

Opening up Access to Learning/ Stimulating Demand: Components for a Strategy

Working Paper

Creating Learning Cultures:

Next steps in achieving the Learning Age

Second report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning

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Opening Up Access to Learning/Simulating Demand: Components for a Strategy

1 The Issues

Background

This paper engages with the second and third of the issues raised by the Secretary of State in his letter of 14 April, namely:

- the identification and promotion of means by which we can open up access to learning for those adults currently least engaged with the education system;
- measures to stimulate and broaden demand for learning from mature adults, particularly from under-represented groups.

Arguably, much of the extensive literature on non-(or under-)participation has had an over-simplified notion of individual agency and the way barriers obstruct. To say that there are problems about time, money, attitude or other things only takes us so far in explaining why some people overcome these and others don't. To develop a learning culture requires more of a multi-level approach, which acknowledges both the constraints which exist and the hugely variable extent to which personal and organisational choice is exercised.

Focus/scope

1 There is no single solution to the problem of access/demand. Many of the issues interact, and the model which frames some of the discussion below is designed to illuminate this interaction¹.

2 It should be clear that the 'learning' referred to extends well beyond formal education, and especially beyond higher education. HE tends to dominate the public debate for understandable reasons, but requires to be kept in proportion.

3 The discussion tends to be framed in terms of individual demand. But the level of demand for skilled, knowledgeable and intelligent behaviour from employers and organisations is a central factor shaping individual demand for learning. In other words, we need to treat demand for the outcomes of learning along with demand for learning itself.

¹ The search for effective models is a long one - see the 1981 article on Demand and supply in the education of adults, by Naomi McIntosh (Educational Analysis 3.3)

4 Defining the ‘underrepresented’ is itself an issue. Is it shorthand for a relatively narrow definition, of those who are unemployed or living in Kennedy-related postcode areas? Or does it refer to the much larger section of the populations which has had some post-compulsory education but has not participated since?²

5 The short-term/long-term distinction is not always helpful; but in this case we need to recognise that some of the measures envisaged relate to quite broad social change, which cannot take place in a few months. Short-term measures can have an impact on some of the more ‘biddable’ categories, but work with others will require much more sustained effort, on several fronts, before results appear. This paper therefore needs to be cross-referenced to the one on culture change.

Some preconditions:

- that learning for pleasure is valued by policy-makers as much as it is by individuals
- that the initial phase of education, however long that lasts, should promote the value of learning as engaging, relevant and stimulating. This has major potential implications for the first phase.
- that access should be universal to new technologies.

2 A Framework

Consumption patterns: switch and infiltration

The whole approach is premised on the assumption that we are seeking to raise the amount of time or money (or both) spent on appropriate learning by individuals, organisations and the state. Part of the message is to do with shifting attitudes and accountancy practices toward viewing learning as an investment; but we are also seeking to change consumption patterns.

Individuals and organisations choose to spend their money and their time in all kinds of ways under all sorts of influences. Perceptions about the ‘cost’ of learning are usually highly subjective, especially when related to what else people are willing to spend on. Efforts can be directed towards changing their consumption patterns overtly, ie to get them to *switch to* learning by giving up other things. (Some of the Campaign for Learning’s marketing strategy attempts to drive home the message that people could be doing something else with their time, eg watching less TV and using the time for learning instead). A different but not at all incompatible approach is to identify how far current consumption patterns lend themselves to being *‘infiltrated’ by* learning.

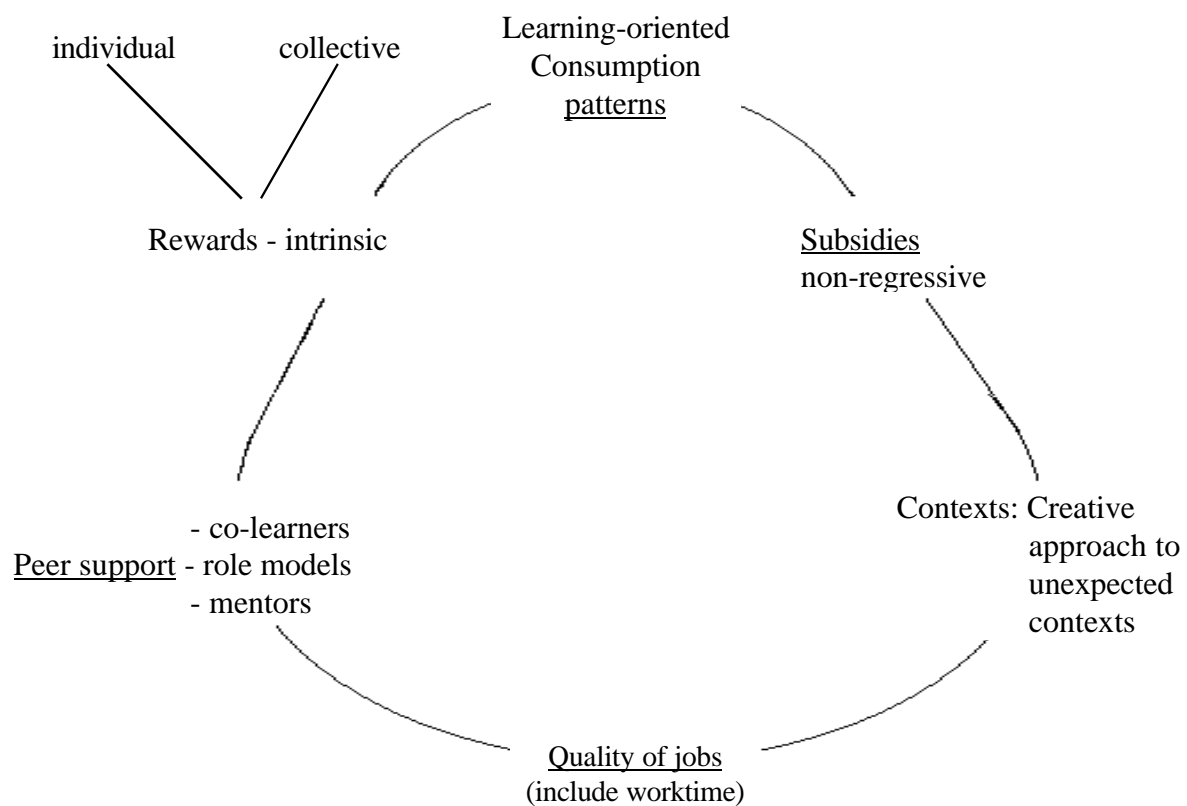
² IFF work (Sargant & McIntosh 1994) divided Merseyside adults into the committed (21%), potential customers (26%), ‘not for me now’ (31%) and the outsiders (22%). Market research for the CfL came up with similar categories.

In the case of underrepresented groups, it is more likely that switching to learning means giving up something else. There is a balance to be struck here, between reducing the sacrifices they have to make on the one hand; and on the other hand encouraging them to take responsibility for making their own positive choices. Whilst it is certainly not true that people only value what they pay for, learning which involves some personal commitment of time or money is more likely to be effective and enjoyable. Many of the underrepresented need help with money and time. But many of them also need help in choosing to change the way they spend both of these. This is not paternalist; it is the simple logic of the commitment to a learning society.

We should also not the possibility of *over-consumption*; and certainly of *ill-timed* or *inappropriate* consumption. Effective policy will not promote all learning, whenever, whatever and wherever. Demand for learning will take different forms at different points of the life-cycle. This means that stepping outside the formal system may need to be encouraged, as well as stepping back into it. Arguably, too many of our young people spend too long inside the formal system, with poor motivation at the time and with poor impact on their motivation to return. Incentives could discourage these forms of over- or mis-consumption.

The rest of the paper is devoted to the instruments which might be used to achieve switching or infiltration in order to boost consumption.

Diversity: There is no single solution



Incentives, rewards and sticks

Learning does pay, usually, for the individual, though certain types of learning pay far more than others. The UK exhibits a high - arguably too high - graduate differential, which accounts for the dominance of the degree over other qualifications. Some of the drop in demand for HE from mature students may be due not just to the immediate issue of student finance, but to changes in perceptions of the graduate labour market, and the return to a degree; so both sides of the equation are being altered in a way that is not favourable, with costs going up and returns down - at least in the eye of the beholder, which is what matters.

Rewards are also affected by changes in career structures. Flatter organisations mean shorter career ladders, with perhaps correspondingly less incentive for directly instrumental learning.

Policies should acknowledge *subjective* rewards along with *material* ones. If learning is sold overwhelmingly on the basis that it brings material rewards (a job, better job, higher salary), this may a) lead to disappointment, and b) have an impact on non-material motivations. In most cases the expectations of reward are probably rather unspecific, and often very arbitrary. Moreover people do not always get the reward they expect. This doesn't mean that they don't get any reward, but it may not be what they anticipated.

Subsidies

Who should be subsidised to learn, and by how much? Where are subsidies most effectively deployed? The question applies to *entry* - bringing people into learning - and to *process* - sustaining them through it. There is a distinct danger that access policies have concentrated too much on entry.

The old issues of efficiency and equity are relevant here. Despite authoritative analysis³ the regressive nature of much public spending on higher education is still not acknowledged. It is also difficult to elicit imaginative ways in which resources might be more efficiently deployed.

We need to open up the debate on alternative deployments much more widely, asking questions such as how many adults could be helped back onto basic skills courses for the price of one subsidised university student, without always phrasing it as a zero-sum game.

We know that the provision most likely to attract the underrepresented takes the form of *shorter, part-time and local* opportunities. Arguably, we should shift the focus of public thinking onto the *infrastructural* issues, and leave decisions about individual support levels more to individuals.

³ For example by Glennerster and LeGrand,

Contexts/environments

The Campaign for Learning has a useful typology of learning environments: 'obvious', 'less obvious' and 'unexpected'. By this they mean environments within which organised learning can happen, eg that you can have put on adult education courses in football grounds; but there is also much scope for creative thinking about how environments could be shaped to encourage learning without there necessarily being any recognised formal learning (as many already are - eg museums and galleries with good commentaries).

There are different environments to which this line of thinking can be applied. It would not be difficult to identify in which of them the underrepresented are most likely to be found:

- the workplace: not only in the obvious sense of access to learning, but in the field of job design and good working conditions⁴;
- shopping centres, supermarkets and other key consumption points, building in (physically) learning centres (for staff and their families, and customers and their families) but also using incentives such as supermarket credit points to build up learning accounts;
- the information environment: access to printed and electronic information, in libraries and other contexts, accompanied by signposts pointing to opportunities for finding out more
- health places: hospitals, GP surgeries, hospices, where people have an obvious incentive to relate learning to behaviour to well being.

This means dialogue with and inputs from people who engineer our daily environments - architects, designers, etc.

Environments are not only *physical*. We can think also of time or *temporal* environments: at what points in the day/week/year/life are different categories of people most likely to be attracted? One very practical area for action is on worktime patterns, on which the ETUI is currently pressing for innovative policies, including on educational leave. Building in learning to worktime means changing these patterns; this is especially important for the low-paid, who are overrepresented amongst the underrepresented, as many of them work excessive hours to make a bare wage.

⁴ New office designs which encourage staff to move round, abandoning old territoriality, may be fruitful (eg - perhaps - British Airways).

Peer support

We all know how powerful peer group influence - both positive and negative - is for young people. Not enough attention is paid to how it shapes adult behaviour. Being 'adult' and therefore 'independent' should mean being able to immunise oneself from peer pressure - but this is not necessarily the case.

For adults the notion of 'peer' is rather broader than for youth, and might include:

- co-learners, who will come along and learn together
- mentors, who will encourage learning but not necessarily take part themselves
- role models, who may or may not be people from similar background. Typically, non-participants are thought to be attracted by images of others from their position who have used learning to their advantage. But there is also a wider notion, which assumes that it is important for conventionally successful people also to show that they have learning needs.

Our first report argued for lifelong learning to permeate all government departments. What would it do for the public profile if

- there was a monthly/quarterly spotlight on each department of state and its record on lifelong learning, in relation to its staff and the clients it served?
- Cabinet ministers acknowledged that they needed to set time aside to undertake some learning, in addition to daily briefings?

3 Building in Learning: *possible measures*

The essence of the measures suggested is that learning should be *built into the fabric of our lives: spatially*, through the design of our living, working and consuming contexts, and *temporally*, through the integration of learning into our other activities. Some of the following proposals are designed to give specific support to underrepresented groups; others are geared to a more general raising of demand.

a Change the shape of student and institutional support:

- sharper differentiation between support for the first two years of HE and subsequent years. This would encourage HNDs and shorter qualifications than the degree courses; these are more likely to attract mature students and underrepresented groups who find it easier to look just one or two years ahead.
- stronger direct differentiation in favour of mature students, with a higher premium and perhaps other support mechanisms

- support for part-timers. The Scottish initiative should be very instructive here: a combination of support for part-time course development; fee waivers for low-income and unemployed part-time students; and funding for additional places for part-timers.

The first and third of these, perhaps also the second, might be best approached by spelling them out as 5-year objectives, giving time for systems to change and institutions to prepare.

b Promote learning-friendly environments

- competition, guidelines etc to encourage good learning-friendly ergonomic workplace design
- likewise for other buildings and physical developments: ‘building it in with the bricks’
- planning regulations for new shopping centres to include incentives/requirements for built in learning/IT centres.

c Reach the consumer

- supermarket customer loyalty cards to bring ILA learning credits
- weekly learning lottery (minimal entry fee) with the prize of a free college/university year plus maintenance costs
- train/bus miles linked to ILA credits (would also encourage public transport).

d Weave learning in with work

- Worktime patterns: promote innovative worktime patterns, reducing excess (and often non-productive working hours and fostering learning hours built into the normal week/year.
- Employer incentives, strengthen fiscal incentives for employers on basic skills training.
- Contract compliance: eg IiP status being rewarded by preferential positions in tendering or supplier contacts.
- Develop the role of the Employment Service in promoting the value of and opportunities for learning (a Kennedy recommendation).

e **Modify the media environment**

- Broadcasting subsidies to include requirements/expectations about meeting learning needs (better analysis of experience to date on this would help).
- Legislate to make it a duty for all terrestrial TV channels to educate as well as entertain and inform (a Kennedy recommendation)
- Work with the BBC and independent broadcasters to explore the possibility of dedicated channels to support learning (Kennedy).

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