



Strand 4: Networked Learning in Community Development

Paper 8:

Connecting Individuals and Companies in a Lifelong Learning Network: Piloting the University for Industry

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Abstract

- The University for Industry is a key plank of UK government education policy. Following the announcement of the concept by (then MPs, now ministers) Brown and Blunkett in 1995, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) conducted a large consultation exercise with leaders in industry and academia which led to the report "The University for Industry: creating a National Learning Network" (IPPR, 1996) detailing the University for Industry concept. Shortly after the report emerged, because of several key ideas included in the report which had originated from successful innovation from the University of Sunderland, IPPR and the University of Sunderland agreed to lead a consortium to pilot many of the ideas in the report. This paper will report on progress to date of this original pilot which is to be evaluated by the UK Department for Education and Employment but which is otherwise independent of direct government funding thanks to a public-private partnership.

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Introduction

"Education is the best economic policy we have"

Rt Hon Tony Blair¹

"Learning is the key to prosperity"

David Blunkett²

When planning for the pilot project began in January 1997, the initial report provided a clear agenda for a test-bed University for Industry (Ufi). At the heart of thinking is that the UK needs a skills revolution if it is not to slip down the international league table of competitiveness. This revolution requires step-changes in people's demand for learning and in their ease of access to education and training opportunities.

The University for Industry (Ufi) is a radically new type of organisation. The Ufi will not be another provider, but will be a broker connecting individuals and companies to learning programmes that best meet their needs.

As described in *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998): "The Ufi will connect those who want to learn with ways of doing so. It will act as the hub of a brand new learning network, using modern communications technologies to link businesses and individuals to cost-effective, accessible and flexible education and training."³

Launched in late September 1997, and operational from mid October 1997, the Ufi pilot project is based in the North East of England. It covers an area – Tyne and Wear, and parts of Northumberland - where huge traditional industries which employed people for life have gone. The area also has one of the lowest rates of participation in post-compulsory education in the UK.

A pilot based on partnership

- The pilot project has been based more on the strategic connection of public and private partnerships than on large grants. It is a lean operation attempting to achieve a substantial impact and totally funded through sponsorship from organisations such as the NatWest Group, the NHS, City of Sunderland TEC (Training and Enterprise Council), Sunderland City Council and others. A large number of companies and organisations have supported the pilot in kind, the BBC has for example employed a dedicated member of staff to work on the pilot team, and two small companies Leighton Internet and Multimedia, and Telematica, have provided a software "virtual engine" for zero cost to the project.

All partners in the pilot are testing their roles and estimating the benefit of a Ufi to their organisations. It is because there are great benefits to all partners involved that the pilot has been a success to date.

The University for Industry Pilot Project Model

- The Ufi will have a number of key functions as outlined in the IPPR report; indicated below are four main aims for the Ufi pilot model and indications of strategies for addressing these which will be described in more depth later in the paper:
 - **It will increase the demand for learning** mass marketing to individuals, specific marketing to companies
 - **It will increase participation in learning** making access to courses easier including a call centre, a network of learning centres, flexible delivery of learning

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- **It will be user-led, not provider-led** listening to users' needs (as well as consulting regional analysis); connecting providers to users' needs as described by them
- **It will be an impartial broker** established and maintain independently of partners, solving personal development needs through connecting individuals and providers

The pilot Ufl is a one-stop-shop for education and training, for lifelong learning. A free telephone call connects individuals and companies into information, advice and direct booking onto over 1000 courses. The call centre and an Internet-based courses database provides quick and easy access to the right information to the right course at the right time, place and cost. A sophisticated computer system entirely based on the Internet for interconnectivity underpins the strategy.

A Network of Learning Centres

- Over 35 learning centres are linked into the Ufl pilot project. These are based in companies, libraries, a church, schools, colleges, a business centre, a University, an Internet Café, a shopping centre and a football stadium. Essentially a place where learning can happen either using a computer or meeting with a tutor, rather than an information point. The minimum requirement is one computer linked to the Internet and hence the Ufl pilot online system, and a contact name of someone who can help. The centres vary from 350 computers at one college to one computer at a rural careers advisory centre.

The learning centres enable the pilot to take a guaranteed delivery point to people around the region. Learning also takes place at home or at work. One success from the pilot is recognising that many places already exist in the community where learning is taking place. In the pilot it is the networking of existing centres together which has benefited both the individual learners but also the organisation which is running the centre.

Helen Hogg from one of the most popular pilot Ufl learning centres describes their involvement as a learning centre: "By their nature our public libraries offer a non-threatening, non-academic and informal environment for the potential student. This is of course very encouraging for those individuals who have rejected the standard, more formal methods of learning. The pilot Ufl has undoubtedly benefited from our involvement but the Library Service has also greatly benefited from the provision of a structured learning programme and the network of support offered by the pilot Ufl's organisation. As a learning centre we now have a strong framework and solid base from which we can move forward."

Sunderland Football Club has been a strong supporter of the Ufl pilot project and the benefits to the club are clear, as Bob Oates, Community Officer at SAFC, indicates: "We are delighted to be involved with the University for Industry pilot project. It promotes the club as not just a place to play football, but as a focal point of the community. As Sunderland Football Club we want to help improve educational opportunities within the community and the Ufl pilot project is a great way to do this. It breaks down the traditional barriers to learning by making it fun, accessible and relevant to your lifestyle."

McNulty's Internet Café, reflect more commercial aims to becoming involved. As Paul McNulty, small business owner and managing director, points out: "The University for Industry pilot project is an interesting and exciting way to attract the public into a learning environment. As a businessman, it has been an extremely useful way to interface with the general public and to attract new people into the Internet Café."

Ufl links people to courses without providing them

- The University for Industry model which has been established in the pilot project is an impartial broker which provides a connection between users and providers and does not provider nor deliver courses itself. To the individual it appears that the

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Ufi provides access to courses (which may look like a provider) and to the provider it appears that the Ufi offers access to new learners.

Although finally the national Ufi's model may be an inclusive one – including all providers and all possible learning interests – the pilot project has through necessity been exclusive to just nine categories. All the categories fit under the umbrella term “Skills for Work”: computing, supervisory and management, languages, number and finance, communication, team work, literacy and numeracy, engineering, and health and social care.

The courses are at all levels from the most basic skills development to post-graduate and continual professional development.

An important part of the offer are tasters – these fit between the marketing “product” and the providers. These tasters consist of free booklets which are sent to home or work, support is given via the provider colleges and University at the learning centres, or from Financial Times Management online using the specially designed learning system available via the Internet. The tasters are a technique to introduce, in a non-threatening way, a small sample of learning for those not confident in their ability or their desire to become lifelong learners. As an introduction to learning they are proving to be very successful. The subjects of the tasters range from “Internet for All” and “IT for the Terrified” to “Getting to Grips with Budgets” and “Customer Care.” Internet management tools enable tracking of progression onto next-step courses

All learning centres are equipped with new technologies, enabling people to have access to information and direct booking, and to communicate with a tutor and other learners online. But learners do not have to use these technologies to take part. The learner chooses the way in which he or she wants to learn, whether through high quality printed materials or face-to-face with a tutor.

The pilot is gathering information from learners about courses which are not currently available in the region; it is often more to do with a need for increased flexibility of delivery mode than inadequate content. The provider also needs to be able to afford to deliver the flexibility demanded.

Content is also perceived as provider driven – focused towards specific qualifications rather than a competence-based route of accrediting actual learning which has taken place.

Use of the Internet for Networked Lifelong Learning

- At the heart of the University for Industry pilot is innovative use of the Internet. Wherever someone is they can use the Internet to browse information, course details, opening hours of learning centres, make a request for a full pack or directly book onto a free taster or a course. In the home, the workplace, and at all of the learning centres people have access to the online Ufi pilot system on www.ufi.org.uk.

The system includes an online database of over 1000 courses which can be searched by staff in the call centre as well as by anyone on the Internet. It includes online booking for courses and online learning for those who want it.

The Internet is the medium-tech approach for the Ufi pilot project. The pilot is embracing the benefits of here-and-now technology. There have been no new cables put into the ground. Some centres have high-speed links to the Internet others have modem links with standard telephone lines. The pilot relies on a range of access points with a range of types of interaction. The pilot has chosen the Internet as the common channel as it is the only cost effective solution to carry the service. It is also scalable to include more learners and more partners with an affordable level of investment at a future date if required.

One of the most innovative aspects of the project is that the providers are able to add, modify and delete course details directly onto the database over the Internet from work or from home. This allows them to take responsibility and control for their own course listings rather than having to channel all information through a central administration. This devolved model puts responsibility into the hands of the providers who therefore must under-

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stand the time which needs to be invested for such a model to work. One college, City of Sunderland College has employed a half-time administrator to work on their database contributions and a half-time manager to co-ordinate information from the college departments; it is fair to assume that this is, at least, the level of staffing required for involvement in Ufl.

One Number Many Calls

- At the heart of the brokerage is a freephone telephone call centre based at Pathways, a career development centre in Sunderland, run by City of Sunderland TEC. All of the pilot's marketing focuses on one key response to dial the freephone number where more tailored information can be provided.

The call centre, or "intelligent helpline", operates six days a week, twelve hours per day during the week, and six hours on Saturday. The majority of callers wish to directly book onto a taster or a course although some require general information and help to statements such as "I think I want to do some learning".

The call centre staff use the Internet and therefore use the same system as they would if based in a learning centre or accessing from home. Of course there are a number of passworded areas which protect the rights and security of learners' personal details.

Most enquiries and bookings come to the pilot via the call centre with direct online bookings being a minority. The telephone seems an acceptable mode of communication even for people who do not own a home telephone.

How Do We Make People Call? Marketing

- Money must be spent to tackle under-participation. As Learning Works (Kennedy, 1997) says: "A society which is so expert in selling goods should be able to find ways of selling education."⁴

Education must compete with business in selling. The marketing of learning must be very professional and needs to consider the marketing messages as well as the media used. Within the pilot a strategy to increasing the demand for learning has been to use and test a range of commercial marketing techniques.

The first step to marketing the Ufl pilot is to understand the product as a product rather than as an abstract concept. The product is two-fold, firstly a one-stop-shop to free and impartial advice, information and direct booking, and secondly, an organisation which can help "you to improve your skills to help you to get a job, to get a better job or to get better at the job you have" and thus embracing the two key aims of employability and competitiveness.

The users also perceive the courses and tasters as the product and these too have been marketed.

Marketing techniques include: company roadshows in canteens or learning centres; telesales – cold calling people at home; media campaigns with local radio and newspapers; the BBC as a partner in the pilot; incentives such as prize draws and competitions; Sainsbury's supported the use of the back of the supermarket till receipt; and a number of events involving football, footballers and football stadia.

Key messages have been used including "Learn More, Earn More" linking increased qualifications to increased earning potential, and, "No More Excuses" indicating that there can be no reason to put learning off until tomorrow.

Special events have been run such as family learning days, learning on a bus, and a special computer session at a supermarket which raise the profile of the Ufl pilot in the consciousness of people in the region and begin to put learning into their everyday lives.

Companies

Improving competitiveness and performance of individuals and of companies is important for Ufl. The project strategy includes working alongside a number of companies in the region, complement-

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ing training plans and in-house provision to ensure that employees have access to the opportunities that the pilot offers as well as integration with existing development.

Lite-On, an electronics firm in Ashington Northumberland, has opened up their learning centre to all employees, employees friends and family, and parents and staff of a local school. All the pilot Ufl tasters are on offer there as well as access to the online system to book onto further courses that might interest them.

Vaux, a Sunderland-based brewery, and Sainsbury's, a supermarket, both see that there is a dual benefit in providing opportunities to the general public at the same time as involving their own staff in information and training sessions.

Roadshows in the canteen at lunchtime are one way in which the pilot is directly interacting with employees - discussing the ways in which the pilot can interest them as well as listening to ways in which the pilot does not meet their needs.

The nature of a provider is changing during the project. Companies such as Siemens and Amec are offering places on their own training courses to other companies. The role of Ufl is to broker the courses to the individuals interested in taking part. Unions too are running courses and supporting learning centres within factories.

People Like What Is Happening to Them

- On 16th March 1998 there were 2126 registrations with the pilot University for Industry in the North East of England; individuals who through work or via mass marketing have booked onto a course or a taster via the pilot's call centre or online system.

The user statistics were as follows:

- employment status: 52% unemployed; 43% employed; 5% other or don't know

- geographical spread: 59% with a Sunderland postcode (SR); 39% with a Newcastle, Washington or Northumberland postcode (NE); 2% other (some DH postcodes are also in the pilot area)
- gender: 53% female; 41% male; 6% unknown

The following three case studies show how people in the North East have been affected by the University for Industry pilot project:

Bill Chambers is North East born and bred. He left school at 15 with no qualifications. He had a job for most of his working life, affected with redundancy and self-employment, and in 1997 he came back to learning and now studies with Ufl at a local learning centre in Sunderland. Bill says: "With Ufl I've learnt about the Internet. I've finished an NVQ in Business Administration and I'm not stopping there. Ufl is giving me all the information I need about an Accounting course and lots of good advice about going onto a degree course. I've learnt such a lot. I never thought I could do it. If I can do it, then all those 20 year olds out there should take notice. They might have more luck finding a job if they had more qualifications."

Mike Burns currently runs his own business, a shop in Dunston, Gateshead. He saw information about the Ufl in the free paper and was interested at first for his son. Mike started with the free taster - "IT for the Terrified" - which he received at home in the post. He now goes to Learning World at the MetroCentre Gateshead as his pilot Ufl learning centre. Mike has finished a "Kick Start in Computing" and hasn't stopped learning. Mike says: "It's amazing. I just started with IT for the Terrified and now I'm doing an NVQ in IT. I'm thinking about changing my career and it's all because of Ufl. The paper said anyone could do it - and it is true. If I hadn't made that first phone call I wouldn't be here now."

Although Jo Aris has lots of qualifications she needed new skills to design a website. Jo is an artist living in Hexham and had difficulty finding a course that suited her in the area. She heard about Ufl, rang the freephone number and started on the free taster "Internet for all" and then moved onto

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"Building Web Pages". Jo says: "I spent a long time trying to find the right course, it was very frustrating. The courses were few and far between and I also needed access to the Internet. Ufi helped me to find the right course and I've started to get the skills I need. The learning centre has a nice atmosphere and everybody there is really helpful."

Summary

- A full evaluation of what is happening in the University for Industry pilot project will be available from the UK Department for Education and Employment alongside a number of publications from the pilot project itself. Some initial indicators show that the pilot is making a difference to the demand for learning amongst people in the North East of England and the pilot is moving towards a target of 5000 registrations by the end of July 1998 (registrations are at 2126 in mid-March 1998).

The pilot is taking a low-cost common sense approach to large scale issues and therefore is dependent upon partnership as well as successful because of partnership.

The pilot Ufi is providing a framework, or a hub, into which existing good practice as well as new ideas fit. This makes the pilot Ufi both diverse in its aims and ambitions as well as very simple at its core and here lies a strength which will be fostered for the duration of the pilot.

Marketing has proven itself to be a key area in both increasing demand but also in demonstrating that demand is there. A number of techniques are being used and tested – the evaluation of these will be disseminated.

The pilot is a regional project with supports locally, regionally and nationally; this combination plays to the strengths and size of national partners and the high quality local information of community partners.

Real people are becoming engaged in the pilot University for Industry and like what is happening. The pilot aims to transform opportunities for thousands of people in the North East of England.

It also aims to demonstrate the efficacy of a new approach to lifelong learning that is exciting for the whole of the nation.

References

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Footnotes

- 1 The Learning Age
- 2 The Learning Age
- 3 The Learning Age
- 4 Kennedy