



PASCAL International Observatory

Briefing Paper 17

A benchmarking approach to understanding community engagement and learning cities

John Tibbitt, Honorary Senior Research Fellow, University of Glasgow and Vice-Chair, Pascal International Observatory

Executive Summary

The development of a learning city requires city leaders to build a complex partnership with a potentially large number of stakeholders in city institutions, business and civic society. Of the wide variety of measurement tools available to cities to gain some understanding of their strategy needs and performance, the paper argues that a benchmarking approach, using a mixture of qualitative self-assessment supported by some qualitative data offers the most fruitful approach to assess the strengths and weaknesses of policy and practice, and offers a guide to prioritising actions.

PASCAL has a well-established benchmarking template, and as part of the service it can offer cities and further and higher education institutions, would be pleased to offer support and guidance in its application.

Introduction: Measuring cities

There are numerous rankings, indexes and data tools available intended to capture and summarise the comparative performance of cities around the world. They vary widely in their purpose, thematic focus, scope, data sources and methodologies. Unsurprisingly, their results are not always consistent; nor is it often clear what actions cities need to take if they wish to improve their position.

Broadly, the available tools can be divided in four main types:

- Indexes and rankings based on secondary analysis of existing data – typically used to provide some idea of current performance and comparison with other cities;
- New data collection and surveys – typically used to explore present performance or establish new knowledge and attributes of cities and populations;
- Evaluation approaches – typically used to ascertain the efficiency and/or effectiveness of present or new initiatives, and
- Qualitative instruments for benchmarking and auditing – typically used to assess strengths and weaknesses in present performance or processes.

It is evident that these tools serve different functions and can be applied at different stages of the policy process to help provide city leaders with answers to the many important questions they face. With a focus here on learning city policies, typically city leaders will need to seek answers to such key questions as:

- How is my city performing? And what are the trends?
- Are we doing a good job in connecting learning with its application for innovation, and economic and social development?
- How do we compare with others? What could we do better to improve things?
- What will be the likely consequences if we continue as we are?
- How can we get government, business, educators and civic society to better work together?

Why benchmarking?

Clearly some form of measurement is necessary as a basis for the assessment of current performance, the identification of actions needed, and to support successful implementation. A successful learning city will involve an often-complex network of stakeholders working together in numerous contexts and combinations. The assessment of an extensive network of relationships can often be a challenge to capture in conventional indexes and survey data. A benchmarking approach has several advantages as a framework for the analysis of such networks as found in the learning city context. It does not take a 'league-table' approach based on quantitative measures (although it may require some quantitative data), nor is it an evaluation of outcomes achieved from actions taken. Rather, it provides a means of 'mapping' the strengths and weaknesses of practice as a basis for policy analysis and development.

The Pascal benchmarking template

A well-developed learning city involves and mobilises a diverse range of stakeholders and resources in a holistic process to achieve its objectives. The PASCAL benchmarking template provides a convenient framework for this kind of analysis.

In its major study of universities' regional engagement in many different cities and regions around the world PASCAL developed a benchmarking instrument which can be readily adapted to focus on a range of priority issues, and which provides for a structured self-assessment of a wide range of factors and relationships central to learning city performance, supported by a limited amount of quantified data. The tool allows the creation of accessible profiles to readily identify strengths and weaknesses in policy, practice and performance.

Learning City Domains

The template is focussed on the range of activities and actions through which cities, along with regional stakeholders and institutions and their communities, might progress to become a learning city for their mutual benefit. The actions and activities are grouped into a series of domains, each of which is associated with achieving a specific aspect of learning city development.

The domains in the PASCAL template cover:

- Governance arrangements for strategic development, promoting, and managing learning city development
- Developing human capital
- Developing regional learning processes and social capital
- Developing business learning processes and innovation
- Community development processes
- Learning from culture and heritage
- Learning for sustainable development
- Developing regional infrastructure

Associated with each of these domains is a list of action areas which determine performance on that domain. This content has been developed over several years and is derived from modifying those included in the original benchmarking tool used in the PASCAL universities engagement studies (Duke, Osborne and Wilson 2013), to take close account of the key features of learning cities identified by UNESCO (2013), and also in some other relevant frameworks, such as the City Resilience Index developed by ARUP for the Rockefeller Foundation (2013), and the Innovation Framework developed by Citie.org with NESTA (2015).

The template consists of appraisal sheets for each aspect of performance or practice to be included. Each sheet has the following format:

Domain: Number

Aspect: Number and title

Rating Scale	Activity	Relevant metrics	Remarks
	Indicates practice associated with each end points and the mid-point on the scale	Record relevant metrics to indicate level or volume of activity	Record any supporting comments to justify rating
1	Poor practice		
2			
3			
4			
5	Good practice		
	Best practice includes Indicates elements of best practice in this aspect of engagement	Metrics may include: Suggested data sources and metrics if available	

Agreed score	Comments
Record agreed rating for aspect	For any other comments, e.g. from regional stakeholders

Using the template

The template asks for ratings on each of aspect of performance in each domain. It is these ratings which provide the building blocks for an appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of performance on each domain, and in turn, an overall performance profile as a benchmark of performance at a point in time.

The data

The appraisal form asks for both qualitative and a limited amount of quantitative data. Each aspect of activity has associated with it a 5-point scale representing a spectrum from poor to good practice. Cities are asked to self-assess performance on each scale and produce a rating score for each aspect of activity.

For the rating scale for each learning city action, indications are given of the kind of practice associated with the end and middle points on the scale, together with a note of key features of best practice for each aspect. These are intended as a guide to assist the appraisal of performance on that aspect. Note that these ratings can never be to a precise objective level but are based on best judgements of those involved in making the rating.

Appraisal sheets also ask for supporting information to help justify the rating. This may be in the form of quantitative indicators of the scale of activity, or notes of agreed plans, and the opportunity is provided to include a note of other factors considered in reaching the self-assessment rating.

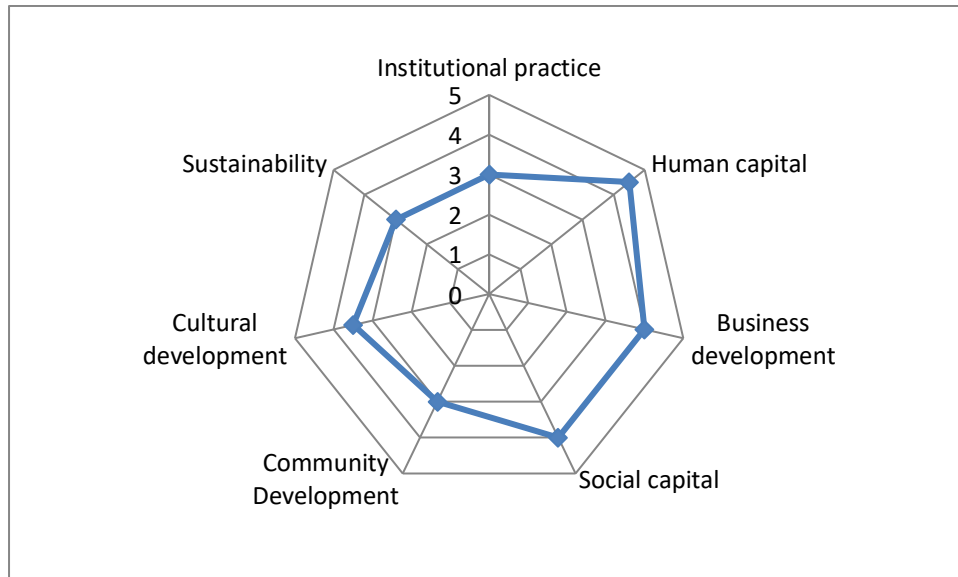
Data collection methods

It is recognised that cities are complex systems and that relevant learning city activity may be undertaken in many different departments of city authorities and by a wide range of different stakeholder groups embracing business, civic society and the community. There is a variety of ways to approach the task of capturing the information sought, the choice depending on local structures, on where knowledge about learning city activity of different types is held, and by the time and resources available to undertake the task. Options include:

- Workshop-based: bringing together a knowledgeable and representative group who can work through the whole benchmarking schedule;
- Agency-based: the schedule is divided up and separate parts completed by those most expert in each aspect, and replies then centrally collated;
- Interview-based: either using an internal assessor interviewing relevant people and groups or using an external interviewer or assessor.

Analysis

The data captured by the adopted process can be aggregated to produce a profile of activity for each domain, and to examine strengths and weaknesses in practice within and between domains. In turn these domain ratings can be compared to produce an overall learning city profile. The example below is taken from a study of strengths and weaknesses in a university's engagement with its local region. The same analysis could be done to derive a 'map' of the performance of a learning city.



Using the outcome profile

The resulting analysis can contribute in several ways to the development of policy and practice across the city, region and community. The appraisal can for example:

- Help assess the extent to which city mission and policies are being delivered;
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in city practice;
- Provide qualitative enhancement to more conventional economic analysis and metrics of city performance;
- If repeated over time, monitor changes in performance in response to policy initiatives;
- Assist city branding and promotion through demonstrating good practice to external stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate the value of a benchmarking approach to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of learning cities' performance and provide a basis for identifying development actions and opportunities. The benchmarking template described has been developed by PASCAL and used successfully in studies of university and college engagement with their communities and is ready to be applied in relation to the emergence of learning cities around the world.

PASCAL stands ready to support such applications, and work with cities and other stakeholders in undertaking such work. Full details of the template and assistance from PASCAL can be provided on request.

Acknowledgement and references

The original PASCAL benchmarking tool was closely modelled on the tool first developed by David Charles for use in studies by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2002.

ARUP (2013) *City Resilience Index*. New York: Arup.

Citie.org (2015) *Cities, a resource for city leadership*. London: NESTA

Duke C, Osborne M and Wilson B (2013) *A New Imperative: Regions and Higher Education in Difficult Times*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (2013) *Key Features of Learning Cities*. Hamburg: UIL