

Designing Learning Ecosystems

A WISE Living Lab
Playbook



وايزز
WISE

من مبادرات مؤسسة قطر
An Initiative of Qatar Foundation

The background is a dark teal color with several large, overlapping, organic shapes in a lighter teal and a vibrant red. The red shape is on the left side, resembling a stylized leaf or flame. The lighter teal shapes are scattered across the right and bottom areas, creating a layered, abstract composition.

**The future of
education lies
in Learning
Ecosystems**

A growing interest in Learning Ecosystems

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in researching and mapping Learning Ecosystems. Academics and researchers have sought to map actors and projects, as well as tried to understand trends and best practices to better define this concept. Indeed, since 2015 alone there have been many foundational papers and reports published including Learning Ecosystems, An Emerging Praxis for the Future of Education published by the Global Education Forum, The OECD Handbook for Innovative Learning Environments, Comprendre la dynamique des écosystèmes apprenants en Afrique published by l'Agence Française de Développement, the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities Guiding Documents, and Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models published by the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), to name but a few. To add to the academic research, policymakers have begun to explore and define the policy and legal frameworks within which Learning Ecosystems could be encouraged, as well as be able to flourish and thrive. Some examples include Day One Project in the USA, Vers une société apprenante in France, and most recently the report published by WISE: Developing Local Learning Ecosystems in Qatar to Advance Equity, Inclusion and Social Cohesion. ^{[1][2]}

The reason for this growing interest has come organically, following the flourishing of initiatives labeled or referred to as 'Learning Ecosystems', across the globe. Some examples of these include; Ako Ōtautahi Learning City Christchurch, Cities of Learning, Big Picture Learning, RSA Cities of Learning, Remake Learning, Educació360, NET EDU Project, and the History Co:Lab are but some examples. In fact, many of these projects have served as examples and case studies for the WISE Learning Ecosystems Living Lab, which has led to this playbook.

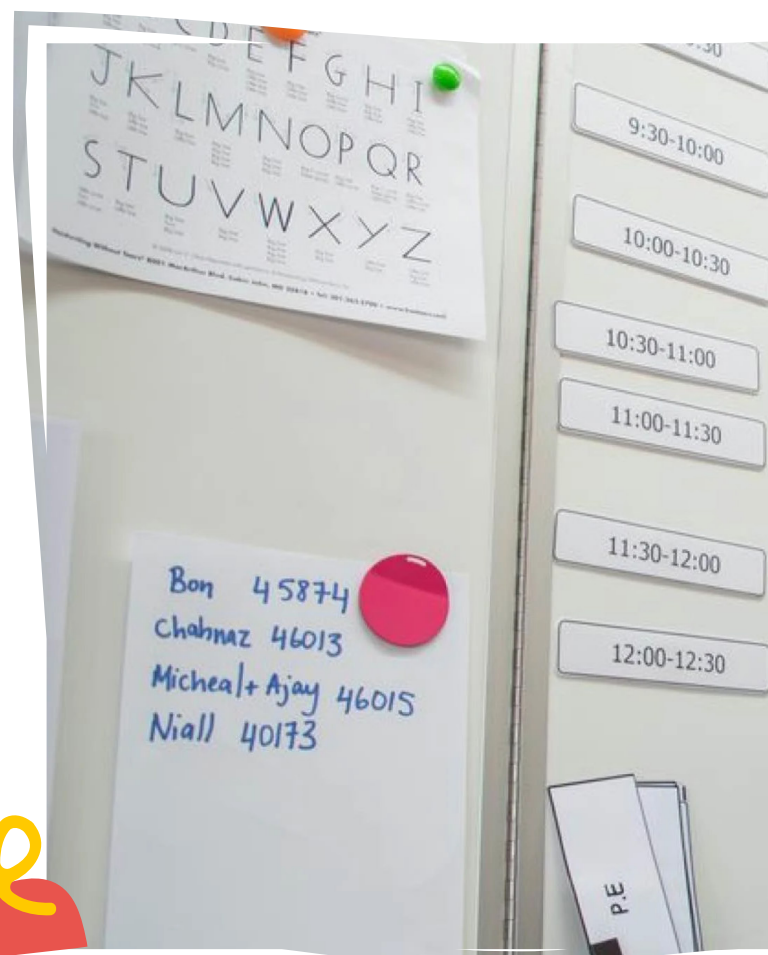
Thanks to the increasing research and interest, many definitions of Learning Ecosystems abound, each revolving around a similar theme – a system or group of people, coming together with their resources to support the evolution of learning within their community. This playbook is deeply anchored in WISE's and Qatar Foundation's effort to research Learning Ecosystems and is built upon the definition put forward by WISE in 2019 in the Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models report by Valeria Hannon, Louise Thomas, Sarah Ward and Tom Beresford:

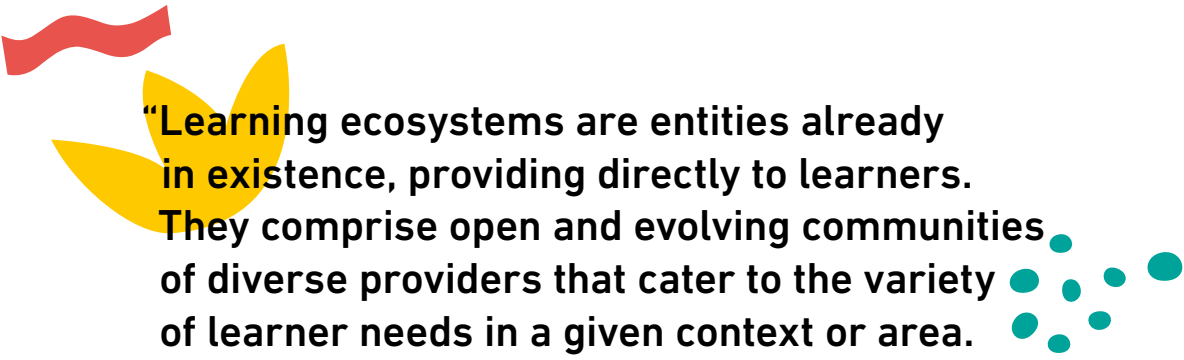
“Learning Ecosystems are entities already in existence providing directly to learners. They comprise open and evolving communities of diverse providers that cater to the variety of learner needs in a given context or area. They are usually supported by an innovative credentialing system or technology phone that replaces or augments the traditional linear system of examinations and graduation.”

More concretely perhaps, a Learning Ecosystem is a network of people connected through their relationships and shared technology, resources, skills and tools, that work together to co-create and test solutions to enhance and advance learning within their community.

At its core, what is important to remember is that a Learning Ecosystem will aim to engage with a diverse pool of stakeholders – specifically integrating people who would not be considered “traditional” learning providers – to facilitate the discovery of new learning solutions and pathways. The work in a Learning Ecosystem is all community-based, effectively working to create a life-long learning society. Everyone can be a learner – at any age – therefore, each individual is systematically involved and invited to build and share their knowledge and discoveries with others. Similarly, a Learning Ecosystem also means that everyone can be a ‘teacher’ or more precisely, a learning provider; through the lens of a Learning

Ecosystem. Everyone has learnings to share as well as a unique personal context. Your neighbor, the local postman, and the librarian each have unique skills, knowledge and life experience that can be turned into a learning opportunity for someone else. Each step of the way, new pathways to learning are prototyped and tested with results shared to improve practices in the community and beyond.





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Learning Ecosystems as a way to rethink learning

Sometimes known as learning communities, cities of learning, or even campuses of innovation, Learning Ecosystems are vectors of pedagogical innovation that have already been successfully active in many places around the world and have played a key role in reinventing ways of learning and living in the world. No one has put it more plainly than Pavel Lushka and his team at Global Education Forward in their seminal report, from where we have sourced this table (see Figure 1). They made a strong case in demonstrating how Learning Ecosystems could allow us to move on from an industrial model of education.

Indeed, we are a far cry from the world that built the industrial model of education. We now live in a digital age, which has completely revolutionized the age of learning – learners can have access to any type of information, anywhere, anytime, whether it is factual or not. Every tiny bit of data is out there, at a learner's fingertips, effectively giving them the ability to be in charge of their own learning over the web. A disconnect occurs when entering the formal education system: our traditional institutions have removed the agency from the learner, turning them into passive learners. This has led to a drop (if not stop altogether) of interest in learning and little has been done to update this system. This is why, central to the notion of a Learning Ecosystem is the notion of learner agency. In other words, it enables the learner to be the hero and leader of their learning journey. Re-positioning the learner at the center of their learning journey through a Learning Ecosystem can re-spark curiosity and enjoyment, ensure they feel fulfilled by the learning opportunities they are able to complete, guide them towards personalized pathways for their future and ignite an interest to become a lifelong, active learner.

As a Learning Ecosystem reflects the people within it and its regional context, there is no set model or template. A Learning Ecosystem can be organization

based (a Learning Ecosystem put together by an NGO representing First-Nations), institution-based (a Learning Ecosystem led by a city, a museum or a school), thematic-based (a STEM Learning Ecosystem); it could also be learner and/or learning provider-centered and learner age-focused. It could also be all these things at once!

Many Learning Ecosystems do share some key characteristics, such as having a strong focus on leveraging informal and non-formal out-of-school learning opportunities. This is incredibly important as it has emerged that learners at the primary and secondary level spend 80% of their waking hours outside of the school environment. Learning Ecosystems therefore seek to connect learners with learning opportunities outside of the formal education system. Learning ecosystems revolve around a learner-centered approach with learner agency at the heart.

What is most interesting about Learning Ecosystems is their ability to flourish and thrive in a wide range of contexts; indeed, too often has innovative education been linked to the financial and political stability of a region. 'State-of-the-art' education is not often linked to areas of crises, inequality or remoteness. And yet, Learning Ecosystems could very well mark a turning point as research has shown how they have come to thrive and provide quality education for learners in under-privileged areas in South Africa, Senegal, Morocco, or even refugees in Lebanon and Turkey. In certain cities in America, Learning Ecosystems has meant bridging gaps in underprivileged neighborhoods - such as in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. The flexibility, adaptability and learner agency-centered approach of a Learning Ecosystem enables learners from all over the world to access education, where previously, the formal education sector was unable to support them. You can read more on this [here](#).

Industrial Education

Institution-focused education driven by cognitive learning and passivation of learners (e.g. lecturing or memorizing)

Education prepares learners for professional level

Learning occurs within specialized learning institutions (e.g. schools or colleges)

Learning is organized in a limited number of pre-set "trajectories" through standardized "batches" most often grouped by age and gender

Educational system is often disconnected from the needs of economy and society, driven by its own standards and practices.

Educational system is predominantly governed by national governments

Learning Ecosystems

Learner-focused education driven by experience based forms of learning and proactive learner engagement (e.g. project or play-based learning)

Lifelong learning blended at the personal, social, and professional levels

Learning occurs across networks of specialized and non-specialized learning providers and venues (e.g. workplaces and public spaces)

Learning is organized as a personalized learning "journey", occurring individually and in various "peer" groups

Learning ecosystem is interconnected with, and co-created by various stakeholders within the economy and society

Learning ecosystem is governed through an interaction of intentionally diverse and inclusive local and global stakeholders, including businesses, social movements, local and online communities

Figure 1 - Table from GEF, Learning Ecosystems, An Emerging Praxis for the Future of Education, 2020



Why a playbook on Learning Ecosystems

As highlighted above and by the Wise Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models Report, there is a clear growing academic interest in the concept of Learning Ecosystems, a growing number of projects and initiatives labeled as Learning Ecosystems, and an ongoing effort to model existing Learning Ecosystem initiatives. Theoretical foundations of Learning Ecosystems are steadily growing stronger, but many education and learning stakeholders say they still lack access to knowledge, a community of practice and practical guidelines on how to build and manage Learning Ecosystems.

Designing and building new ecosystems can seem intimidating at first glance; even more so when considering this more recent model of Learning Ecosystems as there is no clear-cut journey. Where should one start? What and how does one learn? What needs to be considered? Who and where to turn to? Who should be included? How do we engage them? All of these questions are the 'raison d'être' of the Learning Ecosystems Living Lab set up by WISE in 2019. The aim was to mobilize practitioners, experts, policymakers and innovators as a global community of practice and thought-leadership. More importantly, this knowledge and community was to come together to identify the design principles of Learning Ecosystems, from which this playbook was born.

In pursuit of this will to support our community, one key challenge we were faced with was that the design of a Learning Ecosystem seemed to happen very organically: the champion-groups of individuals or

organizations we spoke to very rarely followed a clear and intentional method to build their Learning Ecosystems. Instead, they speak of very iterative "messy" processes that led them to where they are today. In our desire for this playbook to be useful to our community in a very tangible and practical way, we had to make sense of this mess and offer an 'intentional' and 'logical model' that one could follow to design a Learning Ecosystem in their community. Of course, some of you may find that the ingredients for a Learning Ecosystems fall into place organically and your methodology will carve itself out. However, for those that may feel the need for more intentional guidance, this playbook is for you.

This playbook has tried to be as instructive and clear as possible, so as to make it accessible to any person who would want to launch a Learning Ecosystem. It is hoped that this playbook will be useful to those who make education their daily struggles, including teachers, extra-curricular educators, school principals or even local and regional councilors for education etc. But we hope this playbook will be as useful to those of you who aren't traditionally linked to formal education whether you are be museum directors, local business owners, librarians, or at the head of a youth employment network. So long as there is a passion to create change for learners in your community, we have written this playbook to be as of much help as you may need to get started.

Developing the Playbook

To develop this Playbook, the WISE Learning Ecosystems Living Lab team organized 4 global expert workshops, 4 high-level panels, 4 “Special Focus” article series and conducted over 60 interviews with Learning Ecosystems practitioners and experts.

(All content available [here](#))

About Living Lab

Learning Ecosystems Living Lab (LELL) is a new initiative anchored in a place-based and collective design approach to mobilize practitioners, experts, policymakers & innovators as a global community of practice and thought-leadership that will support the design of key components of Learning Ecosystems in different regional contexts. This initiative seeks to disrupt and spearhead the sharing of innovative ideas and support the design of Learning Ecosystems globally.

The global community of practice aims to:

- Identify shared challenges and contextualized solutions in designing and implementing Learning Ecosystems
- Serve as a springboard for content and research that captures and designs high-impact practices and policies in the community and beyond
- Serve as a knowledge hub of design principles and best practices
- Positively impact place-based learning and societal objectives in various contexts



As highlighted by the WISE Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models report, there is a clear growing interest in the concept of Learning Ecosystems. Theoretical foundations of Learning Ecosystems are steadily growing stronger, but education stakeholders still lack access to knowledge, a community of practice and practical guidelines on how to build and manage Learning Ecosystems. The goal of LELL is to bridge this gap and to develop innovative and robust models of Learning Ecosystems to be applied in various global contexts.

How to read and use this playbook

The playbook was created and divided to resemble a 3-tiered cake. Each of the chapters combine to form key ingredients for the success of a particular layer. Each layer needs to be successfully baked for the next – more intricate – layers to be added on top. Much like this baking analogy, you and your core team need to feel confident you have done the groundwork for each part, before moving onto the next, as this will determine the success of your Learning Ecosystem. But this playbook would also like to offer a disclaimer if you will: very much like baking, undertaking the journey of bringing a Learning Ecosystem to life is messy. This is unsurprising, as Learning Ecosystems require so many people to work together, in many different ways, over a long period of time. Every expert we have spoken to over the course of writing this playbook has confirmed that, however well-planned and thought out you and your team may be, when you embark on this journey, prepare to be surprised and warm up your quick-thinking and adaptability muscles.



In Part 1: Preparing for your Learning Ecosystem, you will understand the groundwork it will take for your core team to complete a solid base for your ecosystem. The various steps – which include building a logic model and mapping stakeholders and learning opportunities within your chosen region – will ultimately lead you to collecting the essential data you need, before even thinking about building your Learning Ecosystem. You need to understand the gaps at hand, your target audience and what solutions would be best. To complete these steps, you will only actively need your core team. Although every Learning Ecosystem journey is different, the steps in Part 1 should take you approximately 3 months to complete.

Part 2: Designing your Learning Ecosystem is made up of 4 steps to guide you as you start getting into the nitty-gritty design stage. This is when you and your team will prototype, build an outreach plan, and collaborate heavily within the core team, but also with external stakeholders. Depending on the size and context of your community where you intend to build your Learning Ecosystem, we expect that you will be collaborating with between 10-30 people. This is a higher volume of people than what you needed in Part 1, but it is for good reason: in Part 2, you will need to decide on the leadership and governance of your Learning Ecosystem, as well as understand how to collaborate and create strong external networks.

Finally, in **Part 3: The Learning Experience,** you will be tailoring the user experience of your Learning Ecosystem to its learners. This is where you will have a look at different ways of connecting the learner to the learning which will happen through your Learning Ecosystem. By definition, this step will require you to connect with potentially hundreds or thousands of people as you reach out for feedback from learners, their caregivers and anyone else coming into contact with the tangible product produced from your Learning Ecosystem.

Every chapter should be seen as an introduction to the questions being asked – indeed, once we dived deeper into the research chapter, it became apparent we could have written entire playbooks for each of them! Instead, these chapters were built as introductions to present a big picture in order to facilitate the reader - and future Learning Ecosystem leader - in building an understanding of the different paths you could take and the resources you would need. Every chapter has smaller toolboxes or resource boxes, full of links, further readings, some tips and even some downloadable worksheets for you to discover and dig deeper, if you so wish.

In addition to the resource boxes dotted along every chapter, you will find a bibliography where you can access further reading and research into each topic. We have done our best to give you helpful, accurate guidance on each step of the process, but this is by no means an exhaustive list; your Learning Ecosystem will be unique and tailored to you and your community's needs.

The authors would like to offer one last important note: we would like to insist on the idea that there are many more paths to building a Learning Ecosystem than the one we have suggested. Every Learning Ecosystem is unique, a reflection of the people and places that hold it up, and there is therefore no 'one size fits all' route to building one. However, we hope that this playbook is the beginning of further research and propose-designed methodologies for Learning Ecosystems, by WISE and its community, and that this playbook will be regularly updated in years to come.

Are you ready to embark on the journey of building your Learning Ecosystem?

[1] Gregg Behr, "Investing in Community Learning Ecosystems", Day One Project, February 8, 2021, <https://www.dayoneproject.org/ideas/investing-in-community-learning-ecosystems/>

[2] Becchetti-Bizot, Houzel et Taddei, mars 2017

[3] The Sprout Fund, 2015

