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Title: An initial evaluation of the UK national, e-learning project, 'learndirect'.

Abstract:

In 1997, the first UK Labour government for seventeen years was elected, and the focus of their victorious campaign centred on 'education, education, education'. It should be emphasised that this was not simply education for the sake of education, but education to enhance and perpetuate a world class, and sustainable economy, that would be globally competitive for the foreseeable future. It reflected Prime Minister Blair et al's view that our economy would need to shift quickly, from an industrial to a knowledge base, and that fundamental to achieving that would be a radical restructuring of educational policies, structures, systems and processes. Recognition was given that for this to succeed, societal attitudes towards education and training would have to change, and that to enable this to happen, a whole new approach by learning providers would be needed that reflected would-be learner needs, aspirations, expectations and complex, and busy, lifestyles. And of course, whilst additional funding would go into new programmes, this would not be in direct proportion to existing levels of funding, or indeed be based on current funding models or methodology, and thus it became clear very quickly that to achieve what most would consider to be laudable aims, a radical new approach would be required, probably making use of high technology and developing regional infostructure.

Out of this vision emerged the mis-named University for Industry (UFI). The intention was to create a national, virtual online supply of learning materials, that would be supported by learning providers who bid in to do so. Aside from the fact that it was not a university (by the Department for Employment and Education's own, strictly enforced, definition), and neither was it solely for industry (it's intention was much broader than that), it was conceptually credible and technologically possible. It is a moot point as to whether, at this stage, enough thought was given to fundamental pedagogical principles, but it could be argued that politicians expected that this would be addressed in future content development stages. Hindsight might perhaps judge that this was a concept plucked out of the air; it hit all of the right buttons at the time, and fitted in with the political masters needs of creating a modern new learning ideal, that they could use to show that they were serious in their intentions about raising the profile and importance of education in the UK.

Regardless, structures for the UFI were established and large amounts of money poured in, both directly (to the UFI) and indirectly (to develop regional infostructure). Funding processes were established for partnerships to bid into, and in Staffordshire, a critical decision was taken by a Steering group, representing a wide cross section of those involved in the provision of learning, in its broadest context, that despite all of the uncertainty around the detail of how the project would work, we ought to be part of the ideal. This reflected a strong, and commonly shared philosophy, about the future of education, and also the fact that we were prepared to become risk-takers. As a group, we wanted to do things differently to try to develop a county whose staple industries including ceramics, coalmining, agriculture, auto-engineering and brewing, were mostly in decline.

And so it emerged that Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre became a UFI learning centre. The UFI initiative has now been re-branded 'learndirect', and is currently actively rolling out across the country. Its launch, and progress, have not been without difficulties of all types. The first major groups of learners came online in May 2000, and from October 2000, the next growth phase of the scheme will be commenced. Between May and September, our centre in Lichfield has processed nearly 400 e-learners, and we will be taking on a further 1000 over the next eight months. It is acknowledged that we are a leading centre in the country for the learndirect initiative, and we have developed structures and processes that enable learners to study completely from home / work, if they so chose. Most other learndirect initiatives are still dependent on users having to go into external learning centres to access materials. This, we were very keen to avoid doing, and our model is very much seen as an exemplar of what can be achieved with innovative thinking.

The presentation that I will give will detail how we approached the situation from a supply perspective, and the views / opinions of the users that have adopted our services. For anyone interested in online learning, I will hopefully be able to give detailed feedback as to what we have done well / badly, so that lessons can be learnt, and mistakes avoided, where possible!