

'Much more of the right kind of learning will be available in ways that meet the needs of local people, on their own terms and in settings with which they are comfortable. (...) Local learning opportunities, where people learn together in locally-based, familiar environments, provide the key link to learning for individuals of all ages.'
Learning and Skills Council Prospectus, DfEE, 1999

After the late 1970s, there was a steady reduction in public support for local educational activities designed to help people to re-engage in organised learning. A number of policy measures included: cuts in local authority expenditure; the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority; the prioritisation of accredited and job-related learning; the growing stress on targets and outcomes; incorporation of colleges; mainstreaming in higher education; and pressure on institutions to become more competitive. These measures combined to bring about a drastic weakening of community-based learning activities for adults as well as the loss of staff with experience and expertise in doing this kind of work. After the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and the introduction of the Schedule 2 / non-Schedule 2 adult curriculum divide, it became a major problem to justify public expenditure on time- and labour-intensive approaches which involved small numbers and didn't produce rapid and easily measurable outcomes.

Now the emphasis has changed. Widening participation in learning has become a key policy objective as have community regeneration and combating exclusion, and the key to achieving these objectives is seen as community focused, community-controlled activity.

Working locally - consulting, listening to and working with excluded groups and communities - is a key dimension of the government's linked anti-poverty and lifelong learning strategies. A common label for this kind of work is 'outreach', a word which had virtually dropped out of the education vocabulary but which has reappeared in a succession of influential reports and policy documents that have appeared since 1997.

What is outreach?

"{Educational} Outreach is a process whereby people who would not normally use adult education are contacted in non-institutional settings and become involved in attending and eventually in

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jointly planning and controlling activities, schemes and courses relevant to their circumstances and needs.” (Kevin Ward, Replan Review 1, August 1986)

Like a number of the terms used in post-compulsory education, the word ‘outreach’ tends to be used rather loosely. There is no single and universally accepted definition. While the central connotation is to go outside a centre or institution (a staff activity), a number of other meanings have accrued to the word: to make people in different locations or groups aware of what a provider can offer (a marketing or recruitment strategy); to mount learning programmes in community locations (a delivery mechanism); to liaise and make contact with community organisations and groups (a networking process); to work in an informal and participative way with people outside a centre or institution (a particular approach or way of working), to develop new learning programmes in response to identified needs (curriculum development).

Currently, the word outreach is often used interchangeably with other terms such as ‘widening participation’ and ‘combating exclusion’ and the concept has become strongly connected with the notion of disadvantage – reaching out to people who are in some way deprived. For this reason, the word has acquired certain negative connotations: the provision of assistance for poor and needy people; low level or remedial work.

Why do providers conduct outreach activities?

Many people, especially those who have had poor experiences of formal education, find dedicated education centres and institutions intimidating and exclusive. In order to attract such people, education providers need to contact them in familiar local settings and provide learning activities that are relevant to their immediate interests, priorities and concerns. However, outreach is undertaken for a wide number of other reasons: to reach new groups and identify their learning needs; to recruit people to existing programmes; to take services to areas that lack adult education facilities or to people who cannot access existing provision because of their circumstances (e.g. limited mobility; lack of transport; caring responsibilities) to benefit from the funding attached to attracting particular groups of people or those from specific areas or postcodes.

In some institutions outreach is seen purely as a marketing and recruitment tool to increase participation in existing provision (the top-down, supply-side approach); in others it is viewed more as a means of helping people to determine their own learning need: a process of consultation and consensus, leading to joint planning of learning activities of relevance and value to the people concerned (the demand-led approach). This is the logical direction of outreach in the wider context of community development.

What kind of approaches and models of outreach are there?

Outreach commonly includes:

- The *satellite model* (the establishment of centres for delivery of programmes in community locations outside main sites or campuses).
- The *peripatetic model* (work in organisational settings such as hostels, day centres, homes for the elderly, community centres, hospitals, prisons).
- The *detached outreach model* (contacting people outside organisational settings, e.g. in the streets, shopping centres, pubs, at school gates).
- The *domiciliary outreach model* (visiting people or taking services to them in their homes).

Increasingly popular approaches include the use of mobile services (often providing IT skills, information and guidance and help with basic skills); local capacity-building (training local people as guidance workers, mentors, animateurs or learning champions); distance learning models (such as IT learning networks for people in rural locations).

Issues for providers

Education providers intending to conduct outreach activities need to consider very carefully:

- *Where and at whom to target outreach efforts*
This can involve difficult choices as concentrating on some groups and areas may mean that others are left out.
- *How to identify genuine learning needs*
People are more likely to engage in learning when they are given the opportunity to decide what is of value and relevance to them than when they are offered predetermined

programmes that others consider will be good for them.

- *How best to respond to new learning needs*
When learning needs are identified, a provider needs to be able to address them promptly, not in six months' time, and to see this as the beginning of a process of engagement with local communities, not the end.

'Inreach'

Outreach should involve more than the 'out' part. However, many providers put all their efforts into the pre-institutional stage and do not use the lessons from effective outreach activities to inform their mainstream procedures and practices.

The process of widening participation should produce some changes in institutional culture and practices. If it does not, learners who move from community-based learning into 'mainstream' may fail to achieve and withdraw from programmes before completion.

What are the critical success factors in outreach?

The three most important factors are: managerial support and commitment; the right staff; and adequate resourcing.

It goes without saying that the full commitment and support of managerial champions is a critical success factor in any outreach endeavour. Appointing the right people with the right attributes and blend of skills is another. Outreach work requires a very wide range of practical and interpersonal skills. Staff need to be able to conduct local research; to identify local networks; to contact and negotiate with a range of different agencies, groups and individuals; to interact with and listen to people and identify their learning interests and needs; to set up and co-ordinate meetings; to locate and negotiate use of premises; to broker provision between groups and providers. In performing these and other tasks, they need to have: sensitivity, respect for others and the host communities; the ability to adapt to different groups and different situations and to react to widely differing wants and needs.

Given the range of skills involved in outreach and its importance in widening participation, outreach workers should be appointed on terms and

conditions that allow them to develop the necessary networks and conduct the painstaking development work required.

The effectiveness of outreach also depends on the resources available for it. There is no single funding mechanism for outreach and development work with adults but there are various sources of finance - the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF), the Voluntary Sector Fund for Basic Skills, ESOL, FEFC Non-Schedule 2 pilots, the New Opportunities Fund, the Community Development Learning Fund, Lottery funding and European funds (ESF) – that can be used to support outreach strategies to widen participation and encourage community regeneration. These funding sources are more flexible than mainstream formula funding and enable innovation. However, they are short-term and entail a competitive bidding process.

There can be negative consequences if funding for outreach is only short term:

- It limits what can be achieved although education funders and managers often expect long-term results from short-term resourcing;
- The work tends to be isolated from the mainstream of an organisation and considered as low priority;
- It may disappear at the end of the funding term without major or long-term impact on the host communities;
- Work funded on a short-term project basis can be difficult to embed in institutional arrangements at the end of the funding term;
- Staff may find other jobs before the end of the funding term leading to lack of continuity;
- The work may raise expectations that cannot be met;
- Too short an engagement can lead to loss of trust and damage the credibility of providers.

Post funding sustainability is a real issue for outreach work that is funded on a temporary basis and it raises questions about how outreach workers should manage the cessation of funding.

Outreach therefore needs to be supported by both short-term and more permanent funding: the first to permit experimentation and innovation; the second to allow providers to establish a sustained presence in communities. Core funding for outreach should recognise this kind of work as a long-term investment rather than an add-on cost. It should be

ring-fenced and allow realistic time-scales for the necessary development work to take place before outputs are required.

As an instrument for widening participation in learning, outreach should be seen as a long-term investment. It therefore needs to be supported in a way that takes into account that outcomes, in terms of visible changes in attitude and behaviour, are more likely to be seen in the long- rather than short-term.

How do you evaluate outreach?

Evaluation strategies should be built into the design of outreach activities from the start in order to monitor the impact of interventions and improve their effectiveness. However, the impact of outreach activities is hard to assess, because:

- They are often conducted with groups who are hard to reach and who may need time to develop trust and confidence before they engage in organised learning;
- It is difficult to discover what action has been taken in response to outreach activities;
- It can be extremely difficult to quantify outcomes. Although there are instances where results can be measured in numbers, there is much outreach and community development activity which does not directly generate student numbers.

Because of the diversity of outreach activities and the range of possible outcomes, there can be no single method of calculating costs and benefits. Outreach work should be evaluated on a case by case basis in terms of the specific aims, recognising that the benefits may be widely different for target groups, the wider community and the providing organisation.

It is important for funders and providers to recognise that outreach may have important outcomes beyond increased student recruitment and progression. If the latter are the only prized and recorded results, other broader and more valuable outcomes for individuals, families and communities may not be recognised.

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Resources on Outreach

Recovering outreach: concepts, practices and issues. Veronica McGivney. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 1 86201 099 4. £14.95

Aylesbury revisited : outreach in the 1980s. Foreword by Dan Taubman. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 1 86201 112 5. £14.95

Demonstration outreach projects: identification of best practice. A. Watson and C. Tyers. DfEE / SWA Consulting, 1998. Web site: www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/outreach/report.htm

An evaluation of non schedule 2 pilot projects. Maggie Greenwood, Annie Merton and Sue Taylor. Learning and Skills Development Agency, 2000.

A guide to outreach with laptops. Angela Wood. NIACE, 2000. ISBN 1 86201 109 5. £5.95

Informal learning in the community: a trigger for change and development. Veronica McGivney. NIACE, 1999. ISBN 1 86201 073 0. £13.95

Overcoming exclusion through adult learning. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. OECD, 1999. ISBN 926417026X

Working with excluded groups: guidelines on good practice for providers and policy makers in working with groups under-represented in adult learning. NIACE / Oxfordshire Strategic Partnership, 2000. ISBN 1 86201 081 1. £6.00

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.

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