

Four Stages of Lifelong Learning: An Institutional Case Study from Wales

Danny Saunders, Helen Adams and Gwynoro Jones

In this article a lifelong learning case study is presented from Wales. It supports national and regional strategies which stress the need for widening access and increasing participation within higher education. Four stages of education are identified within a continuum of learning which covers the developmental lifespan. First is compulsory education in primary and secondary schools, with a special emphasis on helping teenagers who lack confidence or motivation. Second, disadvantaged young adults who join universities, and the need for special campus based support through the development of retention initiatives. Third, continuing professional development and work-based learning for employees who find it difficult to visit a university campus. Fourth, community based learners who are especially linked with unemployment or retirement. The case study emphasises the value of using non-threatening learning environments which then lead to other things. It concludes with the recognition of the need for diverse and flexible progression pathways which emerge for students of all ages as they gain in confidence. These pathways begin with workshop or project based activity which is essentially non-assessed but which can lead in to more mainstream awards in further and higher education.

1 Lifelong Learning Principles and Issues

The European Commission values learning activity undertaken throughout life which has the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and employment related perspective. Further afield, Choi Don Min (2004) notes that the lifelong development of skills constitutes one of the most vital tasks for securing the competitiveness of a nation. Which-ever perspective is adopted, be it social or economic, the essence of lifelong learning is investment in educational experiences which are critical for business success, social cohesion and personal fulfilment. Lifelong learning policy makers and access practitioners therefore argue that everyone should be given the opportunity to develop their abilities to the full. With the commitment of all the key partners - employers, schools, colleges, universities, voluntary organisations, individuals, libraries, museums, trade unions, and government - learning through life can become the norm for everyone.

A lifelong learning culture allows communities and organisations to rebuild and redefine themselves through education for people of all ages, no matter what their background. Until recently those learners who participated in learning throughout their adult lives were the

minority who usually did well at school and then went to college or university. By contrast, the majority of UK citizens had left the world of education when they were 16 years old with few qualifications.

The problem is particularly acute in the valleys and inner cities of South Wales, where “status zero” populations (Rees et al 1996) have been identified in communities characterised by profound educational alienation amongst young teenagers, who then fall into a low-skills trap once they leave school. The consequences are guaranteed unemployment and the emergence of black market economies within entire communities that were formerly the proud heartlands of heavy industrial production in Wales. There is now an urgent need to up-skill workforces through urgent and sustained lifelong learning provision which reaches out to schools, families, businesses and communities. This requires a sharing of resources by all education providers through partnerships which plan progression pathways for disadvantaged and marginalised populations.

Since the late 1990s universities have been developing widening access strategies which have a clear vision of lifelong learning for all. At the heart of any framework which increases participation in higher education is the explanation of *change* in communities, industries, commerce and technology. Lifelong learning is all about pursuing such explanation, and it recognises the office, factory, home, community centre, and countryside as valid places of learning. Ultimately, this exploration will link social and economic change with the personal and professional development of learners themselves.

The theme of change is perhaps most pronounced when we consider the power and the potential for new information and communication technologies. Nowhere is this more so than with the convergence of software computing with internet telecommunications. Multimedia has become commonplace through using the three domestic bastions of technology: the computer, the telephone and the television. Digital broadcasting and information superhighways are bringing education and entertainment together; ultimately this convergence is beginning to blur distinctions between formal and informal learning.

There are other widespread developments in Wales which are leading to a renaissance in education worlds. The overall ambition is that no less than 95 % of young people should be ready for high skilled employment by 2015 (Welsh Assembly Government 2003). Furthermore, specific policy for universities (Welsh Assembly Government 2002) hopes that over 50 per cent of school-leavers will have some experience of higher education before they are aged 30. For the first time the majority of people in our nation will have a learning pathway after they leave school.

2 How the Higher Education Sector has Responded

In line with Professor Bob Fryer’s recommendations (1997), the higher education sector is addressing these themes of change, new technology applications, informal learning, and cradle-to-grave educational involvement through using seven lifelong learning principles:

- (i) offering lifelong learning for the many, not the few
- (ii) focusing on people rather than structures so that learners and learning should be

the focus of policy and good practice

- (iii) developing learning which is life enhancing, where the achievement of added value is a vital consideration
- (iv) engaging the whole of the university through a detailed widening access strategy wherein lifelong learning becomes a core part of our mission and culture
- (v) providing flexible courses which use a variety of teaching methods
- (vi) forming inclusive partnerships based on pooling resources across sectors and organisations in order to benefit learners
- (vii) disseminating the experiences of successful teachers and students

We now provide a case study involving the University of Glamorgan's application of these principles via partnerships with over 20 further education colleges and 160 community organisations. This alliance allows the University to reach out to students in West and North Wales as well as remote valleys communities and inner city areas nearer to home. Learners of all ages throughout Wales therefore study higher education courses at their local college or community venue whilst also having opportunities to use the campus facilities at Treforest.

The University has created a Centre for Lifelong Learning (CeLL) in order to develop and co-ordinate access and widening participation initiatives through targeting non-traditional students based in community schools, local communities, voluntary organisations and a variety of workplaces. We have also launched an extensive and sustained eLearning portfolio of undergraduate awards via the *e-collegeWales* (ECW) programme. Over 650 people are enrolled on degree courses; students who otherwise would not be able to attend conventional seminars and lectures (especially because of employment restrictions, disability problems, and caring responsibilities within the family).

3 Lifelong Learning Outcomes at Glamorgan

Approximately two thirds of our students are over the age of 21, half of our students study part-time, and a quarter of them attend partner colleges or community centres for their learning provision. Seventy eight per cent are from Wales, and 15 per cent are from the most 'deprived' wards¹⁾ in the valleys. These statistics underline the success of widening participation policies and strategies in reaching out and involving non-traditional students. It is particularly pleasing to note that at a UK level the University of Glamorgan's lifelong learning programme has recently been cited as a national case study for good practice (Woodrow et al 2003).

The lifelong learning case studies outlined by Woodrow et al underline the need for robust institutional widening access strategies which structure and plan a range of activities that attract learners from a variety of disadvantaged backgrounds. The University of Glamorgan uses a simple framework for doing this, based on the recognition of what we call the Four Stages of Lifelong Learning. Examples of outcomes from the four stages are provided for a 12 month period covering the 2002-3 academic session.

We emphasise that our stages are not to be confused with a separate typology introduced by the University of the Third Age (U3A) which was also reinforced by the Carnegie Inquiry

of 1993. The U3A is a very effective self-organised network of older learners and one that is independent of formally defined institutions of higher education. Within the U3A framework, four ages of learning are also defined: study, work, a golden age of learning, and thereafter till the end of the life.

1) *University of the First Stage (compulsory education in primary and secondary schools)*

The University of Glamorgan leads the *First Campus*²⁾ initiative, which also includes four other universities and seven further education colleges in South East Wales. It targets 11-16 year olds in schools who are at risk of educational under-achievement, especially in relation to the Communities First regions in Wales. Mentoring by undergraduates forms a major part of this large scale project.

Popular compact activities involve master classes and workshop projects. These are typically led by university staff from mathematics, creative writing, history, music technology, science fiction (Saunders et al 2004), dietetics, sports science, journalism (Saunders et al 2003) and multimedia design. Two big favourites at Glamorgan involve (i) an annual conference for over 800 school-children who meet visiting Russian cosmonauts, and (ii) an annual literature festival where famous authors of teenage fiction discuss their work and explain how the ideas for their books emerged.

A key partnership involves launching the first two *university* schools in Wales at Treforest Primary School and Hawthorn High School. This is an example of long-term strategic planning based on the need for higher education to work with younger children. An example of application concerns a European funded project called *Write On*, which brings younger and older generations together to research and record leisure through the ages.

2) *University of the Second Stage (traditional entry, campus based support)*

The foundation studies access programme enrolls over 550 mature students each year who do not have the necessary qualifications for entry to undergraduate studies. In addition to attracting new students into the University, the Foundation Programme continues to operate as a 'safety net' for retaining first year undergraduates who experienced difficulties and would otherwise have left higher education.

Success in attracting disadvantaged students through widening participation initiatives can also lead to difficulties once students begin their higher education studies. For this reason universities are now paying attention to teaching and learning developments which boost retention as well as access. The *Education Drop-In Education Centre Programme* is one such example of retention, through providing open-to-all study skills surgeries for over 6000 students each year. The key areas of demand are essay writing, critical reasoning, statistics, and preparing for examinations. Running parallel with the drop-in centre programme is the work of the retention officers within academic departments, including the creation of innovative student advice shops and the use of peer-assisted student support between level one and two student cohorts

On-campus support for students with disability is a priority for a university dedicated

to working with disadvantaged learners. Last year this involved a total of 676 disabled students at the University of Glamorgan, of which 382 were diagnosed as dyslexic, 57 with mobility difficulties, 37 with hearing and sight impairment, and 75 with unseen disabilities such as epilepsy and diabetes. Support has been provided via student services and the use of a dedicated ICT laboratory for students with specific learning needs.

3) *University of the Third Stage (employability, continuing professional development, work-based learning)*

The university's Business School has continued to be a national leader in the *accreditation of prior experiential learning* (APEL) through awarding academic and vocational credit to work-based part-time students who submit portfolios of evidence. Last year the Centre for Lifelong Learning participated in the European wide TRANSFINE project, leading to the compilation of a national case study on APEL for Wales.

Our European funded ECW programme has succeeded in applying *Blackboard* software and virtual learning platforms to eLearning initiatives. The entire venture has led to the most advanced eLearning project in Wales, with over 650 students who are located in work-places and community organisations. The eLearning portfolio now includes over 30 modules in business, management, care sciences and computing. All of these involve the use of new internet technologies which allow students to study at their own time and pace, and in a place of their own choosing.

The university has also received European funding for the launch of its *Network 75* programme, where part-time students study technology and engineering whilst also completing placements in local companies as well as work based projects. In addition to this project, a series of teaching company schemes have encouraged computing and technology postgraduates to complete specific tailor-made research projects for local business companies.

4) *University of the Fourth Stage (community based learners)*

In addition to developing teaching and learning initiatives which widen access and attract disadvantaged students, there is also a profound need within community groups for financial assistance because they cannot afford to pay fees for courses. Last year over 1,600 students therefore received financial support from the university via scholarships, fee waivers, and hardship schemes.

The success of community based delivery cannot be underestimated, with the number of community centres used by the university expanding to 86 alongside the use of community schools and associated networks from the Community University of the Valleys (a unique partnership involving ourselves, Swansea University, the University College of Wales Newport, and the Open University). Non-accredited *informal learning* involved over 1500 adult learners, with a strategic use of funding to promote first time taster courses for hesitant but enthusiastic participants who are returning to education for the first time.

A Summer School Festival extended the success of the renowned and regular two week *Glamorgan Summer School* held at the University's campus in Treforest, involving over 600 students who completed workshops, projects and courses.

The university's unique *Culture Train* programme continued its journey throughout South Wales, with guest speakers and celebrities from the world of broadcasting and cultural arts giving talks to local communities at such venues as rugby and football clubs as well as town halls and libraries. The tour has included visits to the valleys towns of Aberdare, Ebbw Vale, Treorchy, Barry, Maesteg, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, Pontypridd and Llanelli. Other imaginative projects include the use of a mobile classroom - fully equipped with ICT and satellite facilities - that travels the valleys and inner cities and visits housing estates, business parks, high streets, shopping malls, and schools.

Finally, the university's creation of its award winning *University Community Radio* station has involved an estimated 1000 participants from local community groups and schools have taken part in courses such as interviewing skills, radio production and editing.

Conclusions

The "Four Stages" framework is by no means perfect, especially when there is potential confusion with the U3A framework. Within our own typology, we are aware of many overlaps between the categories. By way of illustration, schools associated with first stage education are also community learning centres for the fourth stage. And the higher education campuses of the second stage attract many work-based learners of the third stage who visit for a part of the week and complete part-time education courses. Nevertheless, the framework proves to be especially useful when trying to make sense of a broad lifelong learning concept and when communicating the large portfolio of activity to people outside of formal education.

The overwhelming emphasis throughout our lifelong learning case study has been on widening access to, and increasing participation within, higher education for under-represented populations of students. From our experience the best way of doing this is through partnerships with other organisations, communities, and sectors - although we also acknowledge that partnership working can be fraught with difficulties (see Balloch and Taylor 2001). Our logic in forming lifelong partnerships is based on the need to offer local access to non-threatening environments which then lead to other things. Progression pathways emerge for learners as they gain in confidence. These pathways begin with workshop or project based activity which is essentially non-assessed and non-accredited. This leads to the completion of introductory modules which then allow entry to more mainstream awards in further and higher education.

One of the great advantages of partnership-based lifelong learning endeavours involves sharing resources in order to achieve easy access through local provision. In so doing, a learning opportunity and a learning resource are close to learners' doorsteps. This is in marked contrast to traditional entry into higher education which involves a long physical and psychological journey to a remote university campus which is set apart from the rest of the world. Through lifelong learning initiatives, the people who embark on these journeys can be learners of all ages and they can come from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds - in former years they tended to be relatively privileged school-leavers.

With our work in the South Wales valleys lifelong learning has involved especially

schools in the public sector, as well as community groups within the voluntary sector. We are also excited by the potential links which can be forged with museums, public libraries, galleries and arts centres (Chadwick and Stannett 1995, Lin He et al 2004). These connections form one of our objectives for the future, based on themes of informal learning (McGivney 1999) which open gates into higher education.

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Notes

- 1) Defined as the top ranking 100 wards as measured by the Welsh Assembly Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation and the *Communities First* programme for Wales.
- 2) Higher Education Funding Council for Wales *Aim Higher* WAG: Cardiff