

Theses of Doctoral (Ph.D.) Dissertation

The learning region – challenge and opportunity

***Experiences of developing disadvantaged regions and
micro-regions in Hungary during the
EU accession period***

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Objective of the dissertation, delimitation of the topic

In recent decades, the often unpredictable and extremely rapid changes in the environment have made it clear that partnerships involving all relevant actors must increasingly play a role in responding to new economic and social challenges, and problems need to be solved as much as possible at their origin, which increases the value of local knowledge and local knowledge creation. New theories and concepts have emerged: besides the learning society, the knowledge society and the knowledge economy, the concept of the learning region (LR) has emerged, having partnership, partnership between different actors within a given area as one of the most important characteristics of the concept, which adds value to the actors. Common elements of different interpretations of the concept of LR are dialogue, partnership, recognition of local knowledge, launching innovation processes, grassroots initiatives, networking and collaboration. Another common feature is that LR concepts designate universities almost exclusively as partners in innovation processes, leaving out or missing out on concepts such as VET and, in general, upper secondary education (Benke 2013a). This, in my view, creates a contradiction between the concept of "ignoring" a large mass of professional interest groups and the desire to encourage bottom-up initiatives. Secondary vocational education institutions are present in a much larger proportion of the regions and are accessible to larger masses than higher education institutions. Their neglect in general, but especially in underdeveloped areas, hurts the power that seeks to harness local knowledge for the development of the area (Benke 2013b). As the proportion of people with low educational attainment is well above the national average in underdeveloped areas, the level of secondary education is also relatively high and appreciated there. Involving the highest-educated locals and being seen as partners can be a lever for the wider community (Benke 2015).

The purpose of my dissertation is twofold: firstly, by studying international literature, I seek to answer the question why LR concepts ignore vocational education and training in innovation processes. This will be supported by an examination of the impact of LR concepts on territorial development processes, including their economic and social dimension.

Lorenz and Lundvall (2006) point out that there is a difference between LR concepts in the interpretation of innovation and in the role of universities and research institutes. A broader range of education and training providers as potential partners can only be found in approaches where the learning region is interpreted as a regional-based development coalition (Asheim & Gertler 2005). LR concepts are primarily considered by universities as innovation

partners of education and training institutions (Lorenz & Lundvall 2006), and they miss out on or miss out on the concept of VET and, in general, upper secondary education and training.

A novel element of my dissertation is that I try to explore the reasons for the lack of vocational education and training in the LR concepts (Benke, 2013). Since an exception to this is research that looks at learning regions and learning communities in the context of VET, Australian research by learning communities (Kimberley and Melville) has been particularly helpful in supporting to highlight the circumstances that hamper emerging the role of VET as partner in LR concepts. This issue is examined in Chapter 2 of my dissertation.

In the literature, while there is a particular focus on universities, there is much less interest in other actors in the learning region. A rare exception is research (eg Nyhan 2007), which focuses on local development from the point of view of LR. At the same time, for the LR concept to be successfully translated into practice, the involvement of all actors in a given region is essential, and it cannot be reduced to universities or R&D institutions. Using the wording borrowed from the management sciences, the new quality must permeate the whole system, it is not enough to apply it only to some of its subsystems. Therefore, in my dissertation, I strive to approach the LR concept from a new angle, considering other actors.

The novelty of my dissertation is to draw attention to a missing element of the LR concept, the importance of approaching the world of work. As part of this - in addition to exploring the reasons for the lack of vocational training in the LR concept - I am adding new elements to the study of the learning region by examining the role of two previously unexplored factors, the social partners and an active labor market tool, jobrotation in the context of the learning region. The social partners have traditionally played an important role in the reconciliation of training interests. In my dissertation I present the transformation of the role of the social partners in reconciling the interests and the partnerships themselves (Benke, 2001, 2016). In addition, I strive to be able to point out, from the point of view of the workers, the working persons, a factor that may be important in the LR concept. Therefore, in my dissertation, I explore a method that is closely related to training and serves to enable employees to understand the widest possible range of work processes by moving, rotating between jobs and tasks. This process is called jobrotation, which is an active tool for managing human resources (Ortega 2001).

On the other hand, European regional development efforts have taken the LR concept as a model in several large-scale projects to catching up in backward areas. Starting from this, I

consider the examination of the connections between domestic spatial development aspirations and LR concepts as an exciting and novel research task. By rethinking my theoretical and previous empirical research, I examine the extent to which the Hungarian regional development ideas of the EU accession period were related, in sync with the LR concept, and to what extent they could contribute to the development of learning regions in the disadvantaged regions and subregions of Hungary. I will also show how the conditions in the disadvantaged micro-regions of Hungary have been met to become a learning region. I present the reasons and circumstances that led to the emergence of the situation, which helped or hindered the birth of the learning regions in the examined micro-regions, approaching both the elitist theoretical approach and the receptiveness of the domestic micro-regions.

Literature evidence suggests that, alongside the discourse of the learning region, there is a growing focus on learning communities, both in policy and research, which is also rich in interpretation (Benke 2014, 2015). Lifelong learning concepts, OECD and UNESCO reports on the topic and the development projects based on them, as well as the political intention to operate with a more easily graspable and manageable concept in the development processes, contributed to learning communities to come to the forefront. All the more so because new EU regional development projects target cities and more fluid "communities" rather than regions. This is why besides the learning regions, I devote a lot of attention to the research of learning communities in my dissertation. From the point of view of the grasp of the topic, the need to study the micro-regional level arises in Hungary, which level played an important role in the domestic spatial development during the examined accession period. As I would like to draw up a macro-level, nationwide view of the possibility of the formation of learning regions, I deal with all seven administrative-statistical (planning) regions and one of the selected disadvantaged micro-regions in each of my dissertations. The phenomena that occur in all regions and in all micro-regions under study, which are apparent, help to draw more general contexts and conclusions.

The question arises as to how the learning region can be interpreted in the underdeveloped regions (regions, micro-regions), and why in my dissertation I focus on these regions. In my opinion, studying the possibility of becoming a learning region in disadvantaged areas is particularly important because in their case - for achieving a lasting development result - the role of bottom-up initiatives, the utilization of internal resources, the mobilization of the untapped intellectual potential of the locals, also the building blocks of the learning region.

Therefore, it is important to examine to what extent the regional development efforts of the EU accession period could help the rise of the disadvantaged regions of Hungary.

In my dissertation I look at the period of the European Union accession, which was an extremely exciting period, full of expectations and planning tasks. Accession to the EU and the possibility of obtaining EU development funds have taken a new dimension to the domestic regional planning and development processes. As the research on regional backwardness and developments aimed at eliminating backwardness received special attention before the accession, I consider the years around the accession to be suitable for studying the conditions of becoming a learning region in selected micro-regions of Hungary during this period. The time since 2004 has been sufficient to examine the documents created at the time of accession from new perspectives and new research questions.

Outline of the methods used

The method of research underlying my dissertation is mainly the processing of literature, as well as the analysis and secondary processing of documents, studies and case studies based on a given set of aspects, which seeks to establish similarities with the learning region concept. To study the theoretical background of the topic I mainly studied English literature. In addition, I used and reinterpreted the results of my research at the National Institute of Vocational Education (NSZI) and the National Institute of Adult Education (NFI) in the 2000s, and the case studies conducted under my guidance in regional vocational and adult education research. I reconsidered my final research study on the role of the social partners in vocational education and training in reconciliation in several countries, the country studies in the context of research and my study on jobrotation. As part of my own research, I analyzed and reinterpreted case studies of two previous research projects, for which I was a research leader, and the related final studies. One study (NSZI 2002) revealed the role of vocational education and training (VET) in regional development plans in all seven planning regions of the country. The other research (NFI 2004) examined the relationship between regional and sectoral planning and its impact on disadvantaged micro-regions based on specific aspects through micro-regional case studies. The results of the secondary analysis of the above regional VET research are presented in chapters 4 and 5 of my dissertation.

In my dissertation I reevaluate the documents of the mentioned regional researches with the help of a set of aspects, while looking for their relation to the most important building blocks of the learning regions. In this way, I undertake to demonstrate the extent to which certain

elements of territorial development during the EU accession period are related to the LR concept. The case studies of the 2002, regional and 2004 micro-regional studies are examined along the following four parts of aspects. The first part focuses on (1) who participated in the preparation of regional and micro-regional development plans. The second part consists of a single element (2), which assesses the amount of time available for planning. The third part examines (3) the vision and innovation objectives of the regions and micro-regions examined. Finally, the fourth part of the aspects (4). deals with the way and circumstances of planning, especially with regard to the quality of the partnership.

The set of aspects outlined, albeit to varying degrees, is suitable for both regional plans and micro-regional plans to find commonalities between the examined plans and the LR concept. In the secondary analysis, I sometimes review my previous statements: as a result of the analysis from a new point of view, I supplement and refine them several times, because with the secondary analysis I can judge and describe certain processes and situations in a more nuanced way than 15 years ago.

In the framework of the research I set up hypotheses. The first group of these approaches the study of learning regions in a new way from the world of work. My first hypothesis is that the problems of interest and prestige in VET make it difficult to develop a VET partner role in LR concepts. My second hypothesis is that the institution of social dialogue, the social partners, can be an effective element of the broad partnership of the learning regions. My third hypothesis is that jobrotation improves employee collaboration and thus helps to develop LR. The second group of my hypotheses is about disadvantaged areas. According to the fourth hypothesis of my dissertation, some elements of the LR concepts can provide useful guidance for the disadvantaged regions and micro-regions to overcome their underdevelopment. The fifth hypothesis of my dissertation, based on my previous researches, indicates that there were only limited opportunities for the development of learning regions in the disadvantaged micro-regions of Hungary during the period of EU accession. Finally, my sixth hypothesis is that domestic territorial development could only contribute to a limited extent to the process of becoming a learning region in the disadvantaged regions of Hungary and in the examined disadvantaged micro-regions during the period of EU accession. Alongside the above hypotheses, my seventh new hypothesis was born during research, which is that learning communities are the germ of the birth of learning regions. I assume that learning regions cannot be created without learning communities. The existence of learning communities is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of learning regions.

Thesis-like listing of results

- In my dissertation, along with the first question related to the world of work, I researched why VET and secondary education in general are excluded from most LR concepts. I find the results of my previous research (Benke 2008, 2013) valid today, as there are maybe prestige problems in dealing with secondary VET institutions as a partner, since VET is a low prestige form of education and training, including the fact that young people often take it as the last choice. The lower the social status of the work the school prepares for, the lower the prestige of the preparatory school and the more vulnerable its students are to the labor market. In the context of VET, the topic of interest concerns, inter alia, school maintenance and school survival efforts. Partnerships can only be established between equal, independent, predictable and trustworthy parties. Centralization in the management of VET, corporate behavior in the short term, and "survival strategies" in VET schools, however, are not conducive to real partner roles (Benke 2018). In practice, there is a long tradition of stereotype, according to which the primary function and purpose of secondary vocational education is to quickly meet the (primarily short-term) needs of the economy. However, carrying out tasks arising from ad hoc market requirements leaves little room for schools to form meaningful partner roles. Secondary analysis of previous regional research documents shows that VET expected by all regional and micro-regional plans and concepts examined, and by all evaluation studies, to respond rapidly to short-term labor market needs. On the other hand, tackling VET as a partner is also hampered by the serious conflicts between the centralization of VET policy and the regional approach of the VET-based local learning community and the need for short-term labor market needs and long-term trust in the learning community. (Melville 2003, Kimberly 2003) There is a significant contrast between market constraints, requirements and the need to connect with VET schools, which does not involve measurable short-term returns. As these diverse circumstances make it difficult to treat VET as a meaningful partner, I believe my hypothesis that VET interest and prestige problems make it difficult to develop VET partnerships in learning region concepts is well-founded. In fact, with the new contexts known in the course of the research, the verification of the original hypothesis has been "overstated". Which also means that there are deeper economic reasons behind the lack of VET partnership in LR concepts than I had formulated in the original hypothesis.

- Along with my second question on the world of work, I examined the role of the social partners in the process of reconciling work-related training with an international perspective. I came to the conclusion that the social partners can strengthen the partnership and the dialogue

between several key actors in a given area, both through their traditional interest reconciliation role and their emerging role based on new foundations. Although it is not clear yet what changes will be made in the social partnership to a move towards more open coordination, deeper social embeddedness, genuine volunteering and more open, honest communication, I believe that both traditional and a transformative, more open social partnership can positively influence the process of becoming a learning region. Therefore, my hypothesis that the social dialogue institution, the social partners can be an effective element of the broad partnership of the learning region, and thus the positive role of the social partnership in the development of the learning region has been confirmed.

- My third question on the world of work was about jobrotation. The study of the literature has led to the recognition that the jobrotation method contributes to a broader understanding of work tasks and thus supports more effective collaboration and partnership between employees. During jobrotation, the employees' explicit and implicit knowledge, awareness, preparedness and horizons are expanded in such a way that a more responsible partnership can be established among them. I regard this responsible partnership and the higher level of knowledge gained through jobrotation as factors that can be a great help in the process of developing learning regions. Therefore, I believe that my preliminary hypothesis has been confirmed regarding the positive contribution of jobrotation to the construction of the learning region.

- With regard to disadvantaged regions and micro-regions, I have examined whether the concept of a learning region can help their development. By emphasizing bottom-up initiatives through self-development, utilization of internal resources, mobilization of local knowledge and the untapped intellectual potential of the locals, the learning region concept is an example of how disadvantaged areas stand out. Secondary analysis of my previous regional research proves that one of the important building blocks of the learning region concepts, the utilization of internal resources, was given special emphasis in the less developed Hungarian regions. The regions, which are not rich in external sources, tried to make maximum use (but at least much more efficiently than before) of their internal capacities and internal resources. At the same time, the LR concept, by emphasizing the importance of dialogue and partnership, draws attention to a factor that is lacking in the culture of domestic development, but without which the disadvantaged micro-regions cannot more effectively protect their own interests. This confirmed my hypothesis that some elements of the LR concepts could provide useful guidance for the disadvantaged regions and

micro-regions to overcome their underdevelopment. The results of the Hungarian researches are related to several examples found in the foreign literature. Nyhan (2007) clearly indicates the key importance of the partnership issue when trying to translate learning region concepts into reality. On the other hand, as Woolcock (1998) points out, the concept of a learning region is attractive to planners and politicians because it promises economic growth, job creation and social cohesion at the same time, and in particular for regions with poor territorial competences.

- The next issue of my research was the extent to which there were opportunities for the development of learning regions in the disadvantaged micro-regions of Hungary during the EU accession period. A second analysis of previous research confirmed the experience of the 2000s (Benke 2005): I concluded that the conditions for the establishment of learning regions in the disadvantaged micro-regions were very limited in the period of EU accession. There was a lack of knowledge about this, and the significance of the learning region as a model and practice remained unknown to the general public. Behind all this was a lack of knowledge, secondly problems of attitude and interest. The extremely low level of trust and partnership in the adoption of the learning region model has not been favored, and it has also been countered by the generally low level of advocacy capacity, especially in disadvantaged micro-regions. The implementation of effective planning in the examined micro-regions was also hindered by the lack of financial resources, mentioned by them as the first problem, by the fatigue and disillusionment of the people living in the micro-region, and by the emigration of the working age population. This confirmed my hypothesis that there were only limited opportunities for the development of learning regions in the disadvantaged micro-regions of Hungary during the period of EU accession.

- Based on the last, sixth research question of my dissertation, I was looking for the answer to the extent to which domestic spatial developments helped to become a learning region in disadvantaged regions and in the examined disadvantaged micro-regions during the period of EU accession. A second analysis of previous research documents led to the conclusion that two very important elements of the LR concept, namely the integration of bottom-up initiatives into local plans and the requirement for a broad social dialogue, appeared in the methodology of the design process under review, but both helped to develop learning regions only to a limited extent. Thus, the examined regional development efforts could not contribute to the significant improvement of the situation of disadvantaged regions and micro-regions. In summary, at the micro-regional level, many factors made it difficult to develop an effective

planning process that could have helped to become a learning region. Based on the results of the secondary analysis, 15 years after the previous research, I believe that there are complex (economic, social psychological) reasons behind the problems. The training of the unskilled local actors could only partially mitigate the shortcomings. The result of the secondary analysis is in line with the well-known proposition in the literature that explicit knowledge “imported” from outside experts in disadvantaged micro-regions loses its meaning without the local implicit knowledge, and therefore the best development (Lengyel 2004), therefore, for the development of disadvantaged micro-regions it is indispensable for the local people to participate meaningfully in the planning process. And since this did not happen in the case of the examined micro-regions, the plans for their development could not be successful either. At the time of writing this dissertation, I believe that the ultimate driving force and sustainer of the problem is the utilitarian economic approach, the effects of which have not been addressed in the adopted EU planning methodology. My hypothesis was found above that domestic spatial development could contribute only to a limited extent to the birth of learning regions in the disadvantaged regions and the examined disadvantaged micro-regions during the period of EU accession.

In conclusion, neither the regional development plans nor the condition of the local societies in the examined disadvantaged regions and micro-regions allowed a significant shift towards the learning region during the period of EU accession. One of the most serious problems, in my opinion, was that the participants in micro-regional planning did not realize the importance of giving them the opportunity, never before experienced, to shape local developments. On the one hand, the prevailing utilitarian economic approach and, on the other hand, the social unpreparedness for a new and strange task from our traditions and culture, partly explain the sub-regional planning failures.

Participatory and community planning are known in the literature to achieve broader civic participation (Faragó 2005). I suspect that the shift could be spatial development based on the capability approach, which outlines a much more sensitive alternative to social problems than the utilitarian economic philosophy. However, the study of this topic went beyond the scope of my dissertation, so in the future I will mark as an important research topic the possibility of linking the learning region theme and the capability approach, and studying the capability approach based development in disadvantaged areas.

- I consider my last hypothesis 7, born during the research, as a logical conjecture. During my research on the LR topic, I came to the conclusion that learning communities can be the starting point, the germ for the birth of learning regions. Learning regions cannot be created without learning communities, the existence of learning communities is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the creation of learning regions. It is logically clear that the expectations of the learning regions at policy level cannot be met at the meso or macro level unless they are based on successful social partnerships at the micro level. Each type of learning community can contribute to the development of learning regions to varying degrees. In terms of their tasks and challenges, the “place-based learning communities” (Faris 2004) are closest to the LR concept. On the other hand, the concept of a learning region reinforces the spirit that problems can and must be recognized and understood locally, that a common vision for a cohesive field can be locally and widely conceived, and that partnerships can be built locally. It logically follows that the learning region does not function without local communities, assumes that they exist, draws on them and builds on them. I think the conjecture is logically proven, in practice it is possible to get closer to its testing by researching smaller regional units and learning communities of a successful learning region. Practical testing of this has exceeded the scope of my dissertation, but I think it is an exciting future research task.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

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1. **Benke, M. M.**: A regionális és az ágazati tervezés kapcsolata a hátrányos helyzetű térségekben. Nemzeti Felnőttképzési Intézet, Budapest, 129 p., 2005. (Felnőttképzési Kutatási Füzetek, ISSN 1787-6982 ; 4.)
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