

References

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Learning Centres in the Learning Region

In this article, the work of a learning centre is contextualised within the wider regional environment, to the notion that it is but one player in the world of lifelong learning, and that it should be networked with other players.



An important component of a learning region is that it can be responsive to the requirements of its citizens and can provide learning opportunities that are flexible in location, mode and time

The term *learning region* has been used throughout the world to express the idea that multiple players have a role in promoting and facilitating learning that develops the economic and social well-being of their locality. Broadly, as in recent documents produced by the European Commission (2002), the concept refers to a region, city, urban or rural area, regardless of whether its identity is defined in administrative, cultural, geographical, physical or political terms. Following the impetus of work sponsored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and others, there exist around the world numerous entities that describe themselves as 'Learning Cities' or 'Learning Regions', and in many countries well-developed networks of such cities and regions are working together.

There is a range of understandings of what a learning region might do. For instance one commentator speaks about the region as being the right institutional environment to promote private and social learning at four scales: the individual; the company; groups of companies; and government. Local and regional governance has become increasingly important throughout the world, and decision-making and service provision has become increasingly localised.

Learning regions are also seen as collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas that provide an underlying environment or infrastructure, which facilitates the flow of such knowledge and thinking. The idea of a Learning Region also links to the related ideas of Social Capital and Trust and the role played by co-operative and collective learning. These may seem to be abstract ideas, but Social Capital, as Field (2005) suggests the concept, refers to three types of measures:

- bonding connections, which bring together people from a very similar background in close ties, such as family and close friends
- bridging ties, which bring together people from rather similar backgrounds but more loosely, such as people with a shared interest (a hobby, a job, or living in the same neighbourhood)
- linking ties, which bring together people from dissimilar backgrounds.



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... multiple players have a role in promoting and facilitating learning that develops the economic and social well-being of their locality

An important component of a learning region is that it can be responsive to the requirements of its citizens and can provide learning opportunities that are flexible in location, mode and time. It would mobilise providers to offer provision that is valued and valuable. It is about *lifelong* and *lifewide* learning. To quote the European Commission, lifelong learning is about learning across the lifespan, "from cradle to grave", from the early years through adult life – including the Third Age - encompassing a common core of knowledge and skills which goes beyond basic numeracy and literacy. It has been argued that the provision of such *lifelong and lifewide learning* opportunities is the driver for local and regional regeneration.

A learning region is not simply about employment-related skills, but also about providing access to and the updating of all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and understanding throughout life. Whilst it is located within formal institutions, it also includes acquiring vocational skills at the workplace and participation in informal learning. *Most learning occurs locally.*

The success of a learning region can be monitored and audited. Tools have been created that can assist stakeholders within regions in self-auditing their progress (see Sankey and Osborne 2006).

The role of the learning centre

Learning centres generally have local and/or regional roles. At a regional level a range of actors play a role in the development of lifelong learning, and there are inevitable and highly desirable interactions between them. The creation of tools that allow the self-monitoring of the contributions of different stakeholders, be they businesses, colleges or informal providers, is key to maximising the efficient use of the region's knowledge resource.

Here are some elements that a learning centre can explore in order to self-audit its practice in contributing to a network of lifelong learning at a regional level:

- current perceptions, commitment and strategies at all levels of the organisation
- measures of its performance as a Learning Organisation, including the application of appropriate quality indicators and standards
- extent of its participation and partnership in the community and its role in *making it happen* through involvement in consultation processes, and developing relationships with other stakeholders
- accessibility of its provision and its facilitation of wider participation to learning, including provision of learning where, when and how people want it

- provision of support systems for diverse populations and removal of barriers to learning
- use of technology for learning, including distance learning availability and strategies, multimedia development and use
- extent of commitment in practice to the development of staff at all levels
- extent of organisational commitment to wider measures associated with lifelong learning, including the practices related to environmental policies and sustainability.

Audit tools such as those designed in a range of learning region projects may provide the basis for self-diagnosis of deficits in organisational learning, communication or knowledge-sharing. Since the realisation of the learning region is dependent on the creation and maintenance of a large number of feedback loops at all levels, such tools can provide a way of assessing how well these are functioning at any given point. Questions posed in such audits could allow learning centres to assess where their priorities in lifelong learning lie, how they relate to other stakeholders in the region and the extent to which they are part of a cohesive local network.

In Scotland, a particularly important dimension is *Community Planning*. There is a statutory obligation (*Local Government in Scotland Act 2003*) on all local authorities to address Community Planning. This concept is based on the principles of partnership working and engagement with communities in decision-making that affect the delivery of public services. It requires an holistic approach at a regional level, and this has led in some regions to a variety of Community Planning Partnerships being set up to address regional issues of Economic Development and Community Safety, Health and Wellbeing, and Lifelong Learning. Whilst learning centres do not fall within this statutory requirement, this is an important context for their operation at a local and regional level. Assessment of practice in lifelong learning using robust indicators as described might be a helpful way of determining their contribution at these levels.

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