

HOSTING A LEARNING FESTIVAL – 10 TIPS FOR BEGINNERS



Are you building a Learning City?

Are you uncertain about what it takes to organise a learning event?

Lara Pugh, Wollongong's Learning City Project Leader, interviewed four organisers of the **LearnWest2021: Learning for Earning Festival** to get some advice on how it's done.

[Australian Learning Community Network](#) - [Melton City Council](#) - [Brimbank City Council](#) - [Wyndham City Council](#)

WHY CELEBRATE LEARNING?

Before we delve into the logistics of organising a learning celebration, let's take a moment to consider why it's important to hold regular learning events and festivals. According to the [UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning](#) (UIL), learning celebrations are a key feature of a Learning City as they encourage people to discover the broad range of learning opportunities in your community and foster a more positive attitude towards learning.

For those of us in the early stages of building a Learning City, [UIL](#) offers guidance on how we can generate enthusiasm for learning and improve our chances of success through celebrations:

- *Invite all relevant organizations to exhibit their courses, products and materials and offer hands-on activities that encourage all citizens to get involved.*
- *Hold a conference to deliver the learning city message. Invite one or more twin cities to participate and share their experience, knowledge, ideas and best practice.*
- *Invite the media to promote and celebrate learning.*
- *Organize regular celebratory events to renew the interest of all stakeholders.*

ABOUT LEARNWEST

The LearnWest Network is a community of practice for both experienced and emerging Learning Community practitioners in the Western Metropolitan Region of Melbourne, Australia.



In response to the impact of COVID-19 on the local economy, the LearnWest network came together to host a learning festival that would inspire and empower individuals across six local government areas: Melton, Wyndham, Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Moonee Valley and Maribyrong.

[LearnWest2021: Learning for Earning Festival](#) comprised 30 online events from 27-29 May 2021 on Learning, Employment, Career Planning and Pathways, Industries, Business and Entrepreneurship and Skills. Here are some of the events that were hosted by LearnWest partners in government agencies, small businesses, non-government organisations and education:

- Online resume help for people aged 15-25
- Women of the West – *turn your side hustle or big idea into a business*
- Tips and tricks for navigating your career in changing times
- Victoria police – *you are more suited than you think*

- Career planning and pathways in early childhood

Three members of LearnWest – Melton, Wyndham and Brimbank City Councils – also run their own learning celebrations in partnership with a range of internal and external stakeholders every year:

- [The City of Melton Lifelong Learning Festival](#) is an annual celebration of everything that is lifelong learning. It encourages the community to come together to participate in free events across the entire municipality and discover that learning is not always done in the classroom, it's done everywhere. Melton City Council was the [first accredited UNESCO Learning City in Australia](#).
- Wyndham City Council hosts an annual learning festival and the theme for 2021 is [Re-emerge, Connect & Thrive \(1-5 September 2021\)](#) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Wyndham is a member of the [UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities](#) and has a [Learning Community Strategy 2018-2023](#).
- The [Brimbank Writers & Readers Festival](#) is an annual event that encourages a love of reading and literature, celebrates creativity and diversity, and promotes lifelong learning in Brimbank. The festival will be held online on 17-26 June 2021 and supports the implementation of the [Brimbank Lifelong Learning Strategy 2018-2023](#).

The combined knowledge and experience of these Learning Community practitioners is vast so let us find out what advice they have for planning, delivering and evaluating learning celebrations.

10 TIPS FOR ORGANISING A LEARNING FESTIVAL

1. Establish a core working party of committed learning practitioners

- Work collaboratively with other learning stakeholders within your organisation to increase the pool of resources like funding, knowledge, assets and experience.
- Seek commitment from working party members through a co-designed Statement of Commitment or [Memorandum of Understanding](#); establish clear expectations to reduce the risk of misunderstandings or poor engagement, especially around funding and workload.

2. Develop and implement a clear project plan

- Develop a detailed timeline with a clear list of milestones, activities and responsibilities in a accessible shared online document, like a Gantt Chart, that all stakeholders can access.
- Appoint people to monitor the shared online project plan so that gaps and issues can be identified and addressed in a timely manner.
- Regularly review the project plan and distribution of workload to foster a sense of fairness.

3. Be prepared for the known and unknown

- Allow time for time-consuming approval processes and procedures: if your core working group members come from different organisations or departments, it may take longer than you think to get approval for a communication plan or even the use of a logo.
- Model Empathy and allow for possible changes to personnel and events. Members of the core working party may become ill, resign or retire; what's more, event hosts may withdraw from the program at any time so it's a good idea to expect the unexpected. Embedding empathy in your work supports better outcomes and decreases the chance of burnout.

- Create a risk assessment that considers the possibility of crises like a bushfire or pandemic; ensure that most events can be delivered online or in an alternative location.

4. Choose a relevant theme

- Prioritise the needs and interests of your community when choosing a theme; speak to community groups about the challenges they are facing and their learning needs.
- Identify a theme that not only fulfils community needs but also aligns with your community goals, for example a COVID-19 response plan, a diversity and inclusion action plan and/or an environmental sustainability strategy.
- Consider funding opportunities when deciding upon a theme; if the theme aligns to a particular grant, it will increase your chances of obtaining funding.

5. Establish clear objectives and tangible outcomes for the festival

- Agree upon a shared vision and purpose for the event; this will be critical for managing the scope of the project, curating events and evaluating the outcomes and impact of the event.
- Limit the number of events in the festival, keeping it unlimited can lead to burnout by the providers as well as the core festival working group.
- Beyond the broad festival theme, set festival sub-themes to support event providers to choose an area of focus.
- Showcase the breadth of lifelong learning opportunities in your community, not necessarily the type of formal learning that we expect in schools, to build a learning culture.

6. Curate with care

- Encourage a broad range of internal and external partners to participate in your learning event; if you work for a local Council it is a wonderful opportunity to bring together different departments to showcase the myriad ways your organisation supports its community.
- Carefully design an Expression of Interest (EOI) form as the information sought will be critical to determining the viability and suitability of an event. Here are two examples of EOIs from [City of Melton Lifelong Learning Festival](#) and [Wyndham Learning Festival 2021](#); Wyndham even supports its potential hosts with an [Event Planning Toolkit](#)!
- Review the EOIs in a systematic manner. Engage a panel of relevant decision makers to review the EOIs and ensure that each event meets the festival objectives, contributes to the intended outcomes and reflects the needs and diversity of the community you live in.
- Look for common themes in individual EOIs; individual events with a common theme could be amalgamated into one event through careful collaboration.
- Where necessary, remind potential hosts that the learning festival is not just a promotional opportunity for them – there must be tangible, meaningful outcomes for all participants.
- Don't fall into the trap of running your own events! The working party has a significant role to play in coordinating events without the added responsibility of hosting one.

7. Promote! Promote! Promote!

- Allocate a considerable amount of time and resources to promoting your learning event – this applies to the EOI process as well as promotion of the actual event.

- Develop a comprehensive communication plan with clear milestones and responsibilities in a shared online document that all stakeholders can access to enter regular updates.
- Appoint people to monitor the shared online communication plan so that gaps and issues can be identified and addressed in a timely manner.
- Utilise all marketing and communication platforms you have available to you; make the most of your social media network and tag all significant contacts to increase your reach and build your events' credibility.
- If your working group spans organisations and municipalities, your network will be broader and your reach will be greater.

8. Seek meaningful feedback from all participants

- Seek feedback from the working party and hosts. Assess the collective impact of the event by measuring the level of partner engagement and contribution to the festival using a tool like the [Collective Impact Assessment Tool \(CIAT\)](#).
- Survey community members who participate in the learning festival. Design a survey tool with care by asking relevant, meaningful questions that link back to the vision, objectives and intended outcomes of the festival.
- Find out if the event had a long-term impact on people's lives. In the event survey, ask festival participants if you can contact them in 3-6 months' time to find out if the learning experience has any longer-term impacts on their behaviour, attitude and way of life.
- Get a balance between quantitative and qualitative data. Meet the needs of your organisation and collect the necessary statistics around registrations, attendance and satisfaction but also seek individual stories of impact and change through evaluation approaches such as [Most Significant Change Technique](#). With the requisite approval from selected participants, use stories of impact from the previous year's learning festival as marketing collateral for next year's event.

9. Reflect and improve

- Establish a cycle of continuous improvement: analyse and evaluate the feedback from all participants then make recommendations for next year's festival based on these findings.
- Test the waters: based on feedback from participants, you may identify an emerging area of interest or a gap in your learning festival's programming, so use next year's festival as an opportunity to gauge the interest of your community.

10. Don't bite off more than you can chew.

- Start small! Your community's learning festival will develop over time as your network grows and your learning city is established.
- Rather than run your own learning festival, join the working party of an established learning festival that is being led by experienced learning community practitioners; for example, Wollongong is participating in the [2021 Global Learning Festival](#) which is being led by Wyndham and Melton City Councils.

There is a lot to take into consideration when planning a learning festival, isn't there? In a nutshell, the advice tells us that there are a few key conditions to running a successful learning event: firstly,

successful collaboration with learning stakeholders requires ample time, clear communication and practical planning tools; second, the learning festival program should be carefully curated to meet the needs of the community whilst aligning with your Council's community goals; finally, the evaluation process is critical to determining whether the events in your program met the intended outcomes which will feed into a cycle of continuous improvement for future events. For more inspiration, check out how they celebrate learning [Cork, Ireland](#) and [Okayama City, Japan](#).

Thank you to Dr Leone Wheeler, Diane Tabbagh, Jac Torres-Gomez, Adam Josifovski, Inderdeep Thapar, Silvia Velez, Danielle Marie and Cassandra Connelly. If you would like to discuss (or provide feedback on) this article, please feel free to contact Lara Pugh lpugh@wollongong.nsw.gov.au