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Articles

Roles of universities in formulating sustainable Learning Cities as ecosystems

Il ruolo delle università nella definizione delle Learning Cities come ecosistemi sostenibili

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Abstract

This study analyses the roles of universities in the promotion of learning cities through stakeholder collaborations and to turn them into sustainable and cohesive learning ecosystems of effective knowledge transfer and skills development. However, learning ecosystems, according to Bakker (2024) claim for better policies and strategies, this paper extends this approach to roles of universities and adult learning providers to outline the importance of a joint lifelong learning programmes and strengthening partnerships with learners, communities and stakeholders of the ecosystem. Based on a focused literature-review, selected learning city cases will demonstrate that higher education institutions have a particular role in both formulating effective policies and demonstrating social and economic impacts of community learning to result in trust, mutuality, collaboration and sustainability. Finally, this study will claim that the success of learning cities will depend not only on municipal leadership, but mainly on the will and engagement of stakeholders to formulate learning ecosystems based on mutuality, equity and inclusion.

Keywords: knowledge transfer; learning ecosystems; stakeholder collaboration; urban community learning; sustainable development.

Sintesi

Lo studio analizza il ruolo delle università nella promozione delle Learning Cities attraverso collaborazioni tra stakeholder, al fine di trasformarle in ecosistemi di apprendimento sostenibili e coesi, capaci di favorire un efficace trasferimento di conoscenza e lo sviluppo di competenze. Come sostenuto da Bakker (2024), secondo cui gli ecosistemi di apprendimento richiedono politiche e strategie efficaci, il presente contributo estende tale prospettiva al ruolo delle università e dei provider di formazione, evidenziando l'importanza di programmi congiunti di apprendimento permanente e del rafforzamento delle partnership con i learner, le comunità e gli stakeholder dell'ecosistema. Sulla base di una *focused literature review*, l'analisi di alcuni casi selezionati di Learning Cities mostra come le università possono svolgere un ruolo particolare sia nella definizione di politiche efficaci, sia nello studio dell'impatto sociale ed economico dell'apprendimento comunitario. Questo favorisce fiducia, reciprocità, collaborazione, sostenibilità. Infine, il successo delle Learning Cities dipende non soltanto dalla leadership locale, ma soprattutto dalla volontà e dall'impegno degli stakeholder nel costruire ecosistemi di apprendimento fondati su reciprocità, equità e inclusione. Questo è il risultato dello studio che si presenta.

Parole chiave: trasferimento di conoscenza; ecosistemi di apprendimento; collaborazione tra stakeholder; apprendimento comunitario urbano; sviluppo sostenibile.

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1. A theoretical framework based on literature review

In order to understand the roles of universities in the promotion of lifelong learning, one may recall the famous Cape own Statement of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) to connect lifelong learning, higher education and active citizenship (Unesco, 2001) and relate this focus to citizenship education within learning cities, a framework to call for the participation of HEIs as stakeholders (Unesco, 2021). This as important dimension to claim for a third mission of universities understood as strategic focus of university lifelong learning (De Viron & Davies, 2015). Moreover, Yanming (2011) has reminded us of the value of higher education in lifelong learning, which ought to be recognized both as a market tool (Jarvis, 2007) and as a form of social behavior and lifestyle. According to Knapper and Cropley (2000), universities are not only providers of lifelong learning, but important preliminary places for lifelong learning in communities within urban settings. No wonder, competitive universities try to integrate lifelong learning into their strategies in the following dimensions:

- enhancing a social character of knowledge transfer;
- developing learning interest through forming good learning habits and motivation;
- improving pioneering ability to help learners adapt to social demands;
- promoting all-round development by putting knowledge into practice;
- adjusting HE system in lifelong learning through developing partnerships with government and with society as one of the stakeholders.

Learning cities are models for local and regional communities to make use of the concept of lifelong learning combined with theories of urban development in order to realize collaborative models of knowledge transfer for life, work and community. However, a learning city can also be understood as a frame of putting the idea of the learning society into place by connecting mental landscape with a physical one in a city (Longworth, 2006).

A learning city, according to Han (2011), is like cultivating a forest of learning systems which needs patience, system thinking and collective minds. In this regard, a learning city is a multi-purpose and multi-dimensional strategy to work with education and learning system, including universities.

Recently, learning cities, regions and learning communities have been identified as places of lifelong learning so as to promote sustainable development goals, namely, enhancing urban-based lifelong learning with sustainability measures for communities and citizens within them. In 2017, Portney already signalled the strong roles of cities in the promotion of sustainable environments through education (Portney, 2017).

Atchoarena and Howells claimed that learning cities have particular roles and responsibilities in sustainable development. In that respect they underline that “learning cities are urban entities committed to promote lifelong learning for all, as a manifestation of the right to education and as an instrument to achieve sustainable development” (Atchoarena & Howells, 2021, p. 171). As Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (Unesco UIL) made it clear in the fourth chapter of its Handbook on Lifelong Learning that learning cities have a characteristic role in implementing lifelong learning as “they promote education and lifelong learning for all and, with this, they facilitate individual empowerment, social cohesion, economic and cultural prosperity, and sustainability” (Unesco UIL, 2021, p. 135).

Universities can also be considered as ecosytems, but they are naturally belonging to a wider learning ecosystem in urban environment. Also, ecosystem-based universities are

essential for building equitable, resilient, and future-ready societies, while highlighting challenges related to institutional culture, digital inequality, and data ethics (Phinla et al., 2025).

In an ecosystem-oriented university, learners are active agents rather than passive recipients; partnerships with industry and communities become vehicles for applied knowledge and innovation; technology serves as both infrastructure and co-participant; and academic programs evolve continuously to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

However, a learning ecosystem refers to a network of resources, relationships, and contextual elements that collectively support learning. Falk and Dierking (2018) suggest that ecosystems provide *affordances* for learning-opportunities that arise from interactions between individuals and their environments. Jackson (2019) similarly emphasizes that learning ecologies comprise personal agency, relationships, digital tools, and purposes that together shape how and why learning occurs.

It is necessary to recognise that universities have a strong role in developing learning ecosystems as they are also one of the key stakeholders in the formation of learning cities through collaborative actions for community development. In such an environment, universities can take role and responsibilities to support knowledge transfers through participation, dialogue, collaboration, and shared problem solving. Learning occurs within peer groups, communities, and partnerships that transcend institutional boundaries.

Spatial structures as learning cities and regions, according to Pagkratis et al. (2023) and to Piazza (2023), may offer more effective and beneficial forms of such frames of knowledge transfer (Local Adult Education Policy II findings on the roles of Adult Learning and Education-ALE in the development of Learning Cities, 2024). While learning eco-systems argue for better policies and strategies of opening Higher Education (Dollhausen & Jütte, 2023), key goals of such an ecosystem include promoting Lifelong Learning (LLL) as a core function of ALE, innovating curricular and pedagogical approaches, improving quality assurance, and strengthening partnerships with wider set of stakeholders both to engage adult educators into innovative LLL initiatives and to support a coherent and integrative Skills Policy embedded into Lifelong Learning Ecosystems (Bakker, 2024).

2. From the evolutionary scope of LC to challenging realities of sustainability and uncertainty

It seems obvious that the level of trust amongst stakeholders of urban policy-formation and community-development may heavily influence the lifespan of learning cities either moving into a phase of learning ecosystems for transforming community or having to stagnate or even fall back. The beginning of formulating learning cities dates back to the Millenium when the lifelong learning policy discourse offered a coherent attempt to bridge in between employability and citizenship measures for the creation of a globally competitive, but locally engaged citizenry based on social capital and inclusive and accessible forms of knowledge creation and transfers in regional settings (OECD, 2007).

In 2002, the formation of regions of lifelong learning in Europe created a frame for a number of development projects which helped to integrate already existing models into wider city-region collaborations to explore the potentials of lifelong learning in generating discourse, but also sharing of knowledge by connecting socially recognised and valued spaces of learning from formal to non-formal and informal grounds.

The German Learning Region model was a successful framework of stakeholder collaborations with regional perspectives so as to build on the needs of citizens and their communities striving for legitimate actions of learning with political support. However, the end of this particular program, called Regions of Lifelong Learning in Europe, brought abought a decline to this rising movement and signaled the fragility of learning city-region aspirations (BMBF, 2010). The Irish model of building of learning cities in and after 2006 resulted a slower move, but the actual support of higher education indicated the benefits of a few, but rather committed stakeholders came to a good decision to formulate a learning city based on existing potentials without waiting for external support and, finally, to reach for an Irish Network of Learning Cities with governmental backing to integrate Cork, Limerick, Dublin, Belfast with Derry and Strabane region into a valuable partnership so as to collect and share from one-another (O' Tuama, 2020).

The journey of Pécs Learning City has shown a rather different process. Although Pécs is a former European Capital of Culture like Cork, its initiative was coming from higher education to get the city enter into the Unesco's Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) based on some former collaborative actions of Global Learning City Initiative of 2011 having been outlined by Pascal International Observatory (Németh, 2020). Some significant EU-funded project-based research work of Place and Social Capital and Lifelong learning (Pascal), like Learning in Local and Regional Authorities (LILARA), Regional Networks for Lifelong Learning (R3L+), EuroLOCAL, and their promising results in between 2003 and 2011 turned distinguished learning city-region researchers to support Unesco in formulating GNLC by 2013 so as to promote urban-based lifelong learning in accordance with global initiatives to respond to the globally driven Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015) and other upcoming matters of social inequalities, health and well-being challenges under pressures of sustainability (Piazza, 2023).

The recent period since 2015 has opened challenging dimensions for further research, development work and innovative actions whilst it has underlined the importance to keep a good and fair relationship in between issues of urban changes and those of globally driven trends. The influence of stakeholder involvement is a characteristic layer of scrutiny which strongly influence the success of a learning city (Németh, 2022).

Therefore, we assume that learning city formations may help urban communities to recognise potentials of lifelong learning through locally and regionally driven partnerships both for widening participation in learning and for extending provision of learning opportunities via effective and accessible forms of knowledge transfer and skills development for the benefits of their citizens.

3. Recognising learning cities as learning ecosystems

3.1. The roles of universities in pursuing stakeholder collaboration to embrace lifelong learning

Europe gained momentum in initiating local and regional developments through lifelong learning (EC, 2002), there was a strong belief and concern 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 construction based on

connections in between formal, non-formal and informal settings to enhance both economic growth with employability and social cohesion through active citizenship.

In the last twenty years, transnational organisations, like Pascal International Observatory and ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub and European University Continuing Education Network (Eucen), have demonstrated in several ways that innovations in lifelong learning would need HEIs so as to formulate developments in participation, performance through partnership-based actions from local/regional to national and international dimensions. Respected innovations were dominantly formulated in project-based actions and claimed orientations towards social capital, place management, lifelong learning and sustainable development. There is no surprise that learning cities and regions, models of urban-based economic recovery, became rediscovered by multidisciplinary research groups using lifelong learning to connect and engage universities to local and regional innovations for economic growth and social mobility and cohesion based on stakeholder collaborations. (e.g. Pascal's PURE project or its ECCoWell model by Kearns).

Roles of universities may vary upon the situation and position whether being initiator, partner or follower in developing urban platforms for knowledge transfer. Three decades of lifelong learning policy having passed away, we must develop constructive answers referring to 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 look into the evolution of learning cities (Jordan, Longworth, & Osborne, 2013), we have to recognise that learning cities, regions and communities have arrived into the age of uncertainties, however, this fact may help us to 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. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) formulated in 2007 a profound response upon how universities should make use of growing competition and risks, therefore, it recommended connecting global competition with local engagements through local and regional models of activating citizens (OECD IMHE-CERI, 2007). Modified goals of the lifelong learning policies in 2008 and beyond resulted in a dominantly economy-centred reality of skills and competence development for jobs through reconsidered Vocational Education and Training (VET).

Universities could still convincingly demonstrate in the last fifteen years that they have a responsibility to keep lifelong learning as a holistic approach so as to develop and promote participatory actions for quality learning and skills for communities, economies and environment. That is why Pascal International Observatory, eucen and ASEM LL Hub made use of policy papers as European Universities 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 (R3L+ Toolkit, 2012). Let us also recognise that the European approach to lifelong learning has always been somewhat twofold in order to balance in between the social and the economic and that was also copied by the learning city-region model so as to combine economic realities with social and cultural aspirations with quality concerns (Duke, Osborne, & Wilson, 2005).

Universities having been involved in innovations around learning city-regions and communities are organisations to have a recent past in researching and developing lifelong learning, place management and social capital with particular concerns of sustainable development. The influence of Unesco and the OECD became rather influential to such

universities across Europe together with approaches and initiatives of the European Commission having moved a number of governments in Europe 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 (ELLI, 1992) or as part of the Regions of Lifelong Learning (EC, 2002). Another possible impact has been the movement of the European Capitals of Culture (EC, ECoC), a significant platform to change cities becoming capitals of culture. Those above indicated factors are rather important for universities in cities which became engaged in turning their cities and communities into learning communities to collect and share good skills and knowledge.

Unesco's focus on lifelong learning and especially on learning cities became characteristic around 2010 to mark 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 to signal a turn into the direction OECD and the European Union to apply indicators in measuring composite elements and conditions of learning city development based on stakeholder collaborations and on citizens involvement (UIL - Global Learning City Index).

One should not forget that the European Commission's (EC) White Paper on Governance in 2002 (EC, 2001) supported practical implications of learning city-region models based on active citizenship and critical thinking. Moreover, new narratives upon active citizenship helped connecting lifelong learning, higher education and active citizenship which became a leading model for Unesco (Unesco Cape Town Statement, 2001) to explain new dimensions for universities in the development of communities.

In the last twenty years, it became rather clear that cities and regions with innovative universities, having strong commitment and activities in lifelong learning, would have better and more creative positions to get together stakeholders to formulate urban developments, based on skills and knowledge transfer reflecting needs of the community, so as to embrace a culture of lifelong learning. Recently, Unesco's call upon promoting adult and lifelong learning connected learning cities and communities to the development of sustainable and resilient communities in line with UN Agenda 2030 and its goals for sustainable development (UN SDGs, 2015; Unesco UIL, 2020).

At the same time, Unesco has recently highlighted that universities have a certain role in the development of lifelong learning through local and regional developments either in smart, creative or in learning models based on collaboration with respected stakeholders aiming at changing place for sustainability (UIL survey on university lifelong learning; 2022). Accordingly, innovations through learning cities turned Unesco's Global Network of Learning Cities to work in clusters so as to respond to challenges of sustainability and of health and well-being (Unesco GNLC).

3.2. Selection of Learning Cities to build learning ecosystems in collaboration with HEIs

Learning cities having collaborated with their universities could effectively make use of urban potentials of knowledge transfers and partnerships for community developments by strengthening skills for life and for work. Accordingly, we have selected learning cities which not only have HEIs with quality education, profound research and innovative practices, but to show and demonstrate roles and responsibilities in social cohesion, economic development and environmental concerns based on their third missions. Therefore, Sonderborg in Denmark, Espoo in Finland, Cork in Ireland, Groningen with

Zwolle and Flevoland regions in the Netherlands, Wolverhampton City-Region in the UK became selected for their good practices in the formation of lifelong learning ecosystems with participation of their universities amongst key stakeholders.

Also, universities of those selected cities have strongly promoted lifelong learning amongst citizens and their communities to reflect not only equity, equalities and resilience as basic values of urban settings, but the potentials of collaboration, trust, engagement and inclusion to collect and share good knowledge amongst members of communities from individuals, families, neighbourhoods, stakeholders and beyond.

Selected cites as Unesco GNLC members have also demonstrated commitments to promote both democratic citizenship and sustainability concerns with social and environmental dimension having been supported by universities and their resources.

Working with examples of Learning Cities to demonstrate roles of universities.

It became evident that learning cities hosting universities with strong positions in lifelong learning could hold better capacities to realise their plans and strategies in the scope of smart, creative and learning communities to reconstruct economies, society for better futures.

Therefore, we have selected learning cities from Unesco GNLC so as to demonstrate particular dimensions of learning city formation in collaboration with other respected stakeholders as members of local-regional platforms of knowledge transfers with sustainability aspects. Having scrutinized selected cities and their regions like Cork, Wolverhampton, Espoo, Pécs, Sonderborg and Groningen, we stepped forward to articulating reflections upon some important points.

Such approaches may help to connect in between basic, vocational and transversal skills by ALE promoting intersectoral partnerships for both quality-oriented and equitable education and training for adults with flexible and secure forms of learning, combined with lifelong guidance as identical for embracing learning throughout life as necessary tools of effective skills policies. Even the European Commission's Communication on the Union of Skills (2025), as a new policy frame to promote upskilling and reskilling, can only be successful in case a more holistic concerns towards lifelong learning is recognised in accordance with World Economic Forum (WEF-2025) messages on the Future of Jobs (2025).

3.3. Promoting learning cities as ecosystems in building a culture of learning with sustainability measures

One of the key roles for 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, foster the plan and strategy, but also form particular projects so as to strengthen commitment of city leadership to support their selected models best fit for occurring needs referring to community development. Although economic growth, development are essential for political leadership so as to legitimate power through strengthening jobs, but social and community dimensions of the same dimension claim several interventions and particular collaborations to prepare communities and their individual members to learn for change with better skills and knowledge.

Accordingly, that aspect may put specific platforms of knowledge platforms in the axis of urban strategies. Pascal International Observatory and its Learning Cities Network (LCN)

have signalled, namely, to explore effective forms of learning cities and regions to offer knowledge transfers to meet emerging needs of different generations in an age of uncertainties, still helping us rediscovering identity, belongingness, active citizenship in various forms of partnerships. (Pascal's LCN) In this regard, universities can help city-region stakeholders to find their ways amongst those directions with smart, creative or learning orientation with a little piece of necessary combination of each and all.

We shall have to understand that celebratory events, based on festivals, days, weeks, etc. of learning are very much import and necessary for universities and other organisations of lifelong learning to support communities of learning to exchange of ideas, values, knowledge and skills in a process of bottom-up work. Learning cities and regions, therefore, become recognised by Unesco in its 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning (Unesco RALE, 2015) and by the Marrakech Framework for Action in 2022 (Unesco CONFINTEA VII, 2022).

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 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, professional development of educators are necessary dimensions some universities may take role and formulate collaborations from local to global are essential to learn from relevant examples.

Beyond Pascal, ASEM LLL Hub and eucen are those higher education platforms where research, development and innovations are combined with practice and relevant scientific advancements having been provided mainly by universities as partners (ASEM network of Professionalisation).

Universities are relevant organisations to highlight learning city activities in the scope of intergenerational and intercultural learning, attention to vulnerable groups and sustainability as key issue for public discourse and dialogue. Also, matters of infrastructure of learning, maintained by providers of formal, non-formal and informal places of learning, together with necessary life skills development by communities of practice can be effectively demonstrated by universities turning such topics to appear in learning city charters as values, 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).

In the case of Espoo in Finland, such focuses 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-region 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, Pascal's EcCoWell Community Recovery Program. Its second priority is an aspiration on skilled workforce which is connected to strategic development of city-wide approach for learning digital skills, aligned with wider strategy and digital inclusion. A third priority is the engagement of adult 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, having been supported by the University of Wolverhampton.

The Cork Learning Festival in Ireland is an example to underline 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 good balance in between social and economic, but also to demonstrate how a city as former cultural capital of Europe may use learning city model to channel its lifelong learning actions into long lasting partnerships for resilience and cohesion in community (Barrett & Mahoney, 2025).

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 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 shows a strong commitment towards learning be connected to the so-called Netflix approach 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, local Unesco festival and weeks for young people for empowerment. An external track is to deliver 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 Program 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 having managed connections with Unesco UIL, organised five international conferences referring to some recent trends and issues since 2017. The University took a role of helping strengthening 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 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).

3.4. Partnership development for sustainable communities of lifelong learning

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 strong and rather high reputation to convince 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 use of making use of effective forms of university lifelong learning, providing capacity building for Learning City partners and stakeholder representatives, applying results of innovations to enhance quality dimensions of learning cities based on Pascal Int. Observatory and ASEM LLL HUB linkages. Moreover, universities can support the development of international partnerships with Unesco Sustainable Cities so as to connect smart, creative and learning aspects. VET development grounded on strong alliance with economic stakeholders, like employers, Unions, Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

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 represent by becoming smart and creative communities (Osborne, 2018).

We have collected some relevant examples of learning cities to underline the above argument.

In Wolverhampton, the University has profoundly been involved in community engagement as a civic mission for Higher Education (HE), accordingly, this scope enables the input for expertise and innovation in lifelong learning, the development of city-wide, national and international partnerships, acting as catalyst of community collaborations in different forms, research to underpin developments in Wolverhampton City Learning Region (WCLR) initiative with innovative steps, co-ordination WCLR platform as investment and finally commitment upon supporting learning communities. (Mahoney, 2020) The City of Wolverhampton Council helps these issues by 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 (UIL Key Features of a Learning City, 2012).

The example of Cork demonstrates a strong linkage in between smart, inclusive and sustainable dimension through the green campus initiative of University College Cork, the Food Forest model and the Playful Paradigm be 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 and its partners and HEIs, like Aalto University, Laurea and Metropolia universities of applied science, are providing 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 are also involved to 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 to co-design, plan and organise the annual learning festivals in partnership with the House of Civic Communities and reach out 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 several international project participation, the University of Pécs, as member of eucen, European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), Pascal and 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 for 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) Another important focus is greening the city and its urban community spaces through ProjectZero Sonderborg (ProjectZero).

3.5. Partnership development for sustainable communities of lifelong learning

Universities are needed to signal initiation of platform-building in the frame of learning cities and regions with attention to project-based piloting and getting acquainted with examples of good practice. Universities and other respected stakeholders of the learning city can organise workshops and intensive programmes with cities/municipalities having been engaged with learning city orientations. As consequence of this process, public discourse upon the benefits of building a learning city with attention to choices and limitation can be generated so as to legitimise the ways and forms of how learning communities may turn learning festivals and other celebrator events demonstrate the power and joy of learning.

Universities are leading agents of cities by turning attention to learning city collaborations for urban benefits how to make use of own resources and capacities in and around lifelong learning. Not only the ways of joining Unesco Sustainable Cities Networks, e.g. Global Network of Learning Cities, but also the development of smaller communities of learning within city, like districts, neighbourhoods and families are necessary forms of collecting and sharing knowledge upon urban collaborations of citizens for better life and environment.

Collected examples may help in responding to the question above.

Cork Learning City is a wider umbrella-formation so as to incorporate early childhood learning, primary and secondary education, tertiary and further education, higher education. Providers and learners, community education and private sector are brought together into the Learning City Roundtable to discuss, initiate and enhance learning community developments and balance it 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; 2025). University College Cork, having been a eucen member, has benefited from several former eucen projects to have promoted the third mission of HEIs (COMMIT project).

The Espoo Learning City Network is a rather open and inclusive format to involve relevant stakeholders, providers of education and learning in formal, non-formal and informal environment. The City of Espoo has generated specific platforms at municipal level, like City Board, Growth and Learning and City Vitality to generate co-ordinated attention, care through effective management to include Chambers of Commerce and the Association of Entrepreneurs to work with several organisations involved on continuous learning (Mäkelä, 2024).

Based on a particular partnership approach, Wolverhampton City Learning Region 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 involves U3A and platform of Equality and Diversity Partnerships (Mahoney, 2020).

In the Netherlands, regions of Zwolle and Flevoland have recently developing platforms for collaborations. Zwolle has developed platforms of learning region to enhance linkages in between city and schools, to connect with business community and to develop quality-based strategies of education and VET. Flevoland has been promoting 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 in order to promote both participation and performance in learning, and to develop access to formal, non-formal and informal learning supported by programmes based on inclusive policies set by stakeholders involved. Inclusive policy in Pécs means addressing barriers of learning for disabled citizens, namely, socially, mentally and physically disabled. Disabilities may lead to learning difficulties and lack of participation, therefore, civil society groups try tackling the problem through collaborative actions based on mutual benefits and attention (Németh, 2020).

3.6. Stimulating a joint approach to learning within a city-region scope

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 overcoming in partnerships with stakeholders in lifelong learning. In such manner and approach HEIs having been involved in the development of learning cities and regions can effectively explain the mutual benefits of learning city developments for urban-based communities. They can also empower communities through collaborations to build trust, better identities and resilience in an age of uncertainties. Universities are seen as strong organisations to bridge learning city developments to effective forms of skills formations and local/regional skills coalitions (OECD, smart cities programme).

Universities can make municipalities plan and formulate policy, law and better financing to improve participation and performance in adult learning with strategic thinking in lifelong learning. Accordingly, universities should accelerate actors/players/stakeholders with practice-based engagement and support efforts of inclusive, equitable and creative actions of learning in sustainable communities so as to leave no one behind (Németh & Berendi, 2025).

Examples of the scrutinized cities demonstrate some valuable sources as models and may be used 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 agreement to create a culture of learning in Cork City. Therefore, these partners, one of them is University College Cork, established a Steering Group so as to enhance Learning for All, promoting inclusion and to work for prosperity and sustainability (Barrett & Mahoney, 2025).

In Espoo Learning City, the commitment to inclusion through participation allows learners from vulnerable social groups of adults to participate programmes of continuous learning and also stimulate youngster below the age of 30 with risks to get involved into inclusive learning for skills development (Erkkilä, 2020).

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

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

Wolverhampton City Learning Region has developed a strategic document, called Relighting our City, to make Wolverhampton respond to vulnerable groups and their members, create opportunities for young people, generate jobs and learning opportunities, to help vital business and communities to grow.

4. Conclusions

HEIs should make every attempt to support learning cities in receiving recognition and respect upon their collaborative work to improve learning in urban environment understood as learning ecosystem (Caughman et al., 2023). As for SDGs, lifelong learning in cities and communities are critical conditions to improve both quality education based in equity, inclusion and equalities and that of sustainable futures through connections in between people and planet (Kearns, 2025). Learning cities are appropriate formations to highlight diversities of learning based on valuable voluntary work and solidarity to provide accessible forms of skills development for underrepresented groups in societies.

In order to successfully fight back illiteracies, digital divide and negative impacts of AI, we must make use of good practices of cities and regions having been engaged in forming learning communities for a better Europe. Therefore, universities must reflect the value of diverse actions and achievements of learning cities across the world in association with Unesco and to demonstrate results of research and development on the potentials of learning cities to enhance adult and lifelong learning in the member states of the EU.

In the scope of stakeholder collaboration for better learning city futures, it must be highlighted that the formal recognition of learning city status ought to be strengthened by effective strategies and other forms of documents, like memorandum of understanding (MOU). Another problem area is the lack of coordination and integration of existing programs to result in fragmented structures to undermine proper outreach and communication and forming a coherent ecosystem of learning. Learning city related program development should be supported by designated learning city management with proper funding as necessary to coordinate and represent programs from local to global referring to sustainability and other occurring measures signalled by local and regional partners, communities within urban districts, neighbourhoods and beyond.

Finally, newly occurring trends of learning cities may offer some further dimensions for analytical work in trying to argue for more cohesive structures of learning ecosystems supported by strategies and actions of local interests based on sustainable connections and goals of mutuality, trust and equity. Such aspects may help in necessary bridging amongst smart, creative and learning focuses of learning ecosystems where higher education has a collaborative role with social responsibilities (Németh, 2023).

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