

# UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC)

## Membership Concept Note

May 2025

### Background

The number of city dwellers worldwide has been growing at an unprecedented rate in recent years. Today, more than half of the world's population lives in cities, and this figure is expected to reach 60 per cent by 2030. As cities expand, they play an increasingly influential role in national and global affairs. However, this expansion also presents municipal governments with significant challenges related to social cohesion, economic development and sustainability. A growing number of municipalities view the implementation of a lifelong learning strategy as key to fostering inclusive, sustainable urban development and addressing these challenges. To support local governments in developing concrete strategies for building learning cities, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) established the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC).

The GNLC is an international, policy-oriented network that provides inspiration, know-how and examples of best practice. Its mission is to support and accelerate the practice of lifelong learning in cities worldwide by promoting policy dialogue and peer learning among member cities, forging links and fostering partnerships, building capacities for lifelong learning, and developing tools to encourage and recognize progress in building learning cities.

The network is based on two foundational documents: the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities and the Key Features of Learning Cities, both adopted at the first International Conference on Learning Cities (ICLC) in 2013. Additional key documents include *Learning Cities and the SDGs: A Guide to Action* and the *Guidelines for Building Learning Cities*.

The GNLC opened for membership in 2015. Since then, the network has grown to more than 350 member cities across all five UNESCO regions. GNLC members are actively engaged in building learning cities and recognize that lifelong learning for all is essential to their cities' future. By applying for GNLC membership, each city formally commits to developing as a learning city, sharing experiences and best practices, fostering partnerships, and strengthening lifelong learning policies and implementation.

GNLC members are cities, represented by mayors or other formally endorsed city representatives. For the purposes of this membership concept, a city is generally understood as an administrative unit

governed by a city council or other elected body, and officially recognized as a city by the national government of its respective country. However, a learning city can also take the form of a learning municipality, learning village, learning town or learning community.

## Benefits of becoming a GNLC member

GNLC members benefit from:

1. Guidance and support in building a learning city
  - a. Accessing tools and strategies for developing learning cities (e.g. training modules, video tutorials and capacity-building workshops)
  - b. Insights into best practices, based on the latest research and reports
  - c. Regular updates on learning city developments worldwide from the GNLC Coordination Team
  - d. Participation in the GNLC Academy, which promotes local capacity-building, develops tools, supports the measurement of learning city progress, and enables effective partnerships
2. Membership in a dynamic network and strengthened partnerships
  - a. Opportunities to host international conferences and regional meetings with UIL support
  - b. Connections with other learning cities that share common interests, challenges and development agendas
  - c. Access to a network of experts and professionals specializing in lifelong learning for sustainable development
  - d. Technical support from other GNLC member cities
3. Recognition and visibility for learning city efforts
  - a. Opportunities to share milestones and progress through GNLC communication channels
  - b. Contributions to learning city case studies, showcasing city actions, innovations, best practices and lessons learned
  - c. Eligibility for the UNESCO Learning City Award

In line with UNESCO's inclusive approach and open-access policy, all GNLC publications and documents are freely available on the GNLC website.

## Membership regulations

### Who can apply?

Key players and/or authorities from a city located in a UNESCO Member State that wishes to adopt the learning city concept may apply for membership. An application may only be submitted after it has been formally endorsed by the city's mayor.

To further diversify and expand the network, we strongly encourage applications from capital cities and megacities, cities in Africa, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and underrepresented countries. Their participation will enhance the exchange of knowledge and good practices within the network and help address the unique lifelong learning challenges faced by urban populations

worldwide. By expanding membership, we aim to amplify our collective impact and advance our shared goal of promoting quality education and lifelong learning for all.

### Who is the member?

The member is the city itself, represented by the mayor and/or a formally endorsed city representative. All endorsed representatives act as delegates of the city.

### What are the requirements for becoming a member?

To join the network, a city must pursue the vision of lifelong learning and commit to becoming a learning city; align with UNESCO's values and objectives, promoting dialogue and international cooperation; and reflect the strategies set out in the key documents, the Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities and the Key Features of Learning Cities.

Membership must be formally endorsed by the mayor, who adopts the guiding strategies and submits a completed membership application to the responsible National Commission for UNESCO for endorsement.

As part of ongoing efforts to improve accountability within the network, GNLC members are required to submit a progress report on their learning city project every two years to the GNLC Coordination Team.

### Application procedure

1. Applicants must fill in the GNLC membership application form, available on the [GNLC website](#). The form must be filled in electronically and must include the mayor's signature.
2. Applicants must email the completed application form to their responsible National Commission for UNESCO for endorsement, copying the GNLC Coordination Team at UIL ([learningcities@unesco.org](mailto:learningcities@unesco.org)). Contact details for National Commissions can be found in the [Database of National Commissions for UNESCO](#).
3. The National Commission for UNESCO will review and endorse the selected application(s) by signing them. Endorsed applications will then be submitted to the GNLC Coordination Team at UIL, copying the respective city. UIL reserves the right to request additional documents or records from the city if necessary before accepting an application.
4. Applications will be reviewed by an international jury, which will submit preliminary results to UNESCO. Following the final selection process, UIL will inform National Commissions and cities of the results.

### How many cities per country can be designated as members?

The National Commission for UNESCO may endorse up to three city applications per application period.

### When can an application be submitted?

A call for applications is issued every two years, with an application period during which cities may submit their membership applications to their National Commission for UNESCO.

After the application period has ended, National Commissions have up to one month to review and submit endorsed applications to the GNLC Coordination Team.

## Membership fee

The GNLC does not charge a membership fee. However, to support the development of the network and its services, the GNLC Coordination Team welcomes voluntary financial and non-financial contributions from its members.

## Communication with the GNLC Coordination Team

Member cities are expected to inform the GNLC Coordination Team by email of any updates regarding their city (e.g. a new mayor or focal point, a new learning city plan, events organized within the scope of the network). This ensures that the GNLC Coordination Team remains informed and that each city's online profile is kept up to date.

## Learning city progress report procedures

GNLC members are required to submit a progress report every two years, detailing how they are implementing their learning city project. Instructions for report submission will be sent by the GNLC Coordination Team to member cities before each submission period.

A city's membership will not be renewed if (1) it submits an incomplete progress report, (2) it does not demonstrate progress in building a learning city, and/or (3) it fails to submit its biennial progress report.

Cities whose membership is not renewed may reapply to rejoin the network during the next application period, following the standard application procedures. The GNLC will notify cities whose membership is not renewed.

## Evaluation of membership applications: Jury

### Composition

The jury is composed of independent, high-level international experts with extensive knowledge and experience in lifelong learning and learning cities-related issues. Jury membership also takes into consideration geographical distribution and gender balance. Jury members are appointed by the Director of UIL for a six-year term.

### Remuneration

Jury members do not receive remuneration for their work. The selection process is conducted online and, in cases where in-person participation is required, travel and accommodation allowances will be provided.

### Working language

The jury's working language is English.

### Proceedings

The jury operates in accordance with this concept note and is assisted by a designated member of the GNLC Secretariat. The jury elects a chairperson, and decisions are made by consensus whenever possible. If consensus cannot be reached, decisions are made by secret ballot until a simple majority is obtained.

### Conflict of interest

Members of the UIL Governing Board cannot be appointed as jurors. Jurors facing a real or potential conflict of interest must recuse themselves from deliberations or may be asked to do so by the UIL Director.

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