

Report of the NI Impact Forum on Adult Learning Conference 8 Oct 2019

Towards a Lifelong Learning Strategy for Northern Ireland

The conference opened with the stories of two adult learners. The Chair remarked that starting with the learner voice gives the true context in which we are working and which we wish to improve.

Andrew Herd from NOW (<https://www.nowgroup.org/>) spoke about how he joined the organisation and how he has undertaken courses in numeracy, ICT and money management. He has also had 2 work placements and currently a voluntary job with NI Historical Society - his dream job being in an office. NOW has made him more independent, he has made friends and has become an ambassador for NOW which gives him a real sense of pride.

Claire Bailey MLA left with 1 CSE as she was just not ready to take on exam system at that point. When she was a lone parent on benefits she could see she was getting into a rut and not able to provide for her kids so when they were in primary school she went back to BMC for A levels - but didn't finish these. She then went to get a part-time access course which clicked with her and led to an offer to QUB. Being a lone parent at university isn't the normal student experience and she often had to cover experiences out of own money. She was the first in her family to go to uni. So she sees a need to challenge the existing school system – one where people are forced into a system rather than system tuning into learner needs. Learning needs to be person focussed and later life opportunities are very important.

NI Context

Impact Forum Chair, Trevor Neilands, spoke to a series of slides outlining the development of the Forum and its achievements to date. He emphasised the value of working with the other UK jurisdictions and being a part of key reports such as Healthy, Wealthy & Wise. Locally, with support from Mervyn Storey MLA, reports have been prepared which should be of use in engaging more political support both now and when Stormont is restored (these reports will become available on the RaISe website in the near future).

Learning from Others

The value of learning from our neighbours was continued by three presentations (these have been shared with conference delegates):

Dave Hagedyk (Learning & Work Wales) presented on Developing a Right to Lifelong Learning in Wales.



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Mark Ravenhall (Senior Research Fellow, L&W) presented on Strategies for Adult Learning Across Europe. See also <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/fc3abdf9-ced3-11e9-992f-01aa75ed71a1>

Technical difficulties prevented the presentation from Scotland's Learning Partnership, but the slides were circulated – Towards a Strategy for Adult Learning in Scotland.

Government Depts

Chair was delighted to introduce representatives from Dept for Communities and Dept of Health as neither department has presented to the Forum before.

Anne Marie Roberts (DfC) –described the role of the dept, what it has been supporting and what it will do moving forward. There is currently a review of current provision and what to take good forward. This will tie into core principals, working across government depts (health, education, justice and communities, plus the two2 city deals). Codesign will be key and will co-commissioning of provision. Dealing mostly with the longterm inactive – people on journey with difficult individual -needs for learning and skills - so will take individual based approach. This will require training up frontline staff re responding appropriately to needs. Customer base often present with health issues that need addressed before looking at an employment journey. Currently doing a lot of test and learns – e.g. looking at health and engaging with key providers to see what is available in the local community with coaches building up their knowledge to give better local provision.

Craig Donnachie (DfH) – placing social workers and health workers into GP practices, seeking to improve health before needing direct intervention. Health workers are now looking at the wider community and the issues it is facing – issues that are often social rather than personal – e.g. isolation or caring demands. The intention is then to work with local communities to identify the best services to reintegrate clients back into their communities. He gave a couple of real examples of how learning has given support to individuals to move forward –e.g. setting up a care service and forming a group to address isolation and give a purpose and skills to people in their communities. These interventions are relatively cheap to do but have a very real impact on the individuals concerned. They are seeking to encourage social workers to build and link up people to opportunities in their communities.

Table Discussion

Four questions were addressed:

1. Is campaigning for a LLL strategy the best way to secure support for LLL? If yes, who should take responsibility? If not, what alternatives can you identify?
2. What can you/your organisation do to secure more support for LLL?
3. Wales and the Labour party are promoting lifelong learning as a right - what do you think of that? Is it an approach we should take in NI?
4. What can/should our learning institutions (across all ages and sectors) do to promote and enable better access to LLL?

In the feedback responses to questions 2 and 4 tended to merge. There was a range of views on both strategy and rights approaches.

Question 1

- Yes go for a strategy but how can we campaign with no Stormont?
- need to work with senior civil servants
- set up a cross dept group for LLL
- many policies and strategies are actually holding back access to LLL
- the EU framework (presented by Mark Ravenhall) could be useful
- can the councils play more of a role?
- Strategy should be people focused not employment focused and a LLL group could give such a focus
- need to tap into learner stories
- Everyone has responsibility to work towards this but also need a leader – the Forum?

- Not sure about a strategy – where, who can you lobby
- Depts are saying that they are building collaboration already – so is that the basis of forming a LLL group?
- competition for resources can undermine the talk of collaboration – community action plans dev without consultation –
- need to move forward but is another strategy the best move since there is so many others already out there? Afterall we already know what works

- Not in favour of creating a strategy – need instead to advocate for the value of LLL and call out emerging city plans etc and challenge where LLL sits
- another policy might lose the voice of the learners

Questions 2 & 4

- need to support these conversations
- need discussion amongst FE sector and the role they can play – how does this fit with other providers?

- Need a less competitive approach - collaborate not compete – between institutions and also sectors
- money for a lot of LLL has disappeared – need new commitment and recognition of what LLL can offer the PfG
- Present evidence of the value of LLL sector – its transformative nature
- Need to educate employers re importance of skilling employees
- Make links between providers and employers, and work with unions.
- keep learners central in creating provision and support

Question 3

- Pursuing LLL as a right is possibly a distraction
 - how would it advance issues for the learner?
 - legal issues could be a barrier – is NI ready for this?
 - most policy here is like English model which is employment focussed – we need more research here in NI to see what really is needed
 - a right without money is a wish (need resources)
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- Everyone has a right to education but present structure can't support this
 - Educational opportunities should be based on circumstance
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- concern about how we would pay for the right to access learning
 - need appropriate access and support
 - the LLL journey needs community provision and community educators
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- Right could be a problem if aligned with a particular party
 - rights can provoke a negative response and can be a distraction - it is an interesting thought though
 - many people possibly think it is already a right as it's written in things like Belfast Agenda –

PANEL

John D'Arcy (Open Uni), Siobhan Wallace (Early Years/Sure Start), John Unsworth (Education Authority NI), Anne-Marie McClure (Start360) and Damian Duffy (Belfast Metropolitan College)

What do you understand by LLL?

S – learning starts prenatally with advice to the Mum – 90% of the brain is formed in first 3 yrs – creating curiosity is so important

JU – learning is fundamental to life - EANI support staff and their development needs – LLL is a collaborative thing supporting parents as well as pupils



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JD – LLL is about valuing people wherever they might be -and celebrating achievements – where you start in life need not determine where you end up – there is a big challenge of connectivity of access and provision
AM –learning it is lifelong – should have opportunities to access at any point in life – we are all learning continually – NI is of a size that we should be able to get this right
D – LLL is the DNA of FE – the soc inclusion part of FE in particular – FE sometimes has to pick up pieces re damage done from people’s past experiences – but less is delivered now because of cuts – can we build a new collaborative approach?

Is there something we can do to create collaboration and create better LLL opportunities?

D – example of collaboration bet BMC and Start360 under Peace IV – both can see the benefits - we need practical experiences to show people that collaboration does work
AM –we talk a good talk but we don’t do it as much as we could – the outcomes should always be for the learner – that’s often missing. There is a lack of coherent progression routes. Problems for NEETS – how do we get those at entry level to progress to L2? Need to recognise that this can take a long time given 14 yrs of bad experience for these young people. Competition shouldn’t be the issue – the learner needs should come first.
JD – OU projects are usually with longer term than short-term funding enabling good relationships to build with key players/partners. Need to recognise the impact on the families of the learners supported. We need sustainable partnerships and need to lobby for support of these when we have a government. There is good will to make things happen and some amazing examples already.
JU – we need leadership to build collaboration – to take people out of their silos. Community Planning could build collaboration. Collaboration is hard work and the importance of preparation is not recognised.
S – examples of good collaboration within Early Years/Surestart . We need investment for collaboration – investment in early years saves a fortune in later life, less intervention is then needed.

Is place based solutions best approach?

- Approaches need rooting in the local community because each is different in terms of need
- Approaches need to be dynamic and need flexibility to change as needs change.
- We need to accept that there are flaws in system currently – need for a real review, particularly if there’s less money to be spent – a lot of money has been wasted because of lack of connectivity.

- We need to tell politicians that change takes time – and short term funding can't provide the change that's needed – stop the churn. We never mainstream what's proven to work.
- We need a continuum of provision over the lifespan – we need to stop dealing with people in isolation not looking at context, family etc.
- for all the policies and projects the fundamental problems are not being solved, because these need long term investment and continual support.

Are we future proofing our provision?

- We need to look at breaking down big qualifications into smaller pieces because people's careers are much more multi-focussed now – need a fundamental review of learning
 - Unitising learning definitely helps access (but costs more) – but big challenge is how we measure outcomes/outputs
 - OU operates a module system already but is looking at even smaller units – micro credentials (10 credit points). Employers are wanting these. We need greater acknowledgment of what learners achieve.
 - APL – accumulate the bits and pieces into a greater whole – there are arguments to disaggregate qualifications to show employers what skills learners have actually achieved. Need bridge programmes.
 - World is really changing rapidly but we're slow at future proofing our sector – we are not as flexible as will be required. Our culture has been all about academic learning but this needs to change
 - Statutory sector is moving more away from modular. Young people are being forced into a system that doesn't work for 30% of them – this needs a political challenge.
 - FE doesn't get a chance to talk in schools even though FE would suit many of them better than the traditional route. Money is driving it all – schools need to hold on to pupils for their finances rather than be encouraged and rewarded to release them to colleges that might better suit the learners' needs.
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- Give individuals control of resources to access the learning they want – give choice to the people –bring back learner accounts
 - Need LLL to be sold more – we need to push for this
 - Schools are creating LLL learners – building confidence of taking responsibility for their own learning – teachers need to model this too as LLL learners
 - Need to ignite spark of learning very early on – schools need to be ready for children – need to find the appropriate 'language' to engage children and this is probably transferable to adults too
 - Problem of parental aspirations – we brand trades etc as lesser than an academic route. We need to value the different pathways. This then results in not producing what our society needs.

- Need a cultural shift to value all sorts of learning – AI etc might force us down this route.

Close

The Chair closed the day by thanking all contributors. It is not yet clear what support there will be to continue the Impact Forum but members are committed to ensuring that this work carries on one way or another and we hope to be able to welcome you to further seminars and conferences in the future.

One way of continuing support for LLL advocacy is to join our partners AONTAS and everyone is encouraged to sign up as individual or organisational members.



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