



# Towards a funding framework for learning communities

by Martin Yarnit

---

Adult Learning Commentary Number 4, 21 March 2001

Back home again, I've had time to reflect on the exhausting series of regional events I have been organising for the Learning City Network. Skills for Social Inclusion and the Knowledge Economy is the title of the conferences that bring together around 900 key figures from the new (English) Learning and Skills Councils, set up to plan and fund post-16 education.

Enthusiasm to get on with the job; bewilderment that responsibility for key tasks is yet to be allocated: these are key messages from the first four events. Who should do what? Luckily, there are also some good ideas and examples of effective practice and coordination. It's worth sharing some with Australian web crawlers (a new Olympic event for 2012?).

But before I do, I want to recall a stark message from one of the UK's key thinkers on lifelong learning, Frank Coffield. A sceptic about the all-curing powers of learning, Frank argues that: "Policies that concentrate on widening access are likely to have limited impact unless they are integrated with wider, well-resourced strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion." The educational upheaval we are currently experiencing in the UK is part of a clear government agenda on urban renewal, social inclusion and competitiveness. Local plans for learning communities have to fit within an emerging framework of the proposed strategic partnerships for local regeneration. All this implies a level of coordination that is hard enough to achieve in education, let alone in the entire governmental apparatus, nationally, regionally and locally.

An emphatic message from the regional events is about the need for focus and phasing – not attempting to do everything at once. Urgent priorities include:

1. A national campaign on literacy and numeracy
2. Neighbourhood learning centres in every disadvantaged community, networked electronically
3. Strengthening the capacity of the community sector to engage with learners, and ensuring its voice is heard in the corridors of power
4. Encouraging local partnerships to develop a strategic view of learning needs and to engage confidently with Learning and Skills Councils
5. Creating a national army of learner advocates, recruited from communities and workplaces, properly paid and with career prospects
6. Establishing a national Learning Pays campaign, using door-to-door canvassing as well as tv and the radio, and incorporating Adult Learners Week.

Talking to people from a variety of agencies, a consensus about what to do next is emerging. Soon, Ministers will have to take a view and provide a lead.

Implicit in all this is that we need to change the way we conceptualise, plan and deliver post-school learning. Up to now, interesting initiatives with threadbare funding have operated on the margins of the mainstream system. Resources have favoured those who did well out of compulsory education. And targeting of disadvantage has been hit and miss. But the increase in resources promised by government, plus increasingly sophisticated tracking systems, means we should aim to reach priority groups. The national system of antenatal care could be a model: a universal service coupled with a special focus on at-risk groups.

We now need a clear framework with scope for local initiative. Learning community partnerships would be funded in line with national and regional priorities, but on the basis of a locally-determined vision and strategy. Partnerships would have to sign up to a code of practice, including a commitment to access for ethnic and other minorities and a clear statement of learner entitlements. Sounds like a job for the Learning City Network, organising peer-assessments and handing out quality marks for those that meet the grade.