

Fifth International Conference on Learning Cities

Research Proposal Project Documents

Project description (including rationale, background and implementation strategy)

1. Rationale and background

1.1 Summary Description

The Fifth International Conference on Learning Cities

Cities have been at the epicentre of the Covid-19 crisis, a pandemic that has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. The impact of the present global crisis triggered by the pandemic is multi-dimensional and is still evolving – it has combined health and economic crises together with a social crisis.

Equally, cities are engines of growth: they create jobs, alleviate poverty, and are key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Throughout history, cities have proved to be resilient and have emerged stronger, showing they can build back better and improve the lives of city dwellers. It is in cities where innovation and knowledge sharing are being provided to a large extent.

COVID-19 has caused an **overwhelming public health crisis** first and foremost which has also affected other sectors, including education. From an education perspective, the most pressing task for governments at all levels has been to **quickly equip citizens with critical knowledge to protect themselves and slow down the spread of the virus**. As these emergency education measures are intended for all citizens, governments must find complementary channels and modalities to reach and ‘educate’ in a timely and effective manner. When considering the **special needs of vulnerable groups**, the task becomes even more challenging. Factors of ethnicity, gender, religion, language, class, age and disability, among others, must be considered.

In pursuit of effective education responses, many cities have **mobilized cross-sectoral resources and are promoting, supporting and developing a variety of non-formal and informal learning initiatives to ensure continuity of education and equip and empower citizens with multifaceted tools to face the crisis**. Non-formal and informal learning initiatives represent additional opportunities to reach underserved communities, promote relevant learning outcomes and organize flexible and efficient programmes.

The biggest opportunity for cities from this pandemic is to build *forward*: more climate resilient infrastructure, green initiatives such as increasing public spaces, creating vehicle free streets, making bike lanes, refurbishing buildings to multiple uses and thereby doing more with less. This cannot be done by the public sector alone. Cities will need to attract private sector and social partners to close the financing gap. Good governance is an imperative to attract private financing and to work with the private sector. Healthier cities could be within reach, as is evident from the impact of COVID-19 on the decline in commuting and on transportation alternatives. With regard to education and lifelong learning, these changes are all part of a move towards **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in cities, which in turn relies on active citizenship through citizenship education**.

It is in this context that the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), in collaboration with Yeonsu City, Republic of Korea, will organise the fifth International Conference on Learning Cities (ICLC) from 27- 30 October 2021.

Sustainable Development Goals

One of the key objectives of the conference is to reinforce the linkages between SDG 3, SDG 4 and SDG11 into policy implementation by providing data and by fostering the involvement/commitment of all major stakeholders (experts, academia, urban planners). Furthermore, as the conference is concerned with further strengthening lifelong learning at the local level, it will have a cross-cutting impact on all 17 SDGs.

Before the challenge of a global pandemic, UNESCO intended to further enhance the transversal work towards SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) and SDG 4 (Quality education), by launching a Strategy on Education for Better Health and Well-being to provide the overarching framework for concerted action with partners. The strategy showcases the growing international recognition for the inter-relationship between education and health. This conference will strengthen linkages between the key ideas contained within the strategy and lifelong learning at the local level.

Thematic focus

The fifth ICLC is being organised around the theme of 'Global Health Education and Emergency Response'. **Background papers will be developed in advance of the event.** The research outcomes of these papers will **provide direction for the overall thematic areas of the conference** and will be published in the conference proceedings.

Beyond the conference, these outcomes will aim to provide insights for ongoing and future research on health, well-being and the resilience of education systems in urban communities worldwide. The thematic focus areas for the conference are the following:

- 1) Understanding education for health, mental health and well-being in the context of lifelong learning
- 2) Strengthening community resilience and learning systems in cities
- 3) Transforming cities into spaces for health and well-being

This proposal is concerned with outlining important steps for this research, including process, timeline, funding, and beneficiaries.

1.2 Overall purpose and relevance

The theme of this conference centres on two major issues that, as recent experience has shown, are interrelated: health and education.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of a strong and responsive approach to health education has become apparent not only in terms of knowing how to react to pandemics, but also in tackling a range of personal and public health issues exacerbated by such a crisis. Healthy, well-informed populations have a better chance of mitigating a pandemic's worst effects and so, with experts warning of the likelihood of new viruses continuing to emerge in the coming decades, the importance of health and well-being education in the post-pandemic world is clear.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed individuals, communities and learning systems under great strain and, in many contexts, has revealed a lack of resilience in response to a global emergency. This has been witnessed in the pandemic's harmful impacts on local community networks and businesses, as well as the often-chaotic shift to distance learning when educational institutions have had to close. At the same time, inspiring initiatives have shown how small groups of people have collectively

organized to provide support in local communities, and how education professionals have helped colleagues and students to adapt to distance learning. Emerging from the pandemic, there is a profound need to build on these disparate acts of resilience in order to create resilient communities and learning systems at the local level.

Finally, with cities’ populations continuing to grow and the prospect of major, overlapping challenges and crises in the coming years (health-related, climate-related and otherwise), it is becoming essential to create healthy spaces for living and learning in cities. This requires a holistic approach to urban development that is particularly cognizant of the needs of vulnerable populations. Groups including homeless people, economically deprived populations, racial and ethnic minority groups and older adults often face obstacles when it comes to healthy living and learning in cities and, as a result, are more susceptible to the detrimental impact of any major challenge or crisis the city might experience. It is therefore important to consider how healthy spaces can be designed to include vulnerable populations.

Through its three main themes (understanding education for health, mental health and well-being in the context of lifelong learning; strengthening community resilience and learning systems in cities; transforming cities into spaces for health and well-being), the conference will tackle these needs and issues for cities worldwide.

2. Approach

2.1 Process

Background papers will be prepared prior to the conference in alignment with the three main themes of the conference. The main findings of the background papers will be developed into a **research synthesis report** by UIL prior to the conference. This report will capture the essence of each piece of research, contextualise it in terms of the objectives and agenda of the conference, and make connections to broader trends identified through the work of the institute, such as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and citizenship education. The synthesis report will be shared with all participants prior to the conference and will foreground the discussions to take place.

2.2 Specific thematic approach

The following table provides a short overview of the research scope to be considered in the development of background papers.

1. Understanding education for health, mental health and well-being in the context of lifelong learning
This thematic area will look at how cities promote health education for their citizens. It will also review the needs of health literacy for vulnerable groups mainly at the institutional level, as well as addressing how cities have dealt with issues related to mental health and well-being in response to the pandemic. Special attention will be paid to the non-formal education and the role of lifelong learning (e.g., partnerships between formal and non-formal learning institutions, the role of community learning centres).
2. Strengthening community resilience and learning systems in cities
This thematic research area will investigate what the pandemic has revealed about the resilience of cities’ communities and learning systems. In terms of community resilience, it will explore issues of multi-sectoral planning as well as bottom-up and top-down policies and practices. Regarding learning systems, it will pay attention to the roles of local governments, institutions and networks of stakeholders in ensuring the continued provision and, in some cases, extension of formal and non-formal education programmes during the crisis, with a focus on the importance of innovation and technology.

3. **Transforming cities into spaces for health and well-being**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed new challenges for public health in densely populated urban areas. This thematic area addresses what key components make up a healthy learning city. It explores the role of local governments in creating environments and opportunities for the improvement of local people's health and well-being, including through shared spaces in cities. This area therefore identifies holistic initiatives to promote a culture for health and learning in the city.

The three background papers will be developed between May and June 2021. Each research paper will be approximately 6,000 words long.

These background papers shall follow the style guidelines laid down in the UNESCO Style Manual: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001418/141812e.pdf>

The background papers shall not be circulated or published in any form without prior approval from UIL.