Lessons From Cork, Ireland

At a Glance

• Cork, the second largest city in the Republic of Ireland, is an internationally recognized learning city that promotes lifelong learning for all its residents.

• The “learning city” initiative brings together Cork’s two higher education institutions along with other stakeholders who share interests and mandates to support community-wide well-being, economic development, and social inclusion.

• Canadian post-secondary education institutions can look to the Cork example to understand the rewards, challenges, and implications of making a strong commitment to a community-based learning initiative.
Executive Summary

Cork is the Republic of Ireland’s second most-populous city and an exemplar of a learning city. A relatively small city by international standards (it has a population of 119,000), Cork’s economic prosperity stems partly from foreign investment in its pharmaceuticals, technology, and engineering sectors. But the city has struggled with pockets of socio-economic disadvantage, exacerbated by the 2008 global economic downturn, an ongoing exodus of Irish nationals, and increased immigration from countries experiencing civil and economic strife. Notably, the city has a high proportion of residents who left formal education early.

In 2002, Cork City Council officially adopted a strategy that would see Cork establish itself as a “learning city.” In the learning city movement, partners across public and private sectors encourage formal and informal opportunities for lifelong learning. Learning cities unify their resources as a means to achieve shared community goals, such as economic prosperity, social inclusion, celebration of culture, and civic participation.

Throughout its development as a learning city, Cork’s two major centres of higher education—University College Cork (UCC) and Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)—have played meaningful roles in the learning city movement. The movement is in line with each institution’s social, cultural, and economic development mandates. Collectively, the partners put on a city-wide annual learning festival; support the development of neighbourhood-level learning initiatives; promote learning in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields to young people; connect with other cities and organizations that promote lifelong learning; and pursue other activities that expand Cork residents’ exposure to lifelong learning.
More than a decade since the partners first launched this learning movement, Cork has become, in many ways, a model learning city for other communities. But there have been ongoing challenges to the continued involvement of the higher education institutions in the learning city movement. Sustaining commitment and participation at all levels of the institutions has required continual effort, and ambivalence or negative perceptions toward higher education in some pockets of the community have tested the relevance of the learning city movement. But the multi-sector learning city partnership still thrives because of the complementarity of the two higher education partners, their mutual respect for the learning city partners, strong city-level support for education and learning initiatives, and a receptive community that has embraced the learning city movement.

The Cork learning city initiative demonstrates how Canadian post-secondary education (PSE) institutions might be able to extend their existing community engagement to be part of a broader movement to achieve significant social and cultural change—including lifelong learning, environmental stewardship, healthy living, and civic participation. The challenges and successes of Cork’s Learning City initiative offer some lessons to Canadian PSE institutions and communities in pursuing a community-based initiative with strong PSE involvement:

- Broader government policy helps foster learning collaboration.
- Participation from all partners needs to be willing and voluntary.
- PSE partners must share in the goals of the broader initiative and make active contributions.
- All levels of the PSE institution need to be engaged in large-scale campus–community partnerships.
- Efforts to counter misunderstanding or negative perceptions in the community toward PSE may be required.
- The intended outcomes of collaborating should be articulated.
- All major local PSE institutions should be invited to take part in major campus–community partnerships.
Overview

With a population of 119,000 (but nearly 400,000 more in the surrounding county), Cork, the Republic of Ireland's second largest city, is a relatively small but vibrant economic centre with many foreign investors involved in its pharmaceuticals, technology, and engineering sectors. But its overall economic prosperity masks some of the city's struggles, such as:

- Large geographic areas of socio-economic disadvantage (exacerbated by the 2008 global economic downturn) and a 22 per cent rate of unemployment.
- Significant outward migration of Irish nationals from Cork and Ireland.
- Rising immigration from areas experiencing economic and civil upheaval, including Eastern Europe and Africa. While many immigrants come to Ireland with a "strong human capital profile" (including higher education credentials), racism and other social and political factors can impede their successful integration.
- The high proportion of its residents who left formal education early—as many as 50 per cent in some neighbourhoods.

Various national weaknesses also bear on Cork. Income inequality has been increasing across the republic, Ireland also has one of the OECD's highest proportions of youth not in education, employment,
Cork’s higher education institutions have been involved in the learning city initiative from its first steps in the early 2000s. or training (NEET),\(^{10}\) and the country ranks below many of its peer countries on international measurements of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills.\(^{11}\)

These conditions prompted partners from various sectors to establish Cork as a “learning city”—a designation showcasing the city’s commitment to achieving greater community well-being, economic development, and social inclusion by promoting learning throughout the lifespans of its residents. (See “Learning Cities.”) In embracing learning city principles, partners from higher education, along with other education, government, voluntary, and business sectors, collaborate to foster access to and enthusiasm for learning in all settings.

Cork’s higher education institutions have been involved in the learning city initiative from its first steps in the early 2000s. The example of Cork’s learning city initiative and the engagement of the city’s two major higher education institutions offers a model of how post-secondary education (PSE) can engage with the local community and region on common goals. This spotlight study profiles the Cork learning city initiative, focusing on the key roles of University College Cork (UCC) and the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT).

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11 Central Statistics Office, *PIAAC 2012: Survey Results for Ireland*. 
Learning Cities

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) defines a learning city (or region or community) as a city that effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to:

- promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education;
- revitalize learning in families and communities;
- facilitate learning for and in the workplace;
- extend the use of modern learning technologies;
- enhance quality and excellence in learning;
- foster a culture of learning throughout life. ¹²

Learning cities unify their resources and partners from public and private sectors to foster a culture of learning as a means to achieve shared community goals, such as economic prosperity, social inclusion, celebration of culture, and civic participation. Environmental sustainability is another core tenet of the learning city, defined as “reducing the negative impacts of economic and other human activities on the natural environment; protecting the natural environment and enhancing the liveability of our cities; and promoting sustainable development through active learning in all settings.”¹³

Partnerships within and between sectors and among organizations are central to a functioning learning city. In learning city movements, all sectors with a stake in education, learning, and training—including, but not limited to, formal education—contribute to fostering an enthusiasm for learning. In *Learning Cities for Adult Learners*, Leodis Scott writes that the objective of the learning city is to:

> in some small measure, [...] remove old divisions of town and gown, the ivory tower against the real world, academic and corporate knowledge sharing, and even adult–continuing education versus vocational–technical training. Instead, the idea of learning cities promotes the development of learning, education, and engagement in its entirety.¹⁴

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Scott adds that the academy has an essential role to play in the learning city by providing reflection on, and delivering solutions to, issues of social, civic, economic, and moral importance. Universities, colleges, polytechnics, and institutes offer up resources and expertise that are well-matched to learning city activities and goals. Given the critical link between education and economic prosperity, “cities and towns in a globalized world cannot afford not to become learning cities,” writes learning city theorist Norman Longworth.

Sources: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning; Scott, Learning Cities for Adult Learners; Longworth, Learning Cities, Learning Regions.

Background: Development of Cork’s Learning City Initiative

Cork’s development into a learning city has been years in the making and subject to swings in political commitment to education. The plan to develop Cork into a centre of lifelong learning was made official in 2002 with the adoption of the Cork City Development Plan, titled Imagine Our Future, which declared:

Learning […] represents much more than the existence of schools and colleges. We see learning as a lifelong activity for all our citizens and not as something to be pursued only by young people. We see Cork as a place:

1. Where access to learning is available for all levels and to all ages in the city.
2. Where provision addresses comprehensively the diversity of learning needs.
3. Where an ethos of quality underpins the provision of continuous learning opportunities for all citizens in the city.
4. Where the city is recognised nationally and internationally as a centre of learning and research.
5. Where available information and knowledge are catalysts for creativity and learning.

15 Ibid., 3.
16 Longworth, Learning Cities, Learning Regions, Learning Communities, xxii.
17 Cork City Development Board, Imagine Our Future, 91.
This municipal plan provided the policy blueprint and political fuel for the early learning city movement. At the time, these priorities were in line with Ireland’s *White Paper on Adult Education*, a 2000 document that set out national policy for promoting learning opportunities throughout a person’s lifespan. But in 2013–14, changes in the national political landscape resulted in the dissolution of the priorities set out in the white paper. The early plans for creating a learning city in Cork were partly modified and some of the official committees that had been created to support the ambitions laid out in *Imagine Our Future* fell away.

Yet the learning city movement did not lose momentum. Several key individuals remained emboldened by the learning city movement and secured city council’s commitment to continue learning city activities in Cork. Five major events in 2014 and 2015 solidified and rejuvenated the Cork learning city movement:

- A steering group—Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork (GLLiC)—made up of voluntary members was created to oversee the coordination of learning city activities.

- Four major partners—Cork City Council, University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology, and the Cork Education and Training Board (Cork ETB)—entered into a memorandum of understanding (MOU), promising to work together to develop Cork as a learning city. (See Exhibit 1.)

- Cork City Council formally adopted the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning’s Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities, making Cork the first local authority in Ireland to become a signatory.

18 Department of Education and Science, *Learning for Life*.

19 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada.

20 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada; Pat Ledwidge, as cited in Cork City Council, *Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Cork City Council*, 6.

21 Cork Institute of Technology, *Cork City Council, Cork Education and Training Board, University College Cork and Cork Institute of Technology Sign Memorandum of Understanding on Learning*.

- City Council affirmed its support for the initiative, aligning it with Cork City Council's Economic Development Strategy.
- UNESCO recognized Cork and 11 other cities with an international learning city award.23

Exhibit 1
Four Major Partners Signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2015 to Turn Cork Into a Learning City

Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Cork Institute of Technology.

23 The other awardees were Melton (Australia), Sorocaba (Brazil), Beijing (China), Bahir Dar (Ethiopia), Espoo (Finland), Amman (Jordan), Mexico City (Mexico), Ybycui (Paraguay), Balanga (Philippines), Namyangju (Republic of Korea), and Swansea (Wales).
Cork’s learning city initiative brings partners together from many sectors to offer lifelong learning opportunities to Cork’s residents.

Objectives of the Learning City

Cork’s learning city initiative brings partners together from many sectors to offer lifelong learning opportunities to Cork’s residents. Cork City Council decided to pursue international recognition as a learning city and adopt the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities to “encourage investment, increase employment and improve the lives of the city’s residents by reducing inequality and social exclusion.”

The three main aspirations of the GLLiC steering group are:

- **Learning for all**—Residents have a wide variety of learning opportunities available to them throughout their lives.
- **Promoting inclusion**—Marginalized and disadvantaged groups have access to learning opportunities and are able to participate in Cork’s civic, social, and economic life.
- **Prosperity and sustainability**—Cork and its residents achieve prosperity through greater learning, and this is sustainable, recognized, and celebrated.

There is a clear fit for Cork’s two higher education institutions with the objectives of the learning city initiative. (See “Higher Education in Cork City: UCC and CIT.”) Aspirations of greater social inclusion, equity, and access to learning and education are in line with UCC’s and CIT’s social and cultural mandates. UCC, through its Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE), is mandated to provide “opportunities in lifelong learning for all adults irrespective of age and previous educational achievements,” while CIT’s Access Service is “committed to widening participation, increasing access, and supporting positive educational outcomes for under-represented groups.”

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24 UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, *Cork City Celebrates Receiving the UNESCO Learning City Award 2015*; Valdes-Cotera and others, *Unlocking the Potential*, 75.

25 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada; Cork Institute of Technology, *Cork City Council, Cork Education and Training Board, University College Cork and Cork Institute of Technology Sign Memorandum of Understanding on Learning*.

26 University College Cork, *About the Centre for Adult Continuing Education*.

Involvement in the learning city initiative also complements both institutions’ mandates to contribute to regional and local economic development through training and research. Moreover, the connection to the community offers an entry point for the institutions to offer expertise and conduct applied research on local issues.28

Higher Education in Cork City: UCC and CIT

In Ireland, universities and institutes of technology are authorized under national legislation to provide higher education in Ireland’s third-level education sector. These institutions award various levels of certificates, diplomas, and degrees. A national ministry of education and skills and several agencies (such as the Higher Education Authority and Quality and Qualifications Ireland) administer education legislation and policy.

University College Cork (UCC) is an academic teaching and research institution founded in 1845 as Queen’s College, Cork. Cork’s largest centre for higher education, it is a world top 500 university according to Times Higher Education and is in the top 351–400 universities in the Shanghai rankings.29 In 2013–14, it enrolled 20,557 students, including more than 3,000 international students.30 UCC offers more than 120 degree and professional programmes at its four colleges—Arts, Celtic Studies, and Social Sciences; Business and Law; Medicine and Health; and Science, Engineering, and Food Science. As well, it offers diplomas, certificates, and professional courses through its Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE).31

Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) became independent in the 1990s as a regional technical college under the Institutes of Technology Act and was subsequently re-designated as Cork Institute of Technology in 1997.32 The institute has existed in various incarnations since the 1800s, tracing its roots to the Royal Cork Institution (a cultural and educational institution that encouraged

28 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada.
29 Times Higher Education, University College Cork.
30 University College Cork, UCC President’s Report 2013–14, 2.
31 Ibid., 2, 6.
adult and community learning) and through various vocational movements in the 1900s. Today, CIT delivers career-focused education and research through its two faculties (Engineering and Science, Business and Humanities) and through its constituent schools—the Cork School of Music, Crawford College of Art and Design, and the National Maritime College of Ireland. CIT enrolled 14,118 students in 2013–14.35

Sources: Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada; Cork City Council; UCC; CIT; Times Higher Education; Shanghai Ranking; Department of Education and Skills; Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

Processes and Partners Involved in the Learning City

The Cork learning city initiative is bolstered by the energy and enthusiasm of its partners, who represent further and higher education, municipal government, primary and secondary education, health and community services, and arts and culture.

The processes and partners of Cork’s learning city initiative have evolved since its inception. At its founding in 2002, several formal structures were put in place, including the Cork City Learning Forum. The Learning Forum’s role was to:

• facilitate better communication between organizations throughout the city that are involved in learning, education, and training;
• collect and analyze data on learning;
• manage projects and develop strategies;
• develop a framework for learning, allowing people to map their own personal learning pathways.36

Members of the Learning Forum were required to report to the forum on learning opportunities, debate and dialogue about improvements to lifelong learning in Cork, and support the development of learning

33 Ibid., 4.
34 Ibid., 7.
36 Cork City Development Board, Imagine Our Future, 92.
opportunities outside of formal education. Several working groups and committees (including one for the Lifelong Learning Festival, described below) supported the Learning Forum’s work. However, when national legislation was revised in 2014, ending Ireland’s national system of county and city development boards, the Learning Forum was dismantled.

In place of the Learning Forum, a voluntary, informal collective of the individuals and organizations that remained committed to the Learning City movement formed the Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork (gLLiC) steering group. Key to its formation was a champion on Cork City Council, who gained council support for the steering group and the assurance that education and learning would remain on Cork City Council’s agenda.

**Activities of the Learning City**

Cork’s learning initiative has generated several successful projects. The work of the steering group and its committees takes place year-round.

**Cork Lifelong Learning Festival**

Cork’s Lifelong Learning Festival, an annual week-long event, was established in 2004. The festival “encourages everyone to investigate, participate and celebrate the huge number of opportunities for learning offered across Cork, whatever your age, ability or interest.”37 The festival has steadily grown from a few dozen events across the city to more than 500. These events include exhibitions, performances, demonstrations, workshops, tours, lectures, and information sessions.38

UCC and CIT’s affiliate colleges are among the most prolific providers of events. Examples of activities offered by UCC during the learning festival including a public lecture series with topics such as “The ABCs

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38 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada; Kearns and others, “The Learning Festival,” 91.
of Psychology,” “Food for Thought,” and “An Illustrated History of Travel by Railroad.” CIT has offered workshops on using learning technologies; a panel of speakers discussing the value of upskilling, retraining, and pursuing lifelong learning; public concerts by students in its School of Music; and artwork exhibitions.

Festival events are free to the public. They are designed to give beginners the chance to learn something new and gain exposure to the variety of learning that is happening around the city. Festival organizers encourage participation by all residents, especially disadvantaged groups, including the disabled, Irish Travellers, and immigrants.

Many groups put on events during the festival. Each provides its own resources and volunteers, with the festival organizers supplying common posters, programs, and publicity guidelines. The festival organizers also coordinate broader publicity partnerships (e.g., with local radio stations and newspapers) and accommodations sponsorships for out-of-town visitors.

**Learning Neighbourhoods**

The Learning Neighbourhoods pilot project, launched in September 2015, is taking the learning city concept to the neighbourhood level and giving profile to the organizations and networks most intimately involved in individuals’ day-to-day learning opportunities. The project is helping local networks of learning and education organizations showcase and develop lifelong learning opportunities. As part of the project, UCC staff developed a handbook to provide:

- information to communities about why and how they should become learning neighbourhoods;
- ideas and advice for promotional activities;

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39 UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities, *Cork City Celebrates Receiving the UNESCO Learning City Award 2015.*
40 “Travellers” are an ethnic group indigenous to Ireland.
41 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada; Valdes-Cotera and others, *Unlocking the Potential.*
• guidance on developing a learning action plan for the neighbourhood (including objectives, actions, and monitoring);
• support and advice on applying for funding to sustain activities of the learning neighbourhood.42

The project also offers a recognition award as an incentive for local organizations to develop learning opportunities.43

Two separate neighbourhoods in Cork were chosen to pilot the project. Each was selected based on analysis of socio-economic conditions, including levels of education and engagement with learning. This analysis identified one neighbourhood in the north of Cork and one in the south as well-suited to an intervention to promote lifelong learning. The two neighbourhoods exhibit some conditions of socio-economic disadvantage, as well as some factors expected for success, such as the presence of engaged organizations that would be willing to develop further learning opportunities.44

Thus far, the project has completed consultations with neighbourhood residents and organizations, with further activities to take place over the coming months.45 The Learning Neighbourhoods project is being viewed as a testing ground for learning strategies that can be used at the neighbourhood level, with potential to be replicated in other neighbourhoods in Cork and other would-be learning communities around the world.46

42 Ó Tuama and O’Sullivan, Designing and Implementing Learning Neighbourhoods, 4–5.
43 Ibid., 2.
44 Ibid., 2–3.
46 Ibid.
Participation in International Networks

Cork holds membership in PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE), a world-wide network that supports knowledge sharing between organizations and communities. PIE is an initiative of the PASCAL International Observatory, a global alliance of individuals and organizations engaged in applying the concept of learning cities and regions. PASCAL was founded in 2002 to expand the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on learning regions and cities. Cork is also a member of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities, which offers resources and expert guidance to member learning cities.

Other Activities

Other activities of the learning city include the Cork Science Festival, a week-long offering of demonstrations and workshops for school-aged residents. The intention of the festival is to inspire excitement about education in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Both CIT and UCC, as well as other learning city partners and industry contributors, have been involved in offering workshops and venues.

There is the potential for the partners to take on other projects under the learning city banner, depending on available resources. One activity of current interest to the partners is an international exchange with another city; however, the partners have yet to secure sufficient funding for this activity.

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47 “PASCAL” stands for “place and social capital and learning.”
48 PASCAL International Observatory, About PASCAL International Observatory.
49 Cork Science Festival, About the Cork Science Festival.
Resources and Contributions of the Higher Education Partners

UCC and CIT have been partners in the learning city initiative from the outset, with representatives holding positions on the original Learning Forum, the Learning Festival steering committee, and the new GLLiC steering committee. With a formal MOU signed in 2015, the two higher education partners have renewed their commitments to long-term roles in the initiative. The MOU outlines the intentions of the signatories to work together to:

- benefit the citizens of Cork by achieving designation as a UNESCO learning City;
- enhance existing projects, including the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival;
- encourage citizens to engage in learning activities, whatever their age, interest or ability, in order to develop a culture of learning.50

CIT and UCC offer financial, human resource, and in-kind contributions for activities and events. For example, during the Lifelong Learning Festival, CIT provides social media coordination, and both institutions offer venues for events.51 UCC and Cork ETB have taken the lead on the learning neighbourhoods project (described earlier), while the members of GLLiC provide advice.52 UCC has dedicated a staff member to coordinate the project, along with a modest budget for developing promotional materials and resources and project evaluation.53

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50 Cork Institute of Technology, Cork City Council, Cork Education and Training Board, University College Cork and Cork Institute of Technology Sign Memorandum of Understanding on Learning.
51 Cork City, Cork Lifelong Learning Festival 2016 Programme.
52 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada; Ó Tuama and O'Sullivan, Designing and Implementing Learning Neighbourhoods.
53 Ibid.
The partners intend to seek out opportunities to build on existing learning city activities and initiate new projects that fit the learning city objectives. They are also developing a proposal to hire a paid coordinator (sustained through financial contributions by all the MOU signatories) who would facilitate all activities under the learning city initiative.  

**Innovations**

Several aspects of the Cork learning city initiative are innovative, especially the Learning Neighbourhoods pilot project (described earlier). Additionally:

- Cork’s Lifelong Learning Festival is innovative, and this was a key element of UNESCO’s recognition of Cork with a Learning City Award. Cork’s festival has inspired other cities’ celebrations dedicated to learning, including a similar festival in Limerick, and a recently launched festival in Burnaby, British Columbia. The Cork festival organizers also have a twinning relationship with Féile an Phobail (Festival of the People), a Belfast community festival that involves exchanges of instructors between the cities throughout the year. The relationship is regarded as a gesture of peace-building and reconciliation between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

- Cork’s Learning City initiative has evolved to increasingly connect with other sectors and interests, including environment, economy, community, culture, and health. This multi-dimensional approach has been adopted by other learning city movements and has become known internationally as EcCoWell. The goal of the EcCoWell approach is to foster “sustainable opportunity cities,” where urban, environmental,
and economic planning are integrated with visions for lifelong learning, social justice and inclusion, and health.\textsuperscript{60} It originated as “a response to a landscape of partial and fragmented […] sectoral responses such as Healthy City, Green City, Learning City, Creative City, Culture City.”\textsuperscript{61} The EcCoWell movement in Cork integrates those involved with the Learning City movement in activities that promote environmental and economic sustainability. EcCoWell Cork has organized local conferences with guest speakers, presentations on projects and good practices, and site visits.\textsuperscript{62}

**Benefits, Outcomes, and Impacts**

Cork’s learning city initiative has brought together organizations and groups of people who may not otherwise have had opportunity to connect. While community-based education providers share many of the same values and objectives of formal and higher education, they typically function in different spheres.

The involvement of higher education in the learning city initiative has helped to extend its reach, connecting adult educators, academics, and researchers with community educators, other education providers, and marginalized groups.\textsuperscript{63} According to Séamus Ó Tuama, director of UCC’s Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE), part of the ongoing value of UCC’s participation in the broader learning city initiative is that it helps to shape how ACE engages with the community: “We’ve been able to be a better partner in the initiative by responding to the needs of the community.”\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Kearns and others, “The Learning Festival,” 93.
\textsuperscript{62} EcCoWell Cork, *Cities for the Future*.
\textsuperscript{63} Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada; Valdes-Cotera and others, *Unlocking the Potential*, 82.
\textsuperscript{64} Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
The Learning Festival now includes more than 500 events. Its reach is wide, including involvement by groups marginalized from formal education initiatives, such as lower-income individuals, seniors, and Irish Travellers. Although the festival organizers do not formally track attendance and participation by target groups, they note that groups such as the Traveller Visibility Group and the Disability Education Network have hosted events and helped expand the profile of the festival to these populations.

The formal renewal of the higher education institutions’ commitment through the 2015 MOU has helped solidify the permanence of the learning city movement in Cork. The level of commitment demonstrated in Cork was noted as a reason for its international recognition from UNESCO, and this international recognition has, in turn, instilled a sense of pride and perseverance in the initiative’s partners.

Neither the extent that Cork’s higher education institutions benefit from the learning city initiative nor the reciprocal benefits of their involvement have yet been systematically evaluated. However, interviewees noted that there has been a breaking down of barriers between the institutions, as seen through increased cooperation on joint projects. Interviewees also noted that education and learning initiatives are receiving greater attention across the city, especially by members of Cork City Council.

Specific activities, such as the Learning Neighbourhoods pilot project, will be evaluated individually, allowing further outcomes to be identified later in each projects’ life cycle. UCC and CIT, and their partners, could also look to the UNESCO Key Features of Learning Cities measurement guide to aggregate evidence of progress toward Cork’s

65 Kearns and others, “The Learning Festival,” 91; interviews with The Conference Board of Canada.
66 Tina Neylon, e-mail correspondence with author.
67 UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Cork City Celebrates Receiving the UNESCO Learning City Award 2015.
68 Valdes-Cotera and others, Unlocking the Potential, 82.
broader learning city goals. A summary of outcomes could be helpful in gaining continued commitment from the partners. As the partners engage in more structured and defined activities, such as the Learning Neighbourhoods project, it will become easier to demonstrate the outcomes and value of the participation of the higher education partners.

Challenges and Responses

Sustained Commitment From Higher Education Partners

In some learning city initiatives, institutions of higher education are the least active member organizations. There are several reasons for this apparent paradox that are intrinsic to many higher education institutions:

- They often see themselves as separate communities unto themselves.
- They may have different goals from the community. Whereas a community may have very local-level aspirations, PSE institutions often have global aspirations.
- The work of universities is often “discipline dependent” rather than “problem dependent” and thus not always easily applicable to the issues facing their local community.
- Participation in the higher education space is bounded and formal, from admission (such as entrance into a program of studies) through to exit (such as graduation), whereas participation in one’s community is seldom so restricted.
- There is often little career reward for academics to contribute to social or community issues.

PSE engagement often varies by type of institution. In Ireland, technical institutes such as CIT have an inherent local and regional focus. According to interviewees, the early and enthusiastic engagement of

70 Dr. Michael Osborne, interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
71 Miclea, “Beyond Rhetoric.”
CIT in the learning city initiative was because it was a natural fit with the institution’s local economic development and lifelong learning priorities. UCC’s relationship to the initiative, on the other hand, was more uneven in the early years, likely due to some of the conditions outlined above. Moreover, although there was top-level support in both higher education institutions in the early years, it was difficult to retain a champion in each institution who would continue the work year after year.

Keeping the administration at UCC engaged is the current primary challenge. University faculty members see the value in the initiative and are eager to participate, but commitment from upper-level administrators is not always as clear. The response has been to work continually to keep both of Cork’s higher education institutions engaged. The learning city partners report elements of dynamic, positive competition between the two institutions in terms of their roles in the movement. Partners see this aspect as beneficial for the initiative in terms of progress, provided a balance between the major partners can be maintained.

Negative Perceptions of Higher Education

Negative or ambivalent perceptions of higher education pose a challenge to the public’s receptivity to the learning city initiative. According to Tina Neylon, Cork Learning Festival Coordinator, “For a lot of people in Cork, the university is an alien place,” closed off and inaccessible to them. With this mindset, the public may be unclear about the goals of learning city activities, misinterpreting them as being intended to recruit individuals into higher education. Individuals disinterested in pursuing higher education (or finding it inaccessible to them) may then decline to participate or support learning city activities.

The partners see this obstacle as affirmation of the need for the learning city initiative. They seek to overcome it by improving “town and gown” connections and building public interest in higher education offerings through events such as the Learning Festival and the Learning Festival.
Neighbourhoods project, which bring higher education to community
neighbourhoods and into a range of venues, such as libraries, parks,
and museums.

**Keys to Success**

Despite the challenges, the involvement of Cork’s higher education
institutions is seen as a positive. Keys to their continued engagement in
the learning city initiative include:

- Complementarity of the two institutions: UCC and CIT have their own
areas of specialty and differentiation that contribute to their value as
partners in the initiative.
- Mutual recognition and respect: The learning city partners recognize
and respect the interdependence of various sectors in the provision of
education and lifelong learning.
- Strong support: Cork City Council backs the initiative and engages with
the higher education institutions.
- An enthusiastic community: Though some negative perceptions of
higher education persist, community residents have shown their
receptivity by attending events and activities hosted by the higher
education institutions.

**Lessons for Canada**

The learning city initiative has not had wide uptake in Canada or
the U.S., though the collaborative spirit of the concept is in step with
such activities as community-based research, community-engaged
learning, formal town-and-gown networks, and other community–
campus partnerships undertaken by many Canadian PSE institutions.
The initiative demonstrates how Canadian PSE institutions might be
able to extend their existing community engagement to be part of a
broader movement to achieve significant social and cultural change—
including lifelong learning, environmental stewardship, healthy living, and
civic participation.
The challenges and successes of Cork’s Learning City initiative offer some lessons to Canadian PSE institutions and communities in pursuing a community-based initiative with strong PSE involvement:

- Broader government policy can foster learning collaboration. Cork’s initiative was able to flourish when national education and economic policy encouraged such collaboration to happen. Provincial education policy in some Canadian jurisdictions, such as Alberta, has likewise been a contributing factor to collaboration between post-secondary education institutions.74
- Participation from all partners needs to be willing and voluntary. In its early years, participation in the initiative became somewhat “staid and uninspired,”75 partly because of the prescriptive design of the Learning Forum membership. The spirit of the 2015 MOU, however, renewed the key partners’ enthusiasm to freely collaborate.
- PSE partners need to share in the goals of the broader initiative and make strong commitments to actively contribute. UCC and CIT, for example, have found alignment between the goals of the learning city movement and their respective mandates to improve access to education and to contribute to economic development.
- All levels of the PSE institution need to be engaged, including senior administrators, teaching and research faculty, other professionals in the institution, and students. Maintaining support for the initiative across the institution is an ongoing effort.
- Efforts to counter misunderstandings or negative perceptions within the community about the role of PSE institutions in the initiative may be required. A community initiative that strives to engage groups marginalized from higher education could encounter skepticism or reluctance to involve PSE institutions.
- The intended outcomes of collaborating should be articulated. Effort should be made to track and measure these outcomes so as to help demonstrate the continued value of the partnership.

74 Martin, The City of Learners.
75 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
• All major local PSE institutions should be invited to take part. Partners need not assume that competition among PSE institutions will detract from their participation in the initiative. All partners should work to define a unique role for themselves in the partnership, based on their strengths and mandates.

Conclusion

As a learning city, Cork is promoting lifelong learning for all residents in order to achieve economic prosperity and social inclusion. The city’s higher education institutions serve a valued role in this multi-sector collaborative effort. But meaningful engagement by higher education institutions in a community movement is not always a given, and sustaining their commitment takes deliberate effort. Canadian PSE institutions, as well as municipal and community leaders, could draw on the lessons from Cork’s experience to build long-standing community learning partnerships founded on shared interests and mutual benefit.

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APPENDIX A

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