

Overview of the inclusion strand – providing lifelong learning opportunities for all

The social inclusion strand of the Conference revealed the following challenges and responses.

1. The breadth of exclusion and the challenge of reaching those who are excluded. The papers underlined the need to strengthen policy and take a holistic approach to fostering inclusive learning communities.

The Conference presented a diversity of approaches to engaging those who are excluded, including place-based and needs-based. Most papers indicated the need to strengthen policy to foster greater inclusion and recognise the contribution individuals can make to a learning city. EcCoWell, mentioned by Cork in their presentations, provides a holistic approach to building inclusive communities. The approach provides a platform for integrating strategies such as Healthy City, Green City, Learning City and Sustainable Economic Development to create a blueprint that fosters quality of life and wellbeing for communities.

The need to recognise learning in developing all government strategies to ensure equity and access in an age-friendly society was implicit in *Seniors Learning*. The paper identified the impact of not engaging disengaged seniors and the increasing cost of not considering ongoing learning opportunities for seniors in policy. The paper proposed integrating lifelong learning into future strategies developed by government so that seniors can continue to contribute to society and maintain wellbeing.

An indication of how policy from the east can engage seniors in learning was contained in the Beijing “Sunset Fulfilment of a Dream” project. This top down approach fosters ongoing quality of life for seniors through education and training that builds upon their interests and was presented in Beijing’s showcase presentation.

Key to the recognition of lifelong learning in policy development was the development of co-operative partnerships with key stakeholders. Strong linkages across sectors, government and non-government organisations are important. The paper, *Partnership strategies in the work-based adult learning in European higher education, through the project Labour Efficiency of Tertiary Adult Education* funded by the European Union demonstrated the scope and scale of partnerships and collaborations in the provision of work-based, work-related learning in higher education seen as crucial in the knowledge economy.

2. Learning needs to be accessible. The integral position of place in addressing the challenges of access was presented in a number of papers. Libraries, cultural institutions, learning centres and learning neighbourhoods and districts are important in fostering learning and inclusion.

Digital connectivity, geographic isolation, distance from services and participation costs, impact upon the individual’s ability to participate learning and civil society. Papers addressed how to reach those who are disadvantaged by such barriers. The Conference papers described how learning neighbourhoods and community learning centres can build connections and community cohesion. In *Designing and implementing learning neighbourhoods in Cork’s UNESCO Learning City Project*, Cork is developing two learning neighbourhoods in two areas experiencing socio-

economic disadvantage with different demographic profiles. Ballyphehane has a larger older population and is a more settled community while Knochnaheeny is a newer community with a young population with low levels of education. Both communities are committed to the project but each area poses different challenges to building a sustainable learning communities.

Taipei and Beijing demonstrate the central role of government in developing learning centres and colleges within city districts to promote equity in learning opportunity, involvement of stakeholders and utilisation of community resources.

3. Learning needs to have relevance and universality. Papers demonstrated the need to be agile and innovative in approaches to maintaining relevance and engaging communities.

Our world is rapidly changing. Our communities have an ageing population, increasing migration, increasing unemployment, physical disabilities and mental health issues and many more factors that create exclusion. The Conference papers addressed the challenge of responding to these and other constant changes in our community. One paper looked at how the learning cities in Kurdistan have utilised an approach founded in culture to respond to the challenges brought about by conflict, the influx of thousands of refugees and a declining economy. In a paper, from Glasgow, Learner Centred Education is proposed as a key for social change in adult education programmes for migrants. Fundamental to the tool is the principle that “the educational process must build around the interests and motives of the learner and seek to fulfil the purposes and goals he or she sees as relevant and important.”

Connected to agility, is innovation. The Australian Learning Communities Network showcase provided an example of a supportive network of learning communities connected via the internet. The case studies presented have similarities and differences, each is supported by local government but each has responded differently to address exclusion in their community. This showcase highlighted the differences between rural and urban learning communities. In particular it established that city models do not necessarily transfer to the rural or regional environment and that such settings present unique challenges. Hume and Gwydir presented two different models and approaches to building inclusive learning communities. In *A case study in lifelong learning: Partnering rural public libraries with the land grant university*, this challenge was discussed with reference to a specific learning initiative. The paper highlighted the impact of rural urban population drift and the pivotal role that building strong community partnerships in rural communities can play in building communities.

We need to investigate the opportunities different approaches to building learning cities provides to breakdown silos and connect learning city initiatives to other initiatives such as Smart City, Resilient Cities and Healthy Cities. In a paper from Scotland, *Place making for learning communities*, a proposal for how place making might meet the policy, resource and equity challenges faced in building sustainable learning communities in Scotland was presented. This paper was centred on place and collaborative relationships to create learning clusters and regenerate communities where people live.

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