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**Empowering Urban Futures: The Role of Lifelong Learning in Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Learning Cities**

**Potenziare i futuri urbani: Il ruolo dell'apprendimento permanente nello sviluppo di città inclusive e sostenibili**

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ABSTRACT

*The article, therefore, proposes Learning Cities as a theoretical model for engineering sustainable and inclusive urban development, focusing on the use of lifelong learning. In other words, it addresses how cities, which are already facing rapid rates of urbanisation and increasingly complex social and economic problems, should prioritise education in addressing issues such as climate change or poverty. Through the examination of case studies based on towns in Italy, such as Turin and Palermo, the paper also provides practical policies that foster social inclusion and community involvement. At the heart of the policy would be efforts by diverse parties to collaborate in developing a city that is a learning city in its orientation, but more importantly, one that creates resilient and sustainable communities.*

*Keywords:* learning cities, lifelong learning, social inclusion, sustainability, collaboration.

#### RIASSUNTO

*L'articolo propone le Learning Cities come modello teorico di sviluppo urbano sostenibile e inclusivo attraverso l'apprendimento lungo tutto l'arco della vita. In altri termini, fornisce una risposta a come le città, che stanno già affrontando tassi di urbanizzazione molto rapidi e problemi sociali ed economici sempre più complessi, dovrebbero dare la priorità all'educazione nell'affrontare questioni come il cambiamento climatico o la povertà. Attraverso l'esame di casi studio basati su città italiane, come Torino e Palermo, il contributo propone una serie di interventi che promuovono l'inclusione sociale e il coinvolgimento della comunità. Al centro della politica ci sarebbero gli sforzi di diverse parti per collaborare allo sviluppo di una città che sia una learning city nel suo orientamento ma, più importante, che generi comunità resilienti e sostenibili.*

*Parole chiave:* città che apprende, apprendimento permanente, inclusione sociale, sostenibilità, collaborazione.

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The term "smart cities" is used to describe towns of any size in the present discussion. Tallinn is a symbolic smart city that emphasises that in the future more emphasis will be placed on local innovation, which addresses city issues at scale, within the framework of various policy initiatives in Europe at local and regional level. In the local government, which absorbs almost 75% of global energy consumption and 80% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the concept of sustainable urban development should be introduced. The leading support must come from the European Commission. Sustainable cities were developed and applied by 193 member states under the United Nations' Agenda 2030, involving 17 goals for sustainable development to foster cultural integration and social equity through sustainability in urban settings. The projected urban population of more than 6 billion by 2050 has raised a call for proactive urban planning and new solutions. The challenge that modern urban centres face is whether they will be vibrant cores for the younger generation. A city that harbours high hopes for the future, which will lead to new approaches. This view of human-centric urban development, with its emphasis on human needs, posits that cities must do more than advance technology; they must also prioritise human well-being. The cities must advance inclusively and progressively. The two hallmarks of smart technology integration in the learning cities can be traced back to sustainability and community engagement. Such cities are meant to host an environment that fosters lifelong learning and sustainable development. Indeed, most smart cities use the principle of sustainability, green practices, and efficient resource management. The sustainable approach effectively addresses not only environmental issues but also general educational goals, as it maintains learning cities' viability in the long term and promotes resource efficiency. Community involvement

<sup>1</sup> The article is co-written by the two authors, specifically VG is the author of paragraph 1,23, and S.B is the author of paragraph 4,5.

was another critical factor in successfully implementing the initiatives of smart cities. Residents should participate in planning and implementing processes for the city's initiatives to enhance the effectiveness of lifelong learning programs. This can be achieved by developing educational programs tailored to the specific needs and desires of the community. This understanding of technology, urban design, and active community participation defines the term socio-technical and is an integral part of the smart cities discourse (Kunzmann, 2020). An adult learning centre, referred to as a learning institution in this ecosystem, has made continuous education and upskilling a fundamental requirement for adapting to the increasing demands of the smart city (Söderström *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, under the smart cities setup, there should be sufficient factors to act as creative centres, where sustainable community development and education are nurtured by a lifelong learning culture, an equal individual pursuit of knowledge and competitiveness, and where no person is left behind in terms of expertise and competitiveness (Picon, 2015).

## 2. THE ROLE OF SMART CITIES IN FOSTERING LIFELOGGING LEARNING

Cities, whether smart or not, are complex and result from the continuous exchange of ideas, aspirations, and memories. As Italo Calvino states, cities are memories, desires, and communication. The smart city is an aggregation of innovations, in terms of both hardware and software, for mitigating urban challenges such as traffic and pollution; however, such implementations often overlook the involvement of citizens in decision-making. The smart city concept has become increasingly important in the broader debate on urban design in Italy and Europe, but remains a somewhat unclear and not universally accepted definition (Angelidou, 2014). It has been generally agreed that the role of information technology is central to the smart city paradigm (Carvalho, 2015; Mora, Bolici, & Deakin, 2017). It has never been more promoted for the assumed benefits that come with adopting technological solutions. However, some doubts may arise regarding the increasing influence of private initiatives in the reshaping of smart cities, and therefore, such cities are often referred to as the "corporate smart city" (Hollands, 2015) or the "entrepreneurial cities" (Harvey, 1989). Based on critical analysis, it has been noted that market-led initiatives can, and often do, promote corporate interests at the expense of social and economic inclusivity, thereby exacerbating inequalities (Hollands, 2008). The paper reflects on theories and provides an analysis of how the smart city concept is evolving in Italy, where the entire country is open to implementing smart urban policies. The historical trend of changes in models of urban organisation proves that change is an inherent quality of cities and that they typically take their lead from their long past. An excellent example is the city of Venice, which grew through commerce and cultural exchange during the Renaissance. By humanising the urban challenges based on the historical contexts, we may gain insights on how to address them in contemporary periods as well as how to incorporate inclusive narratives in the process of forming future urban landscapes.

The paper posits, in clear terms, that Humanistic Education is preponderant in building a learning experience that is both meaningful and geared towards the development of an individual's emotional and social potential, allowing for creative thinking. Counterarguments should also be evaluated; while it is evident in the argument that Traditional Educational Models have their characteristic strengths, the fact of the matter is that they are often more structured, all-encompassing, and financially scaffolded. We will attempt to resolve the paradox of princely municipal education by comparing and contrasting both views. Humanistic education is based on the individual learner, who can create

conditions for their development and self-actualisation. The individualised learning plan takes into consideration the diversity and differences in his needs and potential, recognising him as capable of interacting at his own pace, using the material to a conscious effect geared towards his learning style. Such an approach not only adopts academic efficiency but also involves the learner in it. Personal mastery of the learning process empowers the learner, enabling them to become an active agent rather than a mere transmitter of information. This instils an intrinsic motivation that encourages the learner to set personal goals and achieve them with great enthusiasm. Personal development and self-actualisation will then be the primary goal of education within the framework of humanistics. It fosters an environment where learners can be encouraged to pursue their passions, interests, and talents, and therefore leads to a more enriching learning process. Because it is based on the learner and not the curriculum, humanistic education creates conditions that enable students to excel academically, socially, and emotionally, thereby producing graduates well-prepared to make a meaningful contribution to society.

While individual learning through humanistic education tends to emphasise individual learning, the structure in most conventional models of education has been and will continue to be essential. An organised environment helps students manage their time effectively as they become increasingly familiar with deadlines and responsibilities. Preparing for future workplaces often involves being time-conscious and efficient. At the basic level of knowledge, what has also perpetuated this traditional education order is the dependence on standardised testing to facilitate the required minimum level of understanding among students. Critics of humanistic education argue that without such structures, students will not be able to function at the level needed for a competitive environment. The predictability of conventional models would allow most learners to feel secure, as they would then be working within a well-defined structure. Then, though humanistic education boosts personal development, the discipline and structure inherent in traditional models remain extremely necessary components of effective educational experiences.

### 3. DESIGNING EDUCATORS FOR A HUMAN-CENTRIC URBAN FUTURE

Emotions and knowledge of the students and their languages will play a decisive role in the learning process within the field of humanities. Previously predominant instructor-centered pedagogy has since heavily shifted to learner-centered strategies, which have brought about very great changes in almost any field of education. Well-described recommendations that are mainly a "human resource" function should shift their focus toward creating the "human talent" function that would foster human abilities such as empathy, integrity, and creativity. These guiding principles can certainly be applied to curricula developed in universities worldwide and adapted to each unique institution. The core value of any academic institution lies in the human and cultural capital it embodies, primarily in its teaching staff and students, and curriculum reform needs to incorporate both hard and soft skills to strengthen the goals of humanistic pedagogy. As urged by Huo (2006), the humanistic style of educational management creates an environment in which all members are willing to share responsibility and leadership. The latter should serve as an eye-opener on how relevant the humanities and arts can be in curricula with emerging outcomes-based training paradigms. Such a dichotomy thus stresses the urgent need for the fusion of business behaviour with soft skills as success drivers in the present-day economy. Higher learning is responsible for producing students who can adjust and be responsive employees, whose basic 'human' skills are much sought after by today's businesses.

Consequently, even more emphasis should be placed on management training that is relevant to the multifaceted and sometimes ambiguous world of work. It is, therefore, necessary to rethink curricula in consonance with the dynamics of job market requirements so that a new breed of leaders can take up the challenge of learning how to manage cities.

Humanistic education is more than the acquisition of academic knowledge; it also ensures that students are balanced in their emotional and social development. Such an explicit understanding of emotional intelligence assumes much more about the application of knowledge that students can make in understanding complex personal relationships—that is increasingly necessary in today's world, which is more open and interdependent. While prioritising the value of group dynamics, humanistic education fosters teamwork and, simultaneously, develops communication skills that enable students to interact with each other more meaningfully. The interaction eventually results in a community that is aware of its social responsibilities and involvement in community service. Therefore, there will be a unilateral response to help everybody be better off, only to a collective problem. Empathy, thus, releases personal relationships for some group endeavour when the real issue confronting all is addressed. This prepares students for diverse professional environments, where they are responsive to others, and where reaching one's fullest potential requires a high quality of teamwork and social skills. Therefore, the humanities produce whole persons who are competent not only in the mind but in the feelings and the relationship with others.

Critics of humanistic education argue that proponents' claims of maintaining high standards and accountability are unfounded, as such programs may deliver less effective learning precisely because they are not held to standardised benchmarks. This lack of standards results in large disparities of opportunity and outcomes among students. A misplaced emphasis on respecting each student's unique needs may be somewhat threatening, as it conflicts with the idea of achieving real excellence. Also, of real concern is the fact that humanistic approaches tend not to teach the basic skills needed—technical competence and analytical acumen for the workplace. Standard tests will be easily identifiable since baseline competencies—precisely those critical for subsequent job success—will be acquired by all students under a conventional model. The impulse towards individual humanism, therefore, while failing to give the entire vast background and skills necessary in competitive employment, keeps this from succeeding fully.

Humanistic education can greatly enhance the art of creative and critical thinking, fostering an informed conscience that will be essential for navigating a changing world. In it, therefore, learners are concerned with questioning information rather than memorising it, thus ensuring that the ensuing critique enhances their grasp and use of the subject matter of a lesson. The other is that creative and humanistic education emphasises creative expression, one such value that could yield innovative approaches to problem-solving as well. Educators can begin to appreciate the numerous ways students can express themselves and their intellectual ideas, thereby fostering a climate of creative practices and creativity. These, then, are what add meaningfulness to the learning process and make it viable, leading to an innovative generation that will recognise and solve future challenges. This will continue to bridge learning to the imagination and action in real-world situations.

Though it is good to promote humanistic teachings that rely on critical thinking and creativity, these ideas should also be shared with caution. The reason for all this is that the implementation can be very resource-heavy and can also put a strain on educational institutions. The implementation is typically achieved through teacher training on the application of humanistic methodology, which is a costly and time-consuming process. Not all schools are well-funded to provide this type of learning, which involves an individualised learning environment. This might result in the practice not being

implemented effectively in such schools.

#### 4. TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This forms part of the merging of technological progress with human understanding for smart city plans to deliver and excel in the town setting. Usually, they emphasise efficiency, link, and sustainability rather than human values and community input; such plans indicate a significant mindset shift, where tech is not just tool-based but is said to promote positive interaction among people. These are truly humanistic things, which set a structure by which empathy, critical thought, and collaboration may be emphasised as tools to deal with the complexity of life in a city environment. Smart city solutions should utilise human resources from a participatory governance model, where cities aim to identify the needs and priorities of residents through the values and traditions of co-creation. This will make smart city initiatives more relevant. All of this should be done with trust-building and social cohesion, which are very important for the ultimate sustainability of urban spaces. The content of the human-centric smart city is quite responsive. Such landscapes within cities will require learning institutions to adjust their curricula appropriately, preparing learners for what is expected in a world developing at a rapid pace. The training should be both technological and humanistic, combining technical expertise with softer human qualities such as empathy, ethics, and social responsibility. The priority should be the implementation of a program on soft skills that covers the areas of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, in addition to the technical courses. Such new entrants into the learning environment need to begin with a mix of hard and soft skills to be responsive and productive members of the community, where they will eventually deploy innovation and drive social change.

In the development of human-centric cities with technology, education takes a significant place. In a technological advancement setting within smart cities, the purview changes the frameworks of education into one that supports the development of interactive and personalised learning pathways, enhancing the human experience. A growing recognition that digital literacy empowers citizens to take part actively in initiatives toward smart cities has emerged as smart cities continue to evolve. The tabulation of technology and education encourages not only the uptake of sustainable policies by local governments but also the development of an aware and responsible community. The urban environments of smart education are likely to enable citizens to engage effectively in the development and management of infrastructures within a smart city. For the success of these moves, it is crucial to foster active citizen involvement and provide public spaces for viewing, which in turn enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills among city dwellers (Caragliu & Del Bo, 2022). The change in teaching habits within bright towns is key to maintaining the balance between technological progress and people-focused town growth, ultimately leading to sustainable and robust town ecosystems (Nikolov *et al.* 2016).

#### 5. CASE STUDIES: SUCCESSFUL LEARNING CITY INITIATIVES

The main values that make-up a learning city gain their centrality from the quality and full provision of enabling a lifelong learning culture for all its citizens. Of course, this involves diverse backgrounds, and thus, there is a high commitment and governance effort to ensure collaboration in delivering

learning from any part or angle of the political arrangement, educational setting, or even the private sector. Another value in a learning city is to utilise technology to enhance learning and disseminate learning resources across and within relationships. As such, many things that can be described as digital support pathways to conventional learning methodologies are encouraged, along with the development of innovative learning and the acquisition of new inclusive skills.

Additionally, these cities embody an ethos that values learning, and indeed, lifelong learning. The finding reinforces the importance of continuous personal and professional development within cities. Global examples of learning city initiatives vary widely in their approaches and successes across diverse regions of the world. From Berlin to Cape Town, cities are employing diverse and unique strategies to help their residents learn and develop (Vinod Kumar & Dahiya, 2017). Such examples include Berlin's approach, where a very comprehensive network of educational institutions ensures a rather harmonised and integrated approach to providing learning opportunities. On the other hand, Cape Town fosters community-driven approaches to ensure that there is a relevant provision of learning resources for deprived areas. This evidence, therefore, calls for the adaptation of learning city initiatives to meet the specific demands of each location and to guide its path to becoming a successful learning hub, taking into account socioeconomic and cultural determinants.

Difficulties in developing learning cities arise from various dimensions, but tangible solutions exist to address them. The major challenge is equity in access to learning resources, as different levels of infrastructure and funding create varying degrees of a divide in educational opportunities. Cities must choose to invest in technology and infrastructure that can bridge these gaps and ensure high-quality learning spaces for all residents once again. The other challenge will be mobilising stakeholders and collaboration across different sectors (Proli, 2023). Largely successful learning cities have strong alliances with the business community, nongovernmental organisations, and community-based organisations to create a supportive learning and innovative ecosystem. Another problematic area for cities is the existence of a policy and regulatory framework that hinders the operation of learning initiatives. However, cities should take steps that embody policies of support and draw on international collaboration to create an environment that fosters the continuity of learning and development, leading to capacity-building opportunities that enable adaptation and success in a dynamic world (Ghazal *et al.*, 2021).

Many cities have been making successful efforts in integrating smart solutions into advancing education, thus revealing the transformative power of technology in typical urban learning environments. For instance, the City of Rio de Janeiro has implemented a project called the Rio Operations Centre (COR) to help incorporate smart technologies, improving not only educational services but also community participation (Gaffney & Robertson, 2018). Similarly, open innovation projects in Köln, Germany, have proven to be the ideal channel for not only integrating smart technologies but also creating an environment that fosters both technological and social innovation within the education sector (Kraus *et al.*, 2015). These examples demonstrate the application of smart technologies in various ways to advance education, bridging the technological gap and meeting the demands of the educational sector. The impact of such smart technologies on learning outcomes and community involvement is profound, as these innovations create more inclusive and efficient educational environments. The e-learning market, social media, MOOCs, and bright cities provide an opportunity for citizens to access diverse learning resources, thereby supporting the development of dynamic learning communities.

Smart technologies create conditions for more effective community engagement by providing platforms for co-creation and idea exchange between learners of all ages. They support individual

learning outcomes while simultaneously strengthening the overall educational fabric of the community, thereby improving the quality, availability, and equity of education for all citizens.

The integration of technological innovation turns the core of smart cities into considerably improved opportunities and outcomes for the educational sector. This implies the advanced use of data analytics, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and artificial intelligence in creating adaptive learning environments. For example, classroom conditions can be monitored and optimised in real-time using IoT devices, thus making the best learning environment for students. In addition, another aspect of using data analytics in studying and improving personalised learning experiences is the analysis of student performance, with the ability to dynamically adjust content (Hinzen *et al.*, 2025). This technological framework not only supports conventional systems of education but also encourages a desire for sufficient learning opportunities within the community to facilitate lifelong learning.

Much can be taken from successful case studies that have taken place in urban settings on the potential of Learning Cities to deliver better outcomes. Barcelona and Amsterdam saw the launch of innovative educational programs that create lifelong learning and encourage community participation. In that sense, Learning City highlighted an initiative that stood out as a priority for learning in Barcelona, placing it at the heart of social inclusion through various marginalised programs. This practice will not just empower people but also the possibilities within the community through them. It has also adopted the concept of 'smart education' by integrating technology into the learning systems at schools. Programs were established to prepare students for future employment, as well as to enhance civic consciousness and environmental stewardship. Consequently, partnerships were formed with the private sector and local educational institutions. The strength of its programs is imparted to the call of a resilient city.

These examples demonstrate how to foster a truly effective collaboration among multiple stakeholders—academic institutions, local authorities, and communities themselves—in developing inclusive and sustainable learning environments. By sharing best practices and lessons learned, cities can hopefully jump-start each other in adopting new approaches that place human values at the core of smart urban development.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, this article has discussed how Learning Cities can be a revolutionary approach to sustainable and inclusive urban development, thereby giving value to lifelong learning in addressing current and pressing social and economic challenges. While urban centres multiply their tensions concerning quick population growth and the complexities of modern life, the priority of education is emerging as one of the fundamental strategies that will help foster resilience and sustainability. The case studies under consideration, along with the Italian cities' experiences in Turin and Palermo, have demonstrated that effective policies can create more vibrant and inclusive communities that support and enable residents to participate actively in shaping their urban environments. Humanistic education principles are integrated into urban planning and policies as the core of learning cities, aiming to develop emotions within these cities (Caggiano & Ragusa, 2023). They not only foster technological advancement but also prioritise human values where residents possess such characteristics necessary to contribute positively to society. Cities provide learning opportunities for individuals to learn and develop throughout their lives. In this way, the cities build the required skills and knowledge to lead residents successfully through a world characterised by increasing connections

and change.

Another stake to consider is the collaboration between the stakeholders involved. It requires goodwill among stakeholders from educational institutions, city management, local businesses, and social groups to collaborate in creating learning opportunities that cater to the diverse needs of an urban population. The Barcelona and Amsterdam examples demonstrate how effectively it works for the entire community, harnessing its resources and talents to devise new ways to engage the community more deeply and, consequently, increase social inclusion. However, challenges remain in realizing the full potential of Learning Cities as issues of equity in access to education resources, the need for robust urban learning city policies, and the influence of corporate interests in the development of cities are some of the factors that stifle the ability of full participation of all citizens in the benefits of what smart cities can bring. The ongoing dialogue, addressing the greater human-centric pursuit of innovation about technological balance, should shape the future of our cities. The concept of Learning Cities could be the urban development narrative of the future in the 21st century, providing ample space for both sustainability and inclusivity. Attained through prioritising education and sharing collective responsibilities, cities become vibrant spheres where all inhabitants feel empowered to learn, develop, and fulfil their ideal potential in their participation within the community. The promise to pursue resilient urban development, based on the fundamentals of continuous learning, bodes well for the cities of the challenges of the future. If this is embraced as the vision, let the effort be made to develop cities where common hopes support progress toward equity and sustainability, and where no one is left behind.

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