Lifelong Learning: the agenda and the response

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Lifelong Learning Priorities

The ‘Learning Society’ has been variously ‘invoked’ as a means to produce a skilled and flexible workforce, to widen participation in education and to enhance participatory citizenship.

It is probably fair to say that the balance of the literature on the topic prioritises the economic and vocational concerns, with a particular emphasis on addressing basic skills and on ongoing updating of vocational/professional skills. Thus, the two key government lifelong learning targets are to:

- Improve the basic skills levels of 1.5 million adults by 2007
- Reduce by at least 40% the number of workers who lack NVQ 2 or equivalent qualifications by 2010

In furtherance of these targets we have recently witnessed initiatives such as:

- Skills for Life [national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills]
- Establishment of new Sector Skills Councils
- University for Industry’s Learndirect service
- Establishment of a network of UK online centres to widen access to IT in disadvantaged communities
- Establishment of Centres of Vocational Excellence in FE Colleges
- Establishment of New Technology Institutes

The Learning Divide

The driving force behind these priorities and initiatives is undoubtedly the deep learning divide in our society. On one side are those with qualifications who carry on learning both formally and informally in work and beyond. On the other side is the majority who have few, if any, formal qualifications and who have not been involved in systematic learning since leaving compulsory education. A range of studies demonstrate the social divisions underpinning this divide [e.g., Macrae et al. 1997; Keep 1997; McGivney 1996a]. It is the link between social class and adult participation that is most marked. There is also a strong correlation between social class, achievement at 16 and at 18, and progression to further/higher education [which has prompted initiatives such as Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression].

Establishing a Culture of Lifelong Learning

Addressing the divide demands a new learning culture marked by a vision of learning as a normal, accessible and enjoyable feature of everyday life for all people. Whilst institutions such as universities and colleges will be expected to play a significant role [and they will be judged in part for their effectiveness in promoting learning for all], there will be a need to extend learning to the workplace, to voluntary and community settings and to homes. This realisation is behind recent developments such as the location of Learndirect in community settings [including libraries and football clubs] and IT networking of whole communities [e.g. the Wired-Up Communities initiative in East Manchester]. There has also been a proliferation of employee development programmes, e.g. at Fords and Rover and in the NHS, together with trade union schemes such as ‘Return to Learn’ in UNISON and the TUC’s ‘Bargaining for Skills project. Indeed, it is evident that a major contribution to the national strategy will be made through learning at the workplace. For many, this is the only place where they will engage in formal learning.

The Role of Higher Education

HEFCE has already taken steps to adjust its funding methodology to widen participation in lifelong learning, e.g. through the introduction of HEROBIC, New Technology Institute and Partnerships for Progression funding streams and the widening participation allocation to institutions. More generally, in future, universities are likely to see considerable
growth in part-time study, distance learning and technology-based programmes. They will need to ensure that they are positioned to respond to this agenda. This will in part depend on internally driven commitments and developments. It will also depend on developing strategic partnerships with external agencies that are involved in the lifelong learning agenda. These include further education providers, employers and trade unions, workforce development organisations and community groups. Here, the notion of learning networks is significant; they are crucial to support lifelong learning [e.g. Benn 1997; Merrifield 1997].

More specifically, universities will need to:

- Contribute more to the guidance and counselling of both potential and actual returners to learning. These activities are particularly significant for the target groups [e.g. Dent 1998] but institutions are often unresponsive to the full range of adult learners [e.g. FEDA 1996; McGivney 1996b].
- Guarantee a wider range progression routes into and within higher education, preferably within a context of a credit framework agreement between institutions which enables a credit accumulation and transfer system to develop that will facilitate the management of diverse learning opportunities between different institutions, settings and learning modes.
- Engage more with workplace learning developments.
- Do much more regarding the development of more flexible approaches which enable individuals to learn at their own pace and move in and out of learning. Here, the part-time imperative looms large. So too does the matter of the place of learning. Increasingly this will be the place of the learner. In turn, this signals the growing importance of open and distance learning and of ICT in supporting this.

**MMU’s Response**

In terms of the broad widening participation agenda MMU has performed well. Thus, all of HEFCE’s benchmarks are met or exceeded. These include those concerning recruitment from state schools, from low participation neighbourhoods and from social groups IIIM, IV and V. Moreover, there are currently a number of developments in response to the sorts of imperatives set out above. These include:

- The ReachOut initiative
- Involvement in both the Manchester and Cheshire New Technology Institutes – the former in partnership with MANCAT and New East Manchester, the latter in partnership with Chester College and the Cheshire FE Colleges Consortium, and both in partnership with the Sector Skills Council and the NW Regional Development Agency
- Involvement in both the Greater Manchester and Cheshire Partnerships for Progression, both involving collaboration with the further education sector, Connexions, the LSC and workforce development organisations
- Pre-entry guidance initiatives with incoming students deemed to be at particular risk of ‘dropout’
- Exploration with all HEIs and post-16 institutions in Greater Manchester of the possibility of forming a Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance, the key focus of which would be to develop a credit framework, a framework for Foundation Degree development and progression accords
- Involvement with other Manchester universities and Manchester City Council in the ‘Knowledge Capital’ development
- A focus within the University’s Learning and Teaching strategy on the development of open, distance and e-learning

However, the challenge is great and much more needs to be done by way of responding to it. In this author’s view, for MMU key imperatives include:

- positioning the University much more closely and strategically with organisations and agencies that deal with potential returners to learning
- responding more vigorously to workplace learning developments
- further developing more flexible approaches to learning by attending to issues concerning the pace, modes and places of learning
- more clearly targeted pre-entry and on-course guidance and support of those likely to be at greatest risk of ‘drop-out’

Whilst recognising that there are outstanding examples of practice regarding all of the above in various parts of the University, the argument here is that there is considerable scope for development throughout the institution. That is the challenge.
References

http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000202.htm


McGivney, V. (1996b) Staying or Leaving the Course: Non-completion and Retention of Mature Students in Further and Higher Education. Leicester, NIACE

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