

New Centre, New Learning Culture, New Millennium

Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre - From Vision to Reality

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Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre (SULC) is the result of a unique partnership between Staffordshire University and Tamworth and Lichfield College, supported by the European Union. Converting the vision to the reality took less than a year. The conception of SULC is a direct, and proactive response to the changing environment that UK further and higher education institutions operate in, and to the needs of the local economy. SULC will be much more than just another educational premise. It aims to create a dynamic, new, learning culture with innovation and creativeness at its core, and to act as a catalyst in the re-engineering of learning processes, making use of the electronic gateways that modern technology and communications infrastructure provide. The intention is to give genuine lifelong learning opportunities to the people and businesses of the region, specialising in Business, Computing and IT and Health and Social Care, at all academic levels, where continuous study becomes the norm. Hopefully, a model of good practice will emerge that can be used to reshape learning processes both intra and inter organisations.

The Partnership

As a result of a unique partnership between Tamworth and Lichfield College (of Further Education) and Staffordshire University, the £3.5 million Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre (SULC) opened in January 1998. In the space of less than a year, an educational vision has been transformed into a tangible reality which it is intended should enhance the economic development of South Staffordshire, well into the new millennium.[¹]

The Background

It is important to understand the general environmental situation against which this venture took place. The structure and organisation of both further and higher education has changed radically following the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992. In essence, this Act of Parliament devolved power and responsibility downwards, to individual organisations, who in turn were empowered to make strategic and operational decisions under the auspices of funding and quality councils, which were concurrently established. The core political philosophy that underpinned these changes was the subjugation of the two systems to a competitive environment, with potential users being given access to data and information that would help them to make an informed choice. The main intention was to make providers more responsive and market oriented, and to give an incentive to them to be more efficient, effective and economical. The real agenda was to encourage the expansion of both systems, and to increase participation rates, which were much lower than those of our industrial competitors.

There can be no criticism of the overriding principle that in 1992, to enable industry and commerce to effectively compete in the modern, global economy, taking account of the rapid and continuous technological developments that were taking place, attitudes towards education and training in the UK needed to be revised. The importance of developing, and maintaining, a highly skilled and well trained workforce, had become greater and more urgent than ever before.

The concept of continuous lifelong learning, and a culture and infrastructure that supported this, became of paramount importance.^[2] If the UK economy was to remain internationally competitive, no longer could continuous education and training be treated as an option, or a social nicety, but instead it had very much to become an economic imperative.^[3]

The impact of the many changes made in the past six years, are now apparent. Participation rates have dramatically increased, in both further and higher education. For example, in 1992, less than 10% of the eighteen year old population went on to higher education. In 1997, this figure was 33%.^[4] Most sixteen to eighteen year olds are now in full time education or training, whereas six years ago, these had been a minority.^[5] The numbers of part time students has doubled, and many now go on to study for post graduate or professional qualifications. Many more leisure and recreation courses now exist. Providers currently offer a greater variety of courses than in the past, with multiple modes and models of delivery thereby enabling users to better fit in their studies around work, lifestyles and other commitments. Accommodation and resources have, in many places, been upgraded or updated, and physical access to these has been improved. Many organisations are now open for eighteen hours a day. Therefore, a number of the aims and objectives of the 1992 Act have been achieved, for which due acknowledgement should be given.

However, as always, there is a caveat ... a sting in the tail. The monetary cost of this rapid expansion has been enormous. The centrally resourced, per capita funding methodology, for both further and higher education, inferred that the more students that were attracted and signed up, the greater the cost to the Exchequer (and the larger the income stream to the recruiting institution!). Rapid expansion equated to escalating costs, which became an increasing problem for the Treasury to sustain. Consequently, a financial brake was centrally imposed on growth in 1995, the net effect of which was a subsequent year on year diminution of resource for FE / HE providers. Organisations could not easily react in a 'positive' way to the changes, because of their speed and instantaneous nature. Problems were compounded by the commitments already made to existing cohorts of students. Put simply, the rules were changed in the middle of the game, but the ongoing commitment could not just be abandoned. Thus, drastic contingency plans had to be put into action by most colleges and universities, to try to survive these unanticipated changes. This was not always easy and, on hindsight, was not without negative impact on the learning experience of students. The outcome of the survival measures taken included increasing staff student ratios, reduction of direct teaching hours and tutorials, inadequate library and information resource provision, overcrowding in lectures and less formative assessment work. This should also been seen in the context of increased student indebtedness. The combination of these factors has given rise to many questions regarding quality and value for money.^[6]

Traditionally, full time UK students have never had to pay for the cost of tuition, and they have been subsidised in their living and maintenance costs. Many part time courses are also state subsidised. In more recent years, the relative value of state maintenance grants has diminished, with the balance being switched to student loans, repayable at a later date by the individual, and income contingent. The charging of tuition fees, regarded by many as absolute anathema, was, for a long time, politically too contentious to contemplate. However, the rapid expansion and consequent cost (and opportunity cost), led many politicians, of all persuasions, to contemplate the unthinkable when looking objectively at what was happening in the system overall. A crisis was clearly looming, with, on the one hand, an enhanced demand for the product (education), but on the other hand, the inability to pay for it (in the time honoured way). The option to go back to an 'elitist', 'exclusive' minority system was probably no longer available. Socially and

economically, this would have been suicidal. Thus other solutions were necessary. In 1996, during the latter part of the Conservative government's term of office, an all party agreement resulted in the formation of a national inquiry to investigate the shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing.^[7] This was paralleled by a report investigating participation in further education, chaired by Helena Kennedy, QC.^[8] These both reported in the summer of 1997. It is likely that many of their findings and recommendations, will be at the heart of the new Labour government's White Paper of Lifelong Learning, due out in the early part of 1998, and other key Education Structure and Framework Acts of Parliament, soon to be passed. If, as expected, a greater proportion of the cost of education and training is passed onto the user, then this could have a dramatic effect on the factors that determine where, how and when individual users choose to study. Presently, in UK higher education, many students leave home and study elsewhere in the country. It could be that this approach becomes more the exception rather than the rule, therefore putting greater emphasis on local provision.

It is essential to understand this background situation when looking at the origins, and the concept of, the Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre (SULC). In many respects, this came about in anticipation of what might be expected in the aforementioned White Paper and other forthcoming Acts of Parliament. It is a proactive response to what it is thought will be, a watershed in the organisation, and more importantly, funding, of post 16 education. It brings together expertise covering most aspects of post school provision. Lichfield College had for long concentrated on Adult Education, Tamworth College on more traditional FE work and Staffordshire University on undergraduate, post graduate and professional levels, all with multifarious user groups. When combined, there was, therefore, a vast amount of experience that could be drawn upon in the development of a 'natural', educational continuum. By working together, synergy could be achieved, to the mutual benefit of all concerned.

Building and Developing a Learning Community using modern IT infrastructure

For the past few years, Staffordshire University has been developing its links with further education colleges in, and around, the county. Many of these are now formally federated partners. The relationship with Tamworth and Lichfield College started in this way, and has since matured to a genuine partnership with equal financial commitment to the new university centre. The aim is to provide a seamless transition for students from one level to another, thereby genuinely encouraging progression and continuous learning. This approach helps to reduce both physical and psychological barriers to entry, especially amongst those who have little family tradition, or culture, in post school continued education. There are many who fall into this category in the southern part of Staffordshire, where unemployment rates are above the national average and where those continuing their studies post 16 are lower than average.^[9] It also has the benefit of allowing curriculum and content to be planned in a holistic and integrated way. This helps to ensure that products as well as processes have natural progression, and also that there is a coherent understanding of what different skills, knowledge and concepts are expected at different levels of study.

Funding for the Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre was finalised towards the end of December 1996. Building started in February 1997 and was completed in November of that year. Courses commence in January 1998. For a vision to become a reality took less than a year, and by any measure, this is rapid progress. An innovative curriculum, using modern and creative learning processes and structures, centred on new 'electronic gateways', has been

devised. It is intended that this be the distinguishing feature of the centre, the unique selling proposition upon which long term competitive advantage can be achieved.

The problems underlying the existing system have already been discussed. Existing course delivery and learning structures and processes, no longer match many user, or potential users, needs. Neither, it could be argued, have they ever really been attractive to the 'silent majority', who have chosen not to continue their studies, in one way or another, into adulthood. One of the major strategic objectives of Staffordshire University, shared by Tamworth and Lichfield College, centres around the concept of Building Learning Communities (BLC).^[10] This is a fundamental response to the funding, resource and general environmental position against which they operate. The core background to this concept is that much of the response to the expansion of the past five years has related to teaching and administrative processes. Assumptions have been made about learning that with the benefit of hindsight, could be deemed to be arguable. The focus of BLC is to put learning at the forefront of our thinking, with teaching and other processes subordinate to this.^[11] Intrinsically linked to this, is making use of modern communication technology, to distribute and facilitate learning in a different way. SULC has been connected to global networks via a 620 mbps, broad band fibre optic cable, which links to the main servers in Staffordshire University. This will give the centre the capacity to use desk top links, video conferencing, digital libraries and to develop electronic 'warehouses' of learning materials, that our students will be able to access, either remotely, or from within the centre. Teaching will continue to have an important role. Many lessons can be learned from the Open University, in this respect. Good teaching inspires and motivates, and can help learners to focus on key issues. It brings together like-minded groups who can discuss, argue, debate and from this process develop their own ideas, views and perspectives. It is important that any model developed acknowledges this. There is also a powerful argument that the focus of teaching, especially at the beginning of courses, should focus more on teaching students how to learn, how and where to access information and how to use resources to stimulate interest and to start an effective individual learning process. This is especially relevant to returners, who may have been out of the system for a considerable time.

The Development of a New, Learning Focused, Culture

These strategic overviews and imperatives have then to be translated into clear, consistent and coherent operational activities. One of the big advantages of a brand new, purpose built, centre, is that all of the necessary physical infrastructure can be properly integrated from the outset. Flood wiring and use of 'dado' trunking, for example, mean that from an electronic perspective, the building can accommodate most modern technology. Similarly, rooms and other resources can be designed for purpose, rather than having to adapt around the pre-existing, with the inevitable compromises. Perhaps most important though, is the absence of directly inherited culture. Although there are bound to be aspects of culture brought in from the partner institutions, in a new environment, it is easier to do things differently. This has to be shown to various stakeholder groups to be an opportunity rather than a threat. Much depends on management style, vision and determination and the ability to conceive and communicate core values, attitudes and beliefs that will gradually develop into a distinct culture. Clearly defined strategies and tactics must be developed to achieve this.

Over time, it is hoped that the new learning oriented culture that is being developed can then be transmitted back to the main institutions, where existing strong culture has been a major inhibitor to change. Other factors also help in developing a new, and perhaps very different, culture. The ability to appoint new staff, be they academic, technical, managerial, administrative

or clerical, infers that on selection, you need to be able to identify not only skills and knowledge that you are looking for, but also personalities and individual characteristics that fit in with that which you need. An example might be that you look for people who are customer focused and aware and who have high order interpersonal and communication skills. This might be considered more important than a very impressive research record, or ability to type at 100 words per minute. The ability to create new structures and processes is also easier at start-up. At SULC, we are going to operate with many part time staff. These will come and go, and will not always be on-site. Yet, learners may not be able to get in at times when the academic tutors are there. It could be that electronic links can help with this situation, but again, if tutors are paid on a hourly basis, it is hardly reasonable to expect them to process phone calls, e-mail's etc at home, in their own time. Certainly, it would be dangerous to plan on the assumption that they will. To get round this problem, a new tier of staffing has been created, which for want of a better description, we are calling Learning Support Co-ordinators. These will be a permanent interface between students and academic subject staff. They will be graduates who are teacher trained, and they will work with individuals or small groups, and their sessions may be formal or informal. They will be supported by part time learning assistants, who will be final year undergraduates, postgraduate students or appropriately qualified people, recruited locally. It will be essential for them to work as a team, and to establish structures and resources, primarily electronically based, that ensure a high quality student service. Initially, much of their work will be reactive, which in the context of their roles, is perhaps a good thing, but gradually, it is anticipated that they will be able to identify trends and common problems and take a more proactive structured approach to solving them. In the context of our learning environment these roles will be of paramount importance and it is vital that both students and staff learn to use them effectively. Another interesting development is the partnership that has been developed with the adjacent city library. We will supply a stock of books and other electronically transmitted materials to them and they will monitor and control these for us, in accordance with our needs. The facilities will be available to the local community, as well as students, thereby potentially benefiting many individuals or groups. With thought, planning and co-operation, it is possible to create many 'win' 'win' situations, as this example demonstrates.

Summary

SULC gives a unique opportunity to do things differently; to break and to make 'rules'; to critically challenge orthodoxy; to take the best practices of the past, and to mould them into a new, visionary model for the future. The emphasis must be on user satisfaction, the integration of new technology into the learning process, flexible, adaptable and responsive systems and structures and a determination to break down barriers to entry to education, so as to make lifelong learning a viable reality. Integral must be the quest for continuous improvement; to do the right things and then to do them right. Our very survival may well depend upon the achievement of these factors, and therefore we cannot let the opportunity pass.

¹ Birch, C.J, Limby, H (1996) Assessment of the market situation and potential for the proposed Lichfield University College Project (Research report to underpin bid for ERDF funding, unpublished)

² Reisenberger, A., Sanders, J (1997) Adult Learners; pathways to progression FE Matters, Vol 1, No 12, Further Education Development Agency

³ Kennedy, H (1997) Learning Works; widening participation in Further Education

⁴ Department for Education and Employment Statistics, 1989 - 1997

⁵ Further Education Funding Council, (1997) How to widen participation; a guide to good practice

⁶ Made worse by the reduction in maintenance grants and their replacement by student loans.

⁷ Dearing, R (chairperson) (1997) Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education

⁸ Kennedy, H (1997)

⁹ Birch, C.J, Limby, H (1996)

¹⁰ Staffordshire University (1996), Building a Learning Community. Strategic document outlining the future vision relating to student learning.

¹¹ Barr, R.B, Tagg, J (1995) From Teaching to Learning; a new paradigm for undergraduate education. 'Change' pp 13-25, November, December 1995