

What should a Scottish Learning Society look like?



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lifelong learning
in Scotland has
dropped from
38% in 1996 to
33% in 2009



A Discussion Paper

Background

On 1 June 2009, in partnership with the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland, Scotland's Futures Forum hosted a seminar with Professor Tom Schuller, Director of the Independent Inquiry into the future of lifelong learning in the UK.

Scotland already has a distinctive and worldwide reputation for learning. Given global, demographic, social and economic challenges ahead, the seminar posed the question 'What should a Scottish learning society look like?'

The seminar was attended by 78 educationalists, policy makers, academics and researchers with an interest in the issue of lifelong learning. Following Professor Schuller's presentation, delegates broke up into groups to consider the implications of his findings and proposals for Scotland.

The views contained within this discussion paper are those expressed by the speaker and delegates and not necessarily the views of Scotland's Futures Forum's Board of Directors.

Scotland's Futures Forum

July 2009

1 INQUIRY INTO LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE UK TOM SCHULLER

Setting the scene

Professor Schuller set out the broad aims for the independent Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, sponsored by The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, <http://www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry/default.htm> which intends to provide an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK through:

- articulating a broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning
- a reappraisal of the social and cultural value attached to it by policy makers and the public
- developing new perspectives on policy and practice

The Inquiry will publish its report in September 2009 and has already begun to formulate its key proposals.

Lifelong learning in Scotland

Figures produced by the National Institute of Continuing Adult Education (NIACE) reveal that there has been a drop in participation in lifelong learning in Scotland from 38% in 1996 to 33% in 2009 (compared with the UK as a whole, which has gone from 40% to 39%).

	1996 %	1999 %	2002 %	2005 %	2008 %	2009 %
Total sample	40	40	42	42	38	39
England	42	41	42	42	39	39
Wales	37	43	39	42	38	41
Scotland	38	33	44	36	31	33
Northern Ireland	28	32	40	37	40	42
Weighted base	4,755	5,205	5,885	5,053	4,932	4,917

And there are greater disparities amongst the C1 and DE social classes compared to the UK as a whole.

Current or recent participation in learning, Scotland and UK, 2009, by socio-economic class (NIACE 2009)

	AB	C1	C2	DE
Scotland	50.6%	40.8%	32.6%	20.9%
UK	52.8%	48.2%	33.3%	24.4%

And whilst Scotland does well on the numbers of highly skilled workers, it has a lower productivity rate than the UK as a whole.

Professor Schuller argued that the pattern of provision is not adjusting itself in line with economic, social and demographic changes. For instance, although Scotland's population is ageing faster than the UK as a whole, this is not being reflected in the resourcing of lifelong learning programmes.

He also argued that there is a need to take learning needs into account for the mix of paid and unpaid work, caring responsibilities and voluntary work carried out by its older citizens.

Compared with the rest of mainland Europe, the UK as a whole has relatively high levels of participation in lifelong learning (EU data puts UK close to levels enjoyed in the Scandinavian countries). However, there is divergence on duration: in the UK, we tend to spend only short periods on formal lifelong learning opportunities.

Conclusions

Segmentation

Traditional learning and skilling is undertaken during three key stages in life: formal education, work and in retirement.

Delegates heard Professor Schuller present a proposal for a more meaningful, simpler model that segregates lifelong learning into four age-related demographic quarters: 0-25, 25-50, 50-75 and 75+.

The segments should not form rigid boundaries but the basic premise is that these represent 'staging posts' at key transition points in people's lives at which they tend to take stock and consider personal finances, health and caring responsibilities.

Current or recent participation in learning, Scotland and UK, 2009, by age (NIACE 2009)

	17-24	25-49	50-74	75+
Scotland	68.5%	37.1%	23.1%	12.2%
UK	67.2%	43.8%	29.6%	12.7%

Current or recent participation in learning, Scotland and UK, 2005, by age (NALS)

	17-24	25-49	50-74	75+
Scotland	97.7%	87.1%	58.2%	28.4%
England and Wales	86.5%	83.4%	66.8%	33.6%

Entitlements

This structure could be coupled with a set of entitlements to learning – both individual and collective, producing a more asset based approach to life long learning. Individual Learning Accounts, which have run (in revived form) in Scotland on a means-tested basis since 2005, are a good example and starting point.

These 'entitlements' would focus on key transitions, for example, those leaving prison. Research has shown that if ex-prisoners are not helped into housing and some form of training or employment soon after leaving prison, any investment in learning made during their time in prison is quickly lost.

Other entitlements might centre around providing learning opportunities to those leaving the care system or armed forces.

There might also be a 'welcoming entitlement' for new immigrants and people moving within the UK as a way of welcoming them into a new area and ensuring a better chance of making social contacts and integrating them into the host community.

Citizens' curriculum

Delegates considered the introduction of a citizens' curriculum, based on four capabilities: financial, healthcare, digital and civic, based on the assumption that varying levels of these competences are key to individuals having a sense of personal empowerment.

These competences could be delivered via locally interpreted learning programmes.

Role of public sector

Delegates considered the role of the public sector, which does well at delivering training opportunities compared with other sectors and has a leading role as an employer of good practice.

Professor Schuller noted the potential power of public sector procurement to deliver lifelong learning opportunities through contract compliance, whereby public sector bodies put pressure on their suppliers to deliver training opportunities for their employees.

Local learning exchanges

Delegates considered the idea of local learning exchanges, where people can come together – whether physically or virtually – and get a better idea of what learning opportunities are available, pool ideas and potentially offer their services as tutors and teachers.

Local learning exchanges might also allow individuals to pool their entitlements and perhaps seek matched funding from their local authority. There are some examples of this already in North West England, where there are trades unions' collective learning funds.

2 SCOTTISH SPEAKER RESPONSE TONY COULTAS

Tony Coultas from Skills Development Scotland was clear that we must put the learner experience at the core as we consider building processes, systems and institutions.

People in the future will expect learning to be more personalised and we need to build more interactive learning experiences mediated by technology.

He was also of the view that public authorities need to be more accountable to each other and willing to collaborate to achieve systemic change.

3 DELIBERATIONS

Early years education

One delegate queried whether, given what we know about the importance of early years education, there should be a significantly greater investment in pre-school education and that the apparent imbalance of resourcing for lifelong learning was not necessarily problematic.

Delegates noted that the early years workforce were the least qualified and often the most poorly paid of all educators and that this was far from best practice.

Age-related demographic segmentation quarters

A delegate noted that this could be seen to be slightly at odds with the way the personalisation agenda is working out in Scotland i.e. 'learner at the centre' model.

Accredited vs. non-accredited learning

A number of delegates felt that there has, in the past, been too much focus on accredited courses and skills and that non-accredited provision had fallen back as a result.

There was also a desire to see informal learning better acknowledged and celebrated.

Physical infrastructure

There was agreement about the need to consider the physical infrastructure of our learning institutions. For instance, they are not always designed for effective group interaction and other new ways of learning.

It was agreed that there was scope for more innovative architecture and noted that schools and other public spaces of the future should consider provision for shared learning and group interaction.

It was also suggested that there should be more innovation in the way in which public services are offered, for example, co-locating services, as is the case with schools and public libraries, staffed by both teachers and council librarians.

Delegates noted that we should not fixate on grand new buildings and that, practically speaking, there was a greater need to retro-fit existing buildings to meet current needs.

Opportunity cost

One delegate queried whether the falls in participation in lifelong learning opportunities could be attributed to the fact that people have more choices when it comes to how they spend their free time. Another delegate felt that we should not assume that everyone wants the education and learning opportunities as we know them now.

The Forum regularly highlights the fact that the public sector often invests substantial amounts of money and effort encouraging service providers to participate within existing rigid boundaries. The reality for the future will be the need for service providers to be much more responsive to those they serve.

In the case of lifelong learning, the onus is on policy makers to better understand how and why people might choose to learn, then build flexible, innovative and adaptable spaces and services to meet that need – facilitating and enabling changes in behaviour.

Employment

It was thought that we need to change the attitude of some employers to training and that we should focus more on individual needs and that skills should not become solely vocational.

There was also a desire to ensure that we teach individuals self-management skills so that they can build their own careers.

Measuring success

One delegate questioned whether we are measuring the right things and highlighted the hazards of narrow definitions of 'lifelong learning'. They felt that we needed more sophisticated measures that get beyond impact on GDP and so on.

Impact of recession

With more employers offering their workforce the chance to reduce their hours/salaries rather than take redundancy, it was questioned whether the recession might provide scope for new and different patterns of work and study.

This paper was prepared by Lisa Mackenzie, Scotland's Futures Forum.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our partners in this series:



Scotland's Futures Forum Supporters



The Forum is grateful for the financial support given to support this project from the organisations listed. However, the contents of this or any other Scotland's Futures Forum publication, do not necessarily reflect their views.



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