoo stakeholders but those interested from other municipalities in Finland were also invited. The topics concentrated on showcasing what a learning city is. Successful European learning cities Cork, Swansea, and Sönderburg presented their models. UIL and the Ministry of Education sent their representatives to participate and present. On the second day the local lifelong learning providers gathered their educational offerings and innovations into one big fair and this way the participants could show the public what they were doing, learn from each other, and find new opportunities for collaboration. The festival also included a workshop for all the attending learning cities for planning future developments together. A joint document of the planned activities was launched as the Espoo Statement: *Learning Together*.

The second Learning City Festival was held in May 2019. It was a one-day event held both inside and outside of a shopping mall. The theme of the festival was “Let’s do together!” People were invited to participate, watch, experiment, and learn. This time a team consisting of the core educational organisations had planned and organised the event for about nine months. The only international group who took part in this festival was a delegation from Osan City, Korea.

## **AWARDS AND CHALLENGES**

At the second International Conference of Global Network of Learning Cities in Mexico City in 2015 Espoo was recognised by UNESCO as one of 12 pioneering Learning Cities. This award was a recognition of all of Espoo’s initial efforts (City of Espoo, 2017).

Even though Espoo has been one of the first cities in GNLC in Finland and perhaps Europe as well, to join GNLC, there is still a lot that needs to be done.

Valdés-Cotera and Wang (2018) state as one concrete challenge that Finnish society is becoming more multicultural and diverse, which tends to be most immediately apparent in metropolitan areas. Espoo’s lifelong education services will continue to play a special role in helping newcomers settle into the city while maintaining their own cultural identity.

“No one is left behind” has been a powerful slogan in Finland for many years. Espoo has been implementing plans to realise that successfully on many levels of education. It is a core task in the Espoo school system, but there are also special programmes to pay attention to and work on these challenge as there are many lonely or marginalised persons especially among the youth and the elderly in addition to immigrants.

Another challenge is still to get all the necessary parties and the general public truly engaged in the Learning City agenda. As people in the leadership change, this is a challenge for the city’s commitment. There are so many competing agendas in any city that it is hard

to say which ones are the most beneficial and essential to keep. However, Espoo seems to be truly committed to being a sustainable city and lifelong learning is seen as an essential tool to keep sustainability on the agenda and to advance the actions for reaching the SDGs. It would be a smart choice to support that by continuing to be active as a learning city and in the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is a great opportunity for a city to decide to become a learning city. It requires a lot of work to become one, but it can be seen as a long-term investment for the future of the city and its citizens. Learning city activities can also be a vehicle for advancing things such as citizen wellbeing and sustainable development. Some learning cities have profiled their learning city by emphasizing certain topics. In Espoo the emphasis has been on inclusion, ensuring continuous learning paths for everyone, not just in formal but also in informal learning and free time activities, and working for sustainable development.

One of the main things when beginning to build a learning city is to gain the support and commitment of the society. The better the network to support the learning city's commitment, the better the chances for the city to succeed in its task. As a solid educational foundation is important for a continuous learning path, there is a need to get those providing formal education involved first. There is no right size for a city to do that. It can be a village, a town, a rural city, a metropolis or a part of one. It is really up to the people to decide how the idea best works for them. It is worth taking the time needed and making all the necessary steps suggested in the GNLC guiding materials when building a learning city. Some cities are eager to learn what other cities are doing. It is smart to look for other cities domestically or internationally; even though the conditions, strengths, advantages or challenges might be very different, it is good to reflect on the actions taken in one city and to consider how they might work in another. This is where GNLC can be of great assistance with its database, publications, forums, and gatherings both locally and regionally. Some cities decide to build their learning city in their own way and stick to their own starting points.

When is the city then ready and can finish developing as a learning city? The first major milestone is to be ready to send the application for membership in GNLC. The next could be to apply for the Learning City Award. But in the end, a learning city is never complete because lifelong learning and continuous development are the essence of the whole idea.

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