



Learning Cities: Meeting Today's Challenges for a Better Future

Progress Report 2017-2021

Peter Kearns, September 2021

Abstract

The role of learning cities in meeting today's challenges for a better future has been a dominant theme in PASCAL work on learning throughout the period 2017 to 2021. This theme has been given urgency and direction by developments during this period, especially the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while demographic change with ageing populations, the growing impact of the technologies of the fourth industrial revolution, and the pace of change, in their cumulative impact have brought this sense of a time of disruption and turbulence with the world out of control.

UNESCO (2021) has responded to this situation by establishing an International Commission on Futures of Education to rethink knowledge, education, and learning "in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, precarity". PASCAL research since its 2017 Pretoria Conference¹ needs to be viewed in this context of harnessing learning in the quest for a better and sustainable future. The Pretoria Conference should be seen as the starting point in the PASCAL quest to contribute to this mission. This paper also draws on PASCAL work on learning city policy over the past decade which shortly will be brought into a consolidated document entitled, *Learning and city futures: addressing the policy challenges*.

Learning for a Better Future

PASCAL addressed this theme of learning for a better world in the 14th PASCAL International Conference held in Pretoria, South Africa in October, 2017. While initial planning for the conference was influenced by an OECD (2017) paper, *Trends 2017-Which way to go?*, the conference subsequently focussed on the question of learning for a better future, the focus of the keynote paper for the conference. Papers from the conference have been published by the Centre for Local Economic Development, edited by Venter and Hattingh (2021), by which time the core themes have attained increased significance and urgency, for the reasons suggested above. In a real sense, the conference and this report set an agenda for PASCAL work since 2017, and for our South African colleagues. While this agenda has included the traditional

¹ See <http://conference2017.pascalobservatory.org>

subjects of learning cities such as access, participation, and equity, they have been reshaped and given a sense of urgency by the socio-economic developments over the past three years. As UNESCO established during this period an International Commission on Futures of Education to rethink education and learning and report at the end of 2021, there were some areas where PASCAL was examining similar issues to those examined by the Commission and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).

This quest for a better, sustainable future was conveyed in the keynote address for the Pretoria conference.

I put to you that we are at the crossroads between a dying world order and the emergence of a new order. This is a transition marked by conflict, tensions, and a sense of confusion. (Kearns, 2017).

This theme drew on the OECD Trends 2017 paper, which served as one of the background documents for the conference, along with earlier PASCAL work, and foreshadowed the sense of a society out of control marked by disruption and turbulence. This sense intensified two years later with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, accompanied by a growing sense of the mega changes impacting on society, such as ageing populations and the trend towards a longevity society, uncertainty about the future of jobs with the evolving impact of artificial intelligence and automation, and the prospect of machines with superintelligence in the future that would challenge human intelligence (Barrat, 2013; Bostrom, 2014; Tegmark, 2017).

The Pretoria conference documents, preserved in the 2021 publication conveyed a range of options that could be developed as responses to this evolving sense of crises. These ranged across progressing the UN Sustainable Development Goals, aiming for holistic development, linking learning to happiness, and the need for localising initiatives. Other proposals were directed at the African context of the conference.

A significant aspect was the ideas that were later in the PASCAL EcCoWell 2020 report, termed “psycho-social” aspects. These included balancing local and global consciousness, fostering mindfulness, and pointing to the relevance and value of the traditional African concept of *Ubuntu*. These thrusts in their overall impact pointed to the need to enhance well-being of people by bringing meaning and purpose into lives. This cluster of ideas was later given shape in subsequent PASCAL work on resilience, and with direct links to ideas in the UNESCO Progress report.

A distinctive Africa contribution was the concept of *Ubuntu*.

Ubuntu means humanity and the idea that we affirm our humanity when we affirm the humanity of others points to the path to a truly global empathic civilisation. (Kearns, 2017).

This empathy theme was later taken up by the Wyndham learning city, in the Torres Gomez (2020) report for the PASCAL EcCoWell Community Recovery Program, as the concept “a new model of partnership with empathy”. A key issue emerging from Pretoria lies in finding practical ways to use local initiatives to build global consciousness and empathy.

The PASCAL response to the Pretoria challenge

PASCAL work since the Pretoria conference has been, in general, more focussed and has involved a wider range of subjects relevant to learning for a better future. This may be seen in the subjects brought into the PASCAL Learning City Networks which give the potential for a more holistic approach to its work on learning and community. PASCAL now has a close relationship with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, sealed in a MOU, while webinars conducted during 2020 during the COVID pandemic brought a greater sharing on ideas.

PASCAL development activities in the field of learning cities since Pretoria have had a tripartite focus:

- 1/ The activities of six networks that range across subjects such as addressing disadvantage to build inclusive learning cities, faith and spirituality learning, connecting rural and urban learning initiatives, implementing EcCoWell as a holistic approach, and reimagining inclusive economic futures.
- 2/ A range of papers outside of these subjects, in some cases commissioned by UIL, that are generally linked in some way to the theme of the Pretoria conference Learning for a better future.
- 3/ Embedding the PASCAL knowledge base, particularly at the European centre at the University of Glasgow into a number of high-profile large-scale global urban projects, notably, the *Centre for Sustainable, Healthy, Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods*, and *Strengthening the Urban Engagement of Universities in Asia and Africa*.

The six networks in item 1. above report at the end of September 2021 to a set of questions on their work. As this report is not yet available, I have not taken account of their work in this overview, which is focussed on follow up from the Pretoria conference, with two exceptions: the papers on disadvantage and inclusion, and the EcCoWell 2020 program on Community Recovery that I directed in having regard to the Pretoria challenge.

Disadvantage and inclusion has been included in this overview as the subject relates to all other aspects of PASCAL work, and cannot be excluded from any serious consideration of learning for a better future.

This overview in these terms corresponds to the PASCAL network *Learning cities: meeting today's challenges for a better future* which has obvious links to the main theme of the Pretoria conference and can be seen as follow up on that conference. However, when the report of the six Networks project is available after September, the opportunity will exist to prepare a more comprehensive overview of PASCAL work in the domain of learning city development since the Pretoria conference in the process of exchanging ideas with UIL, and possibly other partners

On this basis, this overview of PASCAL work on learning for a better future includes the following subjects.

- the PASCAL 2018 Suwon conference;
- the enhanced need to address disadvantage and access issues;

- issues arising from ageing populations and the transition towards a longevity society;
- a spectrum of psycho-social issues involving mental health and well-being linked to a new model of partnership;
- the search for innovative ways to build a learning culture;
- the further development of the PASCAL EcCoWell approach to integrated holistic development as an approach to community recovery from the COVID pandemic;
- PASCAL policy review papers over the last decade directed at key issues for learning and city futures.

PASCAL 2018 Suwon conference

While the 2018 PASCAL Suwon South Korea reflected the strong development of learning cities in Korea with a broad agenda; the imperative for change, nevertheless, came through in conference papers. The chair of the PASCAL, Josef Konvitz, summed this up in the following terms.

At the conceptual level: the problem of untangling the economic nexus (keynotes by Shirley Walters and Soonghee Han) and the likelihood for more crises, both economic and environmental, in the years to come, make it imperative that we find better ways to explain why change is both necessary and desirable. (Konvitz, 2018).

Similar themes were developed by Duke and Kearns in the Distinguished Scholars Forum. The humanistic themes from Pretoria were carried further by Kearns in exploring a humanistic path through the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Osborne contributed by comparing learning cities and smart cities which he saw as instruments of corporate marketing.

Konvitz in his summing up noted that many case studies had been presented at the conference which were, overall, about bottom-up initiatives, with strong involvement of civil society. This is a key feature on the path to foster cultural change towards a just learning culture.

Konvitz returned to the question of learning for a better future in seeing the need for explicit national policy direction.

There was a collective sense by the end of the conference that PASCAL should try to promote multi-level co-ordination and explicit national policy direction. (Konvitz, 2018).

He suggested that if ever the aspiration of global citizenship was to be brought down to earth, the learning city concept and the world-wide networks of learning cities should be seen as a start. This idea of finding ways to connect local and global consciousness was taken up in later PASCAL work, including in the report of the PASCAL EcCoWell Community Recovery report.

Inclusion, equity, and lifelong learning

The turbulent conditions since the Pretoria conference, particularly with the COVID -19 pandemic, has impacted the mental health and well-being of many people and enhanced the exclusion of many more from a decent life in society. Addressing inclusion, disadvantage, and equity issues has become even more significant in the quest to harness learning for a better future.

Osborne and Hernandez (2021) prepared a background paper on this subject for the UIL 4th International Conference on Learning Cities held in Medellin in October 2019. This comprehensive analysis of the wide range causes of exclusion demonstrated the wide diversity of issues to be addressed, and the absence of simple solutions. Both top down and bottom up approaches can be effective, although the paper did suggest value in a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach such as existed in London in the past.

Inclusion can be fostered as learning city become better understood and more focussed on the big issues that drive exclusion, and which lead to a lack of equity in cities. Osborne and Hernandez have provided a conceptual framework for understanding learning cities that are effective instruments for empowering citizens, and which reflect citizen demand and need. This paper will contribute much to PASCAL work in harnessing learning for a better future.

A further Pascal contribution to access and inclusion was a background paper by Lido, Hirsu & Wessels (2021) on digital and data literacies for inclusion of marginalised citizens in learning cities. This paper explores the current state of digital literacy inclusion and the digital divide. Progress in these areas will contribute much to empowerment of disadvantaged groups on the wrong side of the digital divide. The case studies which range across Egypt, the Gaza Governorate, Iran, Manila Philippines, Sanandaj, Glasgow & Stirling show what can be achieved in a range of contexts. Particular issues, such as the exclusion of girls and women are addressed in the case studies.

There are aspects relating to access and inclusion in a number of the papers discussed below. These include the papers on resilience, and the papers on the needs of older people where inclusion is a central issue.

Ageing populations and longevity

The trend to ageing populations is international, although the impact up to now varies between countries and regions. While East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, China have been most affected up to now, and African countries have been least affected, this will change so that Africa faces a demographic challenge in the future.

Research on “the hundred year life” by scholars such as Gratton & Scott (2020) and Arrison (2021), points to the probable significant impact of ageing on traditional life styles and the traditional three-stage life cycle, but governments have been slow to react to the social effects of the changes while focussing on financial aspects and costs.

This has been a core theme of PASCAL throughout these years. Ageing was one of the three themes of the PASCAL Suwon conference, and was followed by the report of the PASCAL/PIMSA SIG on good active ageing for all (Kearns and Reghenzani-Kearns, 2018). This

report included case studies from around the world - such as *Kominkan* in Japan, *Volkshochschulen* in Germany and neighbourhood houses in Australia, which demonstrated the important role of these examples of local learning community institutions in bringing people together to provide learning opportunities to support people in ageing well.

PASCAL in this report reviewed the WHO three pillar approach to active ageing, and concluded that inclusion, citizenship, fulfilment, happiness, lifelong learning, and employability should be added to provide a broader support for active ageing in 21st century conditions. The conclusions of this report include the value of learning from the East Asian experience, the significance of place and cultural influences, and finding ways to strengthen the triple helix of learning, health, and community.

PASCAL followed up on this report with a study undertaken for UIL on inclusion aspects of ageing populations (Kearns & Reghenzani-Kearns 2021). Research undertaken for this paper showed the extent of international interest in the emergence of a longevity society driven by ageing populations, and with an international network of Longevity Institutes. Leading universities such as Stanford, MIT, and Oxford engaged in this international research effort.

PASCAL noted that the extent of the demographic shift will require turning from an ageing society narrative with a focus on the end of life to a longevity approach which will address the whole life course in the era of “the hundred year life”. The Stanford Centre of Longevity in its White Paper described the features of a longevity approach in the following terms:

A longevity perspective recognises that development is a recursive process with many interconnected stages that require a broad range of interventions covering education, work, finances, health, community, environment relationships. (Barry, Carstensen, Scott, & Wong, 2019:4)

This poses the critical question of how such a broad approach can be achieved, what the Wyndham learning city termed “a new model of partnership with empathy”. I discuss this question below in terms of the growing importance of local initiatives and partnership at the local area.

PASCAL work on good healthy ageing was extended to a larger audience when Kearns was invited to speak in 2019 at an International Conference in Beijing on Public Policies and Services for the Elderly organised by Tsinghua University. His paper was subsequently published by Tsinghua University in Chinese in a collection of selected papers from the conference titled *Reflections on the Policies and Practices of China’s Healthy and Active Response to an ageing Society in the New Era* (Lan (2021) forthcoming). China, like other East Asian countries, has a major ageing problem which has been worsened by the on-going impact of urbanisation on traditional family support structures, particularly in regions in the western areas of China.

The longevity challenge is a significant aspect of the overall challenge for a better future.

The spectrum of psycho-social issues linked to a new model of partnership

The mega changes discussed at the PASCAL Pretoria conference have impacted on mental health and well-being of many people. This impact has been enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic with its impact on employment, families, and the overall well-being of many people.

These issues were taken into account in planning for the 2020 PASCAL EcCoWell Community recovery Program, including in the Briefing Papers (BP) prepared for the program, particularly BP3 and BP4.

BP 3: Kearns & Lido, *Mental health and well-being*².

BP 4: Wong & Watson, *Engaging a dream deferred: Arts, spirituality and transformative learning*³.

These themes were reflected in a number of the case studies for the program, and in the conclusions from the program with supporting individual well-being in adjusting to on-going change. This was the primary finding from the program.

The lessons of the EcCoWell Community Recovery Program were brought into the further development of the EcCoWell concept as EcCoWell 3 as “a new model of partnership with imagination, empathy, and well-being” (Kearns, 2021b). This absorbed the Wyndham learning city idea of “a new model of partnership with empathy” with EcCoWell 3 seen as “an innovative learning ecosystem directed at a sustainable world”.

By integrating ideas about broader partnerships, empathy, and well being, this paper showed how the Pretoria conference concerns could be taken forward towards a better future, driven by the ideas built into the EcCoWell 3 concept. This reflected a decade of development of the EcCoWell concept, supported by action taken by cities such as Cork, Limerick, Wyndham, and the Harlem and Datong communities.

The Kearns 2021 paper showed how the dimensions of “the new model of partnership with imagination, empathy, and well-being could be applied to enhance well-being, inclusion, sustainability, and equal opportunities”. This represents considerable progress since Pretoria.

The search for innovative ways to build a learning culture

The paper prepared by UIL as a contribution to UNESCO’s *Futures of Education* raised the question in its title of how innovative ways could be found to build a learning culture. Cultural change is a complex process. In the conditions of the turbulent twenty first century, this process of change needs to be accelerated with broad partnerships and common understandings.

UIL, in their paper, *Embracing a culture of lifelong learning*, offers a number of valuable suggestions. PASCAL responded to this paper by proposing that this path should be seen as a “creative learning process” through harnessing the resources in cities that make for creative outcomes (Kearns, 2021c).

² See <http://pobs.cc/1p6k2>

³ See <http://pobs.cc/1ps22>

This paper took the position that learning cities and creative cities have much in common so that harnessing the resources that make for creativity in cities could serve as a valuable instrument for cultural change towards a leaning and innovation culture. This process involved developing a shared framework (through broad partnerships, etc.) to drive cultural change, and then connecting up these instruments in a holistic change process.

This process involves fostering lifelong learners who are imaginative and creative, with “the key role of local communities, networks, and organisation”. This has been a key insight from the PASCAL EcCoWell approach to learning cities (in the experience of Cork, Limerick, Datong [Taipei] and Harlem [New York]), and aligns with an observation from the UNESCO Futures of Education *Progress Update* in the following terms.

A world where education is a common good is a place where bottom-up local initiatives blossom and self organised governance can succeed on a large scale (2021:6).

The PASCAL paper (Kearns 2021c) recognises the important roles of other key stakeholders such as business and industry. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has given a boost to the importance of learning in business organisations at a time of rethinking business models that are more appropriate to a time of recovery from the pandemic. Senge’s ideas on learning organisations, with their underpinning of systems thinking, could have a renaissance.

A McKinsey podcast in April 2021 was directed at building a learning culture that drives business forward from the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This showed that business, at least at the big business end, shares much in common with learning cities and communities in recognising the need to build a learning culture that is innovative and able to adapt to changing conditions. The podcast, summarised by Smith & Young McNally, (2021) involved senior McKinsey managers from around the world, and focussed on five insights:

Six problem-solving mindsets for very uncertain times;

Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work;

When will the COVID-19 pandemic end?;

Why an agile transformation office is the business ticket to real and lasting impact;

COVID-19 implications for business.

This podcast, along with other McKinsey documents points to the business interest in the post-COVID world in moving from a training and development mindset to a broader learning culture that is innovative, flexible and adaptive, and able to bring forward creative solutions in an ever changing world. Nielsen, Dotiwala & Murray (2020) are typical in calling for transformation of the learning function in business.

Organizations are acutely aware of the importance of learning in today’s business environment. They understand that that technology is changing the nature of work and the roles within it. They also understand that the ability of the workforce to learn new skills, model new behaviours, and adapt continuously is key to sustained success. Hence the elevated role of the learning and development (L&D) function, which must

work, together with business leaders, to enable an organization to hear effectively, at speed, and at scale (Nielsen, Dotiwala, & Murray, 2020:1).

Cities and communities face similar learning needs, making partnership imperative. The counterpart of the McKinsey agile transformation office for business exists in the role of transformative learning in cities and communities

A more significant business role in learning cities is the aspect of what the Wyndham learning city has termed “a new model of partnership with empathy”. Like business, other sectors of society share a common interest in building a creative learning culture for the post-COVID world. There are great opportunities for learning cities to extend their partnership initiatives.

Driving cultural change towards a sustainable learning culture is an area for collaboration between PASCAL and UIL, and many other partners, in pooling resources and ideas. This is a key area in harnessing learning for a better, more sustainable future.

The enhanced significance of resilience

The impact of the critical disasters of recent years has enhanced the significance of learning and community strategies in building resilience. This subject was taken up by Kearns in a paper for the Australian Learning Community Network (Kearns, 2021d). The Australian context, in addition to the impact of the COVID pandemic has been marked by the enhanced impact of fires and floods, probably resulting from climate change.

The paper recognises the work on resilience undertaken by the Rockefeller *Foundation One Hundred Resilient Cities*, and the overview by Rodin (2015) derived from this Rockefeller initiative. The Kearns 2021 paper is focussed on action learning communities can take, and had an orientation towards the following policy areas:

- fostering social cohesion;
- harnessing history, heritage, and the identity of the community;
- adopting systems thinking in planning to broaden and strengthen partnerships;
- making resilience an objective in policies to support people in the longevity era;
- addressing ecological objectives through environment policies and strategies;
- building resilience into your approach to ageing populations.

This paper concluded that developing learning cities/communities and building resilience in a community has much in common, so that resilience should be a core objective of learning communities and cities, and in marketing strategies to strengthen community support.

Osborne, Nesterova, and Bhandari (2021) in a paper for UIL on Learning for global health in cities, took a broader international approach to resilience, citing action recommended by organisations such as the UK Cabinet Office, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, and principles advocated by the Global Resilience Partnership in 2018.

Both papers recognised the important role of education and lifelong learning strategies in building a base of resilience in communities. This should now be seen as an essential objective of learning cities and communities, and overall in action directed towards a better future.

Osborne et al also noted the need to contextualise and localise resilience action while simultaneously addressing the root causes that lead to lack of resilience. This will be an important thrust towards recognising the range of barriers to be addressed in the path towards a better future.

A new model of partnership with imagination, empathy, and well-being

Much of the PASCAL effort since the Pretoria conference can be seen as the search for a new and expanded concept of partnership with imagination, empathy, and well-being to drive the quest for a better future in a sustainable world. We have termed this EcCoWell 3 to build on a decade of development of the EcCoWell concept of holistic development (Kearns, 2021b).

The 2020 PASCAL EcCoWell Program was important in showing some ways in which EcCoWell ideas could be taken forward. These included the proposal from the Wyndham learning city for a “new model of partnership with empathy”, while the Harlem learning community pointed to ways of harnessing transformative learning in a small community to contribute to well-being and building community while also contributing to environmental objectives.

The challenge for EcCoWell 3 was described in the following terms,

The challenge for EcCoWell 3 development as an innovative learning ecosystem in an uncertain changing world will be to build on the principles and experience that emerged from the 2020 EcCoWell report, in local and global contexts, so as to foster local and global consciousness, and awareness of the vital interdependencies in a deeply connected world confronted by turbulent change.

This challenge will involve rethinking the concept of “learning” as an instrument for a better future in a sustainable world. Makino, in a paper prepared for CR&DALL (Centre for Research & Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning), addressed this question in a Japanese context titled: *Inventing the new concept of “learning” for the era of the hundred year life*. This vision entailed creating society through countless “small societies” organized through “learning” (Makino, 2020).

PASCAL applied its EcCoWell3 concept in a paper, responding to the UIL paper on embracing a culture of lifelong learning, proposing that building a culture of lifelong learning should be seen as a creative learning process (Kearns, 2021c). This paper is discussed above.

Learning and city futures: addressing the policy challenges

PASCAL policy review papers over the past decade have been brought together in a consolidated document that provides an overview of PASCAL approaches to learning and city futures during that period, and will be published shortly.

The sections of this document cover the following:

1. Why Learning Cities?
2. Understanding characteristics of learning cities.

3. Learning for different groups in the community.
4. Tackling city-wide policy issues.

It is likely that addressing the mega challenges confronting cities after the COVID pandemic, in the context outlined above, will require a creative blend of the old and the new in policy terms. Traditional subjects of learning cities, such as inclusion, strengthening social cohesion and place, and addressing inequality will still require to be addressed in city futures, but they will be joined by “new subjects” such as addressing the turbulence and disruption of the present situation, supporting people in the transition to a longevity society marked by the “hundred-year life”, and fostering global consciousness for a sustainable future.

These challenges will require innovative approaches to transformative learning in community contexts that build empathy, mindful citizens, a deep ecology, and overall, a radical reframing of approaches to learning and building just sustainable learning communities. Tools such as harnessing learning ecosystems will become more important, along with imaginative partnership action in local communities, while exchanging information and ideas between networks of learning cities will be ever more significant. Building an innovative learning culture should be seen as a creative learning process.

This selective overview of PASCAL work since the 2018 Pretoria conference, in the wider context of PASCAL policy review development over the last decade, has taken PASCAL development to the point where further development of the EcCoWell 3 concept, as the PASCAL instrument for a sustainable holistic society, needs to wait until the report of the six networks project, and the UNESCO report on *Futures of Education*, are available.

When these sources are available, it may be possible to prepare a more comprehensive overview of PASCAL work since the Pretoria conference, directed at the Pretoria Challenge of “Learning for a better future.” The Pretoria conference, by raising a number of the big picture challenges confronting humanity, has set PASCAL follow-up work on a number of paths towards a better future. The Suwon conference has, in general, confirmed these directions and added some practical paths in the quest for a better future. The September report of six of the PASCAL networks can be seen as a further step in the process of integrating PASCAL activities in contributing to the quest for a better future, while the consolidated *Learning and city futures* set of policy review papers poses the challenge of finding creative ways to blend the traditional and the new in the quest to rethink learning, community, and city futures.

If the Pretoria conference set the challenge for much of PASCAL follow-up work, the conference also set the course clearly on a regenerative humanistic path for the role of education and learning in a just sustainable future.

*Which way to turn? Of course, to a sustainable human-centred future for all humankind.
A world of Ubuntu.*

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