

Municipality of Larissa, Region of Thessaly
Greece



Larissa Learning City

Keyword(s):

Citizenship education, inclusion

Civic skills, general adult education



Introduction

The Municipality has set as a priority the promotion of lifelong learning as a philosophy of living in the local community. The main aim is to place citizens at the centre of their community by providing them with opportunities to foster their critical thinking skills, learn, and participate in everyday activities. The Municipality encourages cooperation and dialogue among city's stakeholders, organizes projects that support vulnerable social groups, but also motivates local society to be part of the process of lifelong learning and personal development. As of 2016 a local network of 70 stakeholders has been formed (administered by a Municipal Council's Steering Committee), leading to a significant number of innovative projects for all citizens which combine learning and social awareness. In December 2015, Larissa became the first Greek member of the UNESCO Global Learning Cities Network, and in 2017, the Municipality was awarded by UNESCO for its efforts. Moreover, in 2019, Larissa was appointed as the global coordinator of the GLCN Cluster dedicated to Citizenship Education.

Main challenge

The main challenge that the city faced was the disengagement of the general population and especially the most vulnerable citizens, from the public dialogue, a situation that was exacerbated by the lack of equal accessibility to educational opportunities. The pandemic of COVID-19 in combination with the severe economic



crisis and the relevant social isolation, widened the gap and the opportunities for equal access and active participation in the community.

Timing

As a response to the deep financial and social crisis, the main concern of the local authorities was (and still is) to improve access to learning opportunities for all citizens, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups while strengthening the sense of community and solidarity. The emphasis is placed on citizenship education in order to raise awareness about citizenship and encourage active participation. Moreover, human rights education, respect for others and the cultivation of democratic culture, were also emphasized. During the COVID – 19 crisis, the need to maintain and even strengthen social relations and provide opportunities for connection and learning was highlighted.

Objective

Our City's vision is to promote the philosophy of lifelong learning by implementing projects that combine learning and enjoyment for all citizens - of every age and gender (from early childhood to senior citizens) - and especially for vulnerable groups (e.g., disabled, deprived, Roma, etc.). To achieve this objective, the municipality invests in strong networking with city's stakeholders and also sufficient use of human capital and facilities.

Target group

The initiative addressed to all citizens of Larissa (general population, youth, unemployed, migrants, refugees, elderly, educators, Roma, etc).

Geographical range

The initiatives concerned the Municipality of Larissa

Stakeholders and partners

The Municipality of Larissa is constantly investing in cooperation and networking. During the last five years a dynamic network of local stakeholders has been formed including representatives from both the public and the private sector (e.g. the Region of Thessaly), public educational institutions (e.g., University of Thessaly - Department of Medical School, Hellenic Open University, Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary education of Thessaly, lifelong learning institutions, Trade

Associations, Chambers of Commerce, the Greek Manpower Organization), NGO's - local citizens' groups (i.a., the Panthessalian Association of Disabled People, the organization Active Citizens), and from vulnerable groups (Roma, refugees, people with disabilities). The Municipality of Larissa as a Learning City has managed to achieve the better use of the financial and human resources, as well as the facilities of our network through mobilizing and encouraging all parties to share the lifelong learning culture, in most cases free of charge.

The Municipality of Larissa, in the context of the project "Larissa Learning City", invests in collaborations with important institutions, associations and international organizations. Among these, it is worth to mention that we have Memoranda of Agreement with (a) the Region of Thessaly, the Municipality of Larissa and the Thessalian Federation of People with Disabilities to form a local action plan for people with disabilities, (b) the Hellenic Adult Education Association, (c) the local branch of the Hellenic Manpower Organization for the implementation of training programs for unemployed and vulnerable groups, and (d) the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF for the implementation of interventions in the local Roma community

Strategy / materials

Larissa Learning City ensures that information regarding its projects and action is disseminated to citizens and stakeholders. Citizens can find information on the official website of Larissa Municipality, local newspapers and on the frequently updated official pages on Facebook:

- <http://www.larissa-dimos.gr/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/learninglarissa/?fref=ts>
- <https://www.facebook.com/LarissaKoinonikiPolitiki/?fref=ts>
- <https://www.facebook.com/LarissaCulture/?fref=ts>

Moreover, every citizen can be informed by the decentralised structures of the Municipality (Community Elderly Clubs, Municipal Creativity Centres, Cultural clubs). Every participant of the learning programs is informed by email for future actions (lectures, seminars, book presentations etc). A monthly newsletter is mailed to all members of the stakeholder's network. The municipality has developed two informative leaflets: (1) Larissa - building a learning city (in Greek - English), (2) Citizens' University of Larissa (in Greek) that are available to citizens from the municipal offices and during events. For every project or event the municipality funds posters which are displayed online. Also, at least two videos have been developed on the activities of Larissa Learning City and Citizens' University.

The city responds to the specific needs of marginalized and underprivileged groups by implementing programs aimed at facilitating access to the labour market and social inclusion such as learning programs for adult Roma (2nd Chance School, literacy courses e.g.). To deal with the issue of gender equality, a committee has been set up in the municipality dedicated to promoting gender equality with rich action. During the pandemic and in collaboration with the citizens' university a series of online workshops were organized on the theme. The promotion and protection of the rights of all citizens indiscriminately is at the core of the philosophy and actions of the municipality and for this reason awareness and information actions are often organized. So far we have learned that strong political will and networking with stakeholders, services and citizens can lead to interventions that are innovative and significant for all the citizens and especially for vulnerable groups.

Resources

The city makes efficient use of financial and human resources and facilities within the Larissa Learning City's network. Significant alliances and agreements are signed with important stakeholders such as the Pan-Hellenic Association of Disabled People, the Hellenic Manpower Association, Greenpeace and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The Citizens' University is funded by the Municipality but also makes efficient use of volunteers and human capital and facilities of the bodies participating in the "Larissa – Learning City" network.

Compliance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Our strategy is in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4)

Innovation(s)

The City Council has declared its political will to facilitate learning for all and strongly encourages synergies and active engagement of citizens and stakeholders. The network that has been formed has led to successful programs - paradigms of cooperation among local stakeholders and municipality such as the "Summer Camp in the city" - a friendly environment for 2500 kids with creative activities during summer or the "School for Parents" for 400 parents per year where the educators are professionals from local mental health services. In collaboration with 70 private learning centers and volunteer's, free tutorial lessons are provided to 150 disadvantaged pupils each academic year

Since 2015 Larissa Learning City, as a member of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities, has been constantly investing in ongoing cooperation and synergies

with city stakeholders in order to initiate projects that promote lifelong learning philosophy and respond to the learning needs of all citizens, especially marginalized and underprivileged. In 2017 Larissa was awarded by UNESCO for its efforts and in 2019 was appointed as global coordinator of the Cluster “Citizenship Education”. In 2018, in cooperation with civil society and local institutions, the “Citizens’ University of Larissa” was established with the approval of the City Council, under the aegis of the UNESCO National Commission, reflecting the determination of the city to prioritize citizen’s access to high-quality non-formal learning programs. Each year, Learning Cycles on twelve Thematic Learning Fields are provided: local history, environment, technology, education for educators, mental health, health prevention, unemployment and labor market, disability issues, Roma education, refugee and migrant integration issues, Science and new technologies, Education through Art. Each Learning Cycle, through innovative participatory educational methods and critical thinking, enhance local societies’ transformation.

Against a culture of isolation and resignation, this project promotes change through synergies and co decided common actions, helping communities overcome the crises quicker by decentralizing learning actions, better access is facilitated for vulnerable groups and brings closer citizens from neighborhoods.

Evaluation

The Department of Lifelong learning of the Municipality prepares the annual report of the “Larissa – Learning city” initiatives and presents it to all members of the Council at a special event. The report reflects partnerships and collaborations, the number of participants and activities and suggests new actions, improvement of existing, developing an action plan related to “Larissa -Learning City” philosophy.

In this year’s annual (2021) meeting proposals for improving the “Larissa – Learning city” project were generated for the first time from all the participating bodies who worked in small groups, setting out the difficulties that may encountered in the implementation of the programs, evaluating the course so far, thus emerging new ideas for strengthening the most vulnerable groups of the city. The Scientific Committee of the Learning City project holds monthly meetings where all members are informed of the progress of the implemented programs, analyze and organize new actions.

Also parallel meetings are scheduled between the President of the Committee and local groups for decision making in certain themes about learning opportunities in the city.

Regarding the training programs of the Citizens University of Larissa, at the end of each action, the participants complete an evaluation form that explores a) Quality-

Efficiency of the Learning Cycle, b) Evaluation of the Organization and Support c) Teacher Assessment d) general remarks. Data is collected and an evaluation report is drawn up by executives of the Lifelong Learning Department.

Success parameters

To be able to determine if the problem is addressed successfully, we make use of the following data:

Short-term outcome metrics:

- Number of people who complete a training program, fulfilling the educational goals or receiving a certification.
- Number and attendance time of citizens in online City Council's meetings, number of public statements and number of citizens' ideas finally implemented.
- Number of people using new technologies in everyday activities (example: downloads of municipal apps).
- Number of new collaborations and new joint programs.
- Number of visits and active users of the new platform.
- Number of trainees who found a job because of new skills.
- Number of active participants in public dialogue with qualitative contributions.
- Less hate speech on social media.
- More citizens co-shaping strategic planning of public institutions.
- Participation rate in local elections above the current 64%.
- Change of perception of - and respect for - public spaces and the environment (example: less waste volume and increased recycling).
- Change of culture and attitude of citizens, reflected in everyday behaviors (example: better road behavior and respect for the parking spaces of the disabled, which might be proven by fewer fines).
- Institutional reinforcement of transparency and accountability of public policies.

Most of the projects are implemented with collaboration with the city stakeholders. They are involved through the provision of space, trainers, communication material. Also they participate in the project design and they are part of the working group of each action.

Impact

The number of actions and programs that were implemented created the need for the establishment of a Lifelong Learning Department within the Municipal organization scheme.

The participation of about 4000 citizens in the various programs during 2019-2020 and the relative small drop-out rates (20% avg.) highlights the acceptance of the institution. In the case of computer literacy courses for the elderly, it is noteworthy that at first, we had only 15 applications, and 6 months later we received more than 700 applications.

A Second Chance School class – the first in the Roma region in the country – was organized in collaboration with the Greek Ministry of Education and the educational community. Seventeen adult Roma attended courses for completing compulsory education and getting their diploma.

Impediments

The main challenges are:

- the socioeconomic crisis and also the covid-19 crisis
- a philosophy of non cooperation among services, citizens, stakeholders.
- lack of critical thinking

We managed to overcome it by gradually adopting new practices and a "different" philosophy that promotes synergies, common actions and active citizenship; new training programs were implemented in the city by the newly founded "Citizens' University of Larissa" for people of all ages and socio-economic status.

Replicability

Provided that other cities-regions share the same strong political will and additionally the city itself is willing to promote synergies with city's stakeholders, the same strategy can be replicated. Larissa encourages and leads cooperation with other Greek cities aiming to share knowledge, experience and good practices.

Concluding remarks

Synergies and strong political can make a strong impact in the community.

Website/Social Media profile(s) of the initiative

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/learninglarissa2016/>

Website: <https://learninglarissa2016.wordpress.com>

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