

Lifelong Learning UK Conference 2009

The Power of Lifelong Learning: Innovation During a ~~Recession~~ Recovery?

Tuesday 8 December, Kings Place, London N1

A Round-up of the Day

Lifelong Learning UK's 2009 Conference gathered professionals working across its remit – in career guidance, community learning and development, further education, higher education, libraries, archives and information services and work based learning.

All change

The event focused on how the lifelong learning sector should respond to the current economic and social climate and rapidly changing political landscape.

A 'knowledge economy'

Amidst all this, the Conference speakers had the task of providing their insight into how lifelong learning could emerge stronger from this period of change. The economist and Work Foundation Executive Vice-Chair, **Will Hutton**, gave the audience a tour d'horizon of the world post-credit crunch. He forecast that to compete with the emerging Eastern markets on a long-term basis, a shrunken banking sector was essential, with the lynchpin of Britain's growth being the development of a 'knowledge economy'.

This concept, he stated, was a wide one encompassing engineers developing new ideas or nurses using complex medical equipment to treat patients. He pointed to an unpredictable future, filled with an increasing number of inventions, breakthroughs and discoveries. With this as the context, Will set out the idea of a growing knowledge economy, which, fuelled by high-level skills, could develop the technology and the thinking that would allow the UK to be at the forefront of answering some of the world's biggest challenges, such as climate change, energy security, food supply and global poverty.

On the Horizon

- The public finances mean reduced funding.
- Changes to the machinery of Government in the skills and learning environment.
- A General Election next year
- An increasingly digital and technologically-driven world.



Sgiliau i Broffesiynolion Dysgu



Skills for Learning Professionals

Making the case for our sector

Will Hutton outlined that for the UK to be successful and for its workforce to respond to new challenges, learning throughout life would be critical for people to develop alert and innovative minds, equipped with an understanding of new technologies and ways of doing things. Given this, Will stated that the UK needed to learn to love and value lifelong learning, not seeing it as cost, but as an investment.

Innovation and skills

With the importance of the lifelong learning sector predicted to rise in the coming years, its skills and performance will be crucial to our economy and communities. Workforce development must take place in spite of a tougher public spending backdrop. A range of speakers identified that being more innovative, as well as efficient, was the key to success. Motivational speaker, **Paul Sloane**, set out the mindset that workforce planners should adopt.

Listening to our sector

The contributions were not just limited to the main hall. Focused workshops looked at how the skills and performance of the lifelong learning sector could be improved. Alongside the speeches and debates in the main hall, the workshop discussions split into four themes: personalised learning and employability, sustainability for employment and skills, future skills: innovation and community cohesion. Over the next few pages, we will touch upon the key points made on the main stage and within the workshops.

How to Innovate

- Set a vision and allow yourself to think strategically.
- Support your employees' ideas and give them ownership of them.
- Understand which organisational rules you can and can't break.
- Ask questions and continually review performance.
- Purposefully do things differently from the others.
- Welcome failure.

Main topics of debate arising at the Conference

1. The Skills System
2. What Skills?
3. Successful Learning and Support

1. The Skills System

One of the central points made throughout the day was that the current system of providing skills will not allow us to forecast an increasingly unpredictable future economy.

Collaboration

Instead, **Stephen Uden**, Microsoft's Head of Skills and Economic Affairs, proposed to wide support a learning-opportunity system where employers, providers, and learners could work together to map changing skills needs and standards.

In a world which we can't foresee, having a central predict-and-provide skills system will not work.

Stephen Uden, Microsoft

Partnership-working was one of the key methods earmarked for future success. Many contributors focused on the need for Lifelong Learning UK to promote better collaboration to help break down barriers between the various groups that make up lifelong learning, as a way of planning for skills needs and predicting for a more uncertain future. Those in the 'How to help people in a recovery' workshop felt that league tables encouraged institutions to look inward, instead of working through consortia with higher education and the third sector.

Learning support and access to information, irrespective of age

A key area of discussion throughout the day was age. Attendees heard how the recession had primarily affected young people, barring them from the job market. As such, the short-term focus is on supporting young people which was also borne out in the Chancellor's Pre-Budget Report announced a day after the Lifelong Learning UK Conference. However, looking to the future, many attendees felt that lifelong learning should reflect that the workforce will be older, and people will have to 'turn to' education at different stages of life.

'How to help young people during a recovery' Workshop

- Reduce the vocational/academic divide.
- Young people are all different – they should be able to study a range of qualifications.
- Traditional forms of learning are not appropriate for every pupil. Schools should not deem to have failed if students get fewer than 5 A*-C GCSEs.

One popular appeal came from panelist, **Arwyn Watkins**, Chair of the National Training Federation for Wales, who called for the UK Government to equalise apprenticeship funding for learners over the age of 19. His fellow panelist, **Jenny Williams** of NIACE, who led the *Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*, went further. She called for a re-balancing of education funding in favour of people over 25.

2. What Skills?

During the day there was a lot of debate about the skills required to develop the future workforce. Some pointed to a science, maths and engineering focus. Employers, beyond requiring basic numeracy and literacy in their employees, spoke of the importance of softer skills, such as communication and problem-solving. Enabling a more flexible workforce for a more unpredictable future will mean that those delivering learning will see a diversification in their roles.

Performance and change management were other areas identified that the lifelong learning workforce will need to invest in. As funding and machinery of Government changes take place, this will take on extra significance.

In the workshop, 'Equality and Diversity – Learning in the Workplace, **Kathleen Walsh** and her colleagues **Mustapha Jama** and **Reba Rahman**, spoke about a Cambridge Education @ Islington project which assists teachers in understanding the culture of the different nationalities that they teach. Mustapha and Reba also help parents from ethnic minority backgrounds to understand more about the education system in the UK and build the confidence needed to engage in their children's schools.

When Northern Ireland cut its further education colleges from 16 to just 6, our teachers had to adapt to providing for the same demand, only more spread. Teachers were coached to incorporate remote learning into their lessons.

Trevor Carson, Director of the Learning and Skills Development Agency, Northern Ireland

3. Successful Learning and Support

We heard from Sir David Melville about how technology is changing the way information is delivered. Panelist **Dame Lynne Brindley**, Chief Executive of the British Library, outlined the way the digital world is enabling the sale of content through the internet, transforming it into a 'global information services player' – this diversification means a real need for its staff to be fully I.T. literate.

The digital age means that education cannot merely be 'rationed' or 'portioned' out. Instead, an array of information is available to the citizen - we need to think about how learners can use and assess this.

Sir David Melville, Chair Lifelong Learning UK.

The 'Embracing Change: 21st Century Learning' workshop gave advice on how technology could be used to help deliver work, college or community based learning. One of the sub-groups in the workshop was led by **Ian Clifford**, Head of Policy and Business Development at UK Online Centres. He showed attendees how his organisation, whose ICT support centres operate in some of the most deprived areas of the country, has been able to attract learners not previously suited to traditional forms of teaching through 'easy-to-use' IT services. In addition, both speakers and workshop leaders, such as **Howard Hills** of Towards Maturity, talked about how shorter, remote learning really suited many small organisations.

Despite all the positive aspects that new technologies bring, the unanimous view from speakers and contributors was very much that technology is not a panacea – indeed, as Stephen Uden remarked: 'Technology is a good servant and a poor master'.

Building confidence

Another popular point coming from the floor was that some people do not always feel confident enough to begin training. The answer, many contributors felt, was face-to-face interaction with a tutor or youth worker, as well as good advice and guidance.

Indeed, community learning was seen as particularly valuable in this respect because of its inclusive, flexible, accessible and affordable nature. An example of this was outlined in the 'Community Cohesion' workshop where **Liz Cousins** of Martin Yarnit Associates talked about the Community Learning Champions scheme, which involves volunteers working to encourage people in their communities to re-enter education, whether formal or informal.

Providing guidance

Quality information, advice and guidance play an increasingly critical role in helping people to secure a job, or choose the right training course or career direction. Yet, the view from those in the 'Career Guidance and Portfolio Careers' workshop facilitated by **Patricia Pugh, Lifelong Learning UK** was that policy-makers need to be more informed about career guidance practitioners.

'Career Guidance and Portfolio Careers' Workshop

- Chance plays a big role in careers but you can prepare people to be more pro-active and adaptable.
- Careers guidance in schools can offer an ongoing and flexible service.
- This is important to help young people fully understand the paths open to them.
- Giving advice to adults is very different as they often have working experience.

4. Getting the Most out of Training

How do employers and employees get the most out of any training undertaken? The feeling of attendees was that the buy-in of both the employer and employee was all-important. Employers need to know how utilising skills will meet organisational objectives, and employees need to feel they are really benefiting in the long term from the experience. If this is not the case, any training is likely to be wasted. A number of important points about maximising skills were made during a workshop looking at this area.

'Skills Utilisation: How can workforce leaders ensure return on investment?' Workshop

- Employers must recognise and analyse employees' skills in the first place.
- Employers do not make enough use of the employees' training.
- Good practice involves the employees sharing what they have learnt, feeding back more widely.
- Promotion of a reflective employer culture helps to maximise contribution in the workplace.

The importance of qualifications

The majority-held view seemed to be that qualifications offer learners a chance to formalise their skills and build up a stronger portfolio of what they have achieved.

The speakers in the 'Professionalism: What does it mean?' workshop advocated training that offers the learner a clear and usable qualification. Similarly, people agreed that qualifications from different nations, and across the vocational and academic routes, should all align to encourage progression and reward learning. Yet, there were some in the audience who felt that over-emphasis on gaining the right qualifications could actually discourage some people from entering community-based learning.



Beyond qualifications

Whilst the discussion on the merits of qualifications had supporters on both sides, all were in agreement that the meaning of professionalism went further than a score or pass-mark. Indeed, other workshops also came to the view that professionalism is underpinned by a rigorous desire to improve and utilise new information.

'Professionalism: What does it mean?' Workshop

- Beyond qualifications, professionalism is determined by a common and shared set of values, principles and ethics.
- It is about an individual taking responsibility for his/her development and committing to lifelong learning to advance his/her understanding.

Feedback

In the networking zone at the conference Lifelong Learning UK consulted delegates on the issues that affect them as lifelong learning professionals. We will publish these results, along with recommendations from the day, our future plans to address issues raised and the post-conference survey in January 2010.

Your comments are really important to us – it allows us to better represent and respond to your needs. As such, if you have not done so, we would be grateful if you could spend a few minutes filling in the online feedback survey. Indeed, if you were not able to attend the conference, we would still welcome any thoughts you might have on how we can help you in 2010 and beyond. Please email conference2009@lluk.org for more information.

Lifelong Learning UK would like to thank you for attending what we thought was a really interesting and thought-provoking Conference. We will be picking up some of the key points and debates from the day as part of our ongoing work in promoting, researching and mapping the skills of the lifelong learning sector. We will also publish detailed recommendations in the New Year.