

'Great Britain has a long and successful history of employing open and distance learning methods. This has created an industry of many small commercial organisations, large corporate users, universities and colleges with considerable expertise in open learning.'

Open learning materials and learning centres, NIACE, 1999

This is the eighth in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues

Also available:

1. A history of the development of NIACE
2. What motivates people to learn
3. Student non-completion (drop out)
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6. Lifelong learning - opportunities and initiatives
7. New Deal
8. Learning centres
9. Young adult learners, disaffection and social exclusion
10. Social exclusion
11. Emancipatory learning
12. Fees charged to part-time adult students 1998-99

Suggestions for future issues to be covered are welcome.

Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE.

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They are also available on the website at www.niace.org.uk.

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What is a learning centre?

Introduction

There has been consistent interest in the development and use of learning centres over the last two decades. Centres exist in all sectors of the economy. Many colleges, universities, companies and community organisations have developed learning centres. Several universities have launched major learning centre developments while hundreds of public libraries have established open learning centres which provide access to open learning to the public and there is a growing number of community based centres.

Learning centres take many different forms and vary considerably in size, structure and role. Some centres consist of a small collection of learning materials while others are based in multi-storey buildings with hundreds of computers. Some organisations are moving towards developing virtual learning centres based on company Intranets. There is considerable interest in utilising the Internet to deliver and support learning. In some locations learners need to make an appointment to use the facilities while others offer a drop-in service to encourage learners to use the centre.

Functions and Services

Whatever the physical nature of the learning centre it should be able to provide some of the following :

- a welcoming environment
- suitable opening hours
- a distraction free study environment
- equipment and materials which would be uneconomic to provide for one individual
- access to a range of high quality open learning materials
- access to a range of other learning services (e.g. conventional courses)

- access to information and communication technology
- advice and guidance
- information about learning opportunities
- general and specific support
- mentoring
- communication with other learners to share experience and gain peer support
- loan of materials to facilitate home or work place learning
- loan of computers and other equipment
- accreditation

(Clarke, 1999; Jeffries, 1998; Guildford Educational Services Ltd, 1997)

Although all these functions are useful, there are many different ways of providing them including exploiting information and communication technologies or by networking a range of centres. Support can be provided by e-mail so that it is possible to offer specific subject assistance almost anywhere. Many specialists can be made available through the use of communication technologies.

Examples

The examples below illustrate four different types of learning centres. These are:

Small Centre

Essentially an information point which provides access to information about learning opportunities, taster materials and advice. This is provided in a variety of forms including some of the following:

- Publications
- Possibly a free telephone to an advice service
- Small collection of open learning materials including taster packs
- Possible Internet access
- Possibly access to E-mail

Standard Centre

A centre which provides:

- Computer facilities linked to the Internet
- Access to information about learning opportunities
- A range of courses

- Access to a collection of open learning materials
- Catalogues of materials
- General learning support
- E-mail access to advice and guidance service

Major Learning Centre

A substantial centre which provides:

- Substantial computer facilities with multiple links to Internet
- Access to information about learning opportunities
- Delivery of a wide range of courses
- Access to a library of open learning materials
- General support
- Access to subject tutorial support either face-to-face, e-mail or telephone
- E-mail and/or face-to-face access to advice and guidance service
- Personal study space

Some learning centres specialise in a particular subject area and there are many which concentrate on basic skills and information technology.

Virtual Centre

A virtual learning centre can provide access to the service from home or public locations (e.g. library).

A centre will provide:

- Access to information about learning opportunities
- Delivery of a range of Open Learning courses. There are a number of commercial products which allow open learning
- materials to be delivered to an individual computer over the Internet.
- General support
- Access to subject tutorial support through e-mail, electronic conferencing and mail groups
- E-mail and electronic conferencing access to advice and guidance service
- Communication with other learners

These are only examples and many other combinations, functions and services are possible. There are many single learning centres. However, networks of centres are now being developed in several companies and cities. Many centres do not offer a comprehensive range of services but are

customised to meet the host organisation needs. The success of a centre is clearly related to how well the centre serves the needs of its customers. This is difficult to get right first time and many centres have found the value of adopting a flexible approach with regular reviews of services and materials.

Support

Appropriate support is critical to the success of a learning centre. There is considerable evidence which emphasises the importance of supporting the open learner. Failure to complete a course of study or to require excessive time are common problems of open learning. Appropriate human support is important in reducing these problems. Without support many learners will fail.

Support can take many forms and it is not always necessary to provide immediate face to face subject specific help. A trained generalist who understands learning can provide significant assistance. The availability of expert subject support is only required occasionally and can be provided by e-mail or telephone access or the occasional tutorial. Students can help each other and forming a self-help group is a powerful aid to the individual student in overcoming problems. Learners find it far easier to approach each other with questions than to contact an expert. Most students need a balance of general and individual help. They need access to:

- advice and guidance
- general support
- peer support
- subject support.

Summary

Learning centres need to maximise accessibility and relevancy to the learners they serve. A centre within a host organisation needs to be integrated into the overall learning strategy of the organisation. It needs to be flexible and have an approach to continuous improvement so that it can adapt to the changing needs of the learners, organisation or community. An effective centre must be a friendly, welcoming learning place which meets individual needs and provides effective learning support.

Resources for Open Learning

Benchmarking learning centres. C Jeffries. Open Learning Today, Journal of the British Association of Open Learning, 1998

The education and training multimedia market in the UK, report for the MESO project. Guildford Educational Services Ltd, 1997

Ensuring quality in open learning. British Association of Open Learning. BAOL, 1997

Exploring open and distance learning. D Rowntree. Kogan Page, 1992. ISBN 0749408138

A guide to the cost effectiveness of technology-based training. M Hunt and A Clarke. Department for Education and Employment, OL248, 1998

Learning centres: a guide. Education and Training Technologies. Department for Education and Employment. DfEE, 1997

Open learning materials and learning centres. A Clarke. NIACE, 1999. ISBN 1862010714. £6.95

Web-based training. C Steed. Gower, 1999. ISBN 0566081032

Where can you find out more?

British Association for Open Learning
Tel: 01462 485588, Web Site: www.baol.co.uk

Open and Distance Learning Quality Council
Tel: 020 7935 5391, Web Site: www.odlqc.org.uk

Open Learning Foundation
Tel: 020 7636 4186
Web Site: <http://elgar.tvu.ac.uk/olf>

Technologies for Training
Web Site: <http://www.tft.co.uk>

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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