



Learning Region

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The idea of a 'learning region' as a concept and an approach has many definitions. One definition is *"a learning city, town or region goes beyond its statutory duty to provide education and training for those who require it and instead creates a vibrant, participative, culturally aware and economically buoyant human environment through the provision, justification and active promotion of learning opportunities to enhance the potential of all its citizens"*¹.

Another is more simple, that a learning region is *"how actors in a region learn together to promote local innovation"* and *"learning regions are about building, innovative, competitive, and socially cohesive local communities"*². Another is more purposeful, *"learning regions function as collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas and provide the underlying environment or infrastructure which facilitates the flow of knowledge, ideas and learning"*³.

Regions are complex, with many actors and different scales. A regional approach should recognize and work with this complexity. The learning region approach is a way to envision how all actors sharing the same local context can cooperate with one another – people learning together to address complex social and economic problems².

Regional governments for example, are a point of intervention where there is influence of the region⁵. Education and training facilities are also determining factors in the potential for excellence, innovation, and competition – and are thus needed to participate and facilitate learning regions by moderating action oriented learning and carrying out supportive research².

The learning region approach has multiple potential applications with the regional scale becoming the focal point for knowledge creation as well as being a key economic unit³. For example, the economy is one area where a learning region approach is seen as being able to make a difference⁴. Existing examples include applications within manufacturing, universities, cooperatives, and local governments².

The learning region approach recognizes the transition to advanced economies where intellectual labour replaces physical, and economic advantage is built by mobilizing knowledge and ideas³. Learning regions afford the benefit of linking between institutions, providing a sense of control and meaning².

At the core of the learning region is the recognition and understanding that learning plays a key role in prosperity and stability¹. Learning is accepted as a continuous activity¹. As the world becomes increasingly complex there is a need for enhanced human capacity, particularly for those in decision making and management roles⁴.

The learning region approach provides a framework that allows citizens to understand and react to change¹, as well as to understand local resources and relationships⁵.

The ideas of knowledge, learning, and innovation are multi-layered terms. There is a difference between information gathering and knowledge gathering – as information must be analysed, compared, and synthesized in order to mean something⁵. Learning and innovation are seen as separate, although some argue that they are different dimensions of the same reality – that innovative regions have the capacity to set up collaborative learning networks².

The concept of innovation – understood broadly as an interactive process including the product, process, and organizational innovation in firms as well as social and institutional innovation at multiple scales - is on the rise in economic development theory⁶.



Innovation is both social and technological and is shaped by a variety of institutional routines and social conventions^{2,6}.

Characteristics of learning regions include 2–5:

- Non-hierarchical, horizontal organization (e.g., cooperative, network, partnerships)
- Decision making and management is inclusive and actively engages key actors
- Integration
- Continuous improvement
- Use of learning technologies
- Forward looking
- Lifelong learning (continuous and interactive)
- Flexibility

The aim of a learning region goes beyond lifelong learning. It includes the active creation of a culture of learning that encourages and enables continuous participation⁴. A learning region strategy can be summarized in five steps⁵:

1. Formation of common vision of the future that mobilises the region
2. Expression of social demand for initial and continuing education
3. Interventions - partnerships and the use of strengths of social and institutional relationships
4. Inter-sectoral cross over
5. Enrichment of learning environments.