

For NIACE:

## **New Centre, New Opportunities, New Millennium.**

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### **Background.**

Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre opened in January 1998, and 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. The University Centre 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 where continuous study becomes the norm. This will surely be a prerequisite in the new millennium if, as a society, we are to be able to continue to improve our general standard of living and enhance our understanding of the ever-more complex world around us.

### **One stop learning.**

Putting further and higher education under one roof 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. Put simply, we would like to create a 'one stop learning shop'.

### **Building Learning Communities.**

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, and very special partnership, with equal financial commitment to the new university centre, which cost £3.2 million. 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 high, where those continuing their studies post 16 are relatively low, and where the regional gross domestic product is below the European average.

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

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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). This is a fundamental response to the changing funding, resource and general environmental position against which further and higher education providers operate. The focus of BLC is to put **learning** at the forefront of our thinking, with teaching and other processes subordinate to this. Intrinsicly linked to this, is making use of modern information and communication technology, to distribute and facilitate learning in a different way.

### **Fibre optic motorways and software cars.**

We are developing an innovative curriculum, using modern and creative learning processes and structures, centred on new 'electronic gateways'. It is intended that this be the distinguishing feature of the centre which will help to differentiate ourselves from other learning providers.

The University Centre has been connected to global networks via a 620 mbps<sup>1</sup> 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. Recently, a further £1.57 million bid, made under the present government's 'Centres of Excellence' scheme, has been successful, thereby enabling fibre optic 'motorways' to be laid the length and breadth of Staffordshire, connecting up all FE providers via the University. Over the next few years, this infrastructure will enable a quiet revolution to happen in the way that we study and learn.

A significant investment is now being made, in time, effort and money, to build the electronic learning packs that will make use of the fibre optic motorways. A product called Lotus Learning Space is being used to develop these. These will be the 'software cars' which will stimulate and structure learning in a space age way.

Teaching and learning support 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**

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<sup>1</sup>1 mega bits per second, theoretically 20,000 times faster than the quickest modem link

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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. Potentially more important though, is the absence of directly inherited culture. Although there are bound to be aspects of existing 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.

## **Conclusion.**

This article outlines the authors view of the future and the challenges facing those involved in the provision of learning into the new millennium. One thing is for sure. The option to do nothing, to ignore the impact of information and communications technology on education and learning could be fatal. One only has to look at the impact of technology on the banking sector over the past fifteen years to appreciate what can (and does) happen. The education industry is now a multifaceted and global phenomenon. Potentially, learning materials could be distributed by any provider, from anywhere in the world, to any willing recipient. 'Harvard' in your lounge in the UK! Now there is a sobering thought and an incentive, if ever one were needed.