



Learning Region

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he 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.

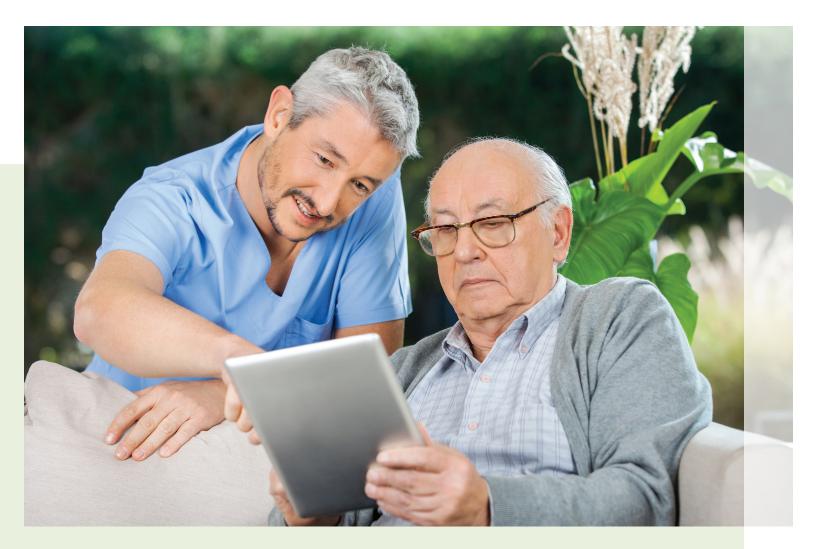
The learning region approach recognizes the transition to advanced economies where intellectual labour replaces physical, and economic advantage is built by mobilizing knowledge and ideas3. Learning regions afford the benefit of linking between institutions, providing a sense of control and meaning².

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 steps ⁵:

- 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.