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Promoting access to learning for disadvantaged groups through the virtual university

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Promoting Access to Knowledge and Learning for Disadvantaged Groups Through the Virtual University

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Introduction

In the period up to the year 2000, the UK government in partnership with the European Commission and various elements of the UK education and training system is experimenting with a new concept in the promotion of learning: the University for Industry (UfI). This project is just one example of a growing interest in the application of ICTs in education in conjunction with a wider debate over the future nature of universities and other further and higher education institutions, especially in terms of widening access to education.

In this paper we will examine the discourses around the emergence of the UfI project, examine its 'realities' in terms of a key pilot project in North East England, and uncover how the main actors are constructing a model of the UfI in the run up to its launch in the year 2000.

The Changing Place of the University in Lifelong Learning

As a long established institution in civic culture, the university has occupied an important place both within the knowledge infrastructure of society and as a place for debate and the formation of political and social philosophies. Whilst the central Humboldtian tradition of a combination of teaching and research within an environment of academic freedom remains the dominant paradigm, the expansion of the university system, and national variations in implementation, has led to a growing diversity in mission and form of university institutions.

The UK university system is currently undergoing extreme change following a period of massive expansion with the re-designation of the polytechnics and a number of colleges to give a total of over 100 universities. Within this total most institutions have also seen massive expansion, in many cases of over 50%, as participation rates in

higher education have risen to over 30% of school-leavers. Accompanying this growth in numbers of institutions and students has been a reduction in the unit of resource, a shift to competitive allocation of block grants for research based on research quality assessment, and an increasing diversity of character of institutions. As a result there has been a long-standing debate on the role and nature of the university system, and the means of financing it, and part of this debate has focused on the regional embeddedness of universities.

One key development as a result of the move to a more mass education system has been the erosion of a particularity of the UK, in which the majority of university students studied away from home assisted by government-paid fees for the first degree, and maintenance subsidies for the poor. With student contributions to fees, and the erosion of maintenance grants, coupled with greater numbers entering higher education, and many more mature students with non-traditional entry qualifications, a much greater proportion are attending their local university. All of these developments are having effects on the nature of the learning process, the nature of the curriculum, the flows of young people between regions, and the role of universities as social escalators.

Whilst expansion has led to approximately one third of the age cohort entering university within a year or two of leaving school at eighteen, and with others coming back into education later in life, there remain major concerns about the skills base of the UK. Outside of the university system there is additional higher education and more vocational further education provision within the college sector,

What is driving much of the change in the educational system is a growing demand for education and training arising from the increasing knowledge intensity of economic activities and the inflation of entry requirements for many occupations. With the decline in numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, increased competition for jobs leads employers to select better qualified staff, notwithstanding complaints of skill shortages in selected areas.

But for the disadvantaged, educational opportunities are still limited, and whilst part-time and mature entry to education increases, there remain many barriers, real and perceived. There is a continuing public policy debate in the UK, as elsewhere, into how skills can be upgraded and the educationally disadvantaged can be persuaded to return to education and become lifelong learners.

The place of ICTs: the Virtual University

Against this background of changes in the role of universities within a deeper set of changes in the nature of the 'market' for education, the interactions between policy and managerial response in universities stimulates a redefinition what is meant by the university. The central place of ICTs in much of the discourse on policy and management these days leads inevitably to the idea of the 'virtual university' as an emblem for a whole range of developments, initiatives and responses. Central to this is the idea that ICTs can be used to make universities less exclusive, to overcome barriers of distance, to provide a wider range of learning approaches, and to continue to reduce the cost of educating a larger section of society.

There are virtual universities de novo and universities that are becoming more virtual, as well as institutions and individuals that resist the trend in defence of traditional

values. Whichever the position adopted what is sure is that the idea of the virtual university is ever present and subject to the same hypes and criticisms that other aspects of the information society bring forth.

In the discourse around the idea of a virtual university I would argue there are three dominant ideas:

- First, there is the idea of the application of ICTs within traditional universities as a means of enhancing efficiency and modernising the learning experience. This is a natural response to the pressures of massification given the claimed powers of ICTs to bring the benefits of Taylorisation without sacrificing the quality and diversification of the product. ICTs are intended here to save time, to enable the scarce resource which is the time of academics to be more widely spread, to be shifted through time like a videoed TV programme, and to provide flexibility in the pace and location of learning. Whilst governments encourage such adoption of ICTs to offset the effects of driving down the unit of resource, technophilic academics develop applications from the bottom-up. Meanwhile university administrators range from the ignorant to the disciples of re-engineering, and the inevitable conflicts when the independence of the academic is threatened as at UCLA and York university, Canada (see the Noble and Winner papers in Science and Culture)
- The second approach is of a networked institution where the university expands its boundaries and scope using ICT networks to link in with other training providers such as colleges and provide a seamless provision across space and with a greater emphasis on enhancing access to the disadvantaged. The emphasis in this case is on the use of ICTs to serve territories that have dispersed populations, or to provide local access to high level resources where both the people and the services are relatively immobile. Such a philosophy fits well also with the spirit of collaboration and partnership. Many universities are working with local colleges to provide routes for access into higher education, and in some areas lacking universities virtual universities as federations of colleges linked into remote universities have been promoted, such as the 'University of the Highlands' in Scotland.
- The third idea is more radical and implies the redundancy of the traditional university and its replacement by cyber-universities based on a different model of education as a consumption good. Individual academics become content developers and assessors. This carries forward both the previous concepts to their ultimate logic of a university without walls that is everywhere and nowhere, which has students but few staff, and where learning products can be out-sourced, and delivered by a flexible workforce of contract tutors, that is if tutors are needed at all. Such dystopian visions abound, in the pages of the education press, and on various websites, but there are a growing number of models being cited such as the Open University of Catalonia, the Western Governors' University, and various company-based institutions such as the British Aerospace Virtual University, McDonalds' Hamburger University and the Disney University.

Given these widely varying visions and meanings applied to the phrase 'the virtual university', I and colleagues in Newcastle are engaged in a study of how different forms of virtual university are being constructed through action involving a broad array of actors and networks. One such example is the University for Industry as the following case study explains.

The Emergence of the University for Industry Concept

Defining and stabilising the concept

The University for Industry is a project still in its early stages of development, and formally has no students as yet. However, it does exist as a pilot project, and the primary aim of this case study is to explore how the concept and idea of the UfI has evolved through various negotiations, and how it is being shaped through interactions between national and local bodies.

The origin of the term 'University for Industry' lies in speeches made by senior Labour politicians, such as Gordon Brown and David Blunkett, when in opposition in 1994. Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown floated the idea in a speech and saw the University of industry in a context in which...

'We must now make a leap in both the uses of technology and the availability of lifelong and recurrent education. This will only happen if there is concerted action by government, education and industry. It will happen if the best skills are made available where people are - in the workplace and at home. And it will only happen if people are able to take control of the learning process itself' (Brown 1994 in Hillman 1996)

Brown used the phrase 'a national crusade for lifelong learning' and saw the University for Industry as a mechanism for dealing with the chronic skills shortage in the UK, particularly the low standard of employability skills compared with more successful economies such as Germany. At this stage there was little sense of what the UfI would look like, only an idea that the country needed a big new idea in vocational training to match the Open University in the 1960s. Although the OU had provided for considerable opportunities for mature students and those in employment to study for a degree without full time attendance at university, there was a view that it could not push further into vocational skills and that a parallel institution was needed.

Such a vague concept needed to be further developed, and the Institute for Public Policy Research was asked to undertake a study to explore its feasibility. IPPR is a non-aligned think tank, which is nonetheless closely associated with left-of-centre thinking. Interestingly the study was primarily sponsored by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (founded by a book publisher) and British Telecom.

The IPPR study involved a huge consultative exercise including the review of many existing experiments in widening access and innovating in delivery. The report that emerged (Hillman, 1996) saw the UfI as an new kind of organisation taking the following roles.

'It would:

- be the hub of a national learning network extending to workplaces, homes and local learning centres
- act as a cataloguer and broker of information, materials, courses and services
- provide access to user-friendly services on the internet and create links with tutors, experts and other learners
- commission new learning programmes in strategic areas

- sustain an accessible system of support and guidance services
- stimulate mass-marketing of learning opportunities'

(Hillman, 1996, v)

Crucially, and unlike the Open University the UfI was not intended to be a new education provider in competition with the existing educational infrastructure but to add value by connecting reluctant or disadvantaged learners with providers. Key phrase taken up subsequently was the idea of 'learning on demand', with the UfI being seen as a tool for changing the inflexible nature of much educational provision.

With the victory for the Labour Party in the election of 1997 all of the principal proponents of the UfI concept entered government. Blunkett and Brown moved into the briefs they had shadowed at the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the Treasury respectively, whilst within DfEE the new Minister for Higher Education was appointed from outside the House of Commons: Tessa (now Baroness) Blackstone, former Principal of a College of London University and Chair of IPPR.

The pilot project: IPPR and Sunderland

During the writing of the IPPR report, one of the areas visited was the North East of England where the University of Sunderland, one the new universities, was involved in an exciting project with Gateshead College. The two institutions were running a joint venture called Learning World, a drop-in facility attached to a regional shopping mall (one of the largest in Europe with 26 million visitors per year). Learning World provides courses from basic numeracy and literacy to degree level, with hours from before the shopping mall opens until late in the evening, six days a week. A second partnership, Pathways, was a partnership of educational providers in Sunderland with the city council and training and enterprise council. Pathways provides a one-stop-shop for adult educational guidance, and unlike many other such centres has its own staff of genuinely neutral staff, rather than secondees seeking to enrol individuals onto the courses of their employers. Following the success of these projects, and the enthusiasm of the Sunderland team, a pilot project was devised for the UfI based on Sunderland.

The pilot was planned prior to the election, and was intended to operate without central government subsidy. A consortium was established with a combination of private sector sponsorship (Nat West Bank, BT), local agencies (Sunderland City Council, Sunderland Training and Enterprise Council, Sunderland NHS Trust), and time inputs from other partners such as the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, local colleges and community groups, the BBC etc.

The UfI pilot ultimately came to have 50 partners, with a core team consisting of:

- Sunderland University
- Three FE colleges
- FEFC
- An internet SME
- The Pathways guidance centre
- Open University
- BBC

- NHS Executive

IPPR provided consultancy and support to the project and evaluated its outcomes.

In this pilot project we can see the continuation of the shaping of the UfI concept as different actors negotiate and translate ideas in the formation of a heterogeneous network (Callon, 1991; Latour, 1987)

So what is the UfI pilot in practice?

The UfI pilot is not an educational provider as such but a network connecting existing providers of various forms with individuals. At its heart the UfI project builds and operates a database of courses (both open/distance learning and conventional courses) and a database of learners. The main application of IT is not in the delivery of learning or course material, but in the call centre that markets courses, both in response to client calls and through cold calling. The call centre is the hub of the network, and directly books individual onto courses, with the responsiveness we have come to associate with telephone sales.

The educational partners come in two kinds:

- Learning material providers develop courses and courseware, including free taster packs that can be sent out to learners, IT-based materials and conventional courses. Providers include publishers, media companies as well as educational institutions.
- Learning centres are places to which people can go to study. This includes traditional educational institutions, but also training centres within firms, libraries, community centres, a football club, and anywhere where people can be persuaded to go to learn. At these learning centres a combination of open learning and classes can be provided.

The underlying methodology of the UfI can be seen as five steps or elements within the pilot, although this is currently expanding in a second phase.

- Stimulate demand through mass marketing techniques including BBC trailers, linked television programmes, leafleting and mailing, press advertising and features and use of employers, unions and other community organisations to encourage interest.
- The call centre operates with a freephone number and provides advice and guidance, accesses a course database, and books individuals onto courses. Call centre agents are trained advisors and do not use a script, unlike many commercial call centres. Experiments have also been made with direct call calling from the call centre, with surprising levels of success.
- Individuals are directly booked onto courses which take place within the next few days, using a venue and modality that is acceptable to the learner. This may involve at home provision, or a variety of learning centres. The emphasis is on responsiveness.
- Course content is focused on basic and key skills, especially IT, although in order to encourage a return to learning this may be dressed up as a hobby, e.g. football on the internet.

- Learners are tracked using a database which stores information on what courses have been completed and is used by the call centre to follow up on experiences and offer additional courses subsequently.

The results of the pilot project will be announced following an evaluation report which will be published early in 1999. However, by the end of the pilot in July 1998 over 5000 individuals had registered for courses, including the free home-based taster courses. Many of these had been out of the learning system for many years, and some have gone on to undertake several courses and become committed learners. Details of the target groups are not yet available but analysis of participant by post-code suggests an unexpected high response from the more deprived inner areas of Sunderland.

The key success factor however is the determination of all of the local partners to keep the project running without significant national funds, although new funds under the ADAPT programme (see below) is enabling the extension of the project to the whole North East region of England, and considerable growth in the areas of demand analysis, content commissioning, and marketing.

Scaling up the pilot

Parallel to the development of the pilot, the new Labour administration has been pushing ahead with plans for the national UfI although the two elements have seemed to be out of synchronisation at times. Whilst the Sunderland partnership has been working out details on the ground, a team of civil servants have been developing the plan for the national UfI with a prospectus issued early in 1988, along with a national consultative document, 'The Learning Age'. In this the UfI has been placed at the heart of the government's plans for lifelong learning, and indeed the establishment of the University for Industry is the first item on the list of actions ofn lifelong learning in the UK Employment Action Plan agreed following an EU Jobs Summit in November 1997.

To fund the further development of the UfI concept, the UK negotiated with the European Commission to use the resources available under phase 3 of the European Social Fund ADAPT programme for 1998 and 1999 to fund development projects especially aimed at SMEs and their employees, but also the unemployed, those threatened with unemployment, and those with low levels of skills or low participation in education and training.

There has unfortunately been some tension between the custodians of the national UfI programme and the regional participants in ADAPT projects with a recent circular from DfEE announcing that ADAPT projects should not use the phrase University for Industry in order to protect the brand in advance of the national launch. Whilst this has been irritating to some and suggests a reluctance to learn from local efforts, the situation with Sunderland was more difficult given that Sunderland pioneered the brand, and are now ADAPT-funded. In the end Sunderland decided to adopt the label Learning North East.

On the 21st October 1998 Baroness Blackstone announced that £40million would be allocated to the UfI for the year 1999-2000 as start-up costs with a further £6.25 million for the costs of Learning Direct, the national learning help-line which will become the national call centre for the UfI. It is however unclear how the national call centre and regional call centres being developed under ADAPT will work together.

The University for Industry represents a bold experiment in extending lifelong learning into new social groups, especially those who have not participated. The concept is still developing, and tensions between the central quality control and the innovation out in the regions will need to be resolved. A key question still to be addressed however will be whether the ICTs are a core element of the delivery of content as is suggested in the national prospectus, or whether they are mainly an administrative tool as is the case in the main pilot project.

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Sunderland UfI pilot web site - <http://www.ufi.org.uk>

National UfI web site - <http://www.open.gov.uk/dfce/ufi/index.htm>

UK Lifelong learning web site - <http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk>

UK Adapt programme web site – <http://www.adapt.ecotec.co.uk>

Further information on CURDS virtual university project and other work on universities and regional development is available on the CURDS web site.

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/curds>