

Cities and regions as learning communities

Adapted from a chapter to appear in Morgan- Klein, B and Osborne, M. (2008) *The Concepts of Lifelong Learning*. London: Routledge

An initial response from many observers to the terms ‘learning community’, ‘learning city’ and ‘learning region’ or the plethora of other epithets that attribute agency to a geographically defined space is that it is people and not places that learn. This response, however, fails to recognise the fundamentally social nature of much learning and that learning occurs in a range of everyday settings in all sorts of places.

It is certainly the case that an increasing number of initiatives around the world attribute to themselves the ‘learning’ or ‘lifelong learning’ prefix and do so from a range of perspectives. For example, in Germany, there are 71 learning networks that have been supported in a Federal learning region initiative and within these a huge variety of activities can be observed that cover the full range of provision that would be considered as lifelong learning (Federal Ministry of Education 2004). Here the concept of a learning region appears to be broad-ranging and includes almost all activities that facilitate participation in the post school period. All around the world there are municipalities that ascribe themselves as ‘learning cities’, ‘learning towns’ or ‘learning villages’. Examples include Espoo in Finland, Victoria in British Columbia and Albury-Wodonga in New South Wales, and in many countries and provinces around the world the development is extensive and co-ordinated. For example, from 2001 in South Korea, 33 areas were designated as lifelong learning cities, including Chilton-gun, Kwanak-gu, Seongbuk-gu, Yangcheon-gu in Seoul, Kwangmyeong-si and Suncheon-si, and in the State of Victoria in Australia, the government has funded the development of 10 learning towns. In the city of Hume, just outside Melbourne exists the Hume Global Learning Village, and we see the ‘learning village’ concept emerging in areas as diverse as Sweden (see Wallin 2007), parts of Africa in the context of widening access to informal learning (see Boshier 2006) and China (see Boshier and Huang 2007).

Furthermore in many cases measures have been created of the extent to which geographical entities have achieved their ‘learning’ status. In Canada, for example, using the four pillars of Delors (1996) as the basis for measurement, the Composite Learning Index provides a comparative score for each city and region.

‘Large cities across Canada are generally above the national average in all areas of learning, but particularly in the *Learning to Know* and *Learning to Do* pillars’... ‘However, rural areas are stronger in their pillar scores for *Learning to Be* and *Learning to Live Together*’, (Canadian Council on Learning 2007)

Longworth (2006) has usefully summarised the development of the learning city concept from its origins in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1973) initiative to establish the ‘Educating City’. At that time, seven cities, Adelaide, Edmonton, Edinburgh, Gothenburg, Kakegawa, Pittsburgh and Vienna were invited by the OECD to become pilots in this programme with the objective of prioritising education within their strategic developments. As one of the authors of this book has reported elsewhere (Osborne and Sankey 2006), the term ‘Learning City’ became the more common usage from the 1980s onwards. This subtle change from ‘educating’ to ‘learning’ reflects the notion of agency within the economic and social actors that make-up cities, and a more general tendency within the field of education in recent decades to acknowledge that individuals and organisations are not simply the objects of institutions, but shape their own learning paths. Useful parallels here may be drawn to ideas of ‘learning organisations’, ‘self-directed learning’, ‘learning careers’, and ‘learning trajectories’.

Learning Cities have themselves networked with each other. For example, the UK's Learning City Network includes over 80 members and itself provides one definition of what the concept means:

'Using lifelong learning as an organising principle and social goal, Learning Cities promote collaboration of the civic, private, voluntary and education sectors in the process of achieving agreed upon objectives related to the twin goals sustainable economic development and social inclusiveness' (DfEE 1998)

This definition in itself contains some of the key notions that are integral to the Learning City concept: the responsibilities of a range of actors in facilitating learning; the creation of explicit and co-operative links between these actors; the goal of including all individuals irrespective of social and economic background, and especially those from groups historically excluded from access to learning opportunity; and a parallel commitment to economic development. The concept recognises that every sector contains learning resources.

It is important to note the twin concerns with both social and economic development, which have become commonplace in the rhetoric of lifelong learning and in its practice. As we emphasised in Chapter 4, often the two concerns of the social and the economic are falsely dichotomised and seen as conflicting objectives. However, for governments throughout the world social inclusion is a policy imperative alongside competitive economic development, and in the context of benefit to individuals of learning the link is clear. Creating the conditions for inclusion often relies on those economic developments that allow renewal of physical infrastructure, such as hospitals, colleges and schools. Partnerships at a local and regional have been an important mechanism for these interventions, involving various mixes of public sector, private/commercial interests, and community-based, non-profit organizations. As we reported in Chapter 6 most studies of participation in learning beyond school demonstrate that getting a job or promotion are key motivating factors, the close connection between the social and economic at the individual level becomes clear.

The European Union in its *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EC 2000) talks of transforming the concept of lifelong learning into 'concrete reality' and a little later within a set of projects that it funded under a programme entitled Regions of Lifelong Learning (R3L) it called for the

'mobilisation of all 'players' involved in ascertaining learning needs, opening up learning opportunities for people of all ages, ensuring the quality of education and training provision, and making sure that people are given credit for their knowledge, skills and competences, wherever and however these may have been acquired'. (EC 2002)

Once again there is an explicit emphasis on finding ways of engaging a range of agencies and decision-makers in creating learning opportunities. Co-operation and partnership between decision-makers, a variety of providers in the formal and non-formal sectors, social partners and citizens are emphasised in achieving this objective. It is also of interest in this quote that flexible opportunities for achieving credit is given some prominence. Here we see a link between community and individual agendas, and potentially conflicting emphases. The city and its agencies if working together in co-operative ways may create and maximise learning opportunities, but at an individual level in order for a person to capitalise on their learning, it is to be translated to a currency accepted by formal institutions and employers. This of course links to two features of modern systems of post-compulsory education: recognition and accreditation of prior learning (RAPL) and credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS), which we explore elsewhere in Chapter 7.

A quote from the OECD illustrates the potential role of cities from a more strongly economic perspective:

‘The city is dead. Long live the city! Those who have rushed to pronounce the city’s demise in today’s globalized communications world may have to eat their words. For cities (and their regions) can offer just the right mix of resources, institutional structures, modern technology and cosmopolitan values that allow them to serve as incubators and drivers for the knowledge-based societies of the 21st century.’ (Larsen 1999)

Larsen argues that the Learning City concept is associated with theories about innovation and systems that promote innovation. A learning city or region puts innovation at the core of its development. The capacity to innovate, through adopting new approaches to problems and taking risks, is linked to the existence of infrastructures that allow for the collection, storage and transmission of knowledge and ideas, and the conditions that facilitate connections between key players engaged in economic development (see Florida 1995). These connections, or forms of *social capital*, are intrinsic to *knowledge transfer* and economic performance.

Social Capital is about connections and ties between people. It has been distinguished from more traditional measures of capital (human and physical) in that it is relational as against being the property of an individual (OECD 2001), though the forms of capital are related and each has exchange value. Field (2005a) 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

It is argued by many economists that highly dynamic regional economies capitalise upon their local assets at the regional level and in some doing, create competitive advantage (Cooke 1997). Increasingly in modern economies that asset is knowledge and it is capitalised upon within social, cultural and institutional networks based upon mutuality and trust that thrive within regional settings where individuals and organisations are in close and frequent contact (Storper, 1997). Economic growth is increasingly seen as being dependent on the quality of knowledge and diffusion of technology at a regional level. Regions become important since they are the spatial locus for inter-dependent clusters of researchers and innovators. Through the range of interactions that occur between the members of clusters (industry, government, NGOs, universities and their spin-offs companies, research institutes, Vocational Education and Training (VET) colleges and a range of other forms of organisations), there is a ‘knowledge spill-over’ that sustains the cluster. It is the network ties that squeezes knowledge out of the overall system and spreads it to places where it didn’t trickle before. The implication for Cooke in the context of short cycle HE (quoted by Rosenfeld 2000) is that this may ‘necessitate a different form of community college, one that focuses on capabilities, encourages and rewards collaborative learning and the sharing of accumulated experience and knowledge—and perhaps even creates social settings and brokers relationships in which firms and other organizations also can learn from one another’.

Of course having access to learning based on that knowledge is not automatic, and at this point, it is important to note however that the connection between social capital and learning is complex. As Field (2005b) points out there is a positive association between social capital and educational attainment especially amongst the young, but in some studies of adult

learning it has been found that individuals rely on their connections (for example in job-finding) rather than their participation in formal learning. Similarly it may also be the case in relation to connections between companies, where it is the existence networks with both weak and strong ties that may be responsible for informal learning. It has been argued by Yli-Renko (1999) that social capital in inter-firm relationships improves access to external sources of learning, increases the willingness of firms to engage in dialogical interaction, and by improves the efficiency of the transfer and interpretation of knowledge¹.

Larsen in his quote links the city and its region, and nowadays the terms learning city and the learning region are barely distinguishable in usage, and at times it is the *city-region* (cities with a surrounding hinterland) that is common parlance (Charles 2005). Region, like many terms is subject to a number of meanings. It may, for example, be a geographic area that encompasses a number of national political boundaries (e.g. the *Middle East*), one that crosses a number of regional political boundaries (the *Thames Gateway* in the South-East of England), a particular unit of governance (e.g. Cape Province in South Africa – the ‘Learning Cape’ (Walters and Etkind 2004) or an area that is defined as sphere of influence for its services by another agency. In the latter case, as Goddard (1994) points out, in the context of the university, there are a range of geographic scales over which different types of services are provided. The local community or region differs according to whether the service is teaching, research or aspects of the third mission such as widening participation.

In essence, however, the idea of a *learning region* arguably simply extends the learning city in scale and scope and as in the R3L initiative refers to a region, city, urban or rural area, regardless of whether its identity is defined in administrative, cultural, geographical, physical or political terms. The further development of the lifelong learning regions as in the R3L initiative puts greater weight to the concept being inclusive of all within communities. The learning region also enables the recognition of the interaction and interdependence of the urban and rural, and presents the challenge of connecting the silos of ‘urban policy’ and ‘rural policy’.

The emphasis on smaller geographical entities within which learning is situated links to broader issues of governance. Throughout the world we see a greater emphasis on regional and local levels of governance and the provision of services, including those of education and training ‘close to the ground’ (EC 2000). According to Belanger (2006), it is at the level of urban communities and economic regions that individuals tend more to establish a local identity and rootedness. As a consequence he argues that the ‘growing sense of identity with the city creates a social demand for responsive regional or municipal government’.

We begin to see a number of facets and indeed interpretations of the learning region. These reflect differing emphases upon economic and social perspectives that have been taken by a number of authors. There is clearly no one definition of what constitutes a learning region, though Wolfe’s (2002) contention, that the learning region provides the right institutional environment to promote private and social learning at four scale (individual; company; groups of companies; government) is a useful catch-all.

We might also ask how learning, towns, cities and regions are distinguished from other forms of learning community. A recent report by Faris (2006) (see also Faris and Wheeler 2006) in support of the Vancouver Learning City Initiative provides a helpful context. He argues that the term learning community can be utilised in a number of different ways and that it can refer to ‘a community within a classroom or educational institution, a virtual global learning community, communities of practice, or those of place’, and suggests that what we have been describing as learning cities and regions are part of a Russian doll of nested social learning

¹ For a detailed overview of the relationship between SMEs, Social Capital and Learning see Sorama et al (2004)

environments of every increasing scale. As shown in Figure 1 below, each can be manifested in virtual form using information and communications technologies and each involves some form of two-way or multiple social interactivity between individuals. Learning neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities and regions are what Faris describes as the *Learning Communities of Place*. He then argues that each type of communities shares certain unique features as shown in Figure 1.

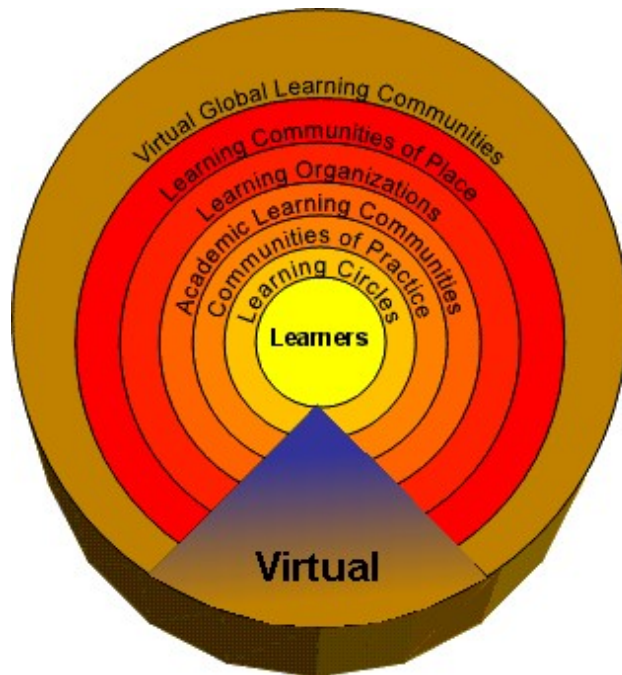


Figure 1 Learning Communities: A Nested Concept of Expanding Scale and Cascade of Social Learning Environments (Faris 2006)

Type	Scale (Smallest to Largest Scale)	Example(s)	Unique Features or Characteristics
Virtual Global Learning Communities	Largest: World Wide Web Networks of Shared Interest or Purpose	*CISCO Academy of Learning * Commonwealth of Learning	Solely dependent upon Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) e.g., Electronic Learning Communities
Learning Communities of Place	▲ Civic Entities: Neighbourhoods, Villages, Towns, Cities or Regions	*Kent Learning Region *Victoria Learning City *Finnish Learning Villages	Place-Based Settings *Places that explicitly use lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal *Political jurisdictions *Residents define operational boundaries * ICT used to network within and among learning communities of place
Learning Organizations	▲ Corporations/Bureaucracies through to Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises	*IKEA Natural Step Eco-Economic Model	Private, Social or Public Enterprises that Foster Learning as a Strategic Objective

		* UK Investors in People Scheme	* Shared Vision * Systems Thinking * Mental Models * Personal Mastery *Team Learning - Peter Senge, chief exponent
Academic Learning Communities	↑ Educational Institutions: Colleges/Classrooms	*Evergreen College *Community Schools	Formal Education Settings *Team Teaching * Interdisciplinary Approaches *Co-operative Learning - A. Meiklejohn, chief exponent
Communities of Practice	↑ Communities of Interest: Professions, Trades, Avocations, etc.	*Artists' Workshop *Legal Assistants' Network	Initially Solely Face-to-Face *Often Theme-Based *Members are Practitioners *Members Learn from One Another - Etienne Wenger, chief exponent
Learning Circles	↑ Smallest: Small Groups Engaged in Learning Activities of Mutual Interest	*Swedish Study Circle Movement *Small Group Discussions	Initially Solely Face-to-Face *Small Group Dynamics *Optimum Size: 8-12 Persons - Kurt Lewin and Myles Horton, chief exponents

Table I: *Learning Communities: A Nested Concept of Expanding Scale and Cascade of Social Learning Environments (Faris 2006)*

Elsewhere we have considered learning circles, communities of practice, many academic forms of learning community, learning organisational models and the role of ICT on a variety of levels including within global contexts. At this point we will look at learning communities of place in practice. A number of authors provide examples including most recently Faris (2006), Longworth (2006) and Duke et al (2006). It is possible from the work of these authors and from a multitude of other models of learning places around the world to suggest how principles underlying the concepts we have previously described are manifested in strategies, missions and actions.

We previously introduced some key features of the learning city, which we will now explore in more detail though investigating some concrete examples. These features are:

- the responsibilities of a range of actors in facilitating learning
- the creation of explicit and co-operative partnership links between these actors
- social inclusion
- economic development

The range of actors

UNESCO has recognised for many decades that contributions to learning may be made by each of the five sectors that make up our communities; civic, economic, education, public and voluntary. Table 2 shows examples of the contributions of that each of these sectors might make to the learning city and the model presents learning within a *lifewide* as well as *lifelong* context. In short learning is not something that simply occurs in formal or even non-formal settings: it is something that infuses all aspects of our lives. It is about our contribution to civil society, health and well-being, economic development, the environment and

sustainability, rural and urban development and social/cultural development, and a number of agencies play a role.

<i>Purposes</i>	<i>Civic Learning</i>	<i>Health Promotion</i>	<i>Economic Development</i>	<i>Environmental Sustainability</i>	<i>Rural/Urban Development</i>	<i>Social/Cultural Development</i>
SECTORS						
CIVIC - municipal government	* Citizen apprentices * Youth Advisory Council	* Community drug abuse strategy	* Farmers' Market	* Green Belt initiative * Sustainable social housing projects * Local organic agricultural co-op	* Development of a Learning Quarter	* <i>Tall Ships Festival</i> * <i>Learning Festival</i>
ECONOMIC - private to social enterprise	* Union shop steward training * Bd of Trade Election Forum	* Occupational health strategy * Migrant worker literacy	* Supply chain training strategy * Individual learning plans * Workplace literacy projects	* <i>The Natural Step City</i> strategy * Architects' Forum on sustainable design * Value-based Business Assn	* Vision 2020 initiative	* Artists' marketing co-op * Single Mom's catering company
PUBLIC - libraries, museums - social/health agencies	* Library series on Rural-Urban Issues	* Community Early Learning Coalition * Seniors Centre health literacy	* Workplace health & safety program * Life Skills training	* Museum historical mapping project	* Library Learning Hub project	* Quality of life survey * Library Mother Goose program
EDUCATIONAL - K to 12 - post-secondary institutions	* College all-candidates meeting * School restorative justice program	* Student nurse community practicums	* Co-operative education projects	* Student river restoration project	* College urban planning seminar	* University International Students' Fair * Intergenerational service-learning
VOLUNTARY/COMMUNITY - civil society	* Community leadership training	* Night Youth basketball	* Disabled Assn food prep co-op	* Environmental movement lecture series * Community organic gardens	* Multi-faith social housing,	* Multi-cultural festival * Family literacy * Faith Community kitchens

Table 2 A Learning City Matrix: Examples of How a Community's Sectors Contribute to Achieve Shared Objectives (Faris 2006)

There are clearly potential inter-connections in practice between the sectors and purposes set-out in Table2, but how in practice are these actualized?

The creation of explicit and co-operative partnership links between these actors

The identification of a range of actors and their potentially linked contribution to the development of learning opportunity is one matter, but it is another matter to create meaningful and productive partnership. The development of effective partnerships is a key driver for encouraging and structuring community engagement at a variety of levels. It emerges as a key element in many successful initiatives around the world, and it is possible to identify facets of those partnerships that successfully mediate community engagement through a few illustrations.

In some societies, the approach to partnership includes at least an element of centralization and even government legislation. In Scotland, for example, as a result of the 2003 *Local Government in Scotland Act 2003*, there is a statutory obligation on all local authorities to engage in 'Community Planning'. This very specifically requires the creation of structures that facilitate the engagement with communities in decision-making that affect the delivery of public services. In the regions of Scotland this has resulted in the setting up of Community Planning Partnerships (CPP) to address a range of linked issues, including Economic Development and Community Safety, Health and Wellbeing, and Lifelong Learning. In this model local authorities are required to engage key players including Health Boards, Enterprise Networks, Colleges, Police, Fire Services and Transport Services in Community Planning at the regional level. It is not surprising that this and other similar attempts to bring together entities with common interests, but with separate organisation arrangements are described as being about *joined-up* service planning and delivery. At national level in Scotland, an agency of government, Communities Scotland, promotes community planning in

the CPPs. This framework seeks therefore to balance high level oversight and integration of activity across sectors with mechanisms that allow for very local community participation. A concrete example of the combination of these approaches is provided by Easterlow and Sankey (2006) in their description of the Community Futures programme in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. Here they give an account of how community aspirations of local communities have been linked to the strategic planning for this area of natural heritage through creating the means for the views of communities to inform the development of policy and projects in the area. This work also demonstrates a link between lifelong learning and natural capital, our stock of environmentally provided resources and services (see Parkin 2000). Conservation, sustainable use of resources, and sustainable economic and social development are a neglected part of lifelong learning actions, but clearly an understanding of the fragile condition of our ecosystem is viewed by many as *the* priority in education.

In Australia, in states such as New South Wales and Queensland, the attempt to secure collaboration amongst the many players involved in the provision of services at a neighbourhood, municipal or regional level tends to be referred to as place management. The objective in place management processes is co-ordinated and integrated delivery of public services across all levels and sectors of government to specific geographic communities. Such models have been translated into Canada, for example in the establishment of Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, as a 'Global Learning City' in 2005.

Partnerships and collaborations need not be structured or initiated from above, and may develop spontaneously if conditions allow. Walters and Etkind (2004) describe the annual Learning Cape Festival in South Africa where within one month over 500 events are held, and it is because of the intense engagement of various actors that a range of networks and partnerships have been built. Irrespective of how partnerships in learning have come about, they do appear to have some common features. From the research undertaken within the PASCAL (Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions) Observatory² co-based at the authors' university, it would seem that a number of conditions are important not only in developing partnerships, but in sustaining them. These have been delineated by Wilson et al (2007) as clarity of outcomes, agreed and maintained governance arrangements, effective approaches to conflict resolution, and clarity about the specific character of the contribution which particular partners are making.

Concluding Remarks - Social inclusion and Economic Development once more!

Many initiatives seek to include those who for a variety of socio-economic reasons have been denied the opportunity to participate in learning, especially access to Higher Education. The development of a regional approach has been the basis for a range of activity in this field since the late 1970s in the UK with most recently the creation of *Aim Higher* and *Lifelong Learning Networks* in England and *Widening Access Fora* in Scotland³. Such arrangements tend to bring together educational providers (schools, vocational colleges and universities) and to a greater or lesser extent link with local or regional governments and non-formal providers in the planning of provision at a regional level. However, even if 'joined-upness' is achieved between separate sectors, simply offering access to educational provision will not however combat inequity in itself since those who are excluded from education are also likely to experience multiple deprivation.// In neighbourhoods with poor educational access and attainment, there will be higher unemployment, greater poverty and crime, and poorer housing, health and general quality of life. In England (in a similar way to the Scottish CPPs),

² See the PASCAL homepage at <http://www.obs-pascal.com> and a series of hot topic papers at this site which deal in depth with a number of issues pertaining to place management, social capital and learning regions.

³ For a full account of such arrangements see Allen et al (2006) and Osborne (2004)

this has been reflected in the creation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in which statutory agencies and other actors on a voluntary basis work together in planning and the delivery of services, and the Neighbourhood Renewal Grant (NRF) has been used to fund changes in service delivery in the most deprived areas. The logic is that the multiple forms of deprivation should be attacked in a cohesive way in order that neighbourhoods can be regenerated. Evidence of the success of such approaches is limited, but Shepherd (2006) reports that an investment to bring houses up to the 'Decent Homes Standard' in the South-West of England is associated with a decrease in unemployment, improvement in education outcomes amongst the school-age population, improvement in health and reductions in crime.

The literature of learning regions is perhaps more influenced by economic rather than social considerations. As we have said earlier it is argued that a particular set of conditions with a particular geography, especially the clustering of innovative companies are those that from one perspective create the foundations for a learning region. It is the development of their human capital (through amongst other things learning) and their connectivity (i.e. their social capital) that is the basis within this setting for the development of economic capital. We should at this point take care in relation to cause and effect. As Schuller (2000) points out social capital is both cited as a *pre-condition* for social and economic progress and an *outcome* of it. In a flourishing community there may be many diverse networks in existence. Are they the cause of affluence or have they come about because of economic prosperity? There is perhaps less of a controversy in relation to human capital, and as we argue in Chapter 4 there is much evidence certainly at a personal level that investment in the development of skills and knowledge has a clear economic benefit (UUK 2007)

In practice, where do we see the learning region delivering economic benefits? Nordic models are perhaps most persuasive in this regard. A combination of factors has ensured that the development of a knowledge-based economy is more reality than rhetoric. These include active central and regional government intervention. For example in both Finland and Sweden the close links are mandated between the producers of knowledge (most particularly the universities) and its users, notably enterprises. In both countries the state requires universities to engage in 'third mission' activities, and they are funded to do so. At regional and city level in Finland there has been a longstanding realisation of the need to build what Sotarauta (2005, p 97) describes as the 'institutional foundation for future clusters and innovations'. He cites the example of Tampere, often referred to as the Manchester of Finland because of its industrial history (and its tall chimney stacks!), which through persuading two universities to move to the city in the 1960s created the knowledge base for the city to be part of the boom in ICT related industries in the 1990s. His argument is that the ICT cluster of companies was complemented by universities that supplied knowledge and knowledge-workers.

However as Sankey and Osborne (2006) have reported previously despite rejoiners to be part of a learning regions is found in many parts of the world, 'commitment to lifelong learning and/or their role at a regional level simply does not impinge on the consciousness of many organisations, especially schools and SMEs'. The Learning Region as an overarching concept has considerable power to engage all potential stakeholders in collaborative activity based on partnership, but much progress is still to be made before it becomes a world-wide reality.

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