

# ACTIVE AGEING IN A LEARNING CITY-REGION: THE SENIOR ACADEMY OF PÉCS

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**Key words:** *collaboration, learning city-community, intergenerational and senior learning, health and wellbeing*

## ABSTRACT

This innovative practice paper will elaborate upon the roles and responsibilities of the University of Pécs in formulating the Pécs Learning City-Region. This programme aims to integrate and build on the diverse learning needs of vulnerable social groups to reach for better health and wellbeing through lifelong learning (LLL) actions. In addition to reviewing some specific examples of collaboration with civic activists in increasing participation around intergenerational and intercultural learning for improved health, sustainable community and skills development, this paper will highlight the model of the senior academy of Pécs. This model, based on geronto-education principles as a key part of university lifelong learning, is framed into senior citizens' collaboration so as to facilitate active ageing, diversity, and better learning performance in later life. This innovative practice reflects the inclusive character of Pécs as a learning city that has been formed by a bottom-up approach.

## IN THE MAKING: A LEARNING CITY PROVIDES INCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

The University of Pécs has been engaged in building a learning city-region model in Pécs for almost twenty-years. It has been supported by the municipality and its main stakeholders in raising participation and performance of its citizens and to embrace LLL amongst vulnerable people through civic activism in the development of learning opportunities based on learning needs. This focus resonates with the impact of sustainable development goals (SDGs) in transforming Pécs as a learning city to demonstrate roles and responsibilities of quality education and the importance of providing LLL opportunities for all.

This inclusive and balanced scope of the learning city has been promoted by a number of initiatives, like the EcCoWeLL model of PASCAL International Observatory, which was adapted by the learning city model of Cork in Ireland (Neylon and Barret, 2013, 2020), and transferred into the Pécs learning city-region construction by the University of Pécs. The intention was to promote and develop an integrative structure to emphasise collaboration amongst learning providers to offer opportunities of learning in community formations with intercultural and intergenerational focuses. Another impact was a research initiative of PASCAL called the PURE project (PASCAL Universities' Regional Engagement) to investigate the roles and responsibilities of universities in promoting regional development, social capital, and LLL (PASCAL PURE, n.d).

A significant role of university lifelong learning has become to underline the roles of mutuality, trust, and equity as basic principles in shaping learning city activities to balance the economic with social, community and well-being dimensions. PURE as example was a reliable reference to help developing an innovative model capable of engaging main stakeholders and their members as civic activists, e.g., senior citizens, building bridges between learning, smart and creative aspects of the learning city, and enhancing the focus on citizenship, social inclusion and wellbeing (Németh, 2022a). However, it is necessary to underline that the impact of smart city-region approaches and initiatives, creative focuses and models, and increased attention to local and regional ecosystems have shifted discourse to recognise the economic realities involved in skills development, effective knowledge transfer, and a more competitive workforce in response to digital and technological challenges, AI and matters of sustainable environments and communities. (Singapore's Skills Future Priorities, 2023). These considerations have served as innovative inputs to transform Pécs Learning City to a greater balance between economic realities and socially driven challenges.

## **COLLABORATIVE LIFELONG LEARNING INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES IN LEARNING CITY PÉCS**

The City of Cork and its 'Learning Neighbourhood' composite model served as the primary source of community-oriented learning city development for Pécs. In the Cork model, certain districts were successful in organising their learning festival programmes based on activities and potentials of lifelong learning communities with intergenerational and intercultural characters (Ó Tuama, 2020). The integration of this case into international learning city developments through UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) made it possible for Pécs to learn from good practice and adapt this into the development of potential learning opportunities offered by local community groups dedicated to intergenerational learning, social inclusion, equal opportunities and active citizenship. These concerns have influenced the University of Pécs to address learning city oriented LLL as necessary to deal with and, therefore, claim to transform the learning city-region model of Pécs into a collaborative format so as to demonstrate equity, care, solidarity and respect amongst community citizens.

Cases of collaborative learning supporting the innovative practice of the learning city of Pécs have helped in joining the GNLC cluster of health and wellbeing to connect wellbeing and social inclusion centred actions to those of socially driven demands from people of smaller communities with learning difficulties. Examples of promoting health and wellbeing have included the formation of a 'kiddy-ladder' action of family-learning, expanding learning opportunities for members of the Association of Parkinson patients or healthy-living programmes for young mothers with the label of 'Conscious Way of Life.' These examples reflect particularly sensitive forms of community-based engagement and collaboration amongst learning providers, shifting citizens' needs into the axis of actions and reflections of the learning City and its annual Learning City Festival.

Another recently identified collaborative learning model that reflects innovative practice is the 'Creative and Experience-based Space.' This model offers action-oriented learning for members of the community by offering creative steps in arts and crafts in community spaces through reflective forms of drawing and painting to help develop mental health and wellbeing. Several other neighbourhood-based initiatives have also become successful through generating action-based learning to facilitate understanding, respect citizens' diversities and to address community problems referring to challenging issues such as environmental issues, social exclusion, deprivation, poverty, homelessness and unemployment. Moreover, these initiatives have been successful in emphasising effective actions to tackle such matters with community collaboration, resulting in creative and innovative models of LLL (Németh,

2023). In this respect, the Learning City Programme and the Learning City Festival of Pécs has demonstrated the importance of facilitating diversity and inclusion and initiated the combination of smart, creative and learning city composite factors to further develop the Learning City-Region based on UNESCO guiding principles (UNESCO, 2015). Therefore, Pécs Learning City has incorporated the Senior Academy of the University of Pécs to help support active ageing for improved identity, belongingness and trust as an effective community form of LLL in the learning city. This model integrates intergenerational capacities and intercultural orientations based on the learning needs of senior citizens and, consequently, is connected to several types and forms of learning under the model of active ageing for better health and wellbeing.

Since 2017, the University of Pécs has channelled a good amount of knowledge from the aforementioned populations into both the framework and content of the Pécs Learning City Programme, especially the contexts, thematisation and citizen-focused approaches. Another clear goal has been to connect the Learning City Festival to the organisation of annual conferences, talks and seminars to create a wider community of collaborators around Pécs Learning City to collect and share good knowledge around lifelong learning trends both locally and globally. Again, environmental and climate dimensions have always been at the forefront in these events, not just in 2017 but in every year to follow. This is not simply because of the SDGs integrated, but a natural consequence of growing citizen and community concerns around what to address and how.

Eight Learning City Festivals have been thematised around the following topics and sub-topics, where people can easily detect community orientations (bolded) to transfer innovative practice from micro to meso levels of learning in local and regional settings in comparison to international trends:

- (2017): Culture – Environment – **Knowledge Transfer and Skills Development**
- (2018): Experiential Learning: Environmentally-conscious? Sustainable Pécs and its Region – Place and Values/Cultural Heritages of Pécs – **Easier Together? Intergenerational Learning and Collaborations for Skills-Development**
- (2019): **Learning Community and Community Learning: Art and Culture Get People Together** – Learning through Sports for Health – Learning Environment/Learning and Environment
- (2020): Learning Together: Culture and Community: TECH-good Smart City – **City, Space and Environment: Learning Culture of Active and Sustainable Communities** – Intergenerational and intercultural Learning
- (2021): **Connections in and through Learning: Communities, Culture and Values – Environment, Settlement and Community** – Space, Form and Meaning – Jobs, Performance and Skills – Voluntary work, Inclusion and Aid – Teacher, Learner and Community
- (2022): **Inspiring Each Other with Learning: Value, Tradition and Identity in Learning** - Exchange between Environment, Culture and Economy
- (2023): **The Joy and Benefits of Learning: Transforming the Learning City into a Smart and Creative Community** – Identity/Belongingness and Tradition – Environment and Healthy Living
- (2024): **Pécs - the Sustainable Learning City: Green City - Sustainable Knowledge Transfers and Skills Development**

The Learning City Pécs Programme has organised not only annual Learning City Festivals, but also six thematic conferences, talks, and webinars. Those international events have been achieved in association with distinguished HEIs, eucen, PASCAL, ASEM LLL HUB, UNESCO UIL and several GNLC partners to help better understand and effectively reflect to collaborations amongst citizens supported by international examples and models of good

practice. UIL framed those upcoming challenges to LLL within an inspiring handbook and provided good reason to bridge social, environmental, and technological challenges to encourage cities and regions to respond in effective and human ways (UNESCO UIL, 2022).

## **THE INNOVATIVE ASPECTS OF THE SENIOR ACADEMY OF PÉCS AS LEARNING CITY PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER PLATFORM**

The Senior Academy of Pécs, an organisation of informal learning, was founded in 2014 and legally formed into a foundation to operate in association with the University of Pécs. In June 2024, the academy has successfully delivered its 20<sup>th</sup> semester with more than 900 registered 60+ year old participants. This format, usually includes seven lectures per semester around the questions and challenging dimensions of ageing combined with life-focused lectures to address specific matters of economy, society, and environment as they affect the lives of senior citizens.

The main general topics of the academy are: society, learning, psychology, economy, history and cultural studies. At the end of each semester, students receive certifications. Besides lectures, the academy also offers special courses on certain topics (e.g., English and German language, local history, ecology, IT, psychology, history of art, anthropology). It also, however, has its own self-organising learning groups: the Senior Tourists, Bridge Club, Bibliotherapy Group and Table Tennis Team. A significant priority of the academy is to support community development and senior volunteering in Pécs by using the resources of a learning city.

Based on a society-oriented approach, they have an innovative view on ageing and their aim is to achieve active and successful ageing (EC, 2006) with intergenerational learning, learning in workplaces, diverse learning activities and complex lifelong guidance. Helping the elderly stay up to date, one of the most common motivations in older age is to follow the development of society and science. In this regard, Geronto-education as a disciplinary approach has been deeply applied to help understanding and reflecting, for example, to inventions, new expressions or scientific discoveries, to interpret arts or to follow progress in life. It is a rather general recognition that the elderly would like to join in conversations and understand others, be able to answer if a grandchild has a question, or offer new viewpoints based on their age and experience in case they are motivated with sensitive modalities of knowledge transfer (Baltes & Smith, 2003).

Solitude poses a serious health risk in older age and is a strong determinant of quality of life. Learning generates opportunities to communicate with other people and learning creates fellowships, social contacts, and new social roles. Moreover, it allows people to meet others with mutual understandings, who can help us if needed, and whom we can help as well. Intergenerational learning has many good practices to bring together older and younger people who can also learn from each other (e.g., a grandmother teaches her granddaughter to knit who, in exchange, shows her how to use Facebook). It is well-reflected in the behaviour of participants of the Senior Academy that for many older adults the actual subject of learning is not always the main motivating factor. Rather, they join learning groups because of communicational needs, to be together, and to spend time meaningfully which is clearly reflected by the term active ageing (Walker, 2002).

Achieving active citizenship and participation in social decisions, political elections, and community actions are important for a democratic society at every stage of adulthood. In post-socialist countries like Hungary, the elderly have mostly been socialised not to think independently, not to voice their opinion or initiate changes. This creates difficulties in teaching when participants are not active and have no suggestions on how to improve the learning process.

Referring to prevention, learning is constantly influenced by ageing. Learning is an excellent way to stay young. Participants of the Senior Academy of Pécs clearly signalled that physical activities stimulate mental efficiency and vice versa and that learning can result in better physical capacity. For them, physical activity is a protective factor against neurodegeneration and plays a role in delaying normal and pathological ageing (Mandolesi et al., 2018).

Ageing derives from loss of functions: the longer we live able to support ourselves the later we age. Being active in most aspects of life means successful ageing. Reflections on senior learning signal that organising spare-time activities is challenging for seniors despite people having more free time in older age. It is challenging to spend it with quality, varied activities with feasible challenges. The Senior Academy offers support to help seniors realise collectively that whether spending time indoors or outdoors, alone or in community, face to face or online, spare-time activities help them experience the world around them and building relationships with others, learning new skills and, moreover, collecting and sharing (Boudiny, 2013 and Bowling, 2005).

The economic function of geronto-education is becoming more important in ageing societies. By 2030, 30% of European workers will be ageing workers (aged 55-64). Therefore, maintaining their working capacity is one of the most important preconditions for economic sustainability (Eurofound, 2024). Responding to employment issues, the academy cooperates with a senior employment agency.

Another significant aspect of the Senior Academy of Pécs is that it has so far collaborated with several stakeholders in promoting active ageing through a number of programmes and activities to promote LLL with intergenerational dimensions. This is why the Senior Academy can be recognised as an innovative practice whereby senior citizens can be integrated into their community as active citizens and motivate both fellow elderly citizens and members of their families to experience the joy and power of learning through collecting and sharing good knowledge and practice in a number of focuses in accordance with the mission of, for example, the U3A movement in the UK (U3A Mission). The University of Pécs has understood the positive role and impact of this good practice to enhance the benefits of LLL in local settings and, therefore, worked to embed community-based participatory actions into the framework of the learning city.

In this regard, let us underline that the innovative character of this practice is the formation and development of the Senior Academy as a specific knowledge sharing format with the following principles and values:

- The Senior Academy programme is formulated, for each incoming semester of the University of Pécs, based upon the needs of members indicated in a questionnaire of programme planning;
- The Senior Academy has a special principle of disseminating science, culture, and arts to be combined with valuable practices from the city-region;
- The Senior Academy is supported by all faculties of the University of Pécs and works as an inclusive platform for senior citizens of Pécs and its region to engage with and enjoy LLL;
- The Senior Academy is a collaborative partner of Pécs Learning City together with other senior citizens' clubs and communities in town;
- The Senior Academy of the University of Pécs has been collaborating with other U3As in Hungary organised by universities in Budapest, Debrecen and Kecskemét;
- The Senior Academy has already participated in several EU-funded projects to transfer and exchange its innovative practice to other senior academies, U3As in neighbouring countries of Croatia, Slovenia, Austria and Italy. This dimension represents the need for collecting and sharing amongst senior academies.



- The Senior Academy in Pécs has made use of the UNESCO GNLC platform to get connected to other Learning Cities of the UNESCO community to exchange active ageing practices as part of health and wellbeing and other respected UNESCO goals;
- The University of Pécs provides a valuable research and study component so as to develop its Senior Academy with analytical work, comparative studies, and critical reflections.

## CONCLUSIONS

Collaborative forms of LLL for social inclusion and wellbeing can be recognised as a particular direction and dimension of LLL embedded into learning city developments. Higher education institutions play special responsibilities in promoting the participation of vulnerable groups of citizens in urban environments of a city-region so as to develop social cohesion, respect, and active citizenship as prerequisites of developing and sustainable communities. (Nemeth, 2022b) Senior citizens play significant roles and call for collaborative actions through LLL and active ageing based on mutuality, equity, and solidarity. This is where universities have to work together with civic activists like senior citizens and their platforms so as to formulate learning cities for the benefits of citizens and their communities and to ensure that no one is left behind.

The strong ties that the University of Pécs has with ASEM LLL Hub and its Research Network on Learning Cities, Pascal International Observatory and, moreover, with [eucen](#) together with its UNESCO GNLC membership, allows our university to further embrace university lifelong learning with international exchanges in research, development, and innovation. All these connections and collaborations puts our institution in a position to enhance the quality of intergenerational knowledge transfer and dialogue through its Senior Academy and other distinguished activities as part of the Pécs Learning City (an innovative practice recognised by UNESCO in 2017 by the *UNESCO Global Learning City Award*).

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