

Report on ASEAN+3 Regional Learning Cities Conference. 29-30 October 2024, Bangkok, Thailand

For ALCN Members
by Dr Leone Wheeler



Photo: Dr Leone Wheeler with Dr Rika Yorozu, Program Specialist for Education, UNESCO Regional Office, Bangkok.

I was honoured to be invited to present at this conference on *Successful Strategies of the Networking Activities of Australian Learning Cities and Learning Communities* by the UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok (UNESCO Bangkok) in collaboration with the Program Management Unit on Area Based Development (PUM A) of Thailand's Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, together with the Equitable Education Fund (EEF) of Thailand; the Ministry of Education; Bangkok Learning City; TK Park and the Office of Knowledge Management and Development (OKMD).

Opening the conference Prof. Supachai Pathumnakul, Ph.D., Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, reminded people that the formal education system (primary, secondary, tertiary...) is very important, but not sufficient. The learning city lifelong ecosystem is vital. How can we promote this ecosystem? City leaders are very important in this regard. Thailand is aiming high. How do we promote Thailand to be a lifelong learning nation?

Mr Raul Valdes Cotera, Team Leader, Skills throughout life, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in his special lecture on Global Trends of Learning Cities spoke about the joy

of learning and sharing together. While the learning city is a philosophical concept, it is a very practical way of leading change.



In highlighting good practice examples, Mr Valdes Cortera, featured, among other examples, the Learning Charter for Belfast as an example of developing a vision and plan for building a learning city; learning neighborhoods for inclusive community learning in Cork and promoting sustainability and community learning in Wyndham!

Mr Valdes Cortera said there are now 356 cities across 79 countries that are part of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC). There are 107 cities in the Asia Pacific region, or 30 per cent of the total number of members. The Republic of South Korea has 56 cities and Thailand has 10. There is a trend that cities are organizing themselves according to regions, for example, the Irish Learning Cities Network, the Regional Network of Learning Cities in the Arab States, Latin America Network of Learning Cities, Alliance of National Commissions and Learning cities in Africa and so forth. This makes sense because of language and time zone differences, and so does a regional alliance of ASEAN + 3. This will also include Australia.

The aim of the conference is to provide invaluable opportunities for cities in the region to learn from the experiences of their regional counterparts by providing examples of how these cities accelerated their own progress in fostering lifelong learning and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the Education 2030 Agenda – particularly SDG 4: Quality Education, and SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

My presentation was part of a plenary session of the driving force of the Learning Cities on the first day of the conference. I used the Himmelman (2001) framework of networking, coordination, cooperation through to collaboration to illustrate various projects of our Australian learning cities and learning communities that bring our communities together. For example, the collaboration required to bring 9 years of celebrating learning at the annual Wyndham Learning Festival; the role of libraries and neighborhood houses increasingly as community hubs (Ballarat Libraries); the networking and cooperation to bridge understanding between different cultures (the Cultural Ambassador Program in the City of Canning); the importance of providing a best start in life (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library – Tamworth Regional Council); strategic planning to cater for all age groups including intergenerational learning (Brimbank City Council) and rural/urban links (Circular Head). The ALCN is a network in and of itself and our informal learning forums meet the needs of our members, but the more strategic Webinars align our network with national and international partners. I also provided information on how we have evaluated partnerships

with mixed results, but increasingly we highlight the powerful impact of stories. Evaluation is an area Dr Rika Yorozu, UNESCO Regional Office, Bangkok is interested in finding out more about and one where we could share information on the successes and challenges.



Panel of the driving force of the Learning Cities

Panel Chair: Ruhimat Soerakoesoemah, Head, Subregional Office for South-East Asia, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

1. **Associate Professor Dr. Poon Thiengburanatham**, Deputy Director of Program Management Unit on Area Based Development (PMU A), Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation Thailand
2. **Mr. Geuntaek Hyun**, Vice Mayor, Suwon Special City and UNESCO Learning City, Republic of Korea
3. **Dr. Leone Wheeler**, Hon. CEO, Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN Inc)

The conference provided an excellent showcase of the 10 Thailand Learning Cities. I was very impressed by the way that each city had a display about their learning city and unique examples of work that comes from their region.



Learning cities were then invited to present on themes in two parallel sessions:

1. Fun and Inclusive Learning Spaces for all (Shibuya City, Japan, Bangkok City, Thailand, Peta ling Jaya, Malaysia)
2. LNOB (Noone left behind) in learning city initiatives (Son La City, Viet Nam, Phayao City, Thailand and Singapore)
3. Leadership or the learning city (Yala City, Thailand, Changzhou, China, Legazpi, Philippines)
4. Citizen-led learning and action for smart and green city development (Khon Kaen City, Thailand, Surabaya City, Indonesia and Nanjing City, China)

I attended sessions 3 and 4. You always learn something from every presentation, but the most memorable for me was listening to our colleagues from Phayao Learning City which included a powerful story from a young person on how entrepreneurial programs within the learning city had changed his life.



With Colleagues from Phayao Learning City

Phayao Learning City is keen to work with us again in the future. This time perhaps we could involve dialogue between young people on entrepreneurial projects. Learning from one another.

Dr Rita Padawangi, Associate Professor (Sociology), College of Interdisciplinary & Experiential Learning, Singapore University of Social Sciences gave an impressive concluding speech on the Future of Learning Cities. Dr Padawangi comes from a perspective of a social urban planner, and it was pleasing to see her combine the idea of learning as human flourishing with the broader concept of the learning city. She also highlighted the disparity of access to education between rural and urban communities across the region. She spoke of the rapidity with which many countries in the region are moving from an ageing to an aged population and this has an impact on economic growth and social inclusion.

Dr Sulaporn Buasai, Chairperson of the Advisory Committee Thailand Academy for Area Collaboration, Innovation and Transformation (TACIT) presented on the development of the Thailand Learning City Platform.

“The Thailand Learning City Platform’s strategic policy is a comprehensive framework aimed at transforming the educational landscape across Thailand. By promoting lifelong learning as a cornerstone for personal development, economic prosperity, and social cohesion, this policy addresses various aspects of learning city development.”

The Platform is not just for the 10 declared UNESCO Learning Cities in Thailand, but a framework to develop 38 areas. Components include:

- Learning City Academy and Forum
- Learning Evaluation and Strategic Research
- Learning City Award
- Learning City Database and Digital Platform
- Learning City Week
- Lifelong Learning Boost

There will be some form of networking across the region, and I will keep the ALCN Executive informed as to how we might become involved. It may be that our first activity together will be a joint Webinar on a topic of interest.

Also, the Sixth International Learning Cities Conference is being held in the City of Jubail, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 3-5 December and if you have not already done so you can register online at

<https://register.iclc6.com/> There is an option to attend online.

Finally, I have copies of all the presentations, so if something is of particular interest to you, please let me know and I will send you the presentation



Thantida Wongprasong, Director, Partnership, Innovation and Scholarships Office, Equitable Education Fund, Bangkok with Dr. Leone Wheeler.