



Identification, Dissemination and Exchange of good practice in
Local Employment development and promoting better governance

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Thessaloniki Thematic Report

Maximising Employment Potential: local approaches to lifelong learning (LLL)

1. Introduction

The seminar starts from the proposition that lifelong learning strategies, developed through a local partnership (or a looser coalition of local players) can help strengthen competitiveness and social cohesion in a locality. Through this the hypothesis is that it can be a valuable instrument both for the creation of jobs and for the economic insertion of socially excluded groups. While lifelong learning has become an increasingly popular policy proposition in recent years at European, national and regional level, it is the purpose of the Thessaloniki seminar to “tunnel under” these higher level programmes for lifelong learning and to explore what value added and good practice can be identified at the *local* level. In this sense, then, lifelong learning is being examined in the Thessaloniki seminar strictly in terms of its role as one of the tools for *local employment development*.

A useful starting proposition for the seminar might be that ‘organically grown’ strategies for lifelong learning; that is the sort of approaches that emerge from established forms of interaction in a particular locality might well be better equipped to “tune in” more effectively to a local economy, society and culture. In a less general and more instrumental sense they might also be expected to be better able to identify those gaps that exist that fine tuned lifelong learning strategies might be well equipped to fill.

The sort of gaps that might be addressed can be at a variety of levels:

- At the scale of general local development - a gap left by the decline of some outdated and uncompetitive economic base that a dynamic learning-focused strategy might seek to fill by raising the level of skills and basic human capital across the board.

- At the level of the local population as a whole – a gap in the available opportunities for learning by gender, age, social status or ethnicity that a dynamic learning-focused strategy might see as a way to offer greater equality of opportunity.
- At the level of the existing labour pool – significant gaps in the matrix of available work based competencies by age and gender that a dynamic approach to lifelong learning might tackle to ensure that employers can continue to meet their skills needs.
- At the level of the neighbourhood or local community – gaps in levels of social interaction and local trust (Putnam’s “bowling alone¹”) that a dynamic approach to lifelong learning might seek to fill as a way to mitigate social alienation and conflict and build social capital.
- At the level of the individual and the household, critical gaps that may occur at key transitional points through the lifecycle – education to work, work to child rearing and back again, work to retirement and so on – where a dynamic approach to lifelong learning might be used to ensure that significant and personally damaging discontinuities can be minimised.

2. The Local in a Context of Rapid Change

We live in a fast-changing world where mobility is the norm. This has a differential effect across localities. Some will be swept up in the process and derive benefit from it. Some will be on the margins, by-passed and suffering the disadvantages. Change is an engine for increasing the inequalities experienced by different local places. Strategically the options open in the context of lifelong learning will, then, be very different from local place to local place. Some will be looking to lifelong learning as a means to capture growth in the first place, some will be using it to sustain what they have already achieved, some will be trying to mitigate the effects of the “wrong kind” of growth and many will have strategies that attempt to encompass elements of all these different components. Once again, as we have found throughout the IDELE programme there are few good practice lessons that can be passed on regardless of the *context* against which the original actions were

¹ Robert Putnam, in his book ‘Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community’ records how individual’s stock of social capital (connections with family, friends, neighbors, and democratic structures) has plummeted in recent years, impoverishing individual lives and communities

designed and implemented. The seminar will provide an opportunity to look at individual case studies in their real context and to establish what can realistically be transferred and what cannot.

3. Demography and the Impact of Mobility

In a fast changing society, those local places caught up in the process are subject to dynamic changes in demography that can significantly redefine what they are and a strategy for lifelong learning will find itself needing to address a moving target. In the opposite sense, those places on the margins will need to address the changes that come with say the ageing of a rooted population – significant change no less in need of a strategy – in this case for real *lifelong* learning.

Looked at through the lens of mobility and purchasing power - those with resources and opportunity can “go with the flow” of change through a process of physical relocation. For them, access to learning and skill building opportunities may look more like a straightforward consumer choice that the open marketplace may satisfy. For example, more affluent, younger and generally more mobile individuals and groups can tackle the “gaps” identified above simply by simply relocating to seek them out - though it might well be in the interests of the home locality to adopt a strategy for lifelong learning that would aim to keep at least some of its “brightest and best”.

Looked at in another way, some localities may be the receivers of those groups seeking opportunity through relocation. Some incomers may well be the “brightest and best” referred to above and the “strategy” would be to recruit and retain them. If learning opportunity were a key variable in doing this, a sound local strategy would find ways to facilitate it. The reverse side of the coin may, however, be where the incomers are those with more basic skills needs such as immigrants or returnees and here the strategic challenge would be of a quite different order and would probably be in the domain of public policy rather than the open marketplace.

For some local places, of course, there may well be little inwards or outwards movement of elements of the population. Perhaps an urban versus rural categorisation may offer a first cut approach to where this is likely to exist (rural) and where this sort of stability would be rare (urban). It is clearly no less important that relatively stable places also have a strong strategy for lifelong learning – as

an aid to the achievement of quality of life for all across the life stages - if for nothing else.

It is clear, then, that a *local* approach to lifelong learning must understand at the outset the dynamics of the circumstances – demographic, economic, and social; that confront any given local place. Of course such considerations also apply at regional and national levels but what distinguishes the local as a domain for policy in a fast changing world is that, by virtue of its scale, it is more open, more porous more subject to those shifts and movements that would be invisible through the regional or national lens. Locally rooted strategies dedicated to lifelong learning will frequently need to deal with a population as well as an economy in flux - as well as striving to meet the needs of those who find themselves (willingly or unwillingly) rooted to the locality itself.

4. Strategic Questions for Local Lifelong Learning

The discussion set out above suggests that even before engaging with the more detailed components of what a local strategy for lifelong learning might look like, there are some key questions for overall frameworks that need to be addressed:

- What is the desired general outcome for a *locally based* strategy for lifelong learning – how should it balance raising the overall quality of human capital against narrower, more instrumental, aims that it should address skills for the workplace or offer excluded groups better access to life chances through learning?
- What does the concept of lifelong learning mean in practice when it is addressed to a *spatial entity below the region*?
- How can employers and educational institutions best contribute to the goals of a local lifelong learning strategy?
- In whose interests should local actions for lifelong learning be taken and how is the *appropriate balance* to be best maintained across those groups identified earlier – the young, women, older people, in-migrants and so on?
- What should be the appropriate balance in a local lifelong learning strategy between meeting the needs of *stayers* – those who either out of choice or out of necessity find themselves closely attached to the local place in question as opposed to *movers* – those with the propensity to move that it might be policy to retain or those newly arrived in the locality?
- Is there a proposition to be made for adopting a more local approach to lifelong learning across the board?

These issues are ones that a strategy for local learning needs to address in the broadest terms and they are issue that policy at higher levels also needs to consider in the design of their own programmes.

5. Choosing the Case Examples

For the seminar, we are then looking for localities:

- That have adopted a strategic approach to local development that embodies a significant attachment to a “learning ethos”;
- Where local actors (including employers, universities and training institutions, the local authorities etc) have understood the need to come together to improve competitiveness and cohesion through open and flexible approaches to lifelong learning and human resources development;
- That pursue wide-ranging and consciously integrated local learning strategies covering many niches of the local labour market and that respond to the needs of different groups of learners across the age ranges;
- That, though competitively disadvantaged as places, have developed a strategy that seeks to use access to learning across the lifecourse as a driver to establish a competitive platform for future growth;
- That see the adoption of local lifelong learning approaches as a way to increase participation in education and training as a routeway to employment and active economic engagement for those suffering exclusion and disadvantage;

6. The Questions for the Case Studies

The key questions for the seminar are:

- What evidence is there that local partnerships and strategies around lifelong learning can contribute significant value added to local employment and development?
- What lessons for good practice can be identified, exchanged and disseminated across the EU and how best can the inevitable differences in

background conditions at local level be handled in such a way as to facilitate meaningful policy transfer?

Having selected the appropriate localities each will be invited to address the following in their seminar contribution:

- What happened locally to initiate the process of partnership/coalition formation? What particular “gaps” were identified that a local strategy for lifelong learning was assumed to be capable of filling?
- What is the added value of acting locally as opposed to regionally or nationally? How can this be measured in such a way as to convince a “sceptical Third Party”? Does LLL actually matter/apply at local level (both in general terms and in practice?)
- How can local collaboration around learning and education best respond to the demands of learning in a given labour market – especially in the context of fast change - both economic and demographic?
- What are the key success factors that make grounded practice in local approaches to lifelong learning work effectively?
- In terms of the equality agenda in the EES, how can a local strategy for lifelong learning best meet the needs of specific groups, such as women, ageing workers and the socially excluded people?
- How does the local level engage with the policy thrust at national and EU level for LLL? Do local initiatives embrace, respond to and/or adapt to EU and national strategies on LLL and apply them at local level?
- What are the general principles that need to be applied to keep a local lifelong learning strategy flexible in the face of change and sustainable in the long term?

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