

BBC Strategy Review 2010:

A response from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)

Introduction

1. The link between broadcasting and adult education is almost as old as the BBC itself. It was a joint committee established by the BBC and NIACE's forerunner (the British Institute of Adult Education) that, in 1927 shaped the BBC mission to educate, inform and entertain. The Hadow Report (*New Ventures in Broadcasting: A study in adult education*), was instrumental in setting out the Corporation's role as an educational force; an instrument of democratic cultural engagement and a promoter of active citizenship.
2. As the successor to the original British Institute, NIACE is a long-established independent charity which works to encourage more and different adults to engage in high-quality learning of all kinds. Its functions include advocacy to inform and influence public policy, research, development and consultancy; information services and dissemination; campaigning for, and celebrating the achievements of, adult learners.
3. NIACE is a committed supporter of the BBC but seeks to act as a 'critical friend'. This means that we seek to ask provocative and challenging questions, suggest different ways of considering issues and offer a critique of the BBC in a manner intended to be supportive and helpful.

Underpinning questions

4. In considering how the BBC's strategy should fulfil the public purposes of its Charter, NIACE's particular interest lies in how well the strategy will improve, increase or extend opportunities for adults who wish to use the Corporation's services for learning.
5. The questions which NIACE believes that the BBC Trust should ask of the Director-General in the period ahead are:
 - i. How well the BBC can demonstrate that it gives sufficient priority to educational (as opposed to educative) programming and services?

- ii. Whether the focus on adult learning (as opposed to the learning of children and young people) is fit for purpose across the whole range of its activities?
 - iii. Whether BBC educational and educative activity is distributed to best effect across its services (TV, radio, website and other)?
 - iv. How well the BBC listens to other stakeholders in the educational field when considering its educational and educative activity (and in particular, whether its commitment to partnership is maintained when BBC budgets are not under threat or the Charter is not under review)?
 - v. Whether the BBC works effectively with other broadcasters, programme makers and content distributors) on educational matters?
6. In this respect at least, the Director General's Proposals (*Putting Quality First*) are rather disappointing. Whilst the document does contain evidence of an understanding of the educational role of broadcasting:
- (‘Knowledge–building propositions will also be a starting point for deeper learning experiences through campaigns that encourage people to take action and learn new skills, for instance through a three–year Hands–on History project.’)*
- the majority of the references to education, learning or educational activity refer to children’s learning or to the important library/archival functions of BBC education content.
7. Overall, NIACE is supportive of the BBC and of the strategy set out but argues:
- i. that the Corporation neither spends enough on, nor gives sufficient airtime to, adult learning and
 - ii. does not always do the right things in the right places with the resources it spends.
8. Overall we call for a strategy that includes substantial increase in spending on educational programming, rising over the life of any future Charter and a consequential increase in the amount of airtime devoted to such programmes which include both formal and educative programmes and which reflect the changing demographic profile of the UK.
9. We believe that the BBC’s educational mission should remain at the heart of its Strategy. We believe that it should discharge the educational dimension of its remit in a range of ways which reflect the complexity and diversity of the United Kingdom’s cultural, civic, social and economic

society in ways which are accessible and engaging for people of all ages. In particular, we believe that broadcasting has a particular responsibility in the field of political education since the electronic media have a uniquely powerful role in framing national agendas and contributing to public understanding of the forces shaping our lives and the world around us.

Specific comments

The Public Service obligation

10. A key question for the Trust to ask is “what constitutes ‘adequacy’ in the discharge of the BBC’s public service obligation? “. Two relevant indicators here are:

Equality and diversity: A layperson’s view of BBC output suggests that the relative scarcity of older presenters (especially older female presenters) and the existence of BBC3 as a ‘youth’ channel is the result of a skewed institutional culture that does not reflect the changing demography of the UK. The proposed closure of the Asian network would also appear to narrow rather than widen the range of different groups made visible/audible by the BBC’s high-quality programming. If these comments are true for general programming, they are especially so with regard to educational programmes and services on different platforms.

Accountability and legitimacy: The mechanisms the BBC has for communicating with educational partners are somewhat one-way. The Corporation often appears better at informing others of its intentions than developing them collaboratively, in learning from feedback, or in understanding the agendas of others. There is a need for a level of dialogue and discussion that goes beyond evaluation or technology-led interactivity and which is based on more open partnerships. In particular, NIACE would urge the BBC to liaise more effectively with other education providers to maximise and sustain the benefits which learners can derive from its activities. While there are opportunities for ‘quick win’ activities, other initiatives (for example initiatives around basic skills) require work over an extended period – and this may prove harder for ‘event’ broadcasters with short attention spans expecting novelty and pace.

Balance of programming

11. The BBC retains the ability to produce showstopping educational programmes, (for example *Brain Story* and other science-focussed output, or on radio, *History of the World in 100 objects*). When these are allied

with support from education providers (for example with the Open University on *Coast*), these can enable viewers to take forward their interest more or less actively in different ways and at different levels of formality and depth.

12. A fleet cannot be made up wholly of flagships however and the BBC seems in recent years to have lost something of its range of on-air educational programming. Deeming some programming (lifestyle and reality especially) to be 'educative' misses the point. There is a need for continued innovation - for example by exploring the potential of CBBC and Cbeebies to educate and 'hook' parents as well as children or in exploring more systematically the educational potential of the innovative 6Music station. The BBC's capacity to innovate is impressive – as evidenced in the way in which *Who do you think you are?* stimulated so many people to become active learners and investigate their own family history and *People's War* created an enduring resource for learning.
13. In particular, a capacity for multi-platform motivational programming seems to have been forgotten. NIACE draws the attention of the Trust to the *Second Chance* initiative of the early and mid-1990s which encouraged viewers and listeners across TV and radio both national and local. to take up learning (through brief advert-like, 'ident' spots) . This approach merits rediscovery.

Synergy between on-air and online activity

14. The BBC has undertaken important work in opening up the expertise of its journalists to wider audiences through its website and through the development of correspondents' blogs. One area where it might do more however, is in promoting media literacy by encouraging responsible and ethical 'citizen journalism' . Some BBC local radio stations (in London and the West Midlands for example) have experimented in this area but the time may be right for a larger initiative.
15. If the size and scale of the BBC's own web-presence is to shrink, the boundary between user-generated content and journalist-generated content becomes more important. There is enormous potential for the BBC to supplement the work of professionals without risking or diluting the BBC's editorial quality or neutrality. The use of intermediaries such as educational organisations to regulate a more porous interface between the BBC and the 'wild frontier' of unregulated bloggers may be worth considering.

Media literacy

16. Ever since the 2003 Communications Act gave OFCOM a statutory duty to promote media literacy, the BBC has had a helpful benchmark against which to assess its own activities. NIACE believes that there is merit in closer collaboration and liaison with other media providers in this territory but that the BBC's unique reach and range should not be jeopardised. BBC Learning has a strong track record and the new strategy should build on this.

Conclusions

17. NIACE would be pleased to provide further information about anything in this response to the Trust or to BBC staff. In the first instance, contact NIACE's Principal Policy and Advocacy Officer, Alastair Thomson (alastair.thomson@niace.org.uk).