

## Choices for and Barriers to a Learning City. Developments of the Pécs Learning City-Region Forum

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Abstract: The Faculty of Adult Education and HRD of the University of Pécs initiated three local learning platforms in the Fall of 2014 as part of the Pécs Learning City-Region Forum, based on the initiative of UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning on the *Global Learning Cities Network*, as an umbrella network to get *new collaborations* started amongst learning organisations. These platforms collect and share best practices around the following themes: *Atypical/Non-formal Learning platform*; *School and Environment platform*; *Inclusion and Handicapped Situations platform*.

This paper and the related presentation will elaborate upon how the *Atypical/Non-formal Learningplatform* generates specific adult learning and training of educators in local/rural Hungary based on a global initiative of learning cities. Accordingly, it will examine the challenges and opportunities for the learning city model of Pécs, based on some concrete actions in museums, and other cultural organisations, in engaging more adults in learning and developing their own communities in atypical forms of co-operative learning within and across particular platform-based actions.

Keywords: learning cities, lifelong learning, sustainable development, inclusion, community development

### UNESCO's Recent Global Learning City Initiative

More than 1000 cities in the world have developed into or are building Learning/Educating cities. This obviously shows that the building of cities which put learning at the forefront of their policies and strategies has become a significant world-wide phenomenon. Cities rarely work in isolation and practical examples have reflected that those cities that are members of a dynamic network of local authorities at national, regional and international levels, have accelerated their growth and competitiveness as learning cities.

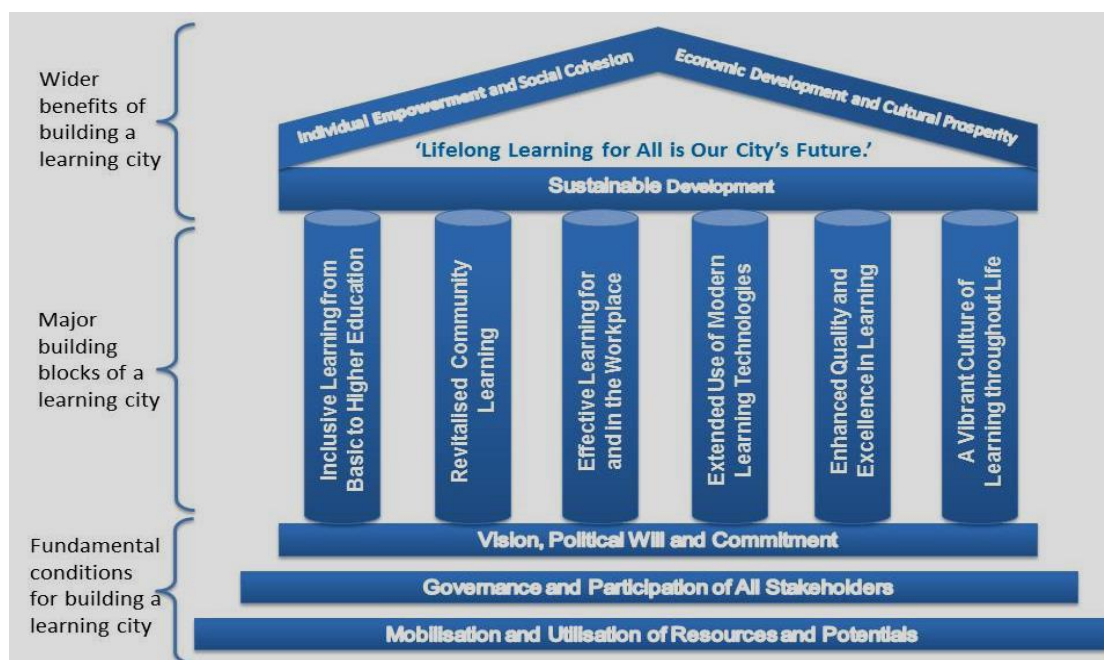
Most of these national, regional and international networks, while playing important roles in spreading the concept of learning cities, also have need of expertise networks or research organizations involved in developing tools and materials promoting and expanding the concept, and in establishing creative on-going working links between cities.

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There are also many cities still unaware or uncertain of the benefits that a truly global network of learning cities can bring to the development of lifelong learning and the learning society. For these reasons and more this initiative is timely. As UNESCO's centre of excellence for promoting lifelong learning, and in response to Member States' call to adopt a more pragmatic and instrumental approach to building a learning society, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) has recently proposed the establishment of the *UNESCO Global Learning Cities Network (UNESCO GLCN)* to enhance and accelerate the practice of lifelong learning in the world's conurbations.

The overall aim of the establishment of the UNESCO GLCN is to create a global platform to mobilise cities and demonstrate how to use their resources effectively in every sector to develop and enrich all their human potential for fostering lifelong personal growth, for developing equality and social justice, for maintaining harmonious social cohesion, and for creating sustainable prosperity. The UNESCO GLCN is intended to be a timely and innovative initiative to offer appropriate means by which cities can develop themselves into learning cities and create better environment – for themselves and for their citizens. (UNESCO, 2013)



Graphics 1: The Framework of the UNESCO Global Learning City Index. Source: [www.uil.unesco.org](http://www.uil.unesco.org)

#### Local Responses to Global Initiatives with the Aim of Community Development: The Pécs Learning City-Region Forum

Based on a decade-old international project partnership, to deal with the Learning City-Region model in cooperation with PASCAL Observatory, UNESCO Institute for LLL, the University of Pécs and its Faculty of Adult Education and HRD initiated, in 2013, the establishment of the Pécs Learning City Region Forum in order to develop a direct tool in certain areas of pedagogical/andragogical work targeting training trainers, educators and facilitators of learning. The project was incorporated into the project of the University of Pécs financed by the Hungarian Government's Social Renewal Operative Programme (TÁMOP 4.1.2.B – Developing Teachers-

Educators/Pedagógusfejlesztés) focusing on the Development of Teachers. Its so called K4 project sub-group decided to develop structural models for collecting and sharing good knowledge and experience for teachers, trainers, mentors and facilitators engaged in the promotion of quality learning and skills-development in formal, non-formal and informal settings.

Therefore, the Pécs Learning City-Region Forum started its activities in the Fall of 2014 in three majors fields by accelerating partnerships and dialogues:

*Atypical/Non-formal Learningplatform*(This platform tries to help cultural organisers, curators, managers be more successful with their educational programmes organised for adults and also for school-teachers engaged in the development of cultural programmes for children) Such a collaborative frame involves more than 8 organisation/institutions and their representatives in order to identify innovative learning methods, tools, methodologies with atypical contexts.

*School and Environment platform* (This platform supports dialogue amongst professionals developing specific environment-oriented programmes for local youth and their parents so as to become Nature-friendly, and conscious in protecting their environment. There is a specific focus to help school-teachers as adult learners building such orientations in the classroom and use available sources, programmes and curricula, etc. to achieve that goal based on collected best practises) Around nine member organisations/institutions work actively in the Forum through delegates, professional experts by providing platform-based exchange of ideas upon bringing closer school –pupils, their families to environment and environment-friendly, green thinking, actions and change-management with attention to interdisciplinary thinking and human behaviour.

*Inclusion and Handicapped Situations platform* (This platform helps teachers to engage in collaborative actions providing dialogue to understand problems emerging from working with young children with learning difficulties, e.g. autists)

#### *Atypical/Non-formal LearningPlatform*

This platform tried to collect and organise specific events with the participation of major institutions and organisations working with culture and culture-related knowledge transfer in museums, libraries, and other cultural formations, local community centres and other particular NGOs.

The platform generated a thorough discussion over innovative actions to help promoting participation by emphasizing collaborative forms of learning in atypical environments and various learning communities around culture, arts, information and library science and elderly education and learning in senior academy frames.

The Faculty of Adult Education and HRD promoted such a platform-building in order get this special focus of learning be integrated into the Learning City-Region Forum of Pécs and, moreover, into the development of teachers/educators through project-based networking amongst some relevant stakeholders in the field.

The programme of the platform enabled participants to get acquainted with some recent developments related to atypical learning and supported a series of rather professional dialogue which has been one aim of the collaborative approach behind the Learning City-Region initiative. These constructive dialogues were mostly built on the circulating

events of the Platform which provided a good occasion to introduce the host organisation's activities and practice-oriented approach towards promoting atypical/non-formal learning. At these events, partners of the platform and other invited guests, participants could reflect to the practice of atypical learning and to widening participation in learning.

At the same time, atypical learning as such was discussed and approaches of many kinds demonstrated challenges to learning in non-formal ways and constructions. The platform partners indicated several times that the ways and methods they provide learning activities for different age-groups have been challenged by the drastically changing learning environment and learning customs and needs. Atypical learning has recently been changing and affected by new technologies, the impact of social media and intergenerational alienations.

However, regular participation in cultural programmes are heavily influenced by falling financial resources and the lack of leisure time for many adults who, at the same time, would have some significant personal need and desire to learn, to expand knowledge and develop skills through lifelong learning.

Examples of the practice of partners have been collected as good practices and demonstrated in additional publications of the TÁMOP/Social renewal project 4.1.2B.

#### *School and Environment Platform*

This Platform aimed at bringing providers of environmental educations and specific learning environments to allow school-pupils and their families to learn about environment, environmental protections, nature, energy save and green thinking with sustainable aspects could demonstrate and show their practices which could be labelled and recognised as good practice. Also, partners of the Platform could learn from each other and, at the same time, collect and share some key issues, experience on the subject matter.

Partners organised the events of the Platform in the logics of rotating the meetings which enabled them to visit one another group member and to learn about their special approaches and practices on environmental oriented educational activities, programmes, publications, web-based materials, etc. This way of organising the platform-meetings generated unusual levels of interest and helped partners to recognise the general approach to the Learning City-Region Forum, namely, that learners will always have the power to shape and form activities by their own obvious claims and orientations.

It became evident and clear that there was a strong and very rich learning opportunity at all those platform events hosted by platform members/partners, which actually demonstrated a particular reality about who would be interested in forming a networking amongst experts and practitioners of environment-oriented education, nature-oriented field-focused learning with young kids and their class, parents or both.

The participation and engagement of invited partners showed a great responsibility and, at the same time, concrete claim for a platform based dialogue in order to collect and share good and relevant practices which would demonstrate quality learning and educational aspirations. Moreover, the establishment and development of such a platform has also signalled an attention to the claim that people who sustain such environment oriented approaches

and get young generations involved in action- and experimental learning need something of a good-practice reservoir/archive where later followers of the field can take inspiring ideas from.

Another momentum has been the development of the website of the Learning City-Region Forum where the Platform, amongst the other two, has got an electronic site for uploading events, programme summaries, blogs, and further elaborative writing on and around environmental protection and environmental education of young people, and other intergenerational groups.

A serious challenge towards the Platform has been how to raise the attention of some more firms being engaged in sustainable development, energy save, and other forms of environmental protection. It might raise the problem of better communication and several direct contacting towards those potential partners in the Pécs region and beyond. This issue, however, needs further planning and systematic networking with better demonstration of what the Platform has so far achieved.

#### *Inclusion and Handicapped Situations platform*

This Platform of the Learning City-Region Forum decided to emphasize concrete dialogue for educators, teachers helping young children with learning difficulties caused by serious mental handicapped status by being autists. This approach signalled the necessity of providing a living platform in order to activate relevant school teachers and developers trying to raise the further perspectives.

The Platform organised several meetings where professional teachers have been mentoring such young children. Some particular good practices have been collected into the Good Practice collection of TÁMOP 4.1.2.B project and, also, have been uploaded to the website of the Learning City-Region Forum.

But one may argue, what impact such a platform can provide in the development of skills and methodological performance of such professional teachers to deal with young children with learning difficulties? The response would come from participating teachers who themselves had indicated a need for a good and viable networking in order to exchange experience-based knowledge upon how to better help the learning of autistic young children. This need was well incorporated into the planning and organisation of the sessions of the Platform by enabling engaged teachers to form the programme and orientations of the sessions by reflecting to upcoming problems and trying to articulate some specific approaches and responses to occurring challenges in practical teaching and learning situations.

Another key element of this Platform was the way and methods of identifying good practices around inclusive pedagogies. It became a particularly interesting process how inclusive approaches to pedagogy was explained and used in the work of the Platform, how some arguments signalled the difficulty of a formally easy label be used upon concrete educational situations and formats. Members of the Platform demonstrated a rather humanistic approach where it turned out to be an alpha principle of labelling a practice as good one directly to helping a learner with learning difficulties recognising the help through the joy of learning and participating situational learning processes.

In a reflecting way, the Platform also turned into a hub for teachers engaged in voluntary work for young children with learning difficulties and also for some specific professionals providing help for those young children whose

parents, for example, need specific assistance in bringing those wonderful minds and souls towards adulthood by becoming better in reflecting to their responses to the world and to their emotions expressed accordingly.

The three dimensions of the Forum's platforms have enabled us to recognise *some key barriers to collect and share good practices* upon particular development works of partner organisations and institutions, which are:

- low levels of culture of mutual partnerships and collaborative actions to share experience and to develop professional skills, competence of educators/teachers, trainers and facilitators;
- limited time available for educators/teachers, trainers and facilitators to develop skills and share exchange knowledge, experience.
- small resources to constrain participation in programmes of the forum and, at the same time, heavy working load dominating majority of working time.

Choices for the development of learning in a learning city-region model:

- Growing interest amongst decision-makers and stakeholders so as to develop and maintain new and effective ways and methods for useful and problem-based knowledge transfer amongst institutions/organisations in the school sector, labour market, cultural organisations and institutions and other respected informal learning grounds and environments.
- European funds available through the European Social Fund for collaborative actions amongst educational, cultural and environmental organisations for raising participation and providing counselling for better performance in learning.
- Need for Common Identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for learning city-region development.
- Necessary improvement of learning conditions and collaborative spaces for young people with learning difficulties through inclusive learning environment.

The main tool of the development of the Forum was the organisation of platform-based sessions for collecting and sharing good knowledge, another key element is the website of the Forum where good practices are collected and documented for further distribution and developments in quality learning with key attempt for local and regional recognition and attention both by stakeholders, decision makers and by the local citizens.

Which ways forward?

The Pécs Learning City-Region Forum has been established in order to push forward the concept of networking around knowledge transfer for the sake of better trends in local and regional performance in learning and skills-development.

The Forum has started as an overall partnership in 2010 supported by all major stakeholders who had established some sort of links and affiliation towards education, training and, on the other hand, development of learning. Therefore, it was set as an umbrella network so as to promote learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. The original networking plan was, however, difficult to be emphasized and promoted amongst partners for

the difficult national and political and social changes to come in the midst of 2010. That climate did not help further partnership building and exchange of ideas. We have to be rather happy to have been able to find an interest of the University of Pécs and its Institute of Educational Science at the Faculty of Humanities to broaden its EU co-funded programme on “Teacher Training” in the Social Renewal Operative Programme (TÁM OP) 4.1.2.B and its K4 programme division.

This programme has not only invited the Pécs Learning City- Region Forum to provide specific platform based actions in order to support the skills developments of school teachers in Pécs and its region, also in Kaposvár, but also to allow the Forum to start growing in its knowledge-transfer networking in local and regional dimensions especially in three identical scopes which may be complemented with other particular orientations later on.

Future orientations have to be framed and settled around some distinguished principles and initiatives based on both local and global calls. This means the continuation of recent platforms with potentially growing partnerships based on headquartering the Forum to the House of Civil Society Groups (NGO Communities – Civil Közösségek Háza in Hungarian). This civil society group has stated that it would host activities and potential actions of the Forum in partnership with the Faculty of Cultural Science of the University of Pécs.

Another important dimension is the website of the Forum that needs serious improvement and expands both in content and relevant collection of information referring to learning cities and regions in local, national and global contexts. This improvement needs, however, a significant input from the University of Pécs in back-up from web-edition through the use of project resources be applied for with direct intentions so as to well-organise the Forum in its virtual aspects so as to be able to reach potential users and, at the same time, so as to raise attention of those users through regular visits to the website of the Forum.

It must also be underlined that local and regional development funds must be targeted by partners in order to develop the Forum and incorporate further services of dissemination and exploitation of results of either on-going or closed projects of partners related to skills development, learning, community development, HR development, etc.

Let us indicate here that the current platforms need further developments and have to prepare for further directions around which they can involve their members to discuss and reflect to some concrete problems affecting their own activities, and the other way round, how their work may influence such scenarios and trends.

The development of the Forum has to reflect, additionally, to some new trends and issues being represented by some distinguished international institutions and organisations, like the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, (UIL-Hamburg), the European Centre for VET Development and Research (CEDEFOP), the OECD and organisations as PASCAL Observatory and EUCEN – European Universities Lifelong Learning Network, the latest one in the aspect of the social dimension of higher education.

We presume that new perspectives of the Learning-City Region Forum is to make the City Council of Pécs and the County Council of Baranya to recognise the innovative potential behind this networking of learning providers and professionals and support future activities both by joining the stakeholder group of the Forum and by demonstrating

social and community need for a specific event in order to celebrate learning and learning performance through inviting all educators for a day into main square Pécs dedicated to Celebrating Learning/Learning Festival.

Finally, the Form should work as a disseminating filter in between its locality and the global initiative of learning cities (GLCN) of UNESCO. This initiative might enable us to make use of other good practices of networking around learning by collecting and sharing good knowledge for the good of people and their communities. Likewise, the Forum should also demonstrate the aim and struggle to stock good local and regional practices of learning in community formats either in formal, non-formal or in informal ways.

A further aspect of the Forum could be the development of web-based exchange of information amongst Learning City-Region providers in the platforms and get their practical work be blogged on the website by participants enrolling to their public events so as to raise knowledge, competence and skills around the themes and topics of their programme.

Learning City development, for this reason, may also need a concentrated actions and input from higher education so as to raise research and innovation around the focus, contents and methodologies used in the promotion of local and regional partnerships for quality learning and education – trainings.

We believe that the impact of the three platforms and the synergic effect generated amongst them could be of potential use and reflection. At the same, these platforms will, in our understanding and expectations, influence education, training and other valuable forms of knowledge transfer in local and regional settings by providing a specific feedback upon such activities and generate some more public attention towards the quality of teaching and learning itself.

It is necessary to promote the improvement of dissemination and exploitation of results through several channels, like local and regional media, social media, community places, public events, etc. through which one can obtain and reach reliable information on activities, programmes and actions. We presume that the Pécs Learning City-Region Forum can be involved into the international platform of PASCAL Observatory where some distinguished actors and promoters of the learning city-region initiative discuss recent challenges and opportunities for learning in urban contexts, especially learning in and through communities.

We, finally, need to think of how to enlarge the platforms and the Forum itself. In order to reach a wider and more frequently engaged community in the work of the Forum, people must be able to recognise the mutual benefit in this initiative and process of knowledge transfer. Therefore, they have to get involved not only in the planning and achievement, formation of platform meetings, lectures and discussions. Another successful way of getting more people involved in such actions, platform engagement must be connected with open societal movements as demonstrations for lifelong learning in urban structures



## Conclusions

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, we believe, is in the interest of city-region programmes to rise participation and performance both in economic production and social terrains. We do hope that dominant economic orientations will need a more sophisticated community vision by which stability, open society and development may be given priority in the locality of Pécs, Hungary with a strong attempt to develop community development in partnerships and dialogue based on collected and shared knowledge and experience. That is what the Learning City-Region Forum is for.

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