

WHAT IF?

LIFELONG LEARNING

- *Andrew Harrison*

What if education becomes integrated into a single policy framework, rather than divided up between those responsible for children and those concerned with adults? What if childhood, youth and maturity in fact cease to be meaningful categories for thinking about learning? And what if universities cater to this shift by spreading out their already very varied functions across space and age groups?

Then, by 2029, the university as ivory tower, if it ever existed at all, will definitely be a thing of the past. The UK's universities will be part of a vertically and horizontally integrated educational infrastructure, indispensable for continually reskilling the labour force.

Surely eventually government, together with the active intervention of industry, will have to break down the old silo mentality that has dominated education, and help a critical mass of institutions to become flexible and creative, as well as resilient in all respects. DEG's Andrew Harrison considers the possibilities.

EDUCATION IN 2029 AS A LIFELONG PROJECT

The next 20 years should see the transformation of the UK educational system into one that comprehensively and equitably provides skilled, healthy members of society through programmes such as Building Schools for the Future, and through investment in further education (FE). In March 2008 the Learning Skills Council announced £2.3 billion for the redevelopment of 150 colleges by 2016 to create zero carbon colleges and to ensure local access to work-based learning through the construction process. In 2010 there will be a major shift in FE, with the transfer of £7 billion to local authorities to help colleges and sixth forms deliver the reforms needed to raise the education and training leaving age to 18. At the same time a new Skills Funding Agency for adults will oversee the distribution of funds to the sector, manage the performance of colleges, and run the new national Apprenticeship Service.

Higher education must also respond to a wide range of challenges. There has already been major rebuilding in many UK higher education institutions as they strive towards efficient, effective and adaptable facilities. In this process, artificial boundaries and barriers between schools, colleges, universities and their communities will need to be replaced by higher levels of educational integration and resource-sharing. This should lead, by the late 2020s, to the creation of inspirational and effective learning communities where everyone can gain access to education and fit-for-purpose educational facilities at every stage of their life.

The future for the university is bright. For it to be at the centre of the learning community 'from cradle to grave', however, there will need to be a rethinking of what a university is, and of how the boundaries between the university and the community within which it operates will take shape.

THE UNIVERSITY AND LEARNING CENTRES

The norm will be for schools and universities to have links of mutual influence, and to share a wide range of resources and space. Schools will have access to university libraries, sports and specialist facilities such as science laboratories as part of their distributed learning landscape. Universities will have access to community learning centres. These will combine advanced individual and collaborative digital research settings with social facilities that will allow students from higher education institutions to interact all day, every day.

These facilities will effectively blend living, learning and working, and people from across the community will use them to access local resources and the global learning community. Telepresence systems (advanced video conferencing systems) and other visualisation devices will allow students from around the world to collaborate. These may also provide access points into virtual worlds, where students can meet their fellow students and lecturers 'avatar to avatar'. More than 200 universities already have virtual campuses in Second Life, for example. Harvard already offers a course on Internet law that meets solely in virtual space.

These community learning centres will be particularly important for students based in remote rural areas, and for students trying to fit academic activities around their working or personal lives. Precedents already exist. In the USA the University of Phoenix operate 190 campuses across the USA, often in redundant space in shopping centres and other community facilities, where students can get together for face-to-face learning activities and access university resources day and night.

THE UNIVERSITY AND BUSINESS

Over the next decade, with declining numbers of post-school enrolments, there will be more opportunities for income provided by continuing professional education and industry-specific training programmes. Most universities already have some form of business incubator function to help research staff and students capitalise on their intellectual property and establish businesses. If successful, they may well move on to a university-linked business or science park and gain further benefits from the association with the institution, but also from other potential partners or collaborators in the same sector.

While this type of collaboration is well understood within the sciences and engineering disciplines, it is less well developed in the humanities and social sciences. Start-up consultancies and sole traders often have to resort to commercial serviced office providers, or take advantage of ad hoc work locations such as cafes and hotels. The Business and Intellectual Property Centre and the range of individual and collaborative work settings in the public areas of the British Library are examples of business and academic functions coexisting within the same space.

These spaces successfully provide access to knowledge and expertise, along with access to technology and resources in a range of work settings. Other shared work settings combine access to technology and expertise with a wider range of social and community-building activities.

The Hospital Club in Covent Garden, for example, is a members' club for the creative industries. Housed in a former hospital, it contains TV and music recording studios, an art gallery, bars and a restaurant. The club hosts a wide range of networking events, including 'First Tuesday' for entrepreneurs, private music performances, dining, book and film clubs. The club is used extensively as a work location from 9.00 a.m. to 2.00 a.m. for both individual and collaborative working.

The coming decade will see universities becoming a more important part of the distributed workplace, where they will increasingly form partnerships with private developers to create mixed-use academic and business buildings. These buildings will be able to provide short-term space for academic research projects or new business units as well as start-up space for individuals and companies. Alumni may also continue their connection with the institution through university clubs that operate within these facilities. These blended work and social spaces can also be used to foster new academic and industrial partnerships, and to encourage participation from industry throughout the university.

THE UNIVERSITY AND LEISURE

University facilities such as sports and health centres, theatres and art galleries are often at the heart of their community. The university campus may also provide a major element of green space that can be enjoyed by all.

Evening and short courses also provide an opportunity

for community access to the university as people of all ages further their leisure and academic interests. University staff will increasingly take their expertise out into the community and provide an academic component to a wide range of leisure and cultural experiences. Cruise ships will become popular locations for learning. Cunard, for example, provides lectures by Oxford Shakespeare scholars, art and film historians, astronomers and political commentators alongside performances by celebrities.

THE UNIVERSITY AND OLDER STUDENTS

In the United Kingdom more over-60s are signing up for part-time courses. Already in 2002 7 per cent (237,000) of the 3.5 million people undertaking education and work-based learning were over the age of 60 – an increase of 300 per cent since 1994.⁷¹ Computing, mathematics and the sciences top the list of subjects attracting the 60-plus age group. With almost half of students aged over 60 signing up for courses in these areas it should not be assumed that growing older implies diminishing ability, skills or interest.

Involvement in continuous learning may also bring health benefits for participants. In 2000, the Institute for Employment Studies in the United Kingdom researched the impact of learning on older people. The survey of more than 300 people aged 50 to 71 found that 74 per cent of those who said their health was excellent or very good were engaged in some form of learning. In addition to a link between education and good health, the research showed that learning had a positive effect on people's enjoyment of life, self-confidence, and ability to cope. More than a quarter of those surveyed reported more involvement in social, community, or voluntary activities as a result of learning.⁷²

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is one of many organisations around the world dedicated to increasing opportunities for learning for older people. The movement was established in France in 1972, but has since grown rapidly into a global affiliation of related organisations. In the United Kingdom there are now over 150,000 members.⁷³ The movement recognises the immense resources, skills, and experience of older people no longer employed full-time. Individual members are encouraged to see themselves as both learners and teachers, and to give their services voluntarily. There is no restriction on membership, and no educational qualifications are awarded.

In the United States, college-linked retirement communities already exist at more than 60 campuses nationwide. The number of such communities is predicted to increase significantly over the next two decades as many of the nation's 76 million baby-boomers reach retirement age.

The nature of the relationship between the retirement community and the university varies. Often the community is affiliated with the school, and residents include alumni and former faculty members. Some retirement communities have informal ties to university programmes. Others offer their residents access to university healthcare services and gerontology experts, the opportunity to attend classes and

cultural events on campus, and the chance to learn and live alongside the college community.

Older adults can contribute to the diversity of campus life and stimulate the development of the campus environment by actively using facilities and participating in social and intellectual activities; they can also support the university in its teaching, research, and public service activities through, for example, guest-lecturing, mentoring, participating in applied research projects, or volunteering, both within the university and among the wider community.

Property development and financial considerations have also influenced the decision to create on-campus retirement communities. Colleges and universities are seeking ways to develop their property effectively and expand and diversify sources of revenue. Collegiate retirement communities have great potential to contribute to this goal by adding land value and generating revenues from the sale or lease of land and facilities. They also provide the potential for income from membership fees as well as from gifts, donations, and bequests from residents who are relatively affluent and often comprise alumni, friends, and retired faculty and staff.

While it may be possible to replicate the American model for university-linked retirement communities in the United Kingdom, it does not fit comfortably within the European social agenda, or the concerns about social sustainability and inclusiveness, since most of the US communities are exclusive, gated communities set within the wider university campus. Greater opportunities exist in terms of reinventing the retirement community as a more vibrant mixed learning community that is equally viable in the inner city and in suburban locations. Academic institutions could work in partnership with a housing association or a private housing developer to create a retirement community that included a range of occupancy types and shared facilities that could be used by both the residents and the wider community.

Most likely by 2028 education-linked retirement communities will be common in the UK and will provide a wide range of benefits.

THE UNIVERSITY IN 2030

The university, as a key part of the overall learning landscape, will consist of a range of intensively used facilities supporting learning for the whole community, as well as an extended range of community and business activities. It will be occupied by different groups, for different purposes, at different times.

Putting the university at the heart of a community's learning landscape could result in the creation of communities based around a learning and resource centre linked to the academic institution. This could, for example, include a 'work centre' for freelancers or people wanting to work near home, a library and information resource centre, and a range of teaching and meeting spaces suitable for both face-to-face and distance learning activities. The creation of learning-centred communities of this type is

entirely consistent with government policies to widen adult participation in learning in the UK.

Providing new types of learning environment closely linked to the places where people live may encourage the residents of these communities to sign up for learning activities, even where a formal university or college setting might discourage them. As well as helping achieve wider social sustainability goals, learning-centred communities may also provide significant opportunities for a wide range of academic institutions across the UK. Where an institution has a significant land bank, the creation of these communities may provide an opportunity to maximise the value of this asset or, if an institution has redundant buildings or campuses, to regenerate the sites and reinvent their role within the wider academic institution. An institution without land, redundant buildings, or financial resources to act as a developer can still participate in learning-centred housing developments by providing the academic programme, access to learning resources, and an 'academic brand' that can help to differentiate the development.

The heart of the university will remain 'on campus', but as it is permeated by new and more diverse uses it will break out from its physical confines for good. Whether online or on campus, in youth or in old age, what people will value is the opportunity to explore and share ideas and interact with other people undertaking their own lifelong learning journeys. The university as an institution will, however, have been transformed into something new.

With this kind of scenario the pressure to accommodate more part-time and other 'non-traditional' students will be eased by ensuring that the building stock is exploited to the full. The traditional campus-based university experience may then become substantially diluted, at least for some. To what extent buildings, iconic or otherwise, will then endow an institution with a brand identity, let alone a cherished and well-used central location, is debatable. Probably those institutions that already enjoy a high profile, such as the Ivy League Dartmouth College, will be best able to respond to the demand for adult learning, not just by sharing spaces but through funding dedicated spaces for it. At the moment, although there is much talk of the importance of adult education, particularly for those not in full-time employment, the reality is that resources are tight and facilities are stretched. A final thought on lifelong learning: if conventional curricular requirements give way to more work-oriented and instrumental types of learning, there is a danger that a qualification will have to have a 'best-by' date on it, as it will have provided the student not so much with a formative experience and skills to develop, as with a set of economically useful aptitudes. On the other hand, it is likely that as lifelong learning progresses in a number of directions, the world-class research university will survive, and as ever, it will still be the privilege of the few.