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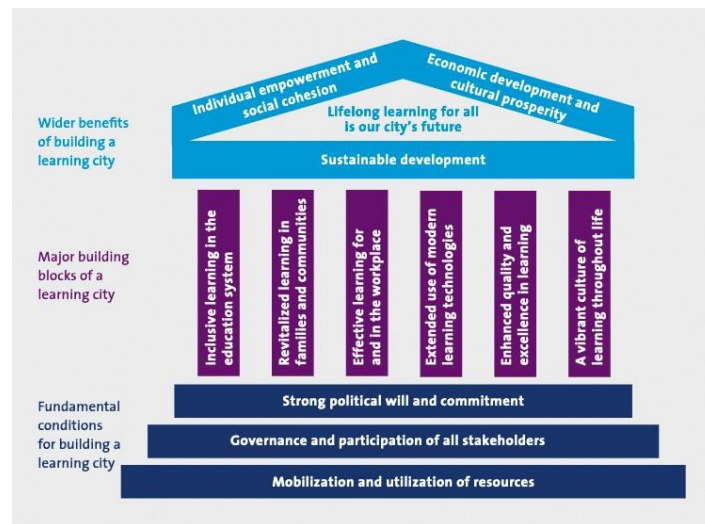
2024

A closer look at Learning Cities



Introduction

Learn for Life developed the Learning Cities Erasmus+ project to investigate what Dutch municipalities could learn from long-established learning cities abroad. This project raised the following questions in the educational field. What exactly is a learning city? How can cities become learning cities and perhaps, even more importantly: what are the benefits and the relevance of a learning city? In this report, we will try to answer these questions.



The structure of the learning city concept

Project motivation

Learn for Life was and is looking for new opportunities to strengthen local and regional cooperation between various parties to promote and facilitate lifelong development at municipal level for everyone, especially for people for whom (further) learning is not a matter of course. After Learn for Life had come across the concept of learning cities developed by UNESCO, it wanted to investigate whether and how this model could also be used by various parties to establish a positive learning culture in the local Dutch context. What possibilities exist to promote local cooperation and make lifelong development a priority in municipal policy, and how can adults from vulnerable groups benefit?

More specifically, Learn for Life wanted to investigate:

- the concept itself and the local variations in implementation (local plans)
- cooperation partners involved
- activities to be organised
- extent of beneficial impact on adults from vulnerable groups
- role of local government
- variations in size and scope of these cities/municipalities
- underlying strategies
- local success factors
- local impact of a learning city, and
- relevance of these factors in the Dutch context

The project included visiting four UNESCO-recognised learning cities within the EU. One of the selection criteria was comparable population size to Dutch municipalities (status of Dutch municipalities on August 15, 2024):

- Fermo (IT) 37,390 inhabitants. In the Netherlands, 197 municipalities have fewer than 37,000 inhabitants. Oldambt, Raalte, Rijssen-Holten, Oude IJsselstreek, Heemskerk, Gorinchem, Teylingen, and Moerdijk have a similar number of inhabitants to Fermo. A further 77 Dutch municipalities have between 40,000 and 65,000 inhabitants.
- Viladecans (ES) 65,549 inhabitants. In the Netherlands, Nieuwegein, Stichtse Vecht, Capelle a/d IJssel, Katwijk, Lansingerland, and Zeist have a roughly comparable number of inhabitants. In addition, 36 Dutch municipalities have between 68,000 and 144,000 inhabitants.
- Pécs (HU) 145,985 inhabitants. The Netherlands has no municipality with a comparable population size, but it does have five municipalities with 160,000–163,000 inhabitants: Enschede, Amersfoort, Zaanstad, 's-Hertogenbosch, and Haarlemmermeer.
- Larissa (GR) 164,000 inhabitants. In the Netherlands, Apeldoorn, Arnhem, and Haarlem have a roughly comparable population size, closely followed by Nijmegen and Breda. There are eight other municipalities in the Netherlands with more than 190,000 inhabitants.

At the start of our project, two Dutch municipalities had already acquired UNESCO Learning City status: Groningen and 's Hertogenbosch. During our project, Oss also acquired UNESCO Learning City status.

Viladecans 2016	Pécs 2017	Fermo 2017	Larissa 2016
Groningen 2019	Den Bosch 2019	Oss 2022	

Table 1 Year of acquiring UNESCO Learning Cities status

General characteristics

During our visits to the learning cities of Viladecans (ES), Pécs (HU), Fermo (IT), and Larissa (GR), we found that in all four cities there was strong cooperation between various local parties, support and embedding of the concept in local municipal policy, as well as strong coherence between different themes. These are probably the most distinguishing features for learning cities and major challenges for many Dutch municipalities.

In line with UNESCO findings, we found that these cities, like many other cities, are facing three major problems:

- Urbanisation combined with climate change and health risks. Urbanisation and climate change reinforce each other and may entail risks such as air pollution, heat stress, limited green space, food and water quality, faster spread of infectious diseases, and more mental health issues such as performance pressure, stress, and anxiety. These factors are interrelated and require an integral approach to reduce health risks and increase the resilience of urban areas.

- Social inequality: large differences between rich and poor, resulting in the risk of separate worlds, fewer or more health risks, limited or easy access to all kinds of facilities, differences in housing opportunities, unequal employment opportunities and potential social unrest. Addressing these inequalities requires an integral approach that considers economic, social and environmental factors.
- Unemployment and weak economic development. Scaling up and increased infrastructure offer opportunities but may also lead to structural unemployment. Tackling unemployment in urban areas requires an integral approach that takes into account economic, social, and infrastructural factors.

The concept of a learning city enables such an integral approach.

The delegation in Viladecans



Differences in local context

Cities visited Differences	Viladecans	Pécs	Fermo	Larissa
Positioning	Barcelona suburb; continue independent existence	Reinforce relationship with region	Reinforce relationship with region	Largest city in Thessaly region and fifth city in Greece in terms of population
Population	65,549	145,985	37,396	164,000
Population density	> 500 inh./km ²	> 500 inh./km ²	> 300 inh./km ²	> 1,100 inh./km ²
Urban area	20 km ²	163 km ²	125 km ²	363 km ²
Location	Near metropolitan area on the coast	In rural area	In rural area near the coast	merger municipality, greenest city of Greece, 10 m ² per inhabitant
Characterisation	Commuter town	Industrial past; former European capital of culture	Old walled city	In the middle of agricultural area
Economy	Industry, services sector and tourism	Education/ research, services, health care, tourism, viticulture	Agriculture, clothes and shoes, tourism, SMEs, artisanal products	Agriculture, food processing, services sector

Table 2: Core data

Depending on the local and regional situation, cities make their own individual choices. These different choices have a significant impact on what is feasible and desirable in terms of policy-making.

Similarities

UNESCO lists the following key characteristics of a learning city:

- Promoting inclusive learning from primary to higher education
- Revitalising learning in families and communities
- Facilitating learning for and in the workplace
- Facilitating and encouraging the use of digital learning
- Improving quality and promoting excellence in learning
- Promoting a culture of lifelong learning

The delegation in Larissa



Which features did we recognise during our study visits?

The table below shows to what extent we recognised these criteria during our study visits.

	+++++ very great	++++ great	+++ medium	++ low
Learning cities visited				
Unesco Features	Viladecans	Pécs	Fermo	Larissa
Inclusive learning from primary to higher education	+++++	+++++	+++	+++++
Family and community learning	++++	++	++++	+++++
Learning for and on the job	+++	++	++	+++
Digital learning	+++++	++	+++	++++
Quality of learning	+++++	+++	++++	++
Learning culture	+++++	+++++	+++++	+++++

Table 3 The extent to which we believe the cities meet the UNESCO criteria

We recognised that differences between cities are partly determined by local context and partly by local policy choices. The most important similarity between cities is the promotion of a culture of lifelong learning, involving all forms of formal, non-formal and informal education.

Textile recycling shop in Pécs



Conditions for implementation

According to UNESCO, the most important conditions for developing a learning city are:

- Strong political will and commitment
- Participatory governance at multiple levels
- Mobilisation and use of resources
- Building a monitoring and evaluation system

These conditions particularly relate to local governments and suggest that initiatives primarily rest with local governments. However, there are also learning cities where the initiative is taken by a consortium of different organisations. We will come back to this later.



International hybrid conference in Pécs

Learning cities visited Unesco Conditions	Viladecans	Pécs	Fermo	Larissa
Strong political will and commitment	+++++	+++++	+++++	+++++
Participatory governance at various levels	+++++	+++++	+++++	+++++
Mobilisation and use of resources	+++++	+++++	+++++	+++++
A monitoring and evaluation system	++	+	++	+++++

Table 4 Basic conditions according to UNESCO

The first three conditions are met by all four learning cities. Work on the fourth condition is in progress: learning cities must submit a progress report to UNESCO every two years. So far only Larissa has developed a systematic approach. With the help of these documents, UNESCO has recently published a summarized progress report: <http://tiny.cc/ptzs001>

Our experiences organised

During our visits, we saw and heard a lot. We learned how the four cities view themselves as learning cities. We saw which institutions, projects and activities they think characterise their learning cities. We tried to somewhat organise and streamline our impressions into a number of core points, so that the similarities and differences become clearer:

1. Broader policy, learning culture
2. Cooperation, organisational structure
3. Funding
4. Use of volunteers
5. Regional involvement
6. Focus/themes
7. Inclusiveness
8. Intergenerationality
9. Digitalisation
10. Sustainability
11. Involvement of local businesses
12. Manifestations and events
13. Cultural participation
14. Participation of vulnerable adults



Museum Fermo

We will now briefly discuss these core points. We distinguish between the first four points as preconditions, and the ensuing points on concretisation and implementation of the learning city concept.

1 Broader policy, learning culture

In all four cities, we saw that the development of a lifelong learning culture has been given a more prominent place in municipal policy. In Viladecans, education has been a political and strategic priority shared by the entire municipal administration for decades. It links up with the Catalan government's Education 360 programme, which has five pillars: educational innovation, economic revitalisation, ecological transition, a healthy lifestyle and quality of life, and resilience in terms of crisis management. It is an integral approach to social issues, in which education plays an important connecting role. In the other cities, too, lifelong learning is not seen as a separate domain, but as a concept cutting across and impacting various other policy areas. Education is seen as a very important factor for social and economic development, both at individual and at municipal level. In Pécs, learning culture offers an appealing integral approach. The municipality, university and local institutions work together, starting from the principle of listening to what residents want, enabling them to optimise the way they function and participate in society. Fermo wishes to further a culture of lifelong learning as fundamental health and well-being factors. Efforts are being made to mobilise

the educational potential of the entire city: educational institutions, public services, businesses, cultural and voluntary organisations, citizens to build a large cultural voluntary network. Larissa takes a holistic and inclusive approach to create a sustainable community and learning culture. As formulated by the municipal council: make active learning an everyday lifestyle for all citizens. It prioritises ten pillars: attention for new technology, culture, vulnerable groups, healthy cities (healthy = mental health), environment and sustainable development, general adult education (citizenship education, open schools) youth, school (educational community and society), learning and the labour market, and training of municipal staff. The definition of learning clearly is not restricted to formal and non-formal education partners. It also includes informal education, cultural participation and preventive healthcare.



Exchange in Larissa

2 Cooperation, organisational structure

Although a learning city may be organised in various ways, it is crucial that a partnership is established between a wide variety of parties: government, educational, cultural, social, societal institutions, and the local business community. This usually involves a joining-forces approach, which means establishing connections between different parties and, above all, encouraging and supporting individual initiative. This cooperation can be achieved in various ways: top-down, as in Viladecans, bottom-up, as in Pécs or by combining various interests, as in Fermo. Alternatively, as in the case of Larissa, educational and cultural organisations may be invited to come up with proposals for projects. A pragmatic, step-by-step approach is used to launch several new projects each year, rather than a blueprint for an ideal city. Viladecans and Larissa have strong collaboration at administrative level. Viladecans employs no fewer than eight policy officers for education. In Larissa, the Lifelong Learning Department works closely together with the municipal Social Services not only to inform citizens, but also to design and implement educational programmes based on specific needs. In Pécs and Fermo, there is strong reliance on university expertise. Personal involvement of policy officers appears to be valuable for the administrative design of (managerial) continuity.

Some other characteristics of the organisational structure are shown in the following table.

Learning cities visited Elements org culture	Viladecans	Pécs	Fermo	Larissa
Initiators	Mayor and city counsellors	University of Pécs, Faculty of Humanities, Institute for Human Development and Cultural Studies and the House of Civic Communities	University College San Domenico	Mayor and city counsellors
Organisational structure	Network for educational innovation, jointly managed by various municipal departments, local educational centres, citizens' initiatives and companies	Learning City-Region Forum, whose task is to stimulate initiatives of local citizens and companies; network of societal organisations, coordinated by the initiators	Association of stakeholders, chaired by the vice-chair of the municipal council	Learning City Network Larissa committee, consisting of 16 stakeholders, including the representative of the Learners Larissa City Committee with representatives of 70 institutes and services
Role of municipality	Initiating, coordinating, actively participatory	Mainly facilitating	Supportive and participatory	Developing and supportive

Table 5 Way the learning city is organised

3 Funding

The resources available for funding a learning city are very limited. Multi-year plans and budget financing are rarely used. Educational institutions often make use of Erasmus+ subsidies, while societal organisations mainly rely on fundraising and cross-funding. Pécs is dependent on the national government, and funding is partly dependent on whether the city council has the same political affiliation as the government. Adult education in Italy is mainly financed through project and programme funding and operating subsidies. In Viladecans, the municipality is dependent on the Catalan government and also makes extensive use of European subsidies. In Larissa, too, no fewer than nine different European funds are used. Furthermore, the Larissa municipality has (become) owner of many accommodations, enabling it to ask institutions for something in return. The municipality's Lifelong Learning Department has an annual budget of 120,000 euros (2022 budget) for activities to promote lifelong learning (educational programmes, workshops, information and awareness events, etc.).

4 Use of volunteers

A preliminary remark is in order. In the Netherlands, we understand a volunteer to be socially active without pay, whether or not, in an organisational context, for example a language volunteer (in a library or welfare institution) or an unpaid experience expert/specialist. The types of volunteers in the four cities we visited were different. Volunteers are used most in Pécs and less in Fermo, Viladecans and Larissa where professionals are primarily used, depending on the capabilities of the educational partners and the availability of funds. As resources are usually limited, citizens are often called upon to volunteer. Because of cultural and historical factors, this is not always labelled as voluntary work, as is customary in the Netherlands. In Italy, Spain and Greece, voluntary work mainly takes place through family connections: parents who perform tasks at schools in Viladecans and retired teachers who run the Università Popolare in Fermo. In Hungary, volunteering is still associated with compulsory

ancillary work under the former communist regime. That is why Hungarians prefer to call volunteers “socially active” citizens. Due to limited financial resources, many activities depend on them. In Pécs, for example, active citizens sponsor various project activities by investing money in long-distance runners and competitive swimmers. Larissa primarily resorts to the use of paid professionals and focuses on professionalisation, particularly on behalf of educational work with adults. Citizen participation, of young people in particular, is encouraged in close cooperation with the municipal youth council. They offer awareness-raising and training activities with the aim of enabling people aged 18 to 30 to participate in socio-political life through open and constructive dialogue with local authorities. Larissa also has a citizens' university for general adult education for everyone, offering programmes in the field of lifelong learning. It was established in 2018 after the previous institution for general adult education ceased to exist in 2016. Participants are also systematically involved in the evaluation process, for instance through focus groups. In the context of family relationships, health prevention activities and puppet theatre performances target adults in their role as parents: learning how to say no to your child.

5 Regional involvement

The extent to which the learning cities focus on their surrounding regions varies. Viladecans is more or less a suburb of Barcelona. However, as a commuter town it wants to clearly distinguish itself from the city and therefore focuses mainly on itself. Pécs is the capital of Baranya County, a wine-growing region with several Roma villages; in the past, the city was important because of its various industries (employment), but today the city's involvement has changed and is mainly focused on the distribution of natural and regional products, and landscape and environmental management. Pécs also offers several regional educational projects. The region itself benefits from all the cultural facilities in Pécs. Fermo is a provincial capital and actually forms a twin town with the coastal town of Porto San Giorgio. In addition, educational projects are offered by as many as 16 neighbouring municipalities, some of which we visited. With its various festivals, Fermo focuses explicitly on the region. Since 2011 Larissa has been a merger municipality as well as capital of the Thessaly region, one of Greece's most important agricultural areas. The role that Larissa played in the region in the past can be seen in the Mill of Papas Museum, but otherwise it is unclear to what extent Larissa, as a learning city, focuses on the region.

6 Focus/themes

Each learning city focuses on specific themes relevant to the local context and to local needs. Such a focus is of great importance. For example, Pécs calls itself a city without borders and a model of cultural cohesion, which can undoubtedly be explained by the fact that it was once a European Capital of Culture. With education as game changer, cultural activities have replaced declining industrial activities. Viladecans explicitly sees learning as an investment in the future of the city. The city is trying in all sorts of ways to enhance the quality of educational activities, for example by introducing an educational passport, by implementing digital learning technology, and by providing all schools with learning resources of the same quality (equal opportunities). Fermo's motto is: “think global, act local”. Learning is seen as the most important answer to the question of the city's history and identity. Projects such as Fermo Deaf-Friendly City and the collaboration with Tipicità, the annual regional food and eco-tourism fair, are directly linked to the further development of tourism in Fermo. In Larissa, the emphasis is on various forms of cultural education and health prevention, in addition to the other pillars mentioned. Road safety is also an important theme, with a focus on teaching young children to ride bicycles and the recent construction of bicycle lanes and paths in a flat city.

7 Inclusivity

Inclusivity is an important theme in all four cities. In Viladecans, the focus is mainly on disadvantaged vulnerable families. For example, since 1996, there has been a programme supporting mothers and fathers in raising their children. In Pécs, especially non-formal educational activities are organised with various groups of adults: people with disabilities, Roma, people with language and/or numeracy issues. These are mainly activities in which intergenerational, intercultural, sustainability and inclusion aspects are important. Using a bottom-up approach, the city seeks dialogue with its citizens, social groups and other stakeholders to identify and realise learning needs. There are various organisations for people with disabilities: reading for the visually impaired, for parents of disabled children, creative organisations, film clubs, etc. In these organisations, people talk to each other to learn from each other. Efforts are made to ensure accessibility. People are guided around to make them aware of accessibility issues. Stickers with the accessibility symbol are available and all accessible buildings are stored in a database. In the city provisions for disabled tourists have been made, such as maquettes in the squares. A “barrier-free tourism” festival is organised: sailing, horse riding, etc., suitable for people with disabilities. In Fermo, too, there is a strong focus on integrating specific target groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, and young people with learning and behavioural problems. One special project is the creation of a deaf-friendly city, which is highly accessible to the deaf and hard-of-hearing. In Larissa, museums are creating specific facilities for the visually impaired and blind. Integration of migrants is paid attention to by identifying similarities between how the local population lived in the past and today. Old photos of Larissa are used to bring out the similarity with the agricultural culture in the countries of origin of newcomers and refugees.

8 Intergenerationality

Intergenerationality is not usually a separate theme, but all four cities have various projects connecting different generations in one way or another. Viladecans actively invites citizens to share their history with the city via the municipal website. Fermo has a special project on autobiography and memory training. The aim is to build a shared memory as a collective autobiography of the city and its inhabitants. This is done through a network of “Houses of Memory” in the social centres of the city's neighbourhoods, schools and parishes. In addition, intergenerational workshops are organised in schools where pupils, parents and grandparents exchange ideas on various topics. Computer classes are also held with young people helping older people to use the most important digital applications. In Larissa, the folklore museum encourages people to continue to actively apply and preserve traditional techniques by organising meetings and educational activities for young and old. There is a digital training project in which 7-12 year olds support the elderly and a shared experiences project, quite popular with children, in which young and old eat traditional Greek dishes and spaghetti together.

9 Digitalisation

The digital transformation requires a great deal of attention and investment everywhere. In Viladecans, a conscious decision was therefore made to first ensure that all schools and educational institutions had equal access to the necessary equipment, such as laptops, tablets and digital whiteboards. Fermo used digital resources mainly in their deaf-friendly city programme: the implementation of an innovative software and hardware environment for hotels and guesthouses to facilitate communication with deaf customers by exclusively using visual modalities, and the production and free distribution of a multilingual tourist information application (sign language and subtitles in spoken languages) for tablets and smartphones providing information about local attractions and services. In Larissa, teachers' digital skills have been boosted thanks to a secondary

education project on the theme of addiction during the coronavirus pandemic. This is now also having a positive impact on other projects.

computer courses for the elderly in Larissa



10 Sustainability

Although the four cities claim they pay due attention to sustainability, this did not become clear during our visits. Viladecans mentions library workshops to create “clean air” zones. Pécs refers to an integral strategy for urban development reflecting innovative industrial growth towards green energy and sustainability, but it remained unclear what form this would take. Fermo pays attention to ecotourism, but this has not yet taken on a clear form, either. The local shoe industry has meanwhile adopted a more eco-friendly approach in line with current environmental requirements. The cities do have ideas about an intergenerational approach to sustainability issues, but these are scarcely being put into practice. In Larissa, cycle paths and lanes have been constructed and cycling courses are offered to schoolchildren. Recently, the municipality invited organisations to come up with projects in the field of sustainability.

11 Involvement local business community

All cities are trying to involve the local business community, either as active participants or as sponsors of activities. This involvement may take various forms, but it usually generates positive PR for the companies and strengthens support for the learning city in society. In addition, learning cities host educational activities focused on the labour market, such as work-study companies and traineeships in Viladecans, as well as language courses in the workplace. In Pécs, we saw reintegration-focused initiatives in the recycling industry. In Fermo, we saw a care farm and a care restaurant run by people with disabilities. There are also various programmes to improve the quality of jobs and the professional qualifications of employees. We saw little involvement from the business community in Larissa, but the focus on the agricultural region is strong.

12 Manifestations and events to increase recognisability

UNESCO points out that it is important for learning cities to celebrate their successes regularly, thus emphasising the importance of a learning city. In Pécs, the Festival of Learning is celebrated annually, supported by a programme of music concerts and a fair where regional businesses showcase and promote their products. Fermo, in addition to the Tipicità Fair, hosts the Calligraphy Festival, where the several generations can exchange ideas about learning to write, and the Watercolour Festival, where artists from all over the world help people to create their own watercolours. There is also the annual science festival “Fermhamente”, which enjoys great popularity. It is a hybrid form of what in the Netherlands is known as higher education for senior people (HOVO) and a summer university. Larissa has a beautiful square right in front of the Mill of Papas, surrounded by various cultural and educational institutions where joint festivals and other activities are regularly held in the open air. In Viladecans, we did not see any examples of celebrations or festivals, but the city’s policy revolves around an educational, social and political initiative called Education 360. This views the community

and the municipality as a local educational ecosystem capable of connecting the learning that takes place in all times and spaces of people's lives. One tool now well-known to residents is the educational passport for young people, in which they can keep track of the non-formal and informal activities they have participated in. There are plans to introduce this for adults in the near future, too.

13 Cultural participation

In the cities we visited, cultural participation was addressed in very different ways. In addition to the educational passport mentioned above, Viladecans offers a cultural and creative programme at the Angela Roca School as part of the extended school day, where schoolchildren from this disadvantaged neighbourhood are taught to play an instrument, do ballet and engage in free expression. In Pécs, the annual Learning City Festival is linked to two other annual events: a large music event with many guest performances and a market for local and regional products. Dr. Zsuzsa Koltyai PhD pays a lot of attention to the social role of museums by offering an action community project including a step-by-step plan, virtual tours, workshops and an active learning tool. In the historic centre of Fermo beautifully restored after the earthquake, the cultural heritage is especially visible in the public library, the adjacent museum and the concert theatre, where numerous activities take place on a regular basis. Larissa is the city which has succeeded most in integrating cultural participation. Its museums are the central platform for creative workshops, active art practice and amateur art. These public buildings (now owned by the local government) are also used for numerous events, performances, workshops, conferences and lectures for cultural, scientific and social events. They are places of celebration and learning. Cultural heritage goes beyond placing the past in retrospect. It also allows migrants to experience the comparison between the past and the present, emphasising not the differences between people from different cultures, but the similarities. Passing on experiences from young to old and old to young also receives a lot of attention. Public political space (outside and inside) was important as a political theme in classical antiquity, and continues to be so in Larissa, and in Greece in general.

14 Participation of vulnerable adults

A learning city appeals to formal education from primary school to university as well as to non-formal and informal learning. Educational activities by and for adults do not stand alone but are part of a broader approach. In Viladecans, there are plans to introduce the educational passport for adults, as well. We visited an adult education centre, where mainly language lessons (Catalan and English) were given, and a local training and employment centre, offering second-chance programmes for adults. In Pécs, our host organisation was a community centre offering not only courses, but also concerts, exhibitions and other cultural activities. The centre also houses various organisations, for example an organisation committed to making facilities more accessible for people with disabilities. We also visited a reintegration organisation where people distanced to the labour market or with occupational disabilities make new products from used clothing. In Fermo, autobiography courses and family history workshops have revitalised the adult community college. "Houses of Memory" in community centres are aimed at building a collective memory of the city. Reintegrating people with disabilities into the labour market was a focus point, too. In Larissa, the connection between education and culture is an important focus, with meetings in public outdoor spaces and public buildings, and many intercultural and intergenerational activities. One of the pillars are vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, Roma, refugees and migrants.

Reflection

In the tables and graphs below, the pluses and minuses summarise the key points in all four cities. Table 6 covers the first five core points.

+++ very good

++ good

+ average

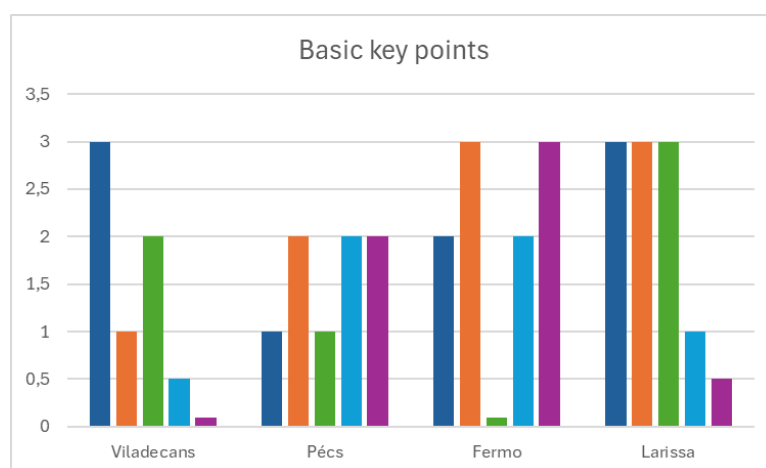
-/ poor

- insufficient

Learning cities visited Core points	Viladecans	Pécs	Fermo	Larissa
Broad policy, learning culture	+++	+	++	+++
Organisational structure, cooperation	+++	++	+++	+++
Funding	++	+	-/+	++
Volunteer involvement	-/+	++	++	+
Regional engagement	-	++	+++	-/+

Table 6 Core points identified

In graph below we have visualised the core points for all four cities:



Dark blue: the extent to which there is a clear learning culture

Orange: the extent to which a stable organisational structure exists independent of changes in policymakers

Green: the extent to which there is project funding

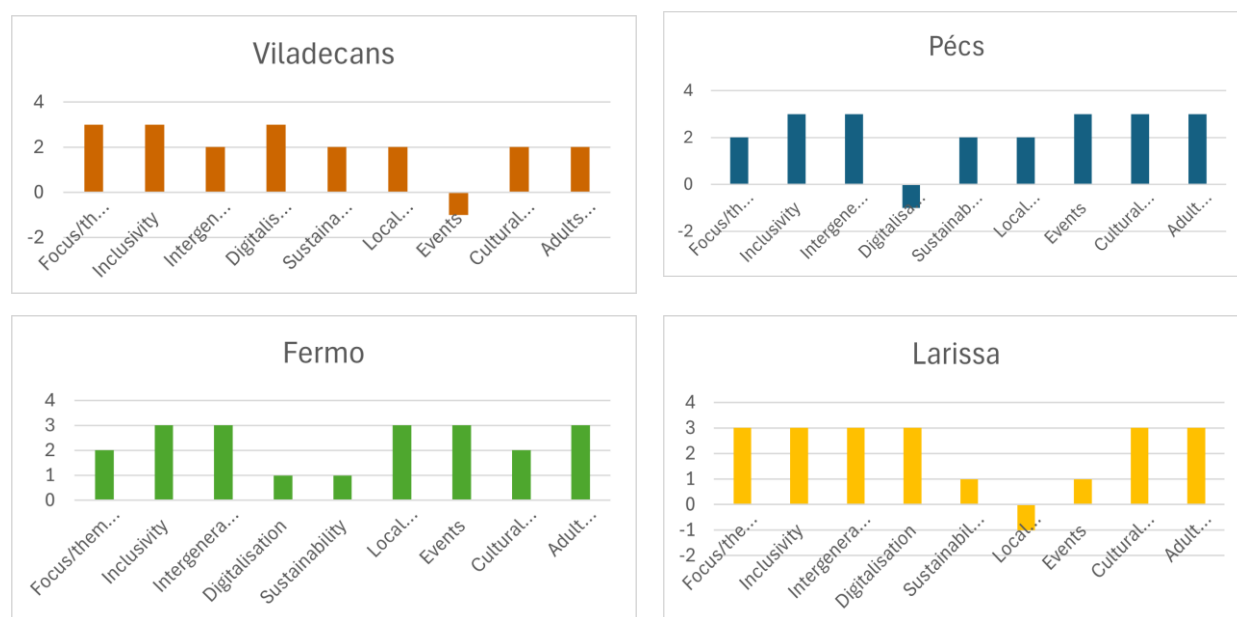
Blue: the extent to which the extent to which people engage in voluntary work/ social activities

Purple: the degree of regional involvement

Learning cities visited Concretisation core points	Viladecans	Pécs	Fermo	Larissa
Focus/themes	+++	++	++	+++
Inclusivity	+++	+++	+++	+++
Intergenerationality	++	+++	+++	+++
Digitalisation	+++	-/+	+	+++
Sustainability	++	++	+	+
Involvement local trade & industry	++	++	+++	-/+
Events and manifestations, recognisability	-/+	+++	+++	+
Cultural participation	++	+++	++	+++
Participation vulnerable adults	++	+++	+++	+++

Table 7 other core points

Based on this, we can distinguish four different local profiles:



These graphs show a distinct difference between the four learning cities, although all four meet the UNESCO concept.

Conclusions

Visits to learning cities have demonstrated that the development of a lifelong learning culture has been given a more prominent place in municipal policy. An integral approach to social issues, in which education plays an important connecting role is key. In a learning city, connections arise between formal education, non-formal education and informal learning situations (for example, through the introduction of an educational passport, a joint offer of digital skills, media literacy, etc.). A learning

city pays attention to adult learning, particularly to target groups distanced from the labour market and/or from social participation (as in the deaf-friendly city project), but also to parents' roles and to elderly people.

A learning city may be organised in various ways (top-down, bottom-up or on the basis of combined interests). However, a broad partnership between different parties is crucial: government, educational, cultural, social and societal institutions, and the local business community. Finally, it is important for such a partnership to focus on themes relevant to the local context and local needs and to place them in the context of UNESCO's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

What exactly is a learning city?

In our view, a learning city is an urban area where a broad consortium of stakeholders makes, implements and evaluates plans to enable lifelong learning for all residents. The initiative does not necessarily have to arise from local government, but it is important that initiators seek cooperation with the municipality. This is more important if a city wants to become a UNESCO learning city, because the municipal executive must ultimately apply for learning city status. It is crucial that the local government takes policy responsibility for making lifelong learning a reality. It not only needs to consider people as economically useful, but it must also pay attention to housing, living and citizen participation, and aim at reducing the gap between privileged and disadvantaged people.

Why is a learning city important?

Lifelong learning is a very important factor for social and economic development. More and more people are living in urban areas nowadays. A learning city is essentially about: "How do we live together?" Cities benefit from residents who can actively participate in society and contribute to social development. They need therefore be able to handle different types of information, develop insights from relevant information, acquire knowledge, form their own opinions, discuss these with others and move with the times. This requires lifelong learning and development.

What are the benefits of a learning city?

At municipal level, a learning city breaks down barriers between different policy areas and fosters strong cooperation between different local parties, whether or not in an organisational structure that is open to new partners. This joint approach can result in a common philosophy, clear policy choices, shared priorities and an integral approach to various themes, leading to structural embedding in municipal policy. Membership of the UNESCO network can result in further international knowledge exchange, study visits and participation in thematic workshops to deepen common interests.

How can learning cities be initiated?

Starting point is to bring together various stakeholders, discuss the idea and verify the feasibility of a plan. Connecting a culture of lifelong learning and numerous social and economic activities in itself is not difficult. However, it requires initiators and leaders who can use their own networks and create a snowball effect, encouraging municipal departments and public and private organisations to step outside their own zones to seek cooperation and better redistribute scarce resources. Start with three or four core partners (with a good reputation and network). Make sure that one party has long-term (financial) power. Various scenarios are conceivable. A regional partnership of municipalities can also become a learning city.

The type of initiator may vary from municipality to municipality. In fact, any organisation can be initiator, invite partners and ask all partners to contribute their own networks. This sets in motion a process of getting to know each other better, learning to speak each other's language and knowing

how to utilise each other's capabilities. Think of a regional training centre, a university of applied sciences, a work-study company, a cultural centre or the public library, all of which have their own networks and partners. In all cases, the municipality will play a role, if the municipality wants to become a formal UNESCO Learning City.

The table below presents an overview of contributions from potential partners

Executive committee and city council	Decide whether or not to prioritise learning city policy
Government organisations	Are often the most strongly represented partners
Companies	See cooperation as a source of commercial opportunity or as a means of giving something back to the community; corporate social responsibility
Educational centres	Are often natural instigators and participate in other networks
Developers of educational methods	Produce various types of educational material
Welfare and health sector	Meeting places for informal learning and providers of accommodation, communication structures, equipment and logistical resources
Work-study companies	Linking education and the labour market; contact with local employers
Educational institutes	Part of other networks, providing virtual learning environments, teachers, educational material; sometimes source of innovation and/or research
Non-governmental organisations	Represent specific groups or themes
Trade unions	Advocates of on the job learning and educational leave, bridge between workers and job seekers
Citizens/participants	Influencers because of their questions and needs
Citizen initiatives	Represent specific themes or interests; Citizen participation Act at decentralised level

Table 8 What potential partners have to offer

Further tips

Make sure you have a common goal linked to a relevant social issue. This will generate energy and focus. Put together a core team and build on existing competences. Think of strategists, scouts, developers and process managers. Get to know each other. Record what organisations specifically wish to gain and contribute. What is their commitment, what results do individual partners expect and what is expected of the joint partnership? Write a plan with clear agreements on goals, resources, time, accountability, results, etc. Ensure recognisability (logo) and findability (website). Make it easy to join. Keep the process going. Initiate a new impulse or be prepared to take a step back in the process. This may feel like a delay but can lead to acceleration later. Ensure support within your own organisations to enable changes in organisational structures and systems. Work on political support and propose structural measures. Politicians will listen if solutions to an urgent problem are presented. Demonstrate what your network delivers, preferably supported by research and stories (numbers and narratives). Secure funding for continuity and human resources. Expand the playing field with relevant parties to arrange substantial funding.

What is the added value of a UNESCO learning city?

The UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities is an international network that offers inspiration, know-how and good practices: (<http://uil.unesco.org/lifelonglearning/learning-cities>). It was founded in 2013 and currently has 356 cities in 79 countries¹. Learning cities at all stages of development can be found in other cities. The network supports the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The network supports and improves the practice of lifelong learning in

¹ As per September 2024

the world's cities by promoting policy dialogue and peer learning between member cities. It promotes partnerships, offers capacity development and develops learning tools. Members of the network can use these services. In addition, cities can be nominated for the triennial Learning City Award based on the demonstrated progress in the Learning City Plan. Pécs (Hungary) and Larissa (Greece) received this award in 2017. Members can also participate in the biennial international conferences and join thematic working groups.

There is an application procedure to become a UNESCO Learning City: [Join the network | Institute for Lifelong Learning \(UNESCO.org\)](#). Applications can be submitted once every two years, with a maximum of three applications per country. The next opportunity is in 2025. Applications are assessed by the national UNESCO Commission.

In conclusion

Learn for Life would like to emphasise that Dutch cities can indeed learn from existing learning cities. An obvious step is to connect numerous social, educational and economic activities at local level and to promote the development of a lifelong learning culture. According to Paulo Freire, cities are the starting point for becoming a critical global citizen, since within cities the local and the global exist in a dialectical relationship². Citizen experience is the basis for a pedagogy of a learning city. The concept of a learning city is defined as a learning organisation constantly called on to learn and transform itself, and learning as a continuous process used strategically. Learn for Life aims to contribute to strengthening the local educational agenda and to provide local policymakers and politicians with policy instruments to enable people of all ages and from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to reap the benefits of coherent, inclusive and fair quality education and learning.

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² In: Deligiannis, D., Kokkos A., Fleming T., 2022



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