

PENR3L PROJECT AND THE LIMERICK DECLARATION: A EUROPEAN CHALLENGE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING CITIES AND REGIONS

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The 6th PASCAL Observatory International Conference, “Lifelong Learning’s Role in Regional Development and Re-Generation”, took place in Limerick, Ireland, on 28-30 May 2008. The meeting represented a fundamental step in the work of PASCAL, since it marked the definitive establishment of PENR3L (PASCAL European Network of Regions of LifeLong Learning). PENR3L is the result of a programme, designed to set up a dynamic and growing working network of expertise centres, and forward-looking local and regional authorities, that will work together to accelerate the growth of learning cities and regions throughout Europe. The project, partially funded by the European Commission, through the Socrates Programme, has been developed through two lively workshops, preceding the Limerick Conference, one of which was held in Kaunas, Lithuania, for East, Central, and Northern Europe, and the other in Barcelona, Spain, for Western and Southern Europe. The workshops discussed themes and sub-themes that are crucial to learning city and region development, and demonstrated existing tools and learning materials that are helpful in that process.

The Conference in Limerick was organized both for presenting the results of these workshops to a wider audience, and to launch the network to a larger membership. It focused on best practices, and practical synergies between academia and local authorities, addressing in particular the topics of regional development, social capital, and regeneration, that have been the central areas of investigation for the PENR3L Project, and are the pivotal strands of the PASCAL Observatory. More specifically, the key focus was not on regional development or the development of the learning region per se, but rather on the impact these have in terms of regional regeneration, that has flowed from the efforts to create learning regions.

The three-day debate also produced a statement called the *Limerick Declaration*. The new document recognizes the urgent need for local and regional authorities to meet the economic, social, political, environmental, cultural, and management challenges of 21st century life, and suggests that the solution lies in a better understanding of the underlying regional dynamic, which balances the global and the local, develops the social capital, already existing in most communities, and fosters

innovation, creativity, and growth. This can only be achieved by a large increase in continuous and lifelong learning for management, professionals, and councillors, eventually extending to the citizens themselves. In brief, cities and regions must become learning cities and learning regions, developing their human, intellectual and community potential for the benefit of all, and engaging all stakeholders in this task.

Suggested actions to help local and regional authorities construct sustainable learning regions:

- exploiting the resources and expertise of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), thus fulfilling their third mission in the Bologna process;
- mobilizing the energies and potential of other public and private sector stakeholders;
- supporting innovation, creativity and vision, in people and organizations;
- recognizing diversity as an investment, valuable for economic, human, and intellectual growth;
- adapting and using already existing tools and materials to increase lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens;
- encouraging all institutions and workplaces, including the local authority itself, to become learning organizations, with continuous improvement programmes for all employees;
- understanding how interaction between the local and the global creates investment opportunity;
- continuously improving employability and skills to meet the changing requirements of the world of work;
- releasing the talents, skills, experience, and knowledge of the community in active citizenship projects;
- using the media imaginatively to publicize and celebrate the learning region, internally to its citizens, and externally to its customers and potential investors;
- enabling people and institutions to become increasingly involved with environmental protection projects.

The Conference also gave the opportunity to discuss about the development of PENR3L network infrastructure and methods of cooperation, as well as launch the PASCAL Regions Project named "I4+PURE 2008-2010". This project follows the successful three-year study, conducted by OECD-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and PASCAL, called "Supporting

the contribution of HEIs to regional development”, which embraced 14 regions, across 12 countries. The work of OECD analyzed the barriers to the economic, social, and cultural improvement of the regions, and suggested that universities should adopt a wide agenda of regional development, recommending that greater autonomy, and better incentives should be given to institutions and their staff to engage with small and medium-sized businesses. It also recommended that countries should provide a more supportive environment for university-enterprise cooperation, including regulatory and tax environment. What is more, the report pointed out that, instead of focusing on the supply-side of knowledge transfer, countries should develop business demand for university interaction. Universities themselves should become more entrepreneurial, widen their service portfolio, and address the needs of a wider range of firms and employers.

On the basis of those considerations, the new project has been scheduled to run for 24 months, from July-December 2008 to December 2010, envisaging the participation of a greater number of new regions throughout the world. Unlike the previous investigation, mostly focused on regions (albeit through universities), “I4+PURE 2008-2010” will mainly deal with the role of HEIs, and the recognition that leadership and local project management may reside with an innovative university, supported by its region.

Universities should be the primary drivers of local renewal, and learning city and region development, by carrying out research, surveys, and studies into all aspects of learning in cities and regions, in order to give a deeper insight into needs and strategies. They should also design and deliver tailored courses, conferences, seminars, and workshops for people in all walks of city life, manage, and evaluate local, national, European, and international projects, in the field of learning cities and regions, develop case studies of good practices, and identify new resources for the territory where they are situated. In short, universities can and should lead the regeneration of local and regional areas.

The importance of the role that should be played by academic institutions also emerged from the interesting paper presented in Limerick by Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi”, entitled “The marble industrial district of Monti Ausoni: definitive decline or possible regeneration?”. The paper aimed at examining the deep

crisis affecting an industrial district, located in the South of Latium region (Central Italy), consisting of a network of small and medium enterprises, operating both in the quarrying and production sector, specialized in the cutting, working, and modelling of marble. After years of success indeed, SMEs engaged in this sector are today struggling in a globalized economy, particularly with low-wage competition from new aggressive actors like China, India or Brazil. The establishment of the District has been considered as a fundamental tool of development, able to reinforce the ability of SMEs to compete successfully at the national and international level. Nevertheless, its simple creation cannot represent a heal-all for the present decline of the interested area, which is the result of a series of several issues, such as the off-hand passage from an agricultural-based to an industrial-based economy, the lack of entrepreneurial culture, and of effective development policies, the environmental degradation, the low level of education, and a limited continuing training for both managers and workers.

One of the structural weaknesses of the enterprises belonging to the District has been their excessive orientation towards the production activity, and the scarce attention paid to training and research, which has led to a limited relationship with academic institutions. In this framework, Università Telematica "Guglielmo Marconi" suggests to fill this gap providing a range of hands-on help, in the areas of technology, marketing, business, and financial planning, and arranging training in skills like communication and business management, in collaboration with local authorities and entrepreneurs. In fact, a long-term regeneration strategy can only be implemented if all stakeholders are committed to the aim of common development.

The case of the marble industrial district of Monti Ausoni confirms that the challenge to promote innovation and growth can only be taken up through the creation of learning communities, in which the higher education sector becomes aware, and takes charge of its driving role, in the regional development agenda.