

CHANGING ROLES OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING CITIES INTO SMART AND CREATIVE COMMUNITIES. REFLECTION UPON TWO DECADES OF ADVANCEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In the age of learning, universities play a key role in the development of smart and creative urban communities in the frames of learning cities. This paper will analyse the changing roles of universities in enhancing learning cities as part of their mission in lifelong learning so as to increase citizen participation in effective knowledge transfer. We will reflect upon the roles of learning cities in building the learning culture/infrastructure to develop skills for life. In addition, we try to understand how the organisational capacity of formal institutions (HE/VET) is used to facilitate and strengthen 'weaker' organisations working with communities, volunteers, etc. We will also respond to trends of how co-operation and partnership within a learning city are fostered between municipalities, formal educational institutions, civic learning organisations, companies, and other types of non-learning organisations. Finally, we formulate a reflection on what universities can do to stimulate joint approaches to learning within a region/city to support learners in acquiring skills for life. The key message of this paper will be connected to how to balance competing individual and community claims when it comes to how urban environments must change in order to offer sustainable, resilient and more equitable ways of cohabitation. Several experiences are reflected in this paper that were acquired through the author's membership in the PASCAL International Observatory, the ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub), UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities, the ESREA Network, eucen, as well as various local and global adult learning communities.

A MOVE TO BRIDGE SMART AND LEARNING CITIES THROUGH ULLL – EXPANDING ROLES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs)

When the aspirations and realities of the new millennium gained momentum in Europe, initiating local and regional developments through learning (EC, 2002), it was widely believed that universities would have strong roles in analysing the ways and methods of developing communities through collaborative forms of knowledge transfer (Longworth, 2006; Doyle, 2007). University lifelong learning became understood as a multidimensional construct of learning based on connections between formal, non-formal and informal settings so as to enhance both economic growth through employability and social cohesion through active citizenship.

In the last twenty years, transnational organisations like the PASCAL International Observatory, ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Lifelong Learning Hub and eucen have demonstrated in several ways that innovations in lifelong learning would require the participation of higher education institutions (HEIs). Such involvement would help formulate quality developments in participation and performance through partnership-based actions from local and regional to national and international dimensions. Recognised innovations were mainly formulated in project-based actions which focused directly on social capital, place management, lifelong learning, and sustainable development. It comes as no surprise that learning cities and regions, as models of urban-based economic recovery, were rediscovered through multidisciplinary research groups using lifelong learning in order to connect universities to local and regional innovations for economic growth, social mobility and cohesion based on stakeholder collaborations. This has been exemplified by the PASCL International Observatory's ECCoWell model (put forward by Kearns (2012)) or its PURE project (Preece, 2017).

The role of universities may vary depending on the specific situation and position, ranging from that of initiator, partner or follower in developing urban platforms for knowledge transfer. After three decades of lifelong learning policy, however, the time has come to develop constructive definitions surrounding the roles and responsibilities of universities in the promotion of sustainable, liveable and creative communities for prosperity and collaboration.

Our attempt is to provide reflections in the context of university lifelong learning to help learning cities and communities demonstrate effective forms of skills development and knowledge transfer. When we explore the evolution of learning cities (Jordan, Longworth and Osborne, 2013), we have to recognise that learning cities, regions and communities have entered an age of uncertainty. This fact, however, may help us generate orientations for discussion to recommend new positions and roles for universities on the basis of some emerging examples of practice in the formation of collaborations through lifelong learning. Therefore, in 2007, the OECD and its two relevant institutes (IMHE-Institute for Managing Higher Education, and the CERI Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) formulated a profound model of how universities should make use of growing competition and risks, thereby recommending connecting global competition with local engagements through local and regional models of activating citizens (OECD IMHE-CERI, 2007).

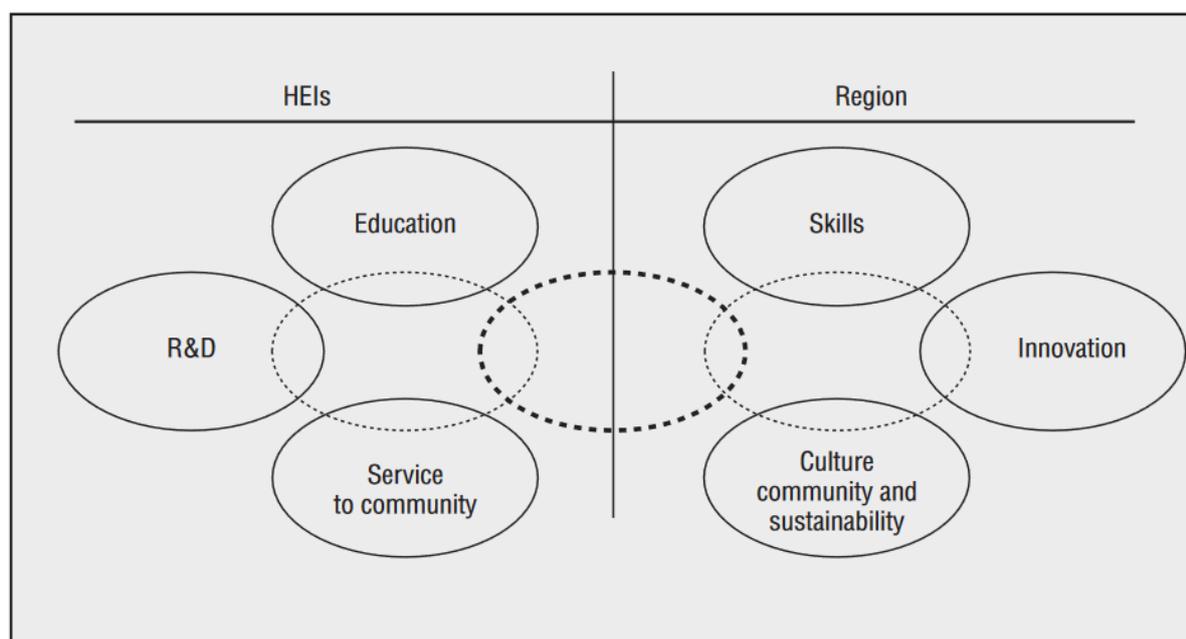


Figure 1 – Closed model of HEI/region interface (OECD, 2017, p. 40, adapted from Goddard and Chatterton, 2003).

Modified goals of lifelong learning policies in 2008 and beyond resulted in a predominantly economy-centred reality of skills and competence development for jobs through reconsidered VET. Universities could still convincingly demonstrate over the last fifteen years that they have a responsibility to maintain a holistic approach to lifelong learning so as to develop and promote participatory actions for quality learning and skills for communities, economies and the environment. As such, PASCAL, eucen and the ASEM LLL Hub made use of policy papers such as the European University Association's Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA, 2008), Learning City charters, declarations and several other project-based toolkits to develop local and regional collaborations of learning (Eckert *et al.*, 2012). Let us also recognise that the European approach to lifelong learning has always been somewhat twofold in order to strike a balance between the social and the economic, and that this approach was also copied by the learning city-region model so as to combine economic realities, social and cultural aspirations and quality concerns (Duke, Osborne and Wilson, 2005).

Universities that have been involved in innovations around learning city-regions and communities are those organisations who have demonstrated a recent history of researching and developing lifelong learning, place management and social capital, with particular emphasis on sustainable development. Along with UNESCO's influence and/or the impact of the OECD, approaches and initiatives of the European Commission must also have played key roles in influencing such HEIs in Europe. These initiatives galvanised a number of European governments to make use of the European Social Fund to turn cities and regions into learning regions, either in the wave of the European Lifelong Learning initiative, as the earliest frame for lifelong learning interchange and dialogue (TrainingZone, 1992) or as part of the Regions of Lifelong Learning (EC, 2002) a decade later. Another possible impact has been the movement of the European Capitals of Culture (EC, n.d.), another significant platform to change cities becoming capitals of culture. The above indicated factors are rather important for universities in cities that became engaged in turning their cities and communities into learning communities to collect and share quality skills and knowledge.

UNESCO's focus on lifelong learning, and especially on learning cities, became more pronounced at the end of the decade directly following the turn of the Millennium. The aim was to highlight the importance of cities and regions connecting formal, non-formal and informal places of learning. In this regard, UNESCO's Global Learning City Initiative (GLCI) was a direct step that signalled a shift into the direction the OECD and the EU had made several years earlier, so as to build on learning communities having explored and achieved significant stakeholder collaborations and having promoted active citizenship (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012).

It is also important to consider that the EC's White Paper on Governance in 2002 (European Commission, 2001) supported practical implications of learning city-region models based on active citizenship and critical thinking. Moreover, new narratives around active citizenship helped connect lifelong learning, higher education and active citizenship, which became a leading model for UNESCO (University of the Western Cape/UNESCO, 2001) to explain new dimensions for universities in the development of communities.

In the last twenty years, it has become rather clear that cities and regions with innovative universities that have a strong commitment to and activities in lifelong learning would have better and more creative positions to assemble stakeholders to formulate urban developments; these developments are based on skills and knowledge transfer reflecting needs of the community, so as to embrace a culture of lifelong learning. Recently, UNESCO's call for promoting adult and lifelong learning connected learning cities and communities to the development of sustainable and resilient communities in line with the UN Agenda 2030 and its goals for sustainable development (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2017). At the same time, enhancing lifelong learning made UNESCO highlight the

unique role of universities in the development of lifelong learning through local and regional developments, either in smart, creative approaches, or in learning models based on collaboration with respected stakeholders aiming at specific places for promoting sustainability (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022a). This recognition, combined with bridges towards innovations through learning cities, encouraged UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities to work in clusters so as to respond to challenges of sustainability, health and well-being (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, n.d.). It became evident that learning cities that have universities with strong positions in lifelong learning hold greater capacities to realise their plans and strategies within the scope of smart, creative and learning communities to reconstruct economies and society for better futures. Having scrutinised some model cities and regions like Cork, Wolverhampton, Espoo, Pécs, Sonderborg and Groningen, we stepped forward to formulate reflections upon some important points.

ROLES OF LEARNING CITIES IN BUILDING THE LEARNING CULTURE/INFRASTRUCTURE TO DEVELOP SKILLS FOR LIFE

One of the key roles of HEIs in the promotion of learning cities/regions and learning communities is the combination of research, development, and innovation. When one looks into the planning, achievement and formation of learning cities and their nearby regions, it becomes obvious that universities can initiate and foster the plan and strategy, but also develop particular projects so as to strengthen the commitment of city leadership to support their selected model's best fit for needs relating to community development. Although economic growth and development are essential for political leadership so as to legitimate power through strengthening jobs, social and community dimensions also claim several interventions and particular collaborations that help prepare communities and their members to learn for change with better skills and knowledge.

This social and community dimension may place specific components of knowledge platforms within the axis of urban strategies. This is, for example, what PASCAL International Observatory and its Learning Cities Networks have signalled – namely, to explore effective forms of learning cities and regions to offer knowledge transfer to meet the emerging needs of different generations in an age of uncertainty. Accordingly, such an approach is helping in rediscovering identity, belonging and active citizenship in various forms of partnerships labelled by different focuses of learning cities (PASCAL International Observatory Learning Cities' Networks, n.d.). In this regard, universities can help city-region stakeholders find their way, whether with a focus on economic, social, or environmental development, or a combination of all three, with smart, creative or learning orientations.

We also have to understand that celebratory events, such as learning festivals, days, weeks, etc., are very important and necessary for universities and other organisations of lifelong learning to support communities of learning to exchange ideas, values, knowledge and skills in a process of bottom-up work building on local needs to collect and share. Learning cities and regions, therefore, have become well recognised by UNESCO in its 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015) and its recent Marrakech Framework for Action 2022 (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022b).

Some other important roles for learning cities and regions are to identify and demonstrate new/atypical places and forms of learning, but also to underline the fact that learning culture is built in common and shared ways amongst local communities. Universities can help in educating and training new generations of facilitators of adult learning to hold good skills and competences in the formation of community-based lifelong learning. Professionalisation and

the professional development of educators are also necessary dimensions some universities may address, as responsibility and relevant project work and collaborations from local to global are essential and effective examples from which to learn. Beyond PASCAL, the ASEM LLL Hub and eucen are those higher education platforms where research, development and innovations are combined with practice and relevant scientific advancements.

Universities are relevant organisations to highlight learning city activities in the scope of intergenerational and intercultural learning, as attention to vulnerable groups and sustainability is a key issue for public discourse and dialogue. Furthermore, matters of infrastructure of learning, maintained by providers of formal, non-formal and informal places of learning, together with necessary life skills development through communities of practice, can be effectively demonstrated by universities; in doing so, universities help make these topics appear influential for learning city charters to describe values and principles of lifelong learning in local and regional settings. Consequently, learning cities and regions need universities to build and develop lifelong learning, but also to generate local and regional development based on strategic thinking (Németh, 2020).

These central focuses, in the case of Espoo in Finland, are demonstrated by specific activities to connect Espoo City Library, Omnia, Third Sector, three designated universities, Omnia Adult Education Centra, Esbo Arbis, Business Espoo and the City of Espoo so as to enhance continuous learning paths from early years to later life (Erkkilä, 2020).

Wolverhampton City and its regions has formulated particular priorities to make its learning region promote and realise aspirations, for example, through the learning festival, the global learning festival, Wolverhampton learning communities, and PASCAL's EcCoWell Community Recovery Program. Its second priority is aspiring towards a skilled workforce, which is connected to the strategic development of a city-wide approach for learning digital skills, aligned with wider strategy and digital inclusion. A third priority is the engagement of adults in learning for health and well-being. This aspect is demonstrated by membership in UNESCO's learning city cluster on health and well-being and also through focuses on learning experience in art and culture, as part of the Wolverhampton City Learning Region (WCLR) for well-being co-ordinated by a specific platform at the University of Wolverhampton (University of Wolverhampton, n.d.).

The Cork Learning Festival in Ireland is an example that underlines the importance of creating a culture of learning through various activities in which University College Cork plays a role of research and innovation in association with several stakeholders and community platforms, like learning neighbourhoods (O' Tuama, 2020). Cork as a learning city is a profound example of community orientation with a good balance between social and economic development, but also demonstrates how a city as former cultural capital of Europe may use the learning city model to channel its lifelong learning actions into long-lasting partnerships for resilience and cohesion in community.

The UNESCO Learning City of Groningen in the Netherlands chose a particularly unique way to signal the importance of inclusion by reaching out to disadvantaged members of the community through changing perspectives of policies, perspectives referring to lifelong learning and to its intergenerational and intercultural dimensions (Klercq, 2021).

The case of Sonderborg Learning City in Denmark is an example of following the "Netflix approach" to learning, so as to link pupils, families and companies at two levels. One is an internal track to promote sustainable development through available specific learning materials, project week, the local UNESCO festival and weeks dedicated to the empowerment of young people. An external track is to deliver the UNESCO Festival for SDGs and a Youth Summit. Such actions are well-supported by the participation of specific university bodies (Andersen, 2021).

The City of Pécs in Hungary has formed its Learning City Programme and its Learning City Festival in association with several stakeholders and civil society organisations. Its key partner for research and development is the University of Pécs, which has managed connections with UIL and organised three international conferences around recent trends and issues in lifelong learning since 2017. The university took the role of helping strengthen community and community learning through learning festivals by formulating thematic programmes, based on collaboration amongst relevant stakeholders, so as to reflect challenging aspects of economy, culture and arts, society and the environment in the context of urban development and sustainability. Also, the University of Pécs has initiated and promoted international partnerships regarding research and innovation through UNESCO GNLC and its cluster on health and well-being (Németh, 2021).

HOW IS THE ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY OF FORMAL INSTITUTIONS (HE/VET) USED TO CAPACITATE AND STRENGTHEN 'WEAKER' ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES AND VOLUNTEERS?

First of all, universities can turn their experience and expertise in lifelong learning into the formation of learning cities and communities based on dialogue with local and regional groups, platforms of organisations and institutions. Also, HEIs have a strong and rather high reputation when it comes to convincing city municipality and local/regional institutions of education and training to enter various forms of partnerships with the aim of quality development of skills and competences.

Key perspectives indicate making use of effective forms of university lifelong learning, providing capacity building for Learning City partners and stakeholder representatives and applying the results of innovations to enhance quality dimensions of learning cities based on linkages with the PASCAL Observatory and the ASEM LLL HUB. Moreover, universities can support the development of international partnerships towards UNESCO Sustainable Cities in order to connect smart, creative and learning aspects following a recent trend in cross-sectoral collaboration. VET development grounded in a strong alliance with economic stakeholders, like employers, unions, chambers of commerce and industry and SMEs is another emerging perspective for universities to enhance engagement and performance in lifelong learning. Simultaneously, widening learning cities with regional focuses to respond to scientific and technological innovation is a further trend that cities would embody by becoming smart and creative communities (Osborne, 2018).

We have collected some relevant examples of learning cities to bolster the above argument:

In Wolverhampton, the university has been profoundly involved in community engagement as a civic mission for HE. Accordingly, this scope enables input for expertise and innovation in lifelong learning, the development of city-wide, national and international partnerships, acting as a catalyst for community collaborations in different forms, research to underpin developments in the WCLR initiative with innovative steps, co-ordination of the Wolverhampton City Learning Region platform as investment and, finally, commitment to supporting learning communities (Mahoney, 2020). The City of Wolverhampton Council supports these issues through a relevant framework for governance to indicate ambition and vision for shaping the learning city. Another form of commitment is the mayor's support towards the implementation of the UNESCO model of a learning city.

The example of Cork demonstrates a strong link between smart, inclusive and sustainable dimensions through the green campus initiative of University College Cork, the Food Forest model and the Playful Paradigm as connected to skills and competence developments.

In Espoo, collaborative partners co-create the learning city by combining formal and non-formal learning grounds. Concrete inputs in VET are provided by Omnia, while its partner HEIs, like Aalto University, Laurea and Metropolia Universities of Applied Science, are adding research and innovation, amongst other directions, to that scope. Accordingly, early childhood education and care, basic education, basic art education and general upper secondary education serve to form a bridge with non-formal learning grounds of liberal art education, libraries and culture, sports and youth services, Business Espoo, third sector and open learning spaces in association with universities (Rinta-Aho, 2021).

In Pécs, the impact of higher education has mainly been focused on the co-design, planning and organisation of the annual learning festivals in partnership with the House of Civic Communities and outreach to several civil society organisations engaged in lifelong learning, community development, sustainable futures, creative platforms in art, education, smart technologies and creative modes of knowledge transfer. Based on its participation in several international projects, the University of Pécs, as member of eucen, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), PASCAL and the ASEM LLL HUB and partner of UNESCO UIL in the development of learning cities, has a specific role to support weaker learning organisations, trying to promote participation and skills development via their programmes to reach wider public attention and recognition in the frame of Pécs Learning City Programme and its festival of Learning City Pécs (Németh, 2020).

In Sonderborg, Syddansk Universitet is a key stakeholder in the formation and development of the House of Science in Sonderborg together with some other educational providers, e.g., the local Folkeskoler and training institutions, to develop STEM related skills with a strong attention to labour market needs and VET realities referring to upskilling and reskilling (Sonderborg House of Science, n.d.)

HOW IS COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIP WITHIN A LEARNING CITY FOSTERED BETWEEN MUNICIPALITIES, FORMAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, CIVIC LEARNING ORGANISATIONS, COMPANIES, AND OTHER TYPES OF NON-LEARNING ORGANISATIONS?

Universities are needed to signal the initiation of platform-building in the frame of learning cities and regions with attention to project-based piloting and to raising awareness through examples of good practice. Universities and other respected stakeholders of the learning city can organise workshops and intensive programmes with cities/municipalities that have been engaged in learning city orientations. Consequently, this process generates public discourse on the benefits of building a learning city with attention to choices and limitations, legitimising the ways and forms in which learning communities may turn learning festivals and other celebratory events into demonstrations of the power and joy of learning.

Universities act as leading agents of cities by turning attention to learning city collaborations for urban benefits and how to make use of respective resources and capacities in and around lifelong learning. It is not only through the ways of joining UNESCO Sustainable Cities Networks, for example, the Global Network of Learning Cities, but also through the development of smaller communities of learning within a city (like districts, neighbourhoods and families) that it becomes possible to collect and share necessary knowledge for urban collaborations of citizens for a better life and environment.

The collected examples may help in responding to the aforementioned question, *How is cooperation and partnership within a learning city fostered between municipalities, formal educational institutions, civic learning organisations, companies, and other types of non-learning organisations?*

Cork Learning City is a wider umbrella organisation that incorporates early childhood learning, primary and secondary education, tertiary and further education, higher education, providers and learners, community education and the private sector. They are all brought together into the Learning City Roundtable to discuss, initiate and enhance learning community developments and balance them with other respected aspects of sustainable urban programmes of learning workplaces, learning neighbourhoods, seminars and conferences and the learning lab, specific platforms where University College Cork has specific roles and responsibilities through university lifelong learning (O'Tuama, 2016). UCC, having been a eucen member, has benefited from several former eucen projects to have promoted the third mission of HEIs (eucen COMMIT, n.d.).

The Espoo Learning City Network follows an open and inclusive format that involves relevant stakeholders and providers of education and learning in formal, non-formal and informal environments. The City of Espoo has generated specific platforms at the municipal level, like City Board, Growth and Learning and City Vitality to generate co-ordinated attention and care through effective management to include Chambers of Commerce and the Association of Entrepreneurs to work with several organisations involved in continuous learning (Erkkilä, 2020).

The Wolverhampton City Learning Region is based on a particular partnership approach and includes a broad range of organisations working in partnership to place learning at the heart of the city to tackle social and economic challenges using education and learning as the focus. This partnership implies platforms like learning organisations and adult education providers. Moreover, it also incorporates a University of the Third Age, and a platform for Equality and Diversity Partnerships (Mahoney, 2020).

In the Netherlands, the regions of Zwolle and Flevoland have recently developed platforms for collaboration. Zwolle has developed platforms of learning region to enhance linkages between city and schools, to connect with the business community and to develop quality-based strategies of education and VET. Flevoland has been promoting a platform of libraries engaged in lifelong learning and effective learning in the workplace (Klercq, 2021).

In Pécs, the main focus is on inclusive policies and practices. The Learning City Programme of Pécs was established by 2017 so as to promote both participation and performance in learning, and also to develop access to formal, non-formal and informal learning supported by programmes based on inclusive policies set by involved stakeholders.

Inclusive policy in Pécs means addressing barriers of learning for disadvantaged citizens, namely, those who are socially marginalised, have physical impairments, or special educational or learning needs. These factors may lead to learning difficulties and lack of participation and therefore, civil society groups involved try to tackle the problem through collaborative actions based on trust, equity with mutual benefits and attention (Németh, 2020).

WHAT CAN UNIVERSITIES DO TO STIMULATE A JOINT APPROACH TO LEARNING WITHIN A REGION/CITY TO ACQUIRE SKILLS FOR LIFE?

Universities are in a position to help learning communities develop through collaborations of local citizens and their organisations and institutions. There are several challenges universities may help overcome in partnerships with stakeholders in lifelong learning. More specifically, HEIs that have been involved in the development of learning cities and regions can help effectively explain the mutual benefits of learning city developments for urban-based communities. Through collaborations, they can also empower communities to build

trust, stronger identities and resilience in an age of uncertainty. Universities are seen as organisations with the capacity to bridge learning city developments to effective forms of skills formations and local/regional skills coalitions.

Universities can make municipalities plan and formulate policy, law and better financing to improve participation and performance in adult learning as part of strategic thinking in lifelong learning. Accordingly, universities should accelerate actors/players/stakeholders with practice-based engagement and support efforts towards inclusive, equitable and creative actions of learning in sustainable communities so as to leave no one behind (Németh, 2021).

Examples of the analysed cities may be used as models and as sources for comparative analysis:

In Cork, a Memorandum of Understanding on Learning was formulated and signed by four distinguished lead partners and two strategic partners based on an agreement to create a culture of learning in Cork City. These partners, one of whom is University College Cork, established a steering group so as to enhance learning for all, promoting inclusion and working towards prosperity and sustainability (Barret, 2020).

In Espoo Learning City, the commitment to inclusion through participation allows learners from vulnerable adult social groups to participate in programmes of continuous learning and also stimulates the involvement of those under 30 who may be facing obstacles to inclusive learning for skills development (Erkkilä, 2020).

In the Netherlands, the City of Groningen tries to build on equal opportunities and Den Bosch advocates programmes for youth and talent development so as to meet the needs of their citizens (Klercq, 2021).

In Sonderborg, collaboration amongst stakeholders resulted in the formation of a taskforce group around SDGs to help develop a roadmap for education and to maintain valuable formal and non-formal learning opportunities (Andersen, 2021).

Wolverhampton City Learning Region has developed a specific strategic document called *Relighting our City* in order to get Wolverhampton to respond to citizens in need, create opportunities for young people, generate jobs and learning opportunities, help vital business to grow, and stimulate vibrant high streets and communities.

CONCLUSIONS

HEIs should make every attempt to support learning cities in receiving recognition and respect for their collaborative work to improve learning in urban environments. Lifelong learning in cities and communities is a critical pre-condition for the improvement of quality education based on equity and inclusion, and the implementation of SDGs. Learning cities are appropriate formations to highlight the diversities of learning based on valuable voluntary work and solidarity to provide accessible forms of skills development for vulnerable and underrepresented groups in societies, but also to integrate atypical forms of learning, non-vocational orientations of learners, communities and/or special districts, neighbourhoods with urban linkage to address challenging matters of life, work, community, nature, cultures, connections, etc.

In order to combat illiteracy, the digital divide and exclusion, we must make use of good practices of cities and regions that have been engaged in forming learning communities for a better Europe of partnership, solidarity and inclusion. Universities must continue to discover

and research valuable learning city models across the world in association with UNESCO in order to learn, relate and compare. They should also rely on the potentials of learning cities to enhance adult and lifelong learning both in EU member states, as well as in other parts of the world, to generate attention and care.

Finally, it is self-evident that eucen and its members must promote the involvement of universities to research and innovate through learning cities and regions for quality learning. There is another opportunity, by bridging HEIs to the New European Agenda on Adult Learning 2030 (Council of the EU, 2021), so as to make use of learning cities and communities in enhancing quality adult learning in between local and global realities.

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