

European Union (EU) Centre

Transposing Concepts: Lifelong Learning and the Learning Region

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Scope and purpose of paper

This paper does two things.

First it offers some general and perhaps provocative observations on East-West relations as manifested in the aspirations of the European Union (EU) apropos Asia. These are triggered by two 'challenge questions' set for this Conference:

EU Visibility in the Region - how do the two regions view each other and how should misperceptions be addressed? and

The EU in the World - what are the connections between the EU as a role model for peaceful integration in Asia? How do the two work together in international fora and in issues of international law?

Secondly the paper reflects upon this relationship as it manifests itself in an educational policy arena where the EU, and indeed other European and Europe-based Inter-Government Organisations (IGOs), notably the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have made a clear policy commitment – principally and broadly to lifelong learning, but also more specifically the concept of the learning region. Let us start with lifelong learning (LLL) and the learning region before ranging wider.

Lifelong learning, North-South

The most prominent IGO advocating for adult education and lifelong learning has for forty years been Unesco, led by its Institute of that name in Hamburg; the honours as main champion of the 'learning region' are shared between OECD and the EU, both crudely speaking rich men's clubs. Unesco has certainly championed lifelong learning, but given Unesco's *de facto* primacy of concern with poor so-called developing countries, its historic focus has been on primary education, literacy and basic education, with much attention given also to functionality and to technical skills training, marginalising the adult education to which lifelong learning often narrowly and too closely attaches (DVV 2010).

My own interest derives from several decades of involvement in both the Asian and the European regions, working mainly with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to foster 'North-South' and 'South-South' networking and collaboration in education, especially adult and non-formal

education, for development. Especially relevant are ASPBAE and the ICAE, notably its 'China project' which successfully drew PRC into the international adult education community during the 1980s (Duke 2003). More recently I have worked on and for the cause of universities playing a significant role in the development of their local regions. While this echoes a long tradition of engagement in 'third mission' or community service work, notably by the 19th century US land grant universities, it also confronts notions of detached and disinterested scholarship to which, in some traditions, universities and scholars strongly adhere. This is my arena for examining the italicised challenge questions cited above.

The term 'region' is used here at two different main levels – the large continental scale region such as Europe, Asia or Africa; and the sub-national more local level. This may be a province, county, city, state or indeed region or some other entity, depending on the character and language of government and of devolution from the political centre, from country to country. Both meanings are necessarily used in this paper. The main focus, when we speak of learning regions and the contribution of universities, is at the latter, sub-national, level. Note however that the meaning and especially the political resonance and salience of the local regions vary within and especially between the big continental regions.

The idea of lifelong learning and resulting policy frameworks evolved mainly in the European context, including initially the Council of Europe and OECD, as well as the EU. 1996 was the European Year of Lifelong Learning. An approach promulgated in the early seventies (Faure 1972, OECD 1974) had rather lain dormant for a generation. It was adopted and vigorously promoted by the EU, through to and after the Lisbon Treaty. Many EU programmes have been devised to promote lifelong learning; a recent EU contract commissioned an evaluation of a number of these, which are together seen as a means to deliver education and training policies that will contribute to the objectives of the Lisbon Treaty.

The learning region

More recently, the concept of the learning region has been developed especially in Europe in the context of the devolved implementation of policy to sub-national regional levels, with emphasis in particular on cross-sector and inter-organisational development, for example between governmental administrations and universities, to build knowledge societies and economies, and learning regions. Common terms and emphases used in this context include: working across boundaries and dismantling silos; focusing on needs within a unit of place; collaboration, networking and

partnership. Social capital is much spoken of, as is diversity of context; sometimes local or indigenous wisdom and know-how are also stressed; sometimes also transparency, trust, community consultation and mobilisation, and active citizenship feature prominently. There is increasing recognition of the need for sustainability, both in the wider ecological sense and in terms of programmes themselves.

It will be evident with a moment's reflection that several of these later items embody philosophical (if not ideological) propositions about the nature of society and what constitutes desirable political process. For many countries, depending on their recent and maybe also longer history, their stability, and the confidence and inclinations of their rulers, they may be quite unacceptable. Devolution of power and resources to possibly unreliable regions with turbulent and dissident communities will not occur. Until this alters it rules out the very idea of a semi-autonomous semi-self-governing learning region. It will quickly be evident that the concept and practice will not transpose easily into many of the Asian countries with their very different histories and political practices.

Inter-regional learning for development

This paper is informed by attempts to migrate these concepts, perceptions and practices into countries in the Asian region; and more broadly to develop common language and understanding between the EU and Asian region countries. How do the broader governance traditions, macro-policy orientations, and assumptions embedded in different histories, cultures and traditions hinder or assist inter-regional learning and the adoption of what are elsewhere thought to be innovative good practices?

The paper also draws on longer experience of building intra-regional cooperation and networks in these fields within the Asian-Pacific region (see ASPBAE, DVV, ICAE), and inter-regional cooperation especially between Asia and Europe. It also calls on experience of EU lifelong learning projects, and of a Unesco-Japanese venture in introducing lifelong learning understandings into Asian political thinking. It notes the huge diversity of the Asian region; and tension between EU knowledge economy discourse on the one hand and the discourse of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Unesco and basic literacy on the other.

In particular I draw on a recent and ongoing project, Pascal Universities and Regional Engagement, or PURE, planned in 2008 and conducted by the Pascal International Observatory (www.pascalobservatory.org) through 2009-10. The work of PURE, which examines the contribution

of universities to building and strengthening learning regions for regional development, informs this consideration of inter-regional learning: both between big continental regions and between sub-national regions which may be metropolitan, or relatively remote and rural, or intermediate in character between these. Twelve of the PURE regions are European and within the EU. The remaining five are located in three other continents.

Learning regions and Asia

Prior to this, OECD was continuing a rich vein of work on regional development and the knowledge economy, considering especially the contribution which higher education institutions should or might make. In 2004 OECD enlisted fourteen regions, nine from Europe with four from the Americas and Australia, and one from Asia, Busan, the second city after Seoul in South Korea (OECD, 2007). Unsuccessful efforts were made to include other Asian regions, especially in Japan and China. In subsequent similar work OECD has been unable to recruit from these two countries, although Penang in Malaysia became involved. Singapore is now planning to take part in a 3rd round of reviews.

Generally, participating regions choose to take part following discussion between universities and the authorities at the local-region (county, province etc) level, with more or less direct national government interest and at least informal support (since OECD is an inter-governmental organisation of Member States). OECD makes every endeavour to involve the national level. Many parameters (barriers or enablers) to the regional engagement of universities are set there within national policy. In the case of the original Asian region, Busan, the government of the day was driving a strong, socially informed, decentralisation policy to diversify the sources of South Korean wealth, moving a significant part of publicly funded research endeavour out of the Seoul region. Busan as the nation's second city was a natural choice, bringing city regeneration and the universities together. In short, the national policy environment was favourable; paradoxically, here local-regional endeavour was strongly driven from the capital. By the time PURE was launched the President and government had changed, and this approach no longer enjoyed the same policy priority.

In the case of Penang, national and regional politics took almost opposite form. The State of Penang was in conflict with the federal Malaysian government. Penang's participation, probably brought about mainly by the enthusiasm of Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang (USM), was in spite of hostility between the two levels of government. Pascal, without the status of the

intergovernmental OECD, was still less successful. Several efforts to enlist a Japanese region have so far failed. What seemed to be promising discussions with several other countries, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, have also as yet come to nothing.

Evidently the EU idea of a local region, of university engagement in regional development, and of institutional 'third mission' community service for the sake of local-region development, does not come as naturally to these countries of East and South-East Asia as to many in the Americas, Europe and Australia. In the remaining continent, despite a sense that many African universities remain locked in a traditional teaching-and-research-only paradigm, Pascal won more active interest there. Two regions directly, and two others indirectly, became involved in the project, greatly enriching inter-regional learning with the more industrialised regions. On the other hand, the notion of a region (other than in the continental sense) was not natural and familiar. As in Asia, this hampered the take-up of ideas of a learning region, although lifelong learning, in a sense of indigenous knowledge, values and learning had easier and more natural purchase.

Lessons

Two lessons in particular stand out from the PURE experience generally. *The first* is that inter-regional learning has potential at both levels. It is obviously attractive between somewhat similar regions: in the case of PURE for example between metro-regions such as Helsinki, Glasgow Melbourne; and between marginalised rural regions in Africa, Australia and Scandinavia. More surprising is the value that is being derived from learning between regions at least within Europe that are very different on the obvious geographical, economic, political and broader cultural dimensions.

Secondly, we found unexpected and significant obstacles to understanding, as a basis for constructive comparison and learning, between regions in superficially similar 'advanced' OECD countries and economies, notably in North America and to some extent Australia, compared with Europe, including specifically the UK with its more similar systems. It took quite some time to clear the ground of linguistic confusion, and of unrecognised assumptions about 'the way things are' across many areas of governance and management. Only then could constructive comparison and dialogue begin.

Another important lesson, amplifying what was already known, was the often overwhelming and sometimes destructive impact of political events and the resulting politico-philosophically informed changes following an election even in mature evolutionary democracies. Also, at a lower level but

still sometimes powerful, was the effect of one or a few changes of key personnel that alter the direction and energy of commitment of a region or an institution. Unless purpose and practice have become deeply culturally embedded, they may be fatally weakened by these 'accidental' factors. Each of these lessons is significant for connecting, collaborating and learning between the EU and Asia.

Culture, history, diversity

Linked to this but broader in its impact is the sheer diversity in detail of different histories and cultural traditions. This is vital to understanding why efforts to collaborate and implement agreed purposes do or do not succeed. 'Culture' in this full sense, along with what is often referred to as social capital, can be crucial. Working with its grain, much can be achieved. Ignored, it derails policy endeavour. For a 'grand project' like the European Union this is obvious and fundamental experience, yet still periodically ignored in some centrally planned EU development endeavours. For inter-(large-)regional collaboration, ignoring it means that misperception will not be overcome.

The sheer complexity of diversity even within Europe (most nations of which also relate directly to most Asian nations directly, as well as via the EU), let alone within the far larger and much more diverse Asian region, suggests limits to what can be quickly achieved other than through established inter-governmental structures and formal diplomatic processes. Beyond these formal levels expectations should be modest and patient, although the cumulative effect may over time prove transformative. New insights and learning grow out of a myriad of informal visits, exchanges and different forms of 'local' cooperation. With patience, sensitivity and a long enough time-scale much can change, informally by NGO, civic and professional endeavour, as also inter-governmentally, as the thirty-year history of German partnership with ASPBAE in the region shows (ASPBAE 2005).

The scale and complexity of the EU lifelong learning (LLL) endeavour is formidable, as its 2007-13 Lifelong Learning Programme shows, requiring a 750k euro evaluative review of its various LLL programmes. Even so, LLL has for most purposes been reduced from the grand concept – life-wide as well as lifelong and encompassing all modes of learning (Faure 1972, OECD 1974) - to an economy-oriented 'human resource development' training and skills agenda with a light top-dressing of the social, civic and cultural. While playing to the policy objectives of many Asian states, this could also divert attention from the potential of these societies to follow different development paths, based in their different heritages and cultures. Even within the EU concerns were uncovered

during the PURE project that EU and national government-determined policies at time ignore the diverse strengths and needs of local regions.

Lifelong learning – Tokyo meeting

A 2007 conference on lifelong learning in the Asian region, planned and hosted in Tokyo by ACCU with NIER and the Bangkok Regional Office of Unesco brought together scholarly, civil society and governmental experts from different parts of the Asian-South Pacific region at ACCU in Tokyo in October 2007. The purpose was to clarify LLL, a concept hitherto fashioned and used as a policy tool largely among the OECD countries of the advanced industrialised North, and to bring this perspective to bear on Education for All (EFA), which is nominally universal but in practice applied mainly to the countries of the South.

The meeting wrestled with very different notions of LLL, largely understood in some big countries as adult literacy and basic education, but elsewhere accepted in its EU and OECD senses. Recently the World Bank had shown interest in its applicability to the poor and poorest countries. Asia embraces a huge diversity of economies as well as traditions, from the most advanced economies of Singapore and East Asia, and the rising giants of China and India, to regions and communities in extreme poverty within these large countries, and very high levels of poverty and especially female illiteracy in other countries both populous and small. Even for countries with still high birth-rates and very young populations, global tendencies will soon accelerate the 'new demography' of ageing. In principle LLL applies to all nations and regions in an increasingly interconnected global economy. In a study presented to the recent Unesco World Conference CONFINTEA VI in Brazil, Unesco is described as having reignited the concept in the 1960s. The study traces the gradual yet dynamic adoption and adaptation of the concept over 40 years, permeating many sectors and arenas in Thailand (Kasama 2010).

At worst, the concluding implication in Tokyo was 'LLL for the wealthy, basic education for the rest'. Such a polarity would constitute a valid critique of policy trends within some EU (and OECD) countries, as much as a polarity between East (or South) and West (or North). Add to this the challenge of interpreting and applying LLL across Europe and Asia, the differences of meaning, and behind that of political philosophy allowing or inhibiting the empowerment of local regions, and the difficulties and prospects for miscommunication become evident. The obstacles to transfer and transposition of concepts and policies are considerable.

EU and Asia - generalisation and implications

Let us now look wider in responding to the Conference challenge questions about mutual perception, and seeing EU as a role model, for example for peaceful integration in Asia. Look at the comparative demographics between EU Europe and Asia. Asia has a population fast approaching four billion. The EU population is estimated at 501 million. China's population is over 1.3 billion. India at around 1.13 billion is fast overtaking it. The next three most populous countries together well far out-number the peoples of the EU, and another three countries are each larger than Europe's largest. There is also the diversity of strongly represented major world religions and philosophies. Note that for all its strong ties with Europe, eg via NATO, Turkey as a large Muslim society is too much for many in the EU to want to accommodate. Encompassing diversity of size, wealth and history even within the EU is not easy; linking and comparing the whole EU with the whole of Asia sounds like a task for Don Quixote – and invites a response from Confucius.

The West has moved beyond early and naïve assumptions about aid and development. These sought to modernise 'backward' or 'undeveloped' countries along lines followed by the industrialised North. Diversity, divergence of pathways, even indigenous ways and wisdom, also now feature. More persuasive to statesmen and politicians for thinking again may be the huge economic wealth and power already of China (and before that of Japan, then South Korea and others), and prospectively of India and other fast-growing 'intermediate economies' in South-East Asia – persuasive at least in its capacity to have us in Europe pause and examine our assumptions. The balance of power has altered sharply with what has been named the global financial crisis (GFC) but is now more often also referred to as the North Atlantic financial crisis (see also *Le Monde* 2010). Since the crisis broke the value of the euro has fallen by over one sixth to the US dollar, but by almost a quarter against the Thai baht and over a third against the yen as well as the Australian dollar.

The assumptions embedded in *'the EU as a role model for peaceful integration'*, like the virtues of mature European democracies, have taken some hard knocks in the past three years. The EU looks weaker and more vulnerable, 'Asia' stronger. Official China's recent deep offence over the Nobel Peace Prize, and its challenge to the implied moral superiority of the West, should give us pause to think, and even to see the episode from another perspective. Westminster and more broadly European democracy may be admired, and even emulated. So may the large steps towards integration that the EU has taken, against a backdrop of centuries of bloodshed and 'cleansing' as violent as almost any, anywhere in the contemporary world.

Yet it would be fanciful and naïve to see the huge Asian region with its billions as walking in the steps of small, relatively homogeneous, EU Europe. Nor do the delay and the manoeuvres entailed in getting the Lisbon Treaty ratified and into effect in 2009 inspire unqualified confidence. In Richard Rose's words 'the tricks used to secure endorsement of the Lisbon treaty have left pro-integrationists with little political capital to sustain further integration' (Rose 2010). Large steps have been taken but a more mature Euroscepticism is alive and well (Leconte 2010).

India has going for it as a large working federal democracy three million elected representatives in a population of 1.2 billion. In terms of gender equality one in three of these three million are women, and there and plans to raise this to one in two (Marquand 2010). How does democratic representation in Europe compare? Surely India would take some matching even in the equity-conscious EU. The most recent Pascal PURE International Conference (see Pascal Website) took place in the context of African policy-making, culture, history, and attempted collaboration within that continent, in what became a dialogue between Africa and the North. Participants from North America, Australia and the EU were challenged, and excited, to try to come to grips with what 'African values' and 'indigenous knowledge systems' meant operationally, and how they might play out into African pathways to collaborative development. It was evident, in this lifelong learning and learning region context, that little could be done by way of real EU-African connectivity until both regions had learned to listen and to understand the other, in the process better understanding themselves.

A further challenge question

We conclude on the large canvas of EU-Asian connections. This paper has called attention to the complexity of learning, emulation and change even between local regions. The EU with a total population of 500 million struggles. It is surely fanciful to see its 'peaceful integration' as a role model for a region eight times as populous. Here two countries each constitutes a complex region twice the population size of Europe.

Here instead is a further challenge, one that does not take the EU as a role model. *Can Europe listen and learn from the Asian region with its still older history and cultures, its still larger numbers of even more diverse peoples?* If it can, Europe may win back the respect and acceptance that its colonial history and persisting assumptions of moral superiority have forfeited. In adopting a modest 'learning posture' it may build a basis for reciprocity, to mutual advantage. It is a challenge worth accepting while there is still time.

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