

## THE LEARNING CITY IS NOT A T-SHIRT

*If the idea of being a learning city is not just a brand printed on a T-shirt, what should be done? Professor and expert in learning cities Norman Longworth gives a description of the situation for building learning cities in Europe and in Asia.*

Today, more than 1000 cities in the world have become or are building learning cities. The modern idea of the learning city can be traced back to an international conference on *Educating Cities* held in Barcelona, Spain, in 1990. This conference was followed up to years later by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) that organised a conference on learning cities in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1992 and published a report on seven cities and their strategies for encouraging their citizens to continue learning throughout their lives. But apart from conferences, what really made a difference was that the growth of lifelong learning cities, regions and communities became one of the European Commission's major focuses. On the one hand, today you could say that the idea of building a learning city has gained much momentum. Not only in Europe, but worldwide. On the other hand, it is time to ask how the project of making learning city becomes a success.

ASEMagazine has asked Professor Norman Longworth from the PASCAL Observatory, based at Glasgow University. Norman Longworth is one of the main actors behind the idea of Learning Cities. He is the author of the policy document that gave rise to the European Commission's strategy on the local and regional dimension of lifelong learning, and his main expertise is in the domain of Learning Cities, Towns and Regions.

### **Momentum moves to Asia**

*What makes cities deserve the title Learning City besides announcing that they see themselves as such?*

There is not as yet a learning cities badge or an organization that is responsible for monitoring performance. Any city can adopt the name without changing anything. However, there is not much point in doing that and most cities that set out on the journey do so with good intentions. Current research is actively seeking out the indicators that will supply that kitemark standard.

*Are there any recognized failures to become a learning city?*

"None that are admitted, but several that have failed for lack of momentum or long-term commitment."

According to Professor Norman Longworth, the zenith of learning city development happened around ten years ago at the turn of the millennium, when the UK had more than 100 such cities, most of Finland's cities were declared learning communities and other cities around Europe were signing up.

*Why did this development lose momentum?*

"Some, possibly most, believed that they had incorporated learning city ideas into their general policy and no longer needed the title, while others adopted other priorities," Norman Longworth says and continues:

"The seat of learning city development lies in Asia at present and particularly in China, Taiwan and South Korea (see the two information boxes). There are signs that the momentum is returning in response to the challenge set from Asia, but the funding streams for such initiatives are fairly dry, both locally and nationally. The European Commission, which funded most of the projects, also changed its priorities to growth and jobs via vocational education, failing to see the connection between successful growth and lifelong learning within a municipal framework."

### **Three preconditions for success**

In the book *Making Competitive Cities*, edited by Sako Musterd and Alan Murie, one can read about ways to facilitate the rise of the so-called 'creative knowledge cities'. One of the conclusions is that leaders of these cities regard themselves as key actors, who are responsible for the development of these cities. However, the real foundations for successful economic development were often established long ago. For example, Toulouse and Munich had created the basis for their scientific and technological development in the nineteenth century, and other local conditions contributed to the cross-fertilisation of research and industry.

But what does Norman Longworth think about the preconditions for successfully building a learning city?

"Making learning cities requires three conditions. The first and primary condition is to have influential champions and drivers who will advance the learning city agenda. These may be politicians, administrators or university professors; anyone with the drive and commitment to make things happen. Given these, I do not think that any city will not be able to make it. But of course there are instances where those drivers either moved on or became unelected, in which case much of the momentum slowed down. The second condition is to have a robust strategy for learning city implementation written into the forward planning for city development. The third is continuity. Frequent political changes are often the downfall of the learning city challenge."

*So, do you not find the history and development of the cities important?*

"Of course this is also important. That is, the impact of pathways and path dependence cannot be neglected. The histories can enable forward developments or they can sometimes block or obstruct needed changes, and thus influence success or failure. The vision of contemporary leaders rather than that of their forebears is what is important."

## **No quick fix**

Making learning cities is not an activity that can be carried out by applying recipes that have been written down by a single professional. It is not something you can make or re-make like a standard product with the help of a common set of tools or instruments. In short: Learning cities are not T-shirts that can be produced over night in much the same way across the world.

Norman Longworth explains:

“There is no quick fix. Learning City development takes place over many years. The recipe lies in the development of indicators that would continuously measure performance and progress for city leaders and stakeholders in schools, small businesses, adult education colleges, universities and so on.” And he continues:

“Of course you have to have the willingness of city leaders to learn themselves what these indicators entail. The recipe also includes ensuring that as many people as possible are involved and have a say in development. This means frequent consultation with a wide variety of organizations and people so that these become enthused and take over the next stage of the development within their own area. Mobilisation of the community is highly important. Without the consent or understanding or eagerness of the people, learning city projects will fail. This also entails a cascade learning system, i.e. training leaders who will train others to implement the strategies.”

## **The difference between Asia and Europe**

Although one must be careful not to generalise, Norman Longworth does see two general differences between the Western and Asian approach to building learning cities. He says:

“People in the West are proud of their individuality and their freedom to do as they please. The lack of learning cities in the USA reflects this tendency. This is no bad thing, but learning city development in Asia tends to be more a collective activity, where people act in the interests of the community and the city. This means more people involved, more rapid advance and solidarity of purpose, which does not exist in the West. The second difference has to do with having a vision. In Asia they see their city as a learning city, they see the learning city as a framework for building a healthy city, a green city, a resilient city, a city of culture, a smart city, a city of well-being and any other positive adjectives they care to adopt. This too gives a unity of purpose among the many, rather than the piecemeal and restricted approach we adopt in Europe. It is both a top-down and a bottom-up approach that leads to a greater involvement.”

By Claus Holm

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## **PERSON BOX:**

## **FREMHÆVEDE CITATER:**

## **TWO CASES:**

### **How to build learning cities in China?**

*Is there a general strategy for building learning cities in China?*

In 2010, *The Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* put forward the strategic goals "to basically modernize education, bring a learning society into shape, and turn China into a country rich in human resources". In response, provincial and municipal governments established the goal of "building a learning city" in their strategic plan, and many cities have carried out various activities toward making a learning city. However, there is no national framework in place for learning cities in China, no specific criteria for what makes a learning society and no agency has awarded any cities the title "Learning City".

*How does China manage the development of these cities?*

Despite the lack of a national scheme for learning cities, the central government has taken actions to advance the building of learning cities in China. For example, the central government has established a national programme on exemplary learning communities, and it has selected a total of 68 learning communities/districts/counties across the country. In 2010, the central government chose to include four cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Jinan (capital of Shandong Province) and Guangzhou (capital of Guangdong Province), in the national pilot programme for building learning cities. The lessons generated from the experiments with the pilot cities will feed into the construction of building more cities in the future.

*How do you determine whether the cities are successful or fail as learning cities?*

China has launched extensive studies on what constitutes successful learning cities. The National Center for Education Development Research, for example, has an ongoing grant to examine the indicators of and pathways to a learning society. Individual cities will be the unit of analysis, and a number of them will be investigated and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative data. An indicator system will be designed to identify the elements that constitute a successful learning city. With the indicator system as a reference framework, specific pathways will be presented to guide individual cities to succeed as a fully fledged learning city.

### **How to build learning cities in Korea?**

*Is there a general strategy for building learning cities in Korea?*

Our Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has together with the research institution – The National Institute for Lifelong Education – developed and distributed a series of manuals to help lifelong learning cities to succeed in promoting and diffusing various projects. These cities have mutually benefited from taking part in routine meetings and conferences for sharing local knowledge and experiences with other cities and experts in the field. In addition, together with provincial governments the ministry has

developed a web-based platform so that local residents and organizations may obtain information on where and how to take lifelong learning programmes nearby.

*How does Korea manage the development of these cities?*

To be designated as a Learning City, a local government must demonstrate and prove that it has solid and outstanding strategies and infrastructures such as:

- Designing lifelong learning short- and long-term plans
- Enacting ordinances to promote the notion of lifelong learning
- Carrying out lifelong learning demand surveys for the locality
- Setting up an office taking charge of related plans and projects
- Organizing and maintaining a lifelong learning committee
- Employing and appointing at least one or more lifelong learning professionals

*How do you determine whether the cities are successful or fail as learning cities?*

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has, in association with National Institute for Lifelong Education, set up certain criteria to evaluate the performance of a lifelong learning city, and the city is to be reviewed quadrennially. Based on the review, it is determined whether the city can continue to hold the title of Lifelong Learning City. Having said that, one should be aware that most of the local governments in Korea are eager to compete for the honour to be designated a lifelong learning city. The key essential criteria for the evaluation vary: a level of will of mayor, robustness of financing plan, citizen involvement in committee and communications with local civil organizations and experts. The weight of each criterion might differ from year to year according to the Korean Government's annual key agenda that reflect the socio-economic climate.