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What do Learning Cities add? Rethinking impact, evaluation, and governance

Che cosa aggiungono le learning cities? Ripensare l'impatto, la valutazione e la governance

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Abstract

Despite the global diffusion of learning cities and the expansion of evaluation frameworks, uncertainty persists regarding what learning cities add beyond existing institutional activities and how such value can be meaningfully assessed. This paper argues that these challenges are not primarily methodological but conceptual and political. Drawing on the historical evolution of learning cities and learning regions, it shows how early economically driven framings – particularly those associated with OECD learning region discourse – have shaped contemporary evaluation logics. Through a critical examination of indicator-based and benchmarking approaches, including those linked to the Pascal Observatory and the Unesco Global Network of Learning Cities, the paper argues that learning cities should be understood as governance ecosystems whose distinctive contribution lies in coordination, alignment, and collective learning. It concludes by advocating learning-oriented, context-sensitive evaluation conceived as a governance practice rather than a technical measurement exercise.

Keywords: Learning cities; Evaluation; Urban governance; Lifelong learning; Path dependency.

Sintesi

Nonostante la diffusione globale delle learning cities e l'espansione dei quadri valutativi, permane incertezza su quale valore aggiunto esse producano rispetto alle attività istituzionali esistenti e su come tale valore possa essere valutato. Il contributo sostiene che tali difficoltà non siano principalmente metodologiche, bensì concettuali e politiche. Attraverso l'analisi dell'evoluzione storica delle *learning cities* e delle *learning regions*, il saggio mostra come i primi inquadramenti economici – legati in particolare al discorso dell'OCSE – abbiano plasmato le logiche valutative contemporanee. Mediante un esame critico di approcci basati su indicatori e benchmarking, inclusi quelli dell'Osservatorio Pascal e della Rete globale delle learning cities dell'Unesco, il contributo propone di interpretare le learning cities come ecosistemi di governance, sostenendo una valutazione orientata all'apprendimento e sensibile al contesto, intesa come pratica di governance piuttosto che come esercizio tecnico di misurazione.

Parole chiave: learning cities; valutazione; governance urbana; apprendimento permanente; dipendenza dal percorso.

1. Introduction

Contemporary learning city discourse is marked by a paradox. The concept of the learning city has achieved remarkable global visibility through initiatives led by Unesco, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and transnational networks such as the Pascal Observatory, with hundreds of cities adopting the learning city label, developing strategic frameworks, and engaging in processes of benchmarking and self-assessment (Unesco-UIL, 2013; Jordan, Longworth & Osborne, 2014). Yet despite this rapid expansion of designated learning cities, evaluation frameworks, and benchmarking instruments, confidence in what these tools actually demonstrate remains strikingly low. Persistent uncertainty surrounds fundamental questions: What, precisely, is the added value of a learning city? What distinguishes a learning city from an assemblage of learning providers? What forms of value emerge at the city scale? And how can such value be meaningfully attributed to learning city governance rather than to individual institutions or pre-existing conditions?

This paper argues that these unresolved questions reflect not a lack of technical sophistication, but a deeper conceptual problem that has constrained prevailing responses through a narrow evaluative imagination. Much of the existing literature treats evaluation as a technical challenge – one of indicator selection, data availability, or methodological refinement (Eckert et al., 2012; Tibbitt & Wheeler, 2015). However, the core difficulty lies at a more fundamental conceptual level. Contemporary evaluation frameworks have evolved within a historically specific policy trajectory shaped by economic competitiveness agendas, human capital theory, and performance-based governance. These early framings, rooted in economic rationalities that privilege measurability, comparability, and short-term performance over emergence, coordination, and long-term learning, have produced a durable path dependency that continues to structure contemporary evaluation logic – privileging what is easily measurable over what is socially, culturally, and institutionally transformative.

Against this backdrop this paper advances a critical conceptual intervention by reframing learning cities as governance ecosystems rather than as delivery mechanisms or simple aggregations of educational outcomes. From this perspective, the distinctive value of learning cities lies in their capacity to coordinate diverse actors, align institutional and temporal horizons, and generate emergent forms of collective learning. Understanding learning cities in this way shifts the focus of evaluation away from the measurement of isolated outputs and toward the analysis of relational dynamics, institutional coordination, and long-term processes of social and educational transformation. This intervention addresses current debates and calls for a fundamental reorientation of how learning city value is understood, assessed, and cultivated.

Crucially, learning cities are not merely governance arrangements but macro-pedagogical environments. They shape the conditions under which individuals and communities learn across the lifecourse, configure relationships between formal and informal learning sites, and influence whose knowledge counts in urban development (Unesco, 1996; Piazza, 2023). Evaluation frameworks therefore do more than measure performance: they define legitimate learning, construct hierarchies of value, and orient institutional behaviour. From a pedagogical perspective, the question of added value is inseparable from questions of epistemic justice, democratic participation, and collective reflexivity (Azizi & Osborne, in press).

2. The Genesis of Learning Cities

In this paper, we explore firstly the genesis of learning regions and learning cities, emphasising both the economic as well as social imperative that has underpinned their development. There have been a number of accounts of the emergence of these concepts (Longworth, 1999; 2006), some tracing them back to the age of antiquity (Longworth and Osborne 2010; Stenger 2019) in cities such as Alexandria, and later with the rise of Islam in cities that include Damascus, Cairo, Tripoli, Jerusalem, Cordoba and Fez. The common feature within these cities was the existence of huge libraries, accessible to the populus. It is perhaps no co-incidence that libraries have been at the centre of many contemporary learning city developments.

In the 20th century, the notion of the learning region emerged from the OECD's (1973) 'Educating Cities' project that invited Adelaide, Edinburgh, Edmonton, Gothenburg, Kakegawa, Pittsburgh and Vienna to put Education at the forefront of their strategies with the purpose of exploring how these cities 'could encourage a culture of lifelong learning' (Hirsch, 1993). This work eventually led to the creation of the International Association of Educating Cities (OECD/CERI, 1992).

A later OECD (2000) project on learning regions considered specifically the economic benefits of developing a learning region, with a focus on the process of transforming industrial economies into knowledge economies. In a report of this study focused on the European regions of Vienne (France), Jena (Germany), Andalusia (Spain), Thames Gateway (UK) and Oresund (Sweden/Denmark). Reporting on this work, Larsen (2001) argued that: "what learning cities and regions have in common is an explicit commitment to placing innovation and learning at the core of development. All seek to sustain economic activity through various combinations of lifelong learning, innovation and creative uses of information and communication technologies".

These early models of the learning region focussed on the way in which learning infrastructure might attract inward investment, stimulate economic development and enhance human capital (Field & Leicester, 2000). Learning was thus framed as a strategic asset for territories, closely aligned with labour market needs and industrial development. Whilst it has been argued that the economic rationale of the OECD lacked a consideration of many social, cultural, educational and environmental dimensions, it did acknowledge "the importance of learning through partnerships, learning through experience, the need for investment in learning as the source of well-being" (Longworth and Osborne 2010, p. 379). However, this early economistic framing established an evaluative trajectory that continues to shape contemporary measurement logics. The prioritisation of competitiveness and human capital development created path dependencies in which what is measurable became conflated with what is valuable. This historical legacy is central to understanding current tensions in learning city evaluation. These elements common to other broader models being developed in parallel work that were the basis for initial developments of measurement tools for learning cities.

More encompassing initiatives can be traced back to work of the now defunct European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) and the World Initiative on Lifelong Learning (WILL) in the mid 1990s, both of which advocated for lifelong learning and learning cities globally (Ball & Stewart, 1995; Longworth & De Geest, 1995). As Longworth and Osborne (2010) report there is a direct link from the establishment of ELLI to a succession of projects funded by the European Commission (EC). Most notable in the first instance was TELS (Towards a European Learning Society), a project completed in 2000, the results of which influenced a policy paper on the local and regional dimension of Lifelong Learning

(Commission of the European Union, 2001a), and the European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (Commission of the European Union, 2001b). The work of ELLI and the TELS project paved the way in Europe for the integration and highlighting of social, cultural, political, educational and environmental perspectives as well as economic ones, the development of indicators of learning city development and their measurement using a variety of audit tools.

3. Development of Learning City/Region indicators. The Pascal contribution

3.1. Phase 1 – Indicators

Since 2002, in Europe a number of projects funded by the European Commission have sought to build on the ELLI work by developing indicators to specify and map the contribution of stakeholders, including HEIs, to the development of learning cities. Much of this work was undertaken by teams co-ordinated by the Pascal Observatory. In a first phase from 2002-2008, three projects are of significance: *Indicators*, *PENR3L* (Pascal European Network of Lifelong Learning Regions) and *LILARA* (Learning in Local and Regional Authorities).

The R3L Indicators project was one of 17 inter-regional networks funded by the European Commission (2002) under its Regions of Lifelong Learning Programme (R3L) and created stakeholder audits of the contribution to lifelong learning of each of Local and Regional Authority Administrations, schools, Adult Vocational Education establishments, Universities and Small and medium-sized enterprises in five cities across Europe.

The LILARA project audited "the needs and desires of local and regional authority employees for knowledge and learning about the future of their authorities as learning cities and regions" (Longworth & Osborne 2010, p. 391). Its rationale was underpinned by the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM), the idea of embedding a permanent focus on continuously improving products and services, and itself linked to the rise in New Public Management (NPM) Models (Vinni, 2007).

PENR3L sought to create a set of experts in learning city and region development in 25 countries in Europe and led in 2006 to the Limerick Declaration on Learning Cities at Pascal's 6th annual conference in the city.

3.2. Phase 2 – Testing and Quality

In a second phase the Pascal Observatory continued this with the development of existing audit tools, translating and testing these in different sectors, including schools, adult education institutions, local authorities and universities, and the creation of a repository of good practices in learning city development in Eurolocal project, again funded by the European Commission (Jordan, Longworth, & Osborne, 2012). In the R3L+ project, also funded by the EC, a research team undertook a 6-country comparative analysis of best practice tools to quality assure and improve learning networks, based on measures of partnership, participation, performance and learning culture (Eckert et al., 2012).

These approaches were amongst those that informed the development of the Unesco's (2013) *Key Features of Learning Cities* and the Beijing Declaration on Learning Cities, which have proved foundation to the subsequent emergence of its extensive Global Network of Learning Cities. While these instruments have significantly enhanced policy

coherence and international visibility, they also illustrate the gradual institutionalisation of an indicator-driven evaluative rationality. The emphasis on benchmarking and comparability, although politically strategic, risks narrowing the conceptual space within which learning cities are understood. In ecosystem terms, indicators tend to capture nodes rather than relationships, outputs rather than coordination processes.

3.3. Phase 3 – Mapping the regional engagement role of HEIs and TVET

It is notable that within early models, universities played a pivotal role, and much of the current policy discourse, including recent debates (Universities UK, 2025) continues to frame universities as key actors in developing a high-skilled workforce, through collaboration with businesses, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) providers, and regional authorities to align skills supply. Universities are also increasingly described as place-makers: strengthening industrial clusters, generating spin-offs, embedding entrepreneurial education across curricula, and attracting talent, research funding and inward investment. These developments framed learning primarily as an economic resource rather than as a pedagogical process shaping civic participation and social inclusion.

Hence a third phase of Pascal's work from 2008-2020 focused on universities. Notable was the Pascal Universities Regional Engagement (PURE) project (Duke, Osborne & Wilson, 2013), which was funded by 17 city and regional governments across four continents from 2008-2014. The research of this project identified policy barriers at institutional, regional and national level to HEI engagement with regional stakeholders as well as potential enabling strategies.

Project outcomes have underpinned conceptual and strategic thinking as to how HEI systems can effectively contribute to sustainable and equitable socio-economic, environmental and cultural development of city/regions, most especially by working alongside other key actors. PURE used collaborative and consultative measurement processes to support development over a three-year period in each region. This involved:

- the creation of semi-structured interviews for use with key stakeholders and consequent development of self-assessment instruments to be used by regions;
- the co-design of Action Plans with a reference group representing the university sector and representatives of its regional ecosystem;
- monitoring and feeding back progress to regions;
- twinning of regions, and following thematic analysis of regional needs and demands, the development of thematic knowledge clusters led by regions with common interests;
- benchmarking tools for both HEIs and cities/regions to assess opportunities and gaps in provision based on the methods developed by Charles et al. (2010).

The research base and impact methods of PURE have also been adapted methodologically and made culturally appropriate for incorporation into firstly a SFC-funded Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) pilot project, Strengthening the Regional Engagement Role of Universities in Africa and Asia, and a subsequent major British Academy GCRF funded project, Strengthening Urban Engagement of Universities in Africa and Asia (SUEUAA), from 2017-2019 (Neary & Osborne, 2018) in six cities in Iran, Iraq, the Philippines, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. This has led to the development of new platforms for knowledge exchange between HEIs and city stakeholders focusing on particular local urbanisation challenges.

The approach was also used in studies of the role of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector in city development in Hong Kong, Italy, Scotland and Taiwan via a UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) award, *Promoting Community Engagement for Vocational, Professional, Education and Training* from 2017-2018.

4. An overview of instruments

The proliferation of evaluation instruments in the learning city field is not a neutral development. These tools embody specific assumptions about value, causality, scale, and responsibility. Their design reflects inherited rationalities rooted in performance management, benchmarking, and comparability (Tibbitt & Wheeler, 2015). Before reviewing these instruments descriptively, it is therefore important to recognise that they are products of a particular policy genealogy shaped by economic competitiveness agendas and new public management reforms (OECD, 2000; Longworth & Osborne, 2010). There are of course a multitude of relevant instruments to learning city development, tangential or partial, and others more comprehensive. Broadly as Tibbitt and Wheeler (2015) report, these can be categorised as follows:

- indexes and rankings based on secondary analysis of existing data, typically used to provide some idea of current performance and comparisons with other cities;
- new data collection and surveys typically used to explore present performance or knowledge and attributes of city stakeholders and populations;
- qualitative instruments for benchmarking and auditing typically used to assess strengths and weaknesses in present performance or processes; and
- evaluation approaches, typically used to ascertain the efficiency and or effectiveness of present or new initiatives.

4.1. Indexes and rankings

Indexes and rankings include those such as the Schroder Global Cities Index (GCI)[1], the Kearney GCI[2] the ISO (International Organization for Standardization) 37106 for Sustainable Cities and Communities[3] and Price Waterhouse Cooper's (PWC) Cities of Opportunity[4] reports. These are highly economically driven, and tend to devote only small sections to education, and mainly higher education with attention in some cases to literacy. Other ranking systems focus on Higher Education and Cities exclusively such as that of QS[5]. Such analysis has some value in as much as they offer a (primarily) economic baseline to work from in assessing learning in cities, though are restricted to major cities and cover limited domains within education.

[1] https://www.schroders.com/en-gb/uk/intermediary/spotlight/global-cities/global-cities-index/

[2] https://www.kearney.com/service/national-transformations-institute/gcr/2025-full-report

[3] https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/store/en/PUB100423.pdf

[4] https://www.pwc.com/gr/en/publications/assets/cities-of-opportunity-7-the-living-city.pdf

[5] https://www.topuniversities.com/city-rankings

There have also been projects that have undertaken secondary analysis of existing datasets to interrogate lifelong learning and engagement leading to the creation of composite indicators. Bertelsmann Stiftung, for example, developed the *European Lifelong Learning Indicators* (ELLI) index at national and regional level (Saisana 2010) based on a conceptual framework derived from Unesco's (1996) *Four Pillars of Learning*, and already available data from Eurostat databases. The ELLI Index was inspired by Composite Learning Index developed by Canadian Council on Learning (2010) for use in a number of cities (Cappon & Laughlin, 2013). Another example, cited by Eckert et al (2012), the MASON (Mainstream Social Cultural Dynamics to enhance National LLL Strategies) project funded within the EC's Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-13, developed a series of composite indicators of factors closely related to the successful delivery of lifelong learning strategies both at national and sub national level across EU countries with relatively fine data available at NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) 3 level[6]. Collectively these approaches offer robust and well-validated tools and are fine-grained enough to offer enough to provide relevant data across a range of domains of lifelong learning at city/regional level.

4.2. Surveys and operationalising Learning City indicators

Whilst there are several well-known surveys of adult learning at national and sub-national level, such as OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the EU Adult Education Survey (EU-AES) and the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) (OECD, 2025), surveys at city level are less common. However, two surveys conducted through projects associated with the Pascal Observatory, the Urban Big Data Centre (UBDC) and the Centre for Sustainable Healthy Learning Neighbourhoods (SHLC) have focused on cities and neighbourhoods.

UBDC's Integrated Multimedia City Data (iMCD) work includes a large-scale survey approach that investigates the extent to which values, attitudes, beliefs, skills and learning influence behaviours and activity within a city. It is designed to collect data within five domains: sustainability: transport: education/skills (in line with the EU-AES); use of time; and Information and Communications Technology (ICT). It has also developed the field of learning city indicators by operationalising a selection of the 42 Key Features for learning cities of the Unesco's GNLC framework by creating valid and reliable metrics. This framework covers three domains: the wider benefits of building a learning city; its major building blocks; and fundamental conditions for such building. Amongst these are several indicators that can be collected through a survey (Lido, Reid & Osborne 2019; Thakuriah et al., 2020).

The SHLC project considered inequalities at neighbourhood scale in 14 cities in seven global south countries, collecting education and health from over 1000 households through a face-to-face survey. As Nesterova, Osborne and Schweisfurth (2025) argue, "relatively little attention has been given to fine-grained analyses at urban and neighbourhood levels of difference in adult participation that reflect the impact and nuances of place, and of the geographical heterogeneity of opportunity" (p. 53). Cities are large and heterogeneous, and an important aspect of this work is highlighting the need to compare neighbourhoods across

[6] Sub-regions with Populations of between 150 - 800k.

cities to reveal more locally relevant data.

4.3. Benchmarking Tools

A well-developed learning city involves and mobilises a diverse range of stakeholders and resources in a holistic process to achieve its objectives. In developing such a strategy at the outset, it is vital to map or profile current activity and assess the strengths and weaknesses within current processes as a basis for defining priorities for improvement. Earlier in this article we highlighted some of the benchmarking and audit tools that have been developed, providing framework for this kind of analysis to be undertaken. This includes the tools developed in the TELS, Indicators, LILARA and PENR3L project. And specifically in relation to universities and TVET colleges, the approach of the PURE project offers structured self-assessment using a wide range of factors central to learning city performance supported by a limited amount of quantified data. An important aspect of this methodology is the analysis of current educational supply as well as demand from stakeholders.

4.4. Evaluation Tools

Following the implementation of initiatives, it is important to assess whether they have achieved their objectives and targets and to understand their impact on the wider process of learning city development. There are very many evaluation methods available which can vary from detailed case studies to more elaborate *before and after* designs. One example From Australia is the Victorian Performance Measurement Framework (VPMF), also known as the Measuring Impact Tool (MIT), which was originally designed in 2004 specifically for the measurement of state government funded Victorian learning towns (Cavaye et al., 2013). The *Learning community framework measuring impact toolkit*, also developed in Australia, is further example from that country and aligns itself with the Unesco Key Features of Learning Cities (Wheeler, Wang & Blunden, 2014). The previously mentioned R3L+ project also has focused on quality indicators for learning regions/cities. A further exploratory initiative is the *Learning Cities in Friuli Venezia Giulia Pilot Project* (launched in 2019), which sought to test context-sensitive assessment tools aligned with the Unesco Key Features of Learning Cities. While it explored the use of proxy indicators to address feasibility constraints, there is limited publicly available evidence on its outcomes, and it does not appear to rely on social media data or digital traces as proxies.

5. Questioning the added value of the Learning City

It is widely asserted that learning cities generate distinctive economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits, and a growing array of evaluation frameworks has emerged to substantiate these claims (Unesco-UIL, 2013; Eckert et al., 2012). The concept itself is now well codified, supported by internationally recognised indicators and audit tools intended to assess progress and performance. Yet the proliferation of measurement instruments has not resolved a more fundamental problem: whether prevailing evaluation approaches are capable of capturing what, if anything, learning cities add beyond the aggregated activities of their constituent institutions. The question of added value thus remains conceptually under-theorised and empirically under-evidenced.

Despite their apparent sophistication, many dominant evaluation frameworks remain methodologically fragile and epistemically narrow. A recurrent limitation is the heavy

reliance on self-reported data, typically generated by institutional providers of learning rather than by learners or communities themselves (Tibbitt & Wheeler, 2015). Such approaches privilege organisational perspectives, reproduce institutional self-legitimation, and marginalise lived experience. Highly aggregated quantitative indicators further obscure intra-urban inequalities, masking neighbourhood-level disparities in access, participation, and outcomes and giving a misleading impression of coherence and inclusivity at the city scale (Nesterova, Osborne, & Schweisfurth, 2025).

From a pedagogical standpoint, this reliance on top-down indicators creates what Moore, Rydin and Garcia (2015) identify as a fundamental tension between *mobile knowledge* and *situated learning.* This limitation has also been identified in urban governance research. Prevailing evaluation regimes tend to prioritize mobile knowledge – abstract, global indicators and best practices that can be easily circulated between cities – at the expense of the situated learning that occurs within the specific socio-spatial fabric of local neighbourhoods. This mismatch suggests that the *added value* of a learning city is often lost when evaluation focuses on standardized outcomes rather than the localized, educational processes of urban transformation.

5.1. The Learning City as a relational governance ecosystem

At the core of this debate lies the question of what constitutes the *added value* of a learning city. Too often, value is implicitly treated as the sum of individual stakeholder outputs. Yet such an additive logic fundamentally misrepresents the learning city as a governance ecosystem. To move beyond additive logic, the learning city must be conceptualised as a system where value is an emergent property arising from coordination and alignment across actors (Piazza, 2024).

This ecosystem does not merely deliver discrete services; it functions as a *thick* network of coordination and alignment across actors and policy domains. The "added value" lies in the creation of deliberative spaces – institutional arrangements that enable trust-building, shared learning, and institutional reflexivity. From this perspective, the governance infrastructure itself becomes the primary output, facilitating a *collective learning* capacity that allows a city to adapt to complex challenges like climate resilience or social inequality. If learning cities derive their value from enabling relationships rather than delivering discrete services, then outcome-focused indicator frameworks are structurally ill-equipped to capture their distinctive contribution. Benefits such as trust-building and epistemic inclusion unfold over long timeframes and resist linear attribution (Jordan, Longworth, & Osborne, 2014).

5.2. Formative governance and the field of education

The shift toward learning-oriented evaluation carries significant pedagogical and formative implications. By reframing the city as a space for *collective experimentation and reflexivity,* governance itself becomes a formative process. This represents the specific contribution the field of education offers to the debate: it shifts evaluation from a technical audit to a democratic learning practice.

As Lim, Novo de Azevedo, and Cooper (2015) argue, experiencing the city in the digital age requires a *conceptual shift* in pedagogical methods. They suggest that learning the city is not just about receiving information, but about active, technology-mediated engagement that allows citizens to re-read and re-experience their urban environment. In this sense, a learning city adds value by functioning as a pedagogical site where power relations are

reconfigured through new ways of seeing and knowing the urban space.

By centring epistemic justice, the learning city moves from being a container of education to a proactive educational subject (Azizi & Osborne, in press). This perspective is echoed in the Italian national context, where recent scholarship emphasizes the role of the city as a *learning subject* (la città che apprende) that fosters active citizenship through its governance structures (Piazza, 2023; Boffo & Biagioli, 2023; Azara, Leproni & Agrusti, 2024). Here, evaluation becomes a mechanism through which citizens and institutions co-produce knowledge and negotiate accountability, reclaiming the transformative ambitions of lifelong learning (Piazza & Osborne, 2025).

5.3. Economic and social value claims

Economic value claims associated with learning cities are particularly under-specified. Early OECD framings emphasised human capital development (OECD, 2000), yet empirical evidence remains limited. Recent efforts to operationalise economic indicators tend to rely heavily on expert judgement rather than observable outcomes (Formolly, Saraei, & Hajforoush, 2025). Evidence from decolonial learning city contexts suggests that actors – including civil society and Indigenous knowledge holders – often generate forms of value (resilience, adaptive capacity) that are critical to long-term urban viability but poorly captured by conventional economic indicators (Azizi & Osborne, in press).

Similar concerns arise in relation to social inclusion. Learning cities are normatively associated with equity (Piazza, 2023), yet designation alone offers no guarantee. Without deliberate efforts to centre marginalised communities as epistemic agents rather than mere beneficiaries, learning city initiatives risk reproducing colonial knowledge hierarchies (Azizi & Osborne, in press).

The fundamental challenge is not the absence of indicators but the dominance of an evaluative rationality that privileges what is measurable over what is meaningful. Until evaluation frameworks are reoriented to capture emergence, epistemic plurality, and democratic learning processes, the added value of learning cities will remain rhetorically asserted but analytically unresolved.

6. A future research agenda

The analysis advanced in this paper suggests that the challenges confronting learning city evaluation cannot be resolved through incremental refinement of existing indicator frameworks. Rather, they call for a more fundamental rethinking of what evaluation is for, who it serves, and how it is embedded within urban governance.

A first and decisive shift concerns the continued reliance on universalised indicator sets. Further research should reconceptualise evaluation as a democratic practice. In governance ecosystem terms, evaluation functions as a feedback infrastructure that sustains adaptive learning. It is less an audit and more a dialogical process through which collective priorities are negotiated and recalibrated. While international frameworks and benchmarking exercises have enhanced visibility and policy traction, they have also imposed a narrow evaluative logic that privileges comparability over relevance. Future research should therefore move beyond the assumption that learning cities can or should be assessed through standardised indicators, and instead explore context-specific evaluative approaches grounded in local histories, capacities, and priorities (Giles-Corti, Lowe, & Arundel, 2020).

This implies abandoning the search for universally applicable metrics in favour of plural, situated forms of evidence that reflect the diversity of urban learning ecologies.

A second, and related, research priority lies in reframing evaluation from a measurement exercise to the design and maintenance of *learning infrastructures*. Rather than asking how learning cities perform against predefined indicators, future research should examine how cities develop institutional arrangements, relational capacities, and deliberative spaces that enable continuous learning among stakeholders. This shift redirects attention from outputs and outcomes to processes of coordination, sense-making, and adaptation. It also foregrounds evaluation as an ongoing practice embedded within governance, rather than as a periodic audit imposed from outside. Insights from urban sustainability research highlight the limitations of outcome-driven monitoring that neglects upstream governance processes and policy learning (Giles-Corti et al., 2020), a critique that applies with equal force to learning city evaluation.

A third and more radical proposition concerns the democratic dimensions of evaluation. Existing frameworks largely treat stakeholders as data providers or respondents, rather than as co-producers of evaluative knowledge. Future research should therefore reconceptualise evaluation as a democratic practice through which different urban actors – public institutions, civil society organisations, educators, learners, and communities – participate in defining what counts as learning, value, and progress. Such an approach would not eliminate issues of attribution or causality, but would render them visible and contestable, thereby enhancing transparency and legitimacy. It would also shift the evaluative focus from proving impact to enabling collective reflection and negotiated accountability.

Within this broader reorientation, more conventional research questions concerning designation effects, temporality, and continuity remain important, but must be situated within a transformed evaluative paradigm. Rather than asking whether Learning Cities exhibit measurable advantages over non-designated cities, future studies should investigate how designation reshapes governance practices, power relations, and policy narratives, and under what conditions such shifts endure over time. Longitudinal and comparative designs remain essential, but their purpose should extend beyond tracking indicator change to understanding how learning city identities are constructed, institutionalised, contested, or abandoned.

By conceptualising learning cities as governance ecosystems, we clarify what they add: they enable relational coordination across fragmented institutions, cultivate shared normative horizons, and embed learning within governance itself. Their added value is therefore emergent rather than additive, pedagogical rather than merely administrative, and ethical rather than purely instrumental. Persisting with narrow evaluative rationalities risks reducing learning cities to symbolic designations. Reorienting evaluation toward relational learning, epistemic justice, and democratic participation reclaims their transformative potential. Therefore, aligning evaluation with learning infrastructures and democratic governance offers the possibility of reclaiming learning cities as spaces for collective experimentation, reflexivity, and long-term urban development. From a policy perspective, this implies treating evaluation not as an endpoint or branding exercise, but as a central mechanism through which cities learn how to govern themselves differently.

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