

Explore - Learning for learners and for the love of learning: a gym for the mind

Detailed Briefing Notes

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“Whatever the economic weather, adult learning matters. There is much we can do, much we must do, to ensure that the beneficial power of adult learning reaches everyone, building stronger communities, stronger business and a bigger society.”

John Hayes, Minister of state for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning

Background

University lifelong learning has been an important part of North East life since the 1920s. Between 1994 and 2009, over 10,000 courses were delivered by the Centre for Lifelong Learning as part of its accredited open studies programme, attracting over 100,000 enrolments. Studies took place at over 100 venues across the region as well as the Newcastle University campus.

In 2003, Newcastle entered a pioneering partnership with the University of Sunderland to secure the continuation and expansion of this provision, building on the strengths of both institutions. Management of CLL was transferred to Sunderland, whilst CLL retained use of the Newcastle University campus.

Partnerships with organizations such as The Sage, Gateshead, Tyneside Cinema and Tyne and Wear museums melded programme content to the region’s cultural life, whilst collaboration with community groups such as the Blyth Resource Initiative Centre enabled outreach to non-traditional learners in areas of economic disadvantage.

Fees paid by students for this HE Level 1 programme were kept to a minimum. In 2008-9, the last year of the HEFCE-subsidized programme, the full fee was £72 for a 10 credit course, with the retired paying £57, and those on benefits £33.

The withdrawal of Funding for ‘ELQs’

In 2007, the Secretary of State at the DIUS, John Denham, announced the suspension of state funding for HE students taking an award equal to or lower than one already held – the ‘ELQ’ rule. Only a small range of subjects were exempted. All subjects taught at CLL except Modern Foreign Languages were affected.

As a result, half the accredited programme was no longer economically viable in its existing form, with more than half the students having a higher than undergraduate level 1 qualification.

ELQ students were distributed throughout the programme rather than concentrated in one subject or geographical area. The existing programme could thus not be sustained for fundable students either, as a sufficient number could never be guaranteed to attend an individual course to make it viable.

Back to basics

The programme team concluded that sustaining the existing programme by replacing HEFCE funding with student fees would not be possible. In the absence of any alternative funding, fees for ELQ

students would have to rise to £300 for a 10 credit module. The impact on demand would be catastrophic.

At the same time, we were aware that the existing structure, devised under mainstreaming in 1994 to harmonize with the funding patterns of 3 year full-time undergraduate programmes, was not without flaws. A minority of student feedback consistently identified accreditation (a core cost) as a barrier to participation. Operationally, it suffered from the need to cancel a large percentage of courses each year because of insufficient enrolments. If we were to have started from scratch to design a programme to deliver core aims, the fact is the existing programme would not have presented itself as the ideal structure.

Rather than looking for ways to preserve the existing programme, we needed to go back to the aims it sought to satisfy, and re-examine them under the new financial conditions. What are the characteristics of university lifelong learning that give value at the deepest level?

The following **deep characteristics** were identified:

- challenging, developmental learning for individuals, fostering understanding of subjects and self through an independent spirit of enquiry, with opportunities for progression or employability as required
- interdisciplinary learning, informed by research, recognizing that the shifting complexities of the modern world learning must move beyond barriers of subject definitions
- collaborative learning, forging a learning community accessible by all, epitomized by the spirit of partnership with other cultural institutions

Other aspects of lifelong learning, such as accreditation and progression, are important, but ultimately secondary to these deep characteristics. They are not essential to the core learning experience, but could flow from it if desired – as options.

Could a programme structure be devised which could foster independence of mind and the spirit of collaborative enquiry better than the old open studies structure? And could it be delivered in a way that remained affordable? Unexpectedly, it was in addressing the latter question that the answer to the first emerged.

The obvious way to save on delivery costs was to increase class sizes, decrease the length of classes, or both. But we doubted students used to attending classes of 12 would pay the same amount of money for half as many hours to join twice as many people.

But what if we were to step aside from the traditional small group course as the vehicle of student experience, each requiring a separate fee? Could an alternative structure be conceived? What, say, if the unit of experience became **the programme as a whole**, and instead of a typical 20 hours experience on a single course, a student could attend any number of different courses for the same fee? What would such a programme look like? Could such a programme offer a profound student experience? Would it be more cost effective to run?

The answers to these hypothetical questions were revelatory, shading out a totally different student experience. The overall programme would need to be smaller to save on delivery costs. Individual class sizes would rise substantially, getting in some cases up to the size of large lecture groups. But instead of fewer hours, individual students would get **more** for their money. And instead of many disconnected modules, the programme could be designed as an integrated unit. Savings from large scale lectures could permit smaller seminars to run alongside. The fact the overall programme would be reduced would not matter. The individual student experience would be richer...

The end result of such thinking, after much refinement and adjustment, is **Explore**.

Explore

The **Explore membership scheme** is a radical new approach to a lifelong learning closer in feel to a full undergraduate course or a conference than a traditional lifelong learning programme based on individual modules and short courses:

- the programme is configured as a set of different types of learning activities. Some activities – termed **open sessions** – are designed to be large-scale, interactive lectures or presentational events, which up to a 100 people can attend. Others, termed **bookable** are seminar-sessions, close in form to that of our old accredited modules but shorter and more intense, with 10 contact hours over 7 meetings rather than 20 over 10. (These courses have been nicknamed ‘Berliners’ because like the Guardian format, they offer the same content but in a tighter format.)
- programme content is carefully organized around compatible and interrelated themes within 4 academic strands: *Readings* (Literature, Creative Writing, TV studies) , *Origins* (History, Archaeology, Science) *Visions* (Art History and Film), *Perspectives* (Philosophy and Cultural Studies)
- students become **members** attached to the *whole* rather than just the part. They can attend any **open** classes they like (all of them if they wish to) and can book on seminar courses (some of which are repeated). They develop their own study route through the programme of each season: a ‘gym for the mind’.
- seasonal membership is for a fee equivalent to 25% increase on the 2008-9 rate for a 10 credit course, but discounts are available for annual membership (payable by monthly instalments.)
- fees can be kept down because of a series of delivery cost savings: (i) the overall volume of contact hours is reduced by 75% compared with the former programme (ii) assessment and accreditation are no longer core costs. They remain available on the programme, but have to be paid for separately by students with full accreditation provided at full cost rate (iii) on line booking, enrolment and registration reduce administration costs. There are no cancellations, so no refund costs (iv) a membership ethos and enhanced communication reduces publicity costs. (v) management costs are pared down – the management team runs with 1.75 academics and a small back up team.
- quality of student experience is maintained. Instead of single module experiences, with the need to pay for every additional module taken in a term, students buy seasons with the possibility of a wide variety of routes. The coherence of the whole substitutes for the reduction of individual course size.
- the scheme is more efficient to manage. All advertised parts of the programme run, avoiding cancellations and reimbursements. Volume of delivery is set at a minimum threshold to sustain costs, but once that critical mass is achieved, stays the same even as more members join, making the scheme more cost effective the larger the membership. That said, more content hours can be added if the numbers attending are sufficient.

2010-11 structure

In 2010-11, there will be 1600 hours content delivery over four seasons. Season 1, as traditionally the busiest season, presents 500 hours. Content has been creatively, but not restrictively, structured around themes of modernity and discovery – ‘Eurekas and Epiphanies’.

Fees are set at 90/£75/£60.00 per season (cf £80/£65/£35 for 10 credits/20 hrs on accredited course). For that, a member can choose from content as rich as this (just taking one double page of the brochure for one strand as example):

Explore Listings <small>continued</small>						Additional information for Explore courses, including reading lists, week by week schedules and late changes, can be found on the Explore website http://explore.sunderland.ac.uk or through the NECLL Library or General Office.					
SEASON 1 - Open Events						SEASON 1 - Open Events					
Date Time	Title Ref	Tutor	Sessions	Duration	Location	Date Time	Title Ref	Tutor	Sessions	Duration	Location
Thursday						Thursday 07 Oct 14:00					
Thursday 07 Oct 10:30	Origins: Theme Talks E20106OR000506	Various Tutors	10 x 1.5 hour sessions	Weekly	Newcastle Arts Centre	Thursday 07 Oct 14:00	Poetry - Fortnightly E20106RE000477	Various Tutors	5 x 1.5 hour sessions	Every Two Weeks	Newcastle Arts Centre
Various tutors present topics within their fields of expertise in history, archaeology and natural world studies.						We will explore a variety of works from the classic to the contemporary. Please see the Explore Website/NECLL Library for full details of the texts to be discussed, and read the relevant poem in advance of the session.					
Thursday 07 Oct	Blood Diamonds – the Child Soldiers of Africa	John Sadler				Thursday 07 Oct	Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning'				Pamela Woolf
Thursday 14 Oct	Herbs of Artemis: from Bitters to Hallucinogens to Anti-Malarial and Haute Cuisine	Jill Schnabel				Thursday 21 Oct	William Blake from <i>Songs of Innocence and Experience</i>				Richard Moore
Thursday 21 Oct	China of the Warlords in the 1920s and 1930s	John Griffiths				Thursday 04 Nov	Carol Ann Duffy, 'Prayer'				Ellen Phethean
Thursday 28 Oct	Getting to grips with History - using Primary source material to re-live Victorian Newcastle/Gateshead	Malcolm Grady				Thursday 18 Nov	Four poems by Emily Dickinson				Michael Ayton
Thursday 04 Nov	The Coxon Family of Embleton, Northumberland: a Case Study in Archival Sources for Family History	Susan Wood				Thursday 02 Dec	Hugo Williams, from <i>Selected Poems</i>				Kathleen Kenny
Thursday 11 Nov	The Images and Forms of Worlds Past: The Creation of Maps Before AD1600	Marie Addyman				Thursday 07 Oct 18:00					
Thursday 18 Nov	Cup and Ring Markings: Why did they do it?	Ian Colquhoun				The Wine: Season 2 E20106RE000480	Tim Crocker	10 x 2.5 hour sessions	Weekly	Ridley Building 2	
Thursday 25 Nov	Fishing and Fowling in the Marshes of Ancient Egypt	Angus Graham				We will conduct a detailed discussion of the second season, preceded by screenings of the episodes. Screenings begin at 6pm; discussion from 7 to 8:30pm.					
Thursday 02 Dec	Roman Frontiers in Germany	Ralf Russow				Thursday 07 Oct 19:00					
Thursday 09 Dec	AD476: The Fall of Rome or was it a non-event?	Colm O'Brien				Objects from the Anglo-Saxon World E20106OR000511	Colm O'Brien	5 x 1.5 hour sessions	Every Two Weeks	Ridley Building 2	
Thursday 07 Oct 12:30	Eureka and Epiphanies! E20106OR000508	Various Tutors	10 x 1 hour sessions	Weekly	Newcastle Arts Centre	We select some objects and object types from the Anglo-Saxon world to consider their design, craftsmanship and use and to consider what we learn from these about Anglo-Saxon England.					
Informal sessions in the Arts Centre bar under the theme 'A Moment of Discovery'.						Thursday 07 Oct	Serpents and other Beasts in Styles I and II				Colm O'Brien
Thursday 07 Oct	1104: St Cuthbert Discovered – Again					Thursday 21 Oct	Charms, Amulets and the 'Cunning Woman'				Colm O'Brien
Thursday 14 Oct	Finding Gold: The Transvaal Gold Rush	Mike Furlonger				Thursday 04 Nov	The Lichfield Angel				Colm O'Brien
Thursday 21 Oct	Moment of Discovery: Ishi - from 'Wild' Indian to Living Museum Display	Myra Giesen				Thursday 18 Nov	The Carved Stone Cross of Ruthwell				Colm O'Brien
Thursday 28 Oct	Eureka - So What? Eureka Moments in Genealogy	Eric Richard Barker				Thursday 02 Dec	St Cuthbert's Coffin				Colm O'Brien
Thursday 04 Nov	A Spirea in the Bottle: Plants, People and the Discovery of Aspirin	Jill Schnabel				Thursday 14 Oct 14:00					
Thursday 11 Nov	A Personal Discovery: Finding Mythical Islands in the Nile	Angus Graham				Short Story - Fortnightly E20106RE000479	Various Tutors	5 x 1.5 hour sessions	Every Two Weeks	Newcastle Arts Centre	
Thursday 18 Nov	A Voyage of Discovery	Tony Barrow				Thursday 14 Oct	Thomas Hardy, 'The Fiddler of the Reels'				Richard Moore
Thursday 25 Nov	The Discovery of the Kerameikos Kourou	Sally Waite				Thursday 28 Oct	Ghost Story Writing Workshop				Gail-Nina Anderson
Thursday 02 Dec	1753: Carl Linnaeus and the Naming of Practically Everything	Angus Lunn				Thursday 11 Nov	David Almond, 'Counting Stars'				Ellen Phethean
Thursday 09 Dec	The Barmacle-Goose Tree: The Inevitable Discovery of the Non-existent	Marie Addyman				Thursday 25 Nov	Hubert Selby Jr, 'Song of the Silent Snow'				Kathleen Kenny
						Thursday 09 Dec	Alice Munro, 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain'				Bronwen Calvert

Does it work?

Recruitment

Over the first year, the programme attracted 641 students, with 469 the highest attendance for an individual season. This was not quite critical mass, and represented around half of the average numbers attending under the subsidized provision, but has proved a useful starting point to test the effectiveness of the new delivery modes as numbers grow.

The new format has been tailor-made for humanities students living close to Newcastle who attend a number of courses. There has been some loss of students, however, from the wider region, who now have to travel to Newcastle, and from creative arts and writing courses, previously delivered in workshop style courses with small numbers. We are finding ways of moving to more cross-regional delivery over this year, and have devised new formats for delivering creative courses which are gradually gaining in popularity.

There has also been some reluctance to join from students with limited time at their disposal. Although anyone studying 10 hours or more is paying no less than the real cost of their course under the new conditions, the fact others are experiencing more makes them feel as though they are not getting full value for money. This is a matter of perception rather than real value, and something the programme team is working hard to change.

Curriculum quality and Student Experience

The evidence of student experience has been overwhelmingly positive: the following student feedback is representative:

'Now that I've made the decision to join, and am busy attending archaeology walks and the course on New Towns, I am so happy. The monthly payment is really well worth it. It is a world of knowledge, experience and interest opening up, like being a student all over again. The qualifications and knowledge of the tutors are impressive, as well of course as those of the language classes.'

'I am really enjoying the mixture of drop-in and bookable sessions, they fit so well into a busy life!'

'A very enjoyable and varied range of talks, lectures and styles of lecturing.'

'I am enjoying the variety of experiences presented by the new Explore Scheme and am looking forward to more stimulating discussions in the new year.'

'NECLL is now a cornerstone of my (intellectual) life and during the holidays I miss it dreadfully. Ordinary reading is just not as satisfying.'

'A miraculous range of quality choices.'

'Wow! This was an excellent, more-than-value-for-money course! The tutor .. skilfully creates a learning community in the sessions where members feel able to voice their opinions, know that their views are respected and valued, and who are able to learn from one another.'

'I would certainly look forward to attending more of this tutor's courses in the future should my job allow as I found his session incredibly rewarding!'

'Central to 'Explore' is the opportunity to stimulate, interest and entertain, with committed tutors and students with many opinions. Don't miss it.'

Research engagement

The initial year of programme included a set of seminars in which academic researchers from across disciplines at Sunderland, Newcastle and Durham Universities presented news of their current ongoing research projects. One unexpected by-product of this was to put the managing director of a local specialist company in touch with a researcher on non-adhesive paints.

Assessment and Feedback

Unsurprisingly, no student has opted for the expense of full accreditation, but take up of informal assessment has also been very small, perhaps indicating the sufficiency of the experience of Explore in itself, perhaps because we have yet to advertise its availability effectively. One tutor noted that the work submitted by a philosophy student was of a higher standard than previous work the student had submitted for the old Award in Continuing Education.

Delivery costs

Delivery costs (including programme management and administration) have been reduced by 50% per unit of activity, with potential for greater savings as membership increases. Teaching hours have been reduced by 75%.

Challenges

1. *Transitional strain*

As with any change, the transition to new arrangements in itself has been difficult. In this case, there has been a considerable impact on part-time staff, many of whom have lost large

amounts of teaching. The scheme could not operate without their continued commitment, and working to earn that support has been a management priority heavy on time.

At the same time, new administrative systems – including IT and records systems - have had to be designed and implemented, another significant drain on programme team time, and one which also required the cooperation of the University and the busy teams supporting its management and information systems. The difficulties of managing priorities in in-house development have meant that some key systems – such as capacity for on line registration and payment – were not available until late in Year 1. That said, in the scale of corporate IT the needs of the system are not complex, and it would not be difficult or particularly expensive to commission a private IT consultancy to create what is required.

2. Publicizing and creating an identity for the brand Explore

The idea is simple: ‘come to a session and book on what you want for one fee!’

Except that it has proved a surprisingly difficult concept to package for students used to something quite different. And there are quite a lot of complications below the surface – three rates of fee for full, retired and those on benefit, different rates for seasonal or termly, booking fees for workshops and seminars, and initially, rules about priorities. The scheme is simpler than deciding on a mobile phone or broadband package – but still difficult to capture until experienced.

In Season 1 the NECLL publicity Brochure – redesigned under great time pressure – did not capture the simplicity and confused quite a number of students, putting some off joining. In Season 2, our publicity was sharper, and as more have experienced it, word of mouth has given the term ‘Explore’ increased currency as a term for a new, challenging educational experience. But until this currency widens, we struggle with analogies, the ‘gym for the mind’ being the best single slogan suggested.

It is possible that we are facing the paradox of choice described by Iyengar and Lepper (2000) who analysed consumer behaviour when buying jam. When faced with the choice between shops with a selection of 24 jams, or 6 jams, subjects express preference for the larger selection. However, if they have to purchase just one jam, they are 10 times more likely to make a purchase when shopping from a selection of 6 than 24. The challenge is to simplify the act of choice in Explore, making it feel natural and value for money both for members with lots of time, and those with constrained schedules. We now issue a weekly bulletin highlighting events, and this had had a dramatic impact on student perception of the clarity of their programme.

3. Staff development - changes to teaching and delivery

All lecturers on the scheme have had to adapt teaching styles around the new structures – a challenge particularly for those whose teaching has been predominantly within intimate, small group settings, and this did give rise to some anxieties before the scheme was launched. However, these proved more a psychological than a real barrier, with no tutors reporting problems, and many examples of creative and innovative teaching emerging.

4. Managing timetabling and course demand within an Open structure

The scheme requires access to at least one quality large teaching space, ideally close to a refreshment area to foster the significant social and informal side of belonging to a learning community. This was not available to us on Newcastle campus, and we have been fortunate

to identify a space in the Newcastle Arts Centre which largely (though not entirely) fits the bill. However, this is not available in the evening, and means we are not ideally dispersed over the city and campus.

The greatest operational difficulty, however, has been in managing the half of the programme which retains a seminar-style small group focus.

Clearly, if all members could go on any of the seminars and workshops, we would be faced with one of two problems: either (i) too many people for the course to be a seminar (or fit in the room), (ii) some sort of booking system, such that some members are left disappointed that they cannot get on a course – perhaps the particular course that most attracted them in the first place.

Our initial solution to this was to create a system of priority booking – with each member getting one priority, and sitting on waiting lists for other classes. However, structurally this did not resolve things, since we could still not satisfy all the demand for the most popular seminars, and some students were disappointed.

Since season 2, we have applied a combined approach (i) recasting some seminars as open sessions and relocating them to the lecture space (ii) creating a new type of course, Seminar Plus, where a small fee of £20 guarantees a place on the course with numbers limited to no more than 20, the fee paying for teaching costs of a second course if numbers exceed 20 (iii) priority bookable courses which are not repeated.

The combined approach has resolved the problem at the cost of a little added complexity.

5. Public Perception of Value

Finally, it is worth noting that nationally we are in a transitional phase around public perceptions of cost and value for education and culture. When first presenting the advantages of the new scheme to the student body, it was clear that though the majority understood very well the funding background and the nature of costs against the value being offered, some students still measure value only according to what has been available in the past through subsidized provision. The ‘Learning Revolution’, for instance, led to a number of short-lived cheap educational opportunities appearing just as we launched Explore.

The publicity about university fees arising from the Browne report and cuts in adult and community learning budget resulting from the spending review may change the awareness of the value for money represented by Explore.

Future developments

Once the essential structure has settled it is hoped to be able to do the following:

- seek sponsorship for aspects of the programme. In the summer, this mechanism allowed bursaries to be paid for younger student attending the Classical Summer School held in Durham.
- develop mini-Explore programmes in satellite locations outside Newcastle – possibly sustained by grant applications or sponsors prepared to support advantages of the scheme, such as community building or employability and confidence improvement
- develop Corporate membership schemes

Conclusion - Lessons for the sector

- the model of Explore has shown itself to be highly attractive student experience: academically challenging, heuristic, with optional features allowing members to receive feedback, develop skills, pursue accreditation and progress to formal learning
- Explore will work in any location with easy access for a learning population – certainly the major conurbations. It works best with access to integrated space with social facilities to promote the ethos of belonging. However, this does not mean it can offer nothing in rural contexts. Once core operations are established on a sound financial basis, it will allow satellite activities at marginal cost
- Explore fosters collaboration with regional cultural and community partners (museums, theatres theatres, etc.) and can be a platform for intelligent and sustained research dissemination
- Explore offers universities a way at minimal cost to engage with their regions and local populations, disseminate research meaningfully, raise profile and reputation, and stimulate recruitment.
- Explore can be structured around the needs of each university – one size does not need to fit all. The balance of fees and content can be altered to meet different geographical contexts, as can be the balance of lecture and seminar content within the scheme.

We believe Explore offers a future for university lifelong learning.

"A little money can achieve a lot, particularly if we are prepared to innovate and to trust people at the front line to organise learning in ways that suit their needs rather than conforming to some centralized model .

John Hayes Tuesday 7 September 2010

NIACE Event

Presentation – slides and summary

Reference:

Iyengar, S. and Lepper, M. (200) 'When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much' of a Good Thing?', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2000, Vol. 79, No. 6, 995-1006