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The Learning Regions

(Preface)

One can ask, what is the reason of editing this thematic issue on the learning region topic in 2014. Why do we believe that it is important? Who is it for? What can it say today? But, first of all, what 'learning region' means at all?

Starting from the last point, the history of the term 'learning region' goes back to the 70' and to the 90's of the last century. The interpretation of the term varies according to the professional background of the authors operating with the 'learning region' from different aspects of different sciences. Rooting in various disciplines is leading to the fact that the term covers a variety, a diversity of theoretical concepts of the learning region. The authors of the term are significant researchers and professors of geography, geographic economy and innovation studies. Since all the different concepts of the learning region theories emphasize the importance of partnership and co-operation between stakeholders in a given region, the key role of universities as innovation partners, the utilization of local knowledge and the support of bottom-up activities, the concept of learning region easily became a flagship of the university-based region/city development activities, the lifelong learning movement and offered an appropriate environment for research projects targeting local development with a wide range of regional instruments.

As we see from the coming articles, the authors represent certain distinct periods and phases of the history of the learning region, therefore they display various aspects of the topic and draw our attention to different sides and activities related to the learning region concept, hence their research outcomes provide a very colourful picture of this broad issue.

We would like to express our great thanks to the authors for their contribution to this thematic issue. We know them as key players of the literature, so it is our honour to bring them together in our journal. They have already made an invaluable contribution to the progress both to the field of research and development of the learning region theory and practise.

Hereinafter we give a short summary of the interesting, inspiring thoughts and messages of the articles.

Barry Nyhan is giving an introduction to the origins of the learning region concept, and citing the fathers of the concept he stresses the importance of the 'establishment of locally driven bottom-up networks', which involves 'public and private economic employment and financing actors, R & D centres, social partners, universities and other educational and training institutes'. In this concept learning in the local community, dialogue and co-operation between the actors can be stated as crucial elements which help people to be able 'to learn together and from each other'.

Answering the question, what is meant by the learning region, Nyhan does not provide a single definition but argues that it is 'a rather elusive term with lots of different meanings'. The term has been created by economic geographers, social economists and learning theorists,

so the meaning of learning in the learning region can be interpreted as 'informal learning'. It occurs through 'social interactions of people who are participating in and contributing to the life of a community'. Since it is shared, this learning can be called 'social' or 'collective' learning. He emphasizes the difference between building up individual 'human capital' applying formal learning and, in contrast, giving rise to 'social capital' in the learning region, utilising collective learning. Nyhan recalls the debates between social and economic geographers who have brought the 'local, contextual and culturally embedded community dimension of knowledge' to the attention of researchers in contrast to those specialists who say that knowledge is 'something abstract, theoretical and context-free'.

As Nyhan points out, the word 'region' in the 'learning region' can be interpreted in a very broad way. Later he emphasizes, that 'the distinguishing feature of a learning region is not its statutory or non-statutory regional status but rather the existence of a 'networking' and 'horizontal' form of cooperation among people in the same territorial area who have a common interest in working together for a common goal or common good'. He underlines the essential features of the learning regions, according to which 'all learning regions are unique, based on their own particular characteristics, history, strengths and weaknesses'. Moreover, since social capital cannot be constituted only on the base of pure market relationships, Nyhan asserts that 'this community needs to be an 'ethical community of practice'.

The Author presents a typology and suggests four types of 'learning regions'. Type A and type B follow 'a traditional linear and more formal approach to learning', while type C represents 'a developmental approach', and type D 'supports mutual interactive learning'. Nyhan discusses the 'tension between formal and informal action-oriented learning roles', and the 'tension between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' thinking about management processes from the point of view of policy makers and funding bodies', two tensions the actors of Education and Training are faced 'while moving from a formal learning environment to the informal one'.

Mike Osborne gives an overview on the history of the idea of the learning city. He introduces the most important documents and initiatives which influenced the formation and the development of the concept and the policy of the 'learning city'. He refers to the report of the International Commission on the Development of Education to UNESCO - *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* from 1972. He mentions the UNESCO report of 1996, from the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century - *Learning: The Treasure Within* (the Delors report, often mentioned as landmark) which develops this theme further with the concept of 'learning throughout life'. The initiatives of the OECD and the European Commission and those projects funded by the EC in the field of learning cities and regions, mainly under the auspices of its Lifelong Learning Programme are of great importance, also.

As significance stations, he mentions the following projects: TELS, Lilliput, Pallace, Lilara, PENR3L, EUROlocal, R3L+ and MASON. As Osborne points out, it is evident from the literature, that 'there are various ways in which the concept of a learning city has been interpreted'. He concludes, that 'at one end of what might be described as a continuum it is about creating an underlying infrastructure of educational opportunity that might attract inward investment from business. A contrasting conception is that of establishing learning networks that promote and enhance social cohesion and inclusion'. He argues, that 'in reality this is somewhat of a false dichotomy,..., whilst the rationale for wanting to become a learning city may principally be economic, social or environmental, it usually contains elements of each stimulus.'

Thereafter Osborne is dealing with the present work of the UNESCO related to the development of learning cities. Recalling the definition of the learning city by UNESCO 'as one which invests in quality lifelong learning for all', he indicates, that a city which is doing so, 'would release the strength and capacity of all its resources for creating individual empowerment and cultural prosperity, social cohesion and economic prosperity, and sustainable development'. He reports that UNESCO has developed 'a set of *Key Features of Learning Cities*' which was announced at a conference which launched the '*International Platform of Learning Cities*' in Beijing in October 2013. Osborne stress the importance of the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities, as its 42 identified 'features are seen as the first internationally agreed set of measures by which cities can reference their progress towards the goal of becoming a learning city'.

Finally Osborne focuses on three key areas of the PASCAL Observatory targeting the establishment of learning cities and regions, namely the PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE), the EcCoWell approach and the Learning Cities 2020 initiative. PIE exchanges led to more holistic and integrated approaches to building sustainable learning cities, this approach is called EcCoWell, (where Ec = Ecology & Economy, Co = Community & Culture, Well = Well-being & Lifelong Learning). As the latest target of the Observatory, PASCAL is now endeavours to 'identify future directions for learning cities up to 2020'.

Ludger Deitmer focuses on the regional learning networks and discusses some key aspects of them in his article. He gives an overview on the initial development of networks by examining the dialogue of interested regional actors. He points out, 'how regional government initiatives can promote the climate of cooperation and networking among local stakeholders'. Deitmer's study is based on the Bremen regional programme Work and Technology and the cases of its successful networks.

Recalling the 'network or partnership paradigm', Deitmer stresses the importance of 'interactive innovation capacity between partners and a rich social capital' as essential resources for the economic development of the future.

Special attention should be given to the message, that the recognition according to which learning has a key role in the diffusion of innovation, is true not only for academic educated workforces, as for exp. engineers, natural scientists or MBAs but also for technical skilled workers, technicians and/or 'Meisters'.

Deitmer underlines the importance of work process orientation as a 'significant and consequent driver' for regional development processes in many European countries which show similarity following work based learning principles regardless of whether 'they face different institutional context and tradition'.

He highlights the importance of recognising the 'critical link between situated learning and social innovation', remembering that many representatives of previous research from human resource development and from innovation theory have failed to do so.

While innovation is considered as 'a technologically determined process' and learning is considered as 'a largely technical and individual matter', therefore learning is rarely regarded as integral part of the process of innovation.

Searching partnerships and networks within a region, he points out that these depend on 'the interaction between the different actors who form communities of practice' representing direct relationships between participants, but these participants are also influenced by facilitators and intermediaries.

Examining the different dimensions of learning networks Deitmer intends to outline how such networks might best be developed. He considers the facilitation of building and transfer of tacit knowledge by direct contact between actors from different organisations based in a spatial neighbourhood as a key role for regional learning and knowledge partnerships and networks.

Deitmer finally gives a summary of the experiences on the Bremen programme work and technology. In the framework of this program 'existing regional networks,, were enriched by external partnerships with bodies from the local university, polytechnics, VET institutions and professional associations'.

Presenting the lessons gathered from this project he highlights the significance of both "soft" and "hard" innovation factors in the 'development of a regional innovative milieu'.

He considers the development of regional learning networks as a critical task which depends on 'integrating the right partners'. He stresses the importance of 'an integrative regional innovation policy', and also that kind of 'R&D infrastructures which are oriented towards trans-disciplinary principles and approaches'.

The aim of **Balázs Németh**'s article is to provide an insight to the evolution of the learning city-region initiative. Also he intends to connect this initiative to the changing roles of higher education institutions and to show how this role - within a frame of third missions of universities – can foster regional development.

The study of Németh is building a bridge between the conceptual approaches and some recent European researches and initiatives with the participation of higher education institutions targeting the support of learning communities and the learning economy.

Németh provides an overview on the history and evolution of learning regions. He refers to the *Educating Cities* project initiated by the OECD in 1972, as the starting point of the evolution of learning regions. The next important stage was the early 1990s, *the age of innocence* according to Longworth, when 'things started to develop in a much broader sense.' Setting up the international association of educating cities, the *European Lifelong Learning Initiative* (ELLI, within which the first charters for the learning regions has been developed) and *the World Initiative on Lifelong Learning* constituted remarkable contributions to the progress of the learning city knowledge in the 90's. Németh emphasises the importance of the European year of Lifelong Learning in 1996.

He identifies the later part of the 1990s as *the age of experimentation* since many National Learning City networks started in that period. One of them (TELS) was remarkable because developing a Learning Cities Audit Tool and studying the performance of 80 European municipalities. The year of 2001 was exceptional, due to outstanding events. The Lisbon agenda 'which has put lifelong learning at the forefront of European policy', and which policy included the strategy to develop learning cities and regions. The OECD learning regions project has started in 5 European regions. Németh points out a striking finding of that project, according to that 'secondary education appears to be the most important for regional development' and reminds 'a more predictable one that there is a need to encourage creativity at all levels of education'. CEDEFOP, the European Vocational Training Agency launched a project between the regions of Europe and USA and hastened regional management 'to develop a means by which educational and other organizations have a common purpose', learning from each other and learning with each other 'in planning and implementing social and economic innovations'.

Németh stresses that 'in the new millennium the movement to create learning cities and regions threatened to become an avalanche'. The examples of Germany, China and Australia

indicate that there is a 'great need for tools and materials that would help cities and regions' to understand what learning region is.

The Author provides an overview of the theoretical frames of the learning cities and learning regions. He identifies four major impacts which influenced the idea. The last one, within the meaning of a broader conceptualisation, the 'whole-of-community approach', according to which 'increasingly learning and learning processes can be the vehicle to equip and empower whole communities'.

Focusing on the functional changes in higher education Németh points out that in the context of the corporate role of universities, universities and research institutes have become 'important stakeholders in regional development to expand and disseminate knowledge of innovation'.

Tamás Kozma pays special attention to the effects of the neo-liberal views of socio-economic and cultural change when examining the 'learning region' idea. In this context he considers it important to distinguish between the two opposing views, the globalisation and the learning region approach. In his article Kozma focuses on three dimensions, on market forces, democratic governance and social networking. He argues that "market" in the traditional sense can function in local markets. The idea of "democratic governance" is inherently rooted in the locality. Also, social networking, like communities of practices and other similar efforts which are based on cooperation for innovation are also bound to localities. He stresses that globalisation has changed the meaning of market and democratic governance.

Kozma interprets the idea of the 'learning region' as which stresses the importance of the 'local' (regional) view opposed to 'global' view. He makes the question, if the idea of the 'learning region' can be a real alternative to the global trends of marketisation and globalisation.

Kozma's article is based on – among others - the research outputs of Florida, Hassink, Morgan and Boekama, whose works linked the regional development with the study of innovation, and introduced the concept of 'learning regions'. His paper points out the importance of research looking for an alternative to the view according to which enterprises are the only actors on the market. He emphasises the importance of the result which stresses that a new idea of economic and social development has been evolving where the community, its government and its regional policies gained (or even re-gained) a key role.

We understand why a formal definition of the concept 'learning region' is missing. The Author argues that 'the shift from the market forces to social cooperation – from global to local / regional -- did not need a precise definition of the concept 'learning region', because a formal definition would just hinder the flexibility of the necessary developmental actions'.

In addition to people and organisations that are necessary for the formation of 'learning regions', a local / regional government is also a necessary factor, which may coordinate all learning parties in order to solve local problems.

Focusing on the governance of the 'learning region', the article highlights, that the governance of the 'learning region' should be self-regulated because 'self-regulation in decision making may lead to organizational learning' (how to make better decisions next time). Kozma considers self-regulation as the guarantee for learning by decision making in the idea of the 'learning region'. He points out that the interpretation of the process of decision-making in the learning regions varies: according to the opinion of many authors, decision-making is the result of a 'harmony of interests', while others believe that it is rather the outcome of fights among various interests and their representatives', a hard struggle of local / regional interest groups.

Studying the effects of comprehensive (higher) education in the 1960s and 1970s, Kozma emphasizes that these institutions supported stagnating and marginalized regions in the searched period. It is an important message to the regional centres of education and culture that they may speed up the regional / local innovation processes. The regional centres of education, training and culture may serve learning regions not only by social networking (as an inside service) but also by influencing its wider environment (as an outside service).