

Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Building Local Initiatives for Learning, Skills and Employment
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Review:

Introduction

This 46 page report published by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education ¹ reviews the experience of the learning communities set up as part of the 2003 Government Skills Strategy. It shows how these share many characteristics with a range of other local initiatives on skills, learning and employment (LILE's) funded from a variety of sources, notably the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund ² and the Single Regeneration Budget ³.

The book identifies an emerging set of frameworks & models of service delivery that are vital to the Government's key agendas: sustainable communities, the opportunity society, prosperity and social justice. It shows that in many areas the tesbeds are valued for their bottom-up perspective on the delivery of services and their ability to create inclusive partnership of providers and voluntary and community organisations.

The Author

The report is written by Martin Yarnit, who specialises in the links between lifelong learning, employment and urban regeneration. He is a Neighbourhood Renewal Adviser to the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit which is responsible for overseeing the Government's neighbourhood renewal strategy ². Martin has also written extensively on neighbourhood, partnership and economic regeneration issues ⁴.

There are five sections to the report:

1. Background to learning communities
2. Sustainable futures – how testbeds can be further built upon in the future
3. Eight testbed case studies
4. Outcomes of the testbeds
5. Further Resources

The testbed community initiatives were set up by the UK Government in 2003 to explore the benefits of community-based learning approaches. A testbed is really a community in which various initiatives which bring together learning, and employment opportunities for the benefit of local residents, are brought together in a meaningful way. Testbeds should have positive impact upon the learning aspirations of communities.

Partners in testbed initiatives include: Learning & Skills Councils, Schools, FE Colleges, HE Institutions, Regional Development Agencies, Community Groups, Adult Education Service, Local Authorities, LEA's, Primary Care Trusts, Housing Associations, Job Centres, local enterprise and SME's.

This book gives selected information on the approach and successes achieved by varying case-study testbeds across the UK. There were 80+ areas identified as being eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding and 8 testbeds are highlighted in this book. The testbeds featured show a wide range of approaches to encouraging skills acquisition and access to learning for residents and often hard-to-reach learners.

One of the lesser mentioned testbed projects in the report is Rochdale's Miro project which combines family learning with the ability to draw amongst Asian women. Described as a, "innovative model of family learning using a creative learning opportunity abroad..." this project enabled 10 women of Pakistani heritage to spend a week in Mallorca working in the studios of artist Juan Miro to develop new artistic skills and widen their experience of European culture outside the UK, including its links with an Islamic past. (p43.)

It is unclear from the report exactly what involvement Higher Education had in the provision of services or playing a collaborative role within the testbed learning communities, although it does not appear that HE institutions were central players in any of the testbeds featured. It is clear, however, that a testbed learning community was conceived to have involvement from "the education sector – all phases: pre-school, school, Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) adult and including Skills for Life/English as a Second Language (ESOL.)" (p11.)

The report cites examples of how testbed learning communities can be successful at developing the local workforce which may then contribute to regional economic performance (p33.) It also emphasises the importance of "Learning for governance/citizenship/regeneration linked to active communities." (p42.)

According to the report, the testbeds have been striving to bring together agencies which have a direct impact on the learning opportunities of local populations.

"Learning communities are akin to Sure Start or antenatal care in taking a systematic approach to service provision where previously it was haphazard, firmly based on a partnership of providers and other agencies, reflecting the multiplicity of organisations with a stake in local learning arrangements." (p12)

It will be critical in the future for initiatives, such as the testbeds, to drive forward the skills agenda which has been given impetus by the Leitch Review.⁵

This report can provide excellent reading material for any student studying topics relating to: community learning, skills acquisition, the politics of a Government led skills agenda, skills for economic growth or community collaboration projects. Its case study approach also provides immediate case study material of lecturers and a wealth of student discussion topics/assignment questions may be derived from this material. For example:

- Do the testbed initiatives go any way to breaking down the cultural factors (organisationally speaking) which can inhibit communication between skills based agencies? Can these factors ever be successfully resolved?
- What causes institutional resistance to cross agency collaboration and has this been addressed in testbed communities?
- Shouldn't the kind of inter-agency 'joined up thinking' outlined in the testbed communities be happening anyway? What might have prevented this in the past?
- What steps will be needed to keep these testbed learning initiatives alive in the future?
- Can testbed communities ever give people access to the type of skills THEY want or are they destined to promote the acquisition of unwanted skills? How do individual and Governmental skills agenda's converge or diverge?
- What added value can the higher education sector add to the provision of learning communities and what barriers might exist within HE to their involvement in the provision of skills based programmes? (How might these barriers be overcome?)

Summary

This report overviews the testbed communities initiative. It brings together many positive features of these initiatives, which cannot have been easy to formalise or maintain. Those involved in Higher Education may use this report to understand the wide variety of ways in which community learning partnerships can be constructed. For every community there appears to be a different, subtle formula for community learning success.

Reading between the lines of the report, it seems that each testbed initiative was grounded in some strongly held belief or commitment to lifelong learning by members of the local communities and/or passionate individuals within local organisations linked to career enhancement, skills development. This has, therefore, in each case, got the testbeds off to a strong start.

Success in all cases seems to have been grounded in mutual respect (between organisations and individual sectors of the community) and the flexibility to build learning options which directly reflect the circumstances, pressures and overcome the preconceptions of those for whom learning has been encouraged. Each testbed

community success also seems to have had its foundations in mutual respect and valuing the individual differences across the partners involved.

There is, no doubt, a wealth of learning contained within each testbed, relating to the factors which will achieve healthy and thriving learning communities and those which have been seen to create (rather than remove) divisions. The report provides a useful list of testbed contacts which will be very useful for any Higher Education Institution planning to become involved in community learning projects of their own.

It will be interesting to see how the successful footings provided by the testbeds are built upon to provide long term access to learning and skills for local communities. Universities could play an active role in these initiatives by becoming involved and, for example, helping define progression routes, offering facilities and helping clarify strategic direction.

References

(1) **NIACE** (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education - England and Wales) is a non-governmental organisation working for more and different adult learners.

NIACE's formal aim is: "to promote the study and general advancement of adult continuing education" Less formally, NIACE interprets this to mean advancing the interests of adult learners and potential learners. Their strategic plan commits NIACE to:

"support an increase in the total numbers of adults engaged in formal and informal learning in England and Wales; and at the same time to take positive action to improve opportunities and widen access to learning opportunities for those communities under-represented in current provision."

As a registered charity, NIACE both represents and advances the interests of all adult learners and potential learners – especially those who have benefited least from education and training. NIACE fulfils its explicit commitment to more and different learners according to the following core values:

- The celebration and promotion of active learning as a necessary condition for personal growth, social change and economic development.
- Equality of opportunity for all learners and those working on their behalf.
- Professional reliability based on integrity and respect, quality and accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- Political independence within the voluntary sector.
- Democratic practice reflecting social justice and the opposition to discrimination and oppression.
- International solidarity with those who share our commitment to adult learning in the wider world.
- Consideration for the environment and for sustainable development in policies and practice.

<http://www.niace.org.uk/>

(2) **Neighbourhood Renewal Unit:** <http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/page.asp?id=3>

(3) Single Regeneration Budget:

(4) Other **Martin Yarnit** projects/publications:

Mr Yarnit has been involved with various research initiatives relating to regeneration and learning communities including:

Lead consultant "Realising the potential - recognising resident's achievement in neighbourhood renewal." 2003 (NIACE sponsored)

"Incubating creativity" - Nov 2002 and event organised by Sheffield based Creative Clusters (set up in 2001 to assist creative entrepreneurs to achieve their potential.

Project implementation "The active learning school project" Feb 2007 bringing together 6 to 9 schools from across authority boundaries to connect schools and communities and tackle the mis-match of purposes and ethos that drive schools and many communities apart.

(5) **Leitch Review** of Skills:

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/leitch_review/review_leitch_index.cfm