

# Setting the Agenda for the Learning Century

## 'Learning Partnerships for Regeneration' - The Learning City Network Conference, 8 March 2000

'Perpetual student' should no longer be considered a term of abuse. Rather, it should be something that every one of us, young and old alike, should aspire to. This was the message that Baroness Blackstone, Minister of State for Education and Employment, urged delegates to the second Learning City Network National Conference to take back to their local communities.

The conference, entitled 'Learning Partnerships for Regeneration', was held on 8 March and sponsored by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the Northern Rock Foundation and Derby City of Learning.

### Welcoming words

In welcoming delegates on the eve of the conference to a reception at the House of Commons, hosted by Dari Taylor, MP, Baroness Blackstone praised the work of the LCN and its many achievements. She also commented on the timeliness of the conference given that the Learning and Skills Bill was currently before Parliament.

From the buzz of animated conversation emanating from the Commons terrace, it didn't take long for delegates to get down to the serious business of networking - perhaps the greatest benefit of these events.

Some 200 delegates reconvened on the following morning at Lord's Cricket Ground, the conference venue. Duncan Sones, Chief Executive of the National Training Organisation, METIER, had the 'honourable' task of chairing the day's events. In his opening address, he made it clear that this was not going to be a conference of talking from the platform and nodding heads, but one that would mobilise the participants and set the agenda for the future.

Hilary Whaley, Chair of the Learning City Network, gave an overview of the conference and reflected on how, in the short space of five years, the LCN has grown from six affiliates to 33 and is still growing by the month. She explained that the organisation's aim was to represent its affiliates on the ground in a practical way, and that its priorities would always be to promote lifelong learning, regeneration and the exchange of best practice between cities, towns and communities. She hoped that the conference workshops would provide an opportunity for delegates to share experiences and gain an insight into what was happening nationally. For the future, the LCN would continue to build strategic links with Learning Partnerships and the DfEE.

### Learning for every community

Malcolm Wicks, Minister for Lifelong Learning at the DfEE, was the first keynote speaker to address the conference. He told delegates that while the 20th century would be seen as the century of citizenship, democracy and state education, we

have to make the 21st century a learning century for everyone, where the notion of the learning city, the learning community, the learning village, the learning town is embedded into every community.

The educational achievements of the last century had been enormous, said Malcolm Wicks, but there are still problems to be tackled. Too many adults are lacking in basic skills and are unequipped to cope in today's complex economy. Too many young people are passing through the education system and still ending up unemployable. The fact that some 170,000 16 to 18 year olds - one in every 11 of this age group - are currently not in education, training or employment shows the scale of the challenge. "*We end the 20th century and start the 21st century still with the most extraordinary inequalities in our society, not least in terms of educational opportunity,*" the Minister commented. This failure to redress inequality must be the spur for action for all of us in the future, he urged.

Malcolm Wicks then outlined some of the Government initiatives which he hoped would enable everyone to share in educational opportunity. These included the University for Industry, Sure Start and the Connexions Service. This is a new support and guidance service for all 13 to 19-year-olds, which aims to ensure that all young people achieve the most from the learning opportunities available to them.

### **Skills priority**

Work-based training was one area which had been neglected in the past, and the Minister stressed that the provision of skills must become a major priority for all of us, business leaders, politicians and Trade Unions alike. A more radical approach was also needed when it came to adult and community education with more flexibility as to where, when and how this is delivered. Forty per cent of places on the new Learning and Skills Councils would be taken by those with business experience to ensure that the post-16 agenda was driven by the needs of business and by the needs of local communities, he said. The councils will also work closely with Learning Partnerships whose members are often best placed to look at local needs.

*"We are truly engaged on a great mission,"* concluded Malcolm Wicks, *"Creating the learning century is the engine for change for our economy, but it is also the great liberator for the individual and it is the thing that can bring dignity back into some of our communities."*

It was then the turn of conference delegates to put forward their comments and questions to the Minister. These ranged from funding for learning shops in deprived areas and the role of the Learning and Skills Councils in supporting literacy programmes, to the difficulties of FE funding mechanisms and the promotion of physical and mental well-being amongst older learners. The Minister was challenged on his view that the Further Education sector was currently not responding to the needs of business, while concerns were expressed about the seeming lack of emphasis on skilled tradespeople, those who could create the urban renaissance in physical terms.

### **LCN Pathfinder Project**

Sue Cara, Associate Director of NIACE, then took the platform to give an overview of the Learning City Network Pathfinder Project. The aim of this project had been to field test *Practice, Progress and Value*, a guide produced by the LCN in conjunction

with the DfEE to help learning communities evaluate their activities and achievements. The Pathfinder Project supported 18 learning community initiatives in the use of the Guide to develop and evaluate their work. Sue Cara explained how their activities covered four different strands:

- developing and sustaining partnerships;
- marketing learning;
- learning and regeneration;
- the use of ICT strategies.

Of the many important outcomes to emerge from the Pathfinder Project, the first concerned the importance of having the right balance of members in a partnership and the need for clarity about members' roles. There were questions about maintaining partnerships in the long term, an area where the LCN had plenty of experience. The main issue for the marketing initiatives was how to attract those people who did not think learning was for them. Many learning communities were preaching to the half-converted rather than to a non-converted audience. Finally, faced with a wealth of ICT initiatives, there was a need to reflect on how these could be joined up to benefit learning. *“Joining up is something that Learning Cities are good at doing and I think the refreshing thing is that they do the joining up at a level where it can make a difference,”* Sue Cara concluded.

Four good practice guides have been produced as a result of the Pathfinder Project. Needless to say, copies were eagerly snapped up by conference delegates.

## Cities and the knowledge-driven economy

The second keynote speech of the day was delivered by Charlie Leadbeater, an independent consultant and author of **Living on Thin Air: the Power and Peril of the New Economy**.

The theme of Charlie Leadbeater's thought-provoking talk was centred on the role of cities in a knowledge-driven economy and how cities can create a sense of excitement around their capacity to come up with ideas. He explained that today we live in an economy in which increasingly the way that we generate value revolves around the generation of ideas and their application. It is the generation of know-how and its combination with other assets, such as the ability to manufacture, to distribute and to finance, which is the key to competitiveness. The combination of knowledge capital and financial capital is critical for competitiveness, Charlie maintained, forming the basis of many new companies and the most dynamic regions, such as California's Silicon Valley.

Charlie Leadbeater went on to explain that cities and 'clusters' are important because they attract the necessary combination of assets, people, resources and ideas. He described cities as wellsprings of creativity, centres of learning, and centres of innovation which in turn depends on the rapid exchange of tacit knowledge. Cities also generate entrepreneurship and this depends on the support of networks and partnerships to succeed. *“One of the things that we have to do in this country is to move well beyond the idea of the entrepreneur as a kind of lone maverick,”* he commented. *“Most entrepreneurship these days in high-tech industries is partnership and team-based and it is the speed at which you can create those teams that really matters.”*

Although Britain has had a long experience of creating 'clusters', these have not always proved successful. Too frequently they are based around a single industry or one large company. The critical question for cities, he thought, was not how to create a cluster but how to create a 'dynamic' cluster which would take off and grow. A distinctive and durable knowledge base, highly adaptive local institutions which enable people to share ideas, and the ability to look to the outside were important factors which could contribute to this. *"All successful cities over history have always had large immigrant populations. They have always attracted an influx of new ideas and new people,"* explained Charlie. *"Openness, diversity and immigration are absolutely vital to breathing life into cities."*

A business creation platform, would allow people to rapidly turn ideas into businesses, and finally, citing the example of Bilbao, Charlie urged political leaders to think of themselves as entrepreneurs and to take risks to get cities moving.

In the ensuing question and answer session, delegates queried why Charlie had not dealt on the issue of regeneration and social inclusion, and commented on the downsides of the American experience, and the difficulties of smaller towns and cities in creating a culture of entrepreneurship.

## Workshop sessions

Inspired by what they had heard from the speakers, delegates then embarked on the main business of the conference - a series of workshop sessions. Faced with a choice of eleven interesting possibilities, the difficulty for many was how to narrow this down to only two. New technologies and widening participation, learning and the private sector, measuring added value of learning communities and partnerships, and marketing learning opportunities were just a few of the topics on offer. Other workshops covered a review of regeneration projects, engaging and informing the community, and skills for neighbourhood renewal.

The international dimension was explored in 'Learning Cities and Regions in Europe and North America', while 'Towards an Urban Renaissance' looked at how learning can enable the urban renaissance to flourish. The issues facing Learning Partnerships, the progress they have made and their key role in taking forward the Government's social inclusion and regeneration agendas came up for scrutiny in the workshop run by Terry Laws, Operations Director of Southern Derbyshire Chamber, Alan Davies, Head of Learning Partnerships at the DfEE and Mike Campbell of Leeds Metropolitan University. Partnership was seen as very much a 'process', rather than a 'structure' and the question was how partnerships should adapt in a time of continuous change.

Creative and cultural industries can provide a highly successful means of motivating people and creating a climate for regeneration. This theme was explored in the workshop led by Ruth Mackenzie, Special Adviser to Chris Smith, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Stephen Allen, Chair of the Group for Education in Museums, explained how his own museum, the Grange Museum of Community History in the London Borough of Brent, was developing to become a learning centre for the local community. Al Dix, Cultural Plan Consultant, Greenwich Millennium Office, then described how the Dome has created a climate in Greenwich where cultural activities are now placed at the centre of the borough's regeneration.

## Key points for the future

The final plenary session, led by Duncan Sones, reflected on the multitude of key messages to emerge from the workshops. Summarising “1200 hours of person power” was no easy matter, and these are just some of the key points which will be setting the agenda for the Learning City Network over the coming months:

### For practitioners:

- Practitioners need to work:
  - to ensure that communities feel empowered;
  - with and for communities, with a clear shared agenda;
  - through the tensions between the city and the wider region; and
  - to anticipate private sector demand for learning.
- People have clear ideas about where they want to learn and the people they want to learn with - how do we ensure that we respond to that?
- How do we promote the links between lifelong learning and active citizenship?
- How can we use ICT as a hook for wider learning?
- Practitioners should involve learners in the evaluation processes.
- On marketing, clear messages and targeted information are required.

### For the Network:

- There are too many initiatives and schemes with similar aims. Document these and make recommendations for rationalisation.
- Ensure that funding is led by a combination of demand and need.
- Clarify and codify what is meant by good practice and prepare clear plans for making good practice into common practice.
- Support programmes of capacity building amongst the Network.
- Help to clarify messages on common purpose.
- Be clear, as a Network, about the evaluation techniques that are appropriate.
- Identify different models of partnerships to aid evaluation and networking.
- Work to shared definitions.
- Keep the lifelong learning agenda inclusive.
- Identify ways to simplify funding streams.
- Advocate messages that people are at the heart of the urban renaissance.
- Develop new models to support networking and different approaches to networking.
- Make sure that the LCN is fully inclusive and that it represents the broad range of practice.

## In conclusion...

What had obviously been a successful conference was brought to a close by David McNulty, Lifelong Learning Manager of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and Deputy Chair of the Learning City Network.

*“One of the key messages that I will take from today,” David McNulty remarked, “is to keep it local because local is where it works, and that you have to work in partnerships with the communities you are supposed to be serving.”*

The challenge was to ensure that the voice of practitioners and the voice of communities continues to be heard and this is where the LCN has a vital role to play. *“It is important that people are in an effective network that can share good practice, share ideas, but equally for that network it is important that we get the variety, the experience, and knowledge and skills that are in this room actively engaged in taking things forward,”* he concluded.

With this in mind, Duncan Sones thanked the conference organisers and urged delegates to *“go back to your constituencies and prepare to learn!”*