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NEW FORM OF INNOVATION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH HIGHER EDUCATION: THE RESEARCH POTENTIAL OF THE EUROLOCAL PROJECT

The EUROlocal project

The use of the terms 'Learning City', 'Learning Town', 'Learning Region' and 'Learning Community' is rapidly becoming commonplace in the European lifelong learning debate. This is logical. After all, cities and regions are the places where lifelong learning is implemented. The European Commission's definition is:

"A city, town or region which recognises and understands the key role of learning in the development of basic prosperity, social stability and personal fulfilment, and mobilises all its human, physical and financial resources creatively and sensitively to develop the full human potential of all its citizens."

The Limerick Declaration, produced by the European Commission's PENR3L project in 2008 went further. It identified a number of economic, social and environmental indicators distinguishing learning cities and regions.

The European policy document on the local and regional dimension of lifelong learning published in 2001 made several recommendations, some of which have been implemented. It stated *"No European region can afford not to become a learning region – it is a matter of continuing prosperity, social stability and the wellbeing of all its citizens."* Some European cities and regions are already well aware of the work to be done in order to meet these challenges. Most of Germany is now covered by more than 64 learning regions, the UK and Finnish national learning city networks cover more than 100 members and many cities a in a diverse range of countries describe themselves as learning cities, Gothenburg, Rotterdam, Dublin, Brno, Pecs, Limerick and Kaunas, to name but a few. Lifelong Learning is recognised as a powerful tool in European and regional economic, social and environmental development. The European Commission has itself supported several projects and programmes to create learning regions notably the Socrates R3L programme, the TELS, LILLIPUT, INDICATORS, PALLACE, LILARA and PENR3L projects and several others. These have produced data, tools, indicators, recommendations and learning materials to help cities and regions understand how they can become Learning Cities and Learning Regions and the benefits resulting there from, for example the 'stakeholder audits' for universities, schools, local authorities, small businesses and adult education institutions developed by several of the partners in this project. And yet there are still huge gaps in all parts of Europe.

While it can be argued that all cities and regions aspire to the lifelong learning ideal, only a small percentage are actively isolating and addressing the major issues and actions that would transform them into true learning entities, capable of meeting the challenges of the future. Other initiatives from the Committee of the Regions, the Social Affairs directorate, Framework and other parts of the Commission recognise the value of lifelong learning at a regional level, and some individual member states have their own strategies and policies in this field. However, little work has been done to synthesise all this knowledge, nor to disseminate it as a coherent whole to those places where it would be of benefit. Assembling and disseminating the wealth of existing knowledge and development aids is essential. Many of the partners in this project have been engaged in either producing or implementing them.

Objectives

Since October 2009, the overall objective of the EUROlocal project has been to activate learning region development by producing and continuously disseminating in an attractive and innovative way a comprehensive knowledge database that includes concepts, tools and techniques, learning materials, indicators, diagrams, networks, reports, papers, policies and strategies and recommendations for action from European Commission and other regional bodies' projects and reports. In order to do this, EUROlocal has mainly targeted in the last 20 months to:

•   study the activities, projects and outputs that have already taken place in Europe, both on a European and at member state level;

•   isolate the tools and materials for informing and promoting action in cities and regions and giving them a thorough test in places, where they have not yet been used;

•   develop an audit and interview key people in the European Commission, European Parliament and European networks active in this field, including DG EaC, DG Social Affairs, DG for Regional Development, The Council of Europe, CEDEFOP, the Committee of the Regions the PASCAL International Observatory on Learning Regions, the PENR3L network, the EARLALL regional network and other bodies responsible for developing and implementing policies in this domain;

•   contact people and networks in member states to ascertain their views and activities;

•   update the database of around hundreds of regional development centres produced by the PENR3L project and disseminate the project results to these;

•   create a database of the tools, knowledge, initiatives and strategies adopted by leading regions in this field;

•   design and develop an interactive website that can present the results in an attractive, culture-sensitive and innovative way;

•   design, develop and deliver a final conference for key decision-makers, practitioners in local and regional authorities, associations for regional development and continuing education, industry and business and academics;

•   produce a report synthesising current European knowledge, tools and activities, with recommendations for future focus;

•   disseminate these to all European Regional Centres, Committee of the Regions and the other organisations that can push forward the development of learning cities and regions in Europe in accordance with the revised Lisbon agenda.

•   organise a European conference.

The knowledge and insight produced by all of these actions has expanded considerably the number of European regions actively involving themselves in Learning Region construction.

Sources of information

The main European policy and practice documents are to be found on the SCADplus databases within the Europa-website. They include policy documents and White papers from Framework, DG Social Affairs, DG EaC, Lifelong Learning and other programmes, Committee of the Regions, DG External Affairs. Member State information on lifelong learning have been identified at national education department websites, e.g. DfES in UK. Other websites with up to date information include the European Learning Cities Network. This have been supplemented by the audits of all relevant European organisations. Learning Region Initiatives in Member States will be handled by the partners who will use the extensive PENR3L network (PASCAL European Network of Lifelong Learning Regions), a network established by the Commission's PENR3L project to push back the frontiers of Learning Region knowledge and practice and to propagate the Learning Region message in member states.

Added value of international approach

Learning Organisations, Cities and Regions are not the preserve of any one member state. They affect the economic, social, cultural and democratic future of every city, town and region in Europe. Equally the Europe of the Regions is a powerful movement throughout the continent. This is why European co-operation in the development of materials is important, so that, despite cultural differences (which have of course been taken into account during the whole project), the essential body of knowledge needed by individuals in city and regional administrations can be disseminated Europe-wide.

Methodology of data collection

EUROlocal audits containing the learning region indicators have been used in the TELS, INDICATORS and PENR3L projects. They are accompanied by publicity literature outlining learning region character-istics. The Audits are more than information questionnaires, containing also learning region knowledge, the facility to comment and add relevant concepts and comments and inviting opinion, experiences, ideas and expertise. The data so obtained have been both qualitative and quantitative. The audits have been uploaded onto the website.

The website itself is attractively designed to present relevant key information on the home page. It en-courages users to access the data they need to take the process of establishing a learning region further. Thus there are sections on tools, learning materials, papers, case studies, courses, reports, seminars and workshops, existing networks, policies and strategies, recommendations for action, projects, international links, and a help line for each European group of countries. Embedded hyperlinks enable users to navigate easily and to find the knowledge they need.

Tools for learning regional development are still being tested and modified where necessary by the part-ners. For example, the LILARA learning needs audit, the Stakeholder Audits and the road map learning requirements portfolio and the personal learning plan development are being tested in countries, where they have not previously been used. This is the task of the four main partners, two of which are universi-ties researching the innovative role of learning cities and regions. The project has also organised a large European conference with the support PASCAL Observatory and the European Commission.

In addition to the website, EUROlocal delivers: *Data collection audit tool* – An audit tool to collect quali-tative and quantitative data on learning city and region activities, tools, materials, processes etc. Includes extensive consultation processes with local authorities, educational organisations and partner networks. The audit tool is made available in all partner languages as well as French and Spanish.

Tools testing – Testing of a wide variety of tools in the organisations for which they were designed to verify content, methodology and cultural acceptability. Translations are provided in German, Hungarian and Italian. Core partners have selected the organisations and encourage them to apply the tools. They have been modified, classified and made available to regions through the EUROlocal website.

Learning materials for regions – Active learning materials in a variety of presentation styles aimed at organisations involved in learning region development. These cover many topics and are drawn from best practice examples and contain exercises, lessons, research assignments, case studies and discussion tasks. They are still tested in organisations belonging to the partner networks and featured on the website.

Regional development database – A database of regions and regional organisations containing key contact information and a short description of activities. The database is utilised for the dissemination and exploitation of project outcomes, particularly the publicity of learning materials.

Recommendations for European policy on learning regions – Recommendations for a new European policy document on the development of lifelong learning regions, including sections devoted to:

- Regional development organisations for the creation of learning regions;

- Stakeholder organisations on their role and responsibilities;

- Member state governments and

- The European Commission on future actions.

Project seminar – An international seminar and conference for leaders in European regional organisations – "Investing in Learning Regions". This included marketing, programme development, speaker selection, logistics and outputs, with a balance between formal presentations and 'active solution sessions' that promoted international cooperation and leverage the experience of the audience on 27–29 October in Murten, Switzerland.

Dissemination and continuity – Throughout the project, materials related to both the work undertaken as well as that collected are made available through the implementation of a comprehensive dissemination plan. This has ensured that all EUROlocal materials are publicised and distributed throughout Europe, both during and after the project.

Websites:

http://eurolocal.info

http://learningregions.eu

Project partners:

University of Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom – co-ordinator

Universus CSI Bari, non-profit higher education consortium, Italy – partner

LRD Munich, non-profit agency, Germany – partner

University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary – partner

Further reading

http://eurolocal.info

http://www.learning-regions.net/

Balázs Németh: *Higher Education, lifelong learning and regional development.* In: **Doyle, L.–Adams, D.–Tibbitt, J.–Welsh, P.** (eds.): *Building Stronger Communities. Connecting research, policy and practice.* NIACE, Leicester. pp. 82–102. 2008.

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