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Key Features of Learning Cities

Introductory Note

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Introduction

Several approaches have been taken in recent years to translate the concept of a learning society into reality. One significant example is the growth of 'learning communities', 'learning cities' and 'learning regions'. Although the idea of a learning city has mostly been conceptualised in developed countries, facilitated by the OECD since the 1980s and the European Commission since the 1990s, it is now rapidly gaining momentum in developing countries. In more and more Member States, local authorities now claim to be learning cities/regions/communities. Their proliferation has become a major worldwide phenomenon, with considerable educational, social, economic and environmental implications.

What is a Learning City?

Cities differ in their cultural and ethnic composition, in their heritage and social structures. However, many characteristics of a learning city are common to all. The initiative on learning cities developed by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning defines a learning city as follows:

A Learning City is a city which effectively mobilises its resources in every sector to

- *promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education;*
- *re-vitalise learning in families and communities;*
- *facilitate learning for and in the workplace;*
- *extend the use of modern learning technologies;*
- *enhance quality and excellence in learning; and*
- *foster a culture of learning throughout life.*

In so doing it will create and reinforce individual empowerment and social cohesion, economic and cultural prosperity, and sustainable development.

Why monitor progress in developing learning cities?

Since a learning city facilitates lifelong learning for all, and therefore helps to realize the universal right to education, building such a city has far-reaching appeal. This is a continuous process; there is no magic line over which a city will pass in order to become known as a learning city. There are, however, attributes by which a learning city can be recognized, mainly in terms of what it does rather than what it is. The construction of a learning city entails an operational and pragmatic approach to the implementation of lifelong learning. It is not an abstract theory. If a city has the political will and commitment to build a learning city, it will also need a set of indicators or key features against which it can monitor its progress.

Put simply, monitoring the progress of a learning city is necessary for three main reasons:

- To transform political and theoretical discourses into concrete strategies and approaches;
- To measure progress over time; and
- To evaluate the benefits of the strategies it has put into place

The Key Features of Learning Cities will make it possible:

- To support in a meaningful way the development of lifelong learning within and across member cities;
- To determine up to a certain level how much progress is being made to implement lifelong learning for all in many of the world's communities; and
- To facilitate international comparative analysis and experience-sharing and mutual learning among member cities.

The development of the Key Features of Learning Cities

This normative instrument for measuring learning cities is the result of a long consultation process. Initially, UIL held a workshop on developing a framework for the Key Features of Learning Cities from 3 to 5 July 2012. Experts representing some of the partners for the establishment of IPLC, including the PASCAL Observatory, Bertelsmann Foundation, CISCO Systems, Beijing Municipal Education Commission, National Centre of Education Development Research of China, Kuwait University and the Cape Higher Education Consortium, as well as some UIL professional staff and consultants, participated in the workshop.

This workshop first of all drew inspiration from the following well-established conceptual frameworks and indicators for measuring social and economic development:

- The *Human Development Index (HDI)* and related indices developed by UNDP (2007);
- The *Revised Official Monitoring Framework for the Millennium Development Goals: goals, targets and indicators* (UN, 2008);
- *The Knowledge Assessment Methodology: Variables and Clusters* by the World Bank (2012);
- The *Better Life Index* by OECD (2012);
- *The Future We Want – RIO+20 Report* (UN, 2012);
- *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty And Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development* (UN, 2013); and
- *Post-2015 Development Agenda: Goals, Targets and Indicators* (The Centre for International Governance Innovation and the Korea Development Institute, 2012).

Inspired by a list of criteria for indicators developed in the UN report *Analysing and Measuring Social Inclusion in a Global Context* (UN, 2010), the following criteria were endorsed at the workshop to develop the Key Features of Learning Cities.

- *Ambitious but achievable* – achieving the target should represent significant progress but should also be realistic.
- *Crucial* – every feature reflects a value, a priority or a critical issue.
- *Relevant* – a feature must fit its intended purpose; achieving the target should contribute significantly to meeting a key objective.

- *Clear and understandable* – a feature must be simple and easy for all stakeholders to understand, and should make sense to the average person.
- *Easy to measure* – a feature should be measured by available data, or by data to be collected through a well-designed survey.
- *Valid and reliable* – people must trust the information that a feature provides.

As a result of intensive debates and group work, the workshop produced the first draft of the framework of the Key Features of Learning Cities. Taking the comments from experts into consideration, UIL has produced a draft which was presented in the 1st meeting of the Expert Group for Developing Learning Cities in Hangzhou, China. In April and May 2013, UIL consulted some experts and a number of cities on the relevance of the key features and the feasibility of data collection. On 4–5 June 2013, UIL held a second meeting in Jeju Island, Republic of Korea. The participants of the meeting elaborated further on the draft Key Features of Learning Cities.

Based on the expert group's validation, UIL selected a number of cities in each of the UNESCO regions for piloting, which was completed in September 2013. The Key features reflect the results of the piloting.

Components of the framework of the Key Features of Learning Cities

As shown in Figure 1, the framework of the Key Features of Learning Cities corresponds to the pediments, columns and foundation steps of the UNESCO logo.

The Pediment – three areas of focus reflect the wider benefits of building a modern learning city, broadly defined as:

- (1) Individual empowerment and social cohesion;
- (2) Economic development and cultural prosperity; and
- (3) Sustainable development.

The Columns – six areas of focus reflect the major building blocks of a learning city:

- (1) Inclusive learning in the education system;
- (2) Re-vitalised learning in families and communities;
- (3) Effective learning for and in the workplace;
- (4) Extended use of modern learning technologies;
- (5) Enhanced quality in learning, and
- (6) A vibrant culture of learning throughout life.

The Foundational Steps – three areas of focus reflect the fundamental conditions for building a learning city:

- (1) Strong political will and commitment;
- (2) Governance and participation of all stakeholders; and
- (3) Mobilisation and utilisation of resources.

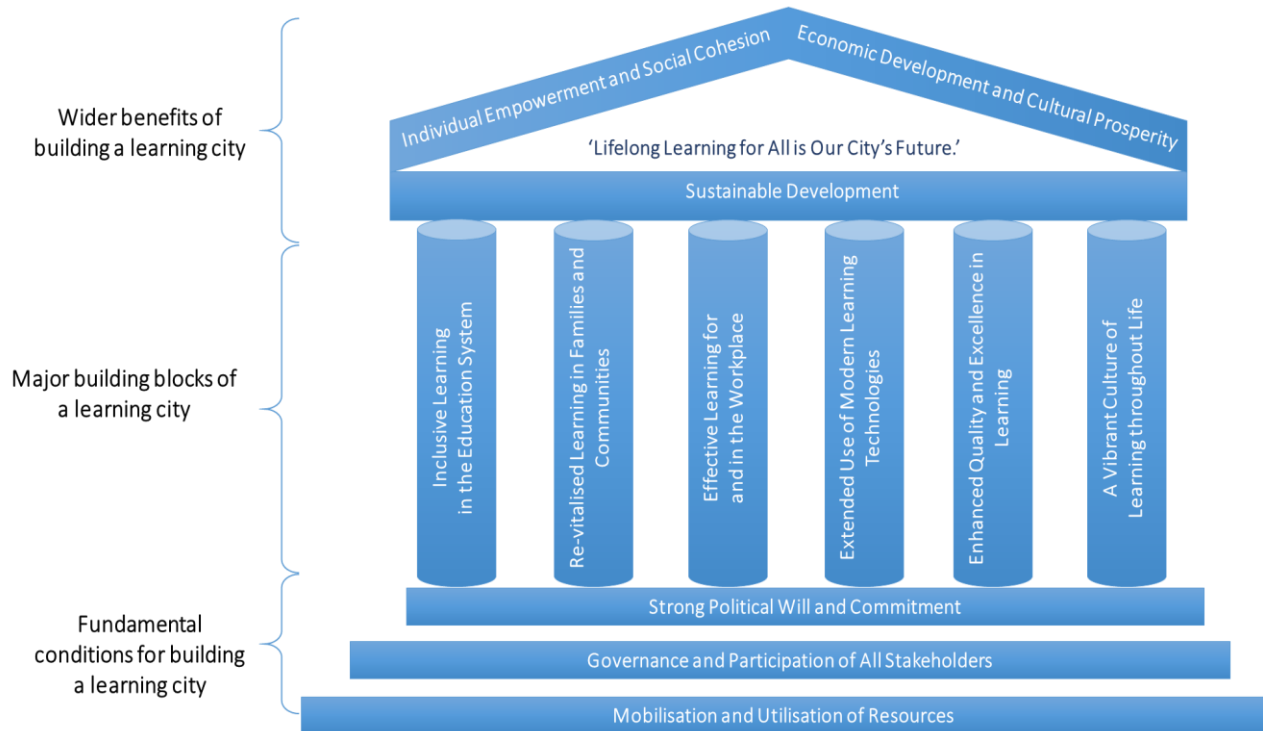


Figure 1: The Framework of the Key Features of Learning Cities

A total of 42 features are included in the Key Features of Learning Cities. Most of the features are quantitative, and related statistics can be provided by the responsible city authorities. As for qualitative features, some can be measured by the results of a survey conducted by independent professional agencies such as Gallop, while others can be measured through expert review of reports provided by the responsible city authorities.

The objective is not to make distinctions between cities. Each city is different and its progress towards a learning city can only be measured within the context of its own cultural, economic and social history and traditions.

How to use the Key Features of Learning Cities

Formally endorsed by mayors and city education executives of learning cities as well as experts participating in the International Conference on Learning Cities, the Key Features can serve as a comprehensive checklist of action points to help municipal governments and other stakeholders of cities in their efforts to build learning cities that promote lifelong learning for all.

Furthermore, as the members of a global network of learning cities need to be recommended by UNESCO Member States, the national authorities of the Member States can use the Key Features to select and recommend cities to join the network.



More generally, the Key Features can also be used as a reference document for international organisations and national authorities in promoting the development of learning nations, regions, cities and communities.