

**Clicks and  
mortar:  
learning centres –  
locating learning  
and skills?**

**Kevin Donovan**



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Feedback should be sent to  
FEDA publications, 3 Citadel Place,  
Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EF  
Tel: 020 7840 5302/4 Fax: 020 7840 5401  
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## **Please note**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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# Introduction

*Westminster Council says its twelve libraries could follow the example in Tower Hamlets, where traditional branches are being replaced by supermarket-sponsored 'idea stores'. Tower Hamlets aims to create a clutch of hi-tech branches which will be used as cafés, galleries, classrooms and theatre spaces, as well as for book lending.<sup>1</sup>*

*The first trade union learning centre to deliver training and development to its members opened for business this week. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCSU) Open Learning Centre will provide information technology and communications skills to secretaries, typists, clerical and support staff in Whitehall departments.<sup>2</sup>*

*By sunset today the folk of the Yorkshire Dales will have acquired their very own college. There will be nothing obvious to the casual passer-by. No campus to tip a cap at. No new smudge on the sublime skyline. Nor will any grand outsiders be gracing today's event with their presences. In Whitehall they're largely ignorant of the new arrival although a letter was winged to David Blunkett notifying him of this addition to his domain.*

*The College of the Dales, which is being formally opened by Hannah Hauxwell, a local celebrity, is not some Yorkshire act of defiance, a sort of UDI. It will actually be an offshoot of Craven College, Skipton, situated on the southern margin of this 600 square-mile region of outstanding beauty. It will consist of a network of learning centres, access points with computer facilities for individual study, and information points, explains Craven College's principal, Alan Blackwell.<sup>3</sup>*

A huge amount of political and educational attention is currently being devoted to the development of learning centres.

*Learning centres are the flavour of the moment. Ufi's target of 1,000 learning centres, organised through 100 'hubs', by September 2000 is central to the government's policy of providing lifelong learning for all. Another 720 learning centres supported by the Capital Modernisation Fund, and 80 in the Excellence in Cities programme, are aimed to meet the needs of individuals and small businesses who do not have other access to high specification computing, to enable them to learn about, and through, information communications technology.*

*The private sector is also developing learning centres, sometimes related to government initiatives, sometimes independent of them, sometimes in partnership with educational institutions, or through a franchised network, or in-house in larger companies, often open to the families of employees.<sup>4</sup>*

There is a particularly strong conjunction between the aim to widen participation in education and training, and the view that new technology has the potential to support this.

*Lifelong learning, the Internet age and technology is all around us and becoming a greater part of our everyday lives. More and more people are using ICT both at work and in their leisure time to improve their skills, opportunities and quality of life.*

*However many people, particularly in disadvantaged communities, do not have the chance to do this. They do not have access to ICT facilities in their home or place of work, are unaware of the range of opportunities available to them through ICT and how to make the most of them, and have low or no ICT skills.<sup>5</sup>*

The work of the Social Exclusion Unit and its Policy Action Teams (PATs) also reflects the interest. For example, the PAT 15 report looked at access to and use of ICTs (information and communications technologies) by people living in the poorest neighbourhoods. Their overall goal was to develop a strategy to increase the availability and take-up of ICTs.

*The PAT found that while there are a large number of projects and initiatives already in operation or planned, there are gaps in provision and barriers still exist which prevent people in deprived neighbourhoods accessing ICTs. To overcome these barriers there are a number of key issues that have to be tackled [including] developing better means of promoting the benefits of and the centres providing access.<sup>6</sup>*



# The FEDA initiative

The interest in learning centres fits with the rationale of the 1999 *Modernising government* White Paper. This discussed how the business of government might be modernised by, among other considerations:

- making services more responsive to the public
- improving the quality of services
- using technology more effectively for 'information age' government and creating a public service for the 21st century.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the related FEDA research project will also examine:

- the associated development of 'one-stop shops' which might combine learning with the provision of social information.

Recent emphasis on lifelong learning and 'just-in-time' learning has been driven by a similar ambition – to provide information age learning and 21st century services for learners, industry and society. Those developing learning centres, in both the public and the private sector, are aiming to create modern, flexible learning environments and offer learning opportunities which use ICT effectively.

However:

*Because learning centres are being based on so many different organisations and institutions and related (or not) to different initiatives, there could be a danger of fragmentation.<sup>4</sup>*

This publication is the first in an occasional series and later in 2000 there will be an associated website. These are part of a FEDA research project that will:

- describe and analyse the development of learning centres across England and Wales, identifying whether they can be usefully categorised by structure, purpose or learning approach
- examine particular ways in which ICT is being used within learning centres or types of learning centre
- develop robust criteria for judging the effectiveness of centres and analyse the contexts in which centres seem to be most effective
- assess the extent to which learning centres are an effective means of meeting key elements of the government agenda for lifelong learning, e.g. widening participation, raising achievement, providing 'one-stop shop' services, etc.
- disseminate findings about effective practice.

The outputs from the project should:

- inform the development strategies of government and other agencies
- provide models to assist colleges and other organisations developing learning centres
- encourage sharing of good practice, collaboration and benchmarking within and across sectors.

The project will look at how learning centres are funded. FE funding methodology is coming to terms with 'distributed open and distance learning' (DODL). This will be of crucial importance as more learners study at a distance from traditional institutions. Above all, the project will attempt to explore the pedagogical issues that relate to learning centres.

This first bulletin will begin to:

- describe what learning centres do
- help understanding of the various current initiatives
- encourage dialogue between those interested in the role of such centres.

# Learning centres

## What is a learning centre?

One definition is a location with a collection of resources which support learners and learning. The location can be actual or virtual; the resources can be people as well as materials.<sup>8</sup> Part of the interest in learning centres is, of course, a product of the potential of ICT. The title 'learning centre' may now be standard but the concept applies equally to libraries, learning resource centres and open learning centres. The traditional open learning mission was to provide learning at a 'time, place and pace' which suited individuals. New technology may support this but excitement about new technology should not erase the valuable role of multiple media. One e-mail exchange defined a learning centre as 'a library with a computer':

*Thanks to today's technology, learning is changing – and it's changing for the better, leading the way is learndirect. A brand new way of learning that lets you learn what you want, where you want, and at a pace that suits you.*

*We can help you find the best course for you – not just work courses but courses for fun too, traditional courses, classroom-based courses and ones you can do at home.*

*To make learning easier we will help you find a course that fits around your lifestyle, learning that is available through the Internet or in one of our national network of learndirect centres.<sup>9</sup>*

Learning centres may have a variety of aims which relate to:

- the age and status of users
- the purpose of attendance
- the range and level of learning programmes
- the degree of specialisation or otherwise
- the nature and sophistication of learning resources
- the physical location and concentration of resources.

## What does a learning centre offer?

Some or all of the following features can be found in learning centres:

- access (to resources and support)
- information, advice and guidance
- tutors and other staff
- learning materials in a variety of media
- a range of technology
- assessment, accreditation and progression services
- social facilities.

*Within an organisation many people are prone to distractions when seated at their usual desktop PC (personal computer). By locating PCs in a special 'learning centre', you can create a more learning-friendly environment, where people can concentrate better on the training materials.<sup>10</sup>*

## Where are learning centres?

They can be found in (or in the form of):

- colleges, schools and universities
- local libraries and museums
- shops, shopping centres and pubs
- other 'community' locations
- employers' premises
- cyberspace

and may occupy:

- a single address or building
- several linked addresses.

## International developments

Interest in learning centres using technology is not confined to the UK. An announcement on the EC website notes that:

*The eLearning initiative establishes a number of objectives for the European Union [including] to offer vocational training organisations, learning centres and firms good quality (high speed) infrastructures for access to the Internet.<sup>11</sup>*

In the USA, for example, the fast-growing University of Phoenix, which makes extensive use of online methods, also has a large network of learning centres in a number of states to complement technology-assisted teaching and learning. Its website includes this marketing material:

*Degree programs generally meet one evening a week for four hours at a location convenient to your home or office. Classes are small, participative and information-intensive. Our faculty is superbly qualified, teaching the subjects in which they have practical expertise. Our service is excellent, too, a fact which working professionals appreciate.<sup>12</sup>*

The FEDA project will draw on international experience and the website will include appropriate links.

# What are the current UK initiatives?

Listed below are some current UK learning centre schemes. The list is not exhaustive and, in fact, readers are invited to contribute to a developing and more comprehensive picture. The chart also illustrates the overlap and commonality between various initiatives.

It does not include many of the various centres outlined above, for example in the private sector.

The associated website will provide current information and appropriate links. The website and future editions of this bulletin will also feature case studies drawn from real practice across the range of learning centres.

For other information see the web addresses cited here and the various references in this bulletin.

Title/Initiative and numbers	Funding	Purpose	Notes
720 ICT learning centres	Capital Modernisation Fund	To give adults in disadvantaged communities access to computers and the Internet	'Learning centres will bridge gap between computer have and have-nots' – Prime Minister, DfEE press release 480/99, October 1999 and initially announced in March 1999 Budget. Further details at: <a href="http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ict-learning-centre">www.dfes.gov.uk/ict-learning-centre</a>
85 (32 initially) City Learning Centres/ Excellence in Cities	Capital Modernisation Fund	To provide technology-based learning and teaching opportunities for inner-city schools	'Estelle Morris announces network of city learning centres', DfEE press release 447/99, October 1999
e-libraries and New Library Network/ Community Access to Lifelong Learning (CALL)	New Opportunities Fund (NOF)	To develop and run a nationwide network of ICT learning centres: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to fund Community Grids or Learning, which will provide community-based content for adult learners</li> <li>● to support the People's Network, linking up every public library to the Internet, community websites and the National Grid for Learning</li> </ul>	<i>Community access to lifelong learning</i> consultation paper/ England (NOF, October 1999). CALL information can be accessed at: <a href="http://www.nof.org.uk/educ_frame.htm">www.nof.org.uk/educ_frame.htm</a>
1,000 (eventually) Ufi/learndirect centres	Centres of Excellence and Skills Challenge EU ADAPT, NOF Budget announcement for learning centres, learners funded from existing sources (e.g. FEFC)	To offer a public access point to Ufi service: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to provide local learning facilities (especially PC workstations) to learners who lack such facilities at home or work</li> <li>● to be a focus for delivering Ufi learner support services.</li> </ul> <i>(Learning centre hubs – a call for outline proposals, Ufi 1999)</i>	'Guidance for hub partnerships – hub processes: questions and answers', Ufi 1999

# Key questions

## What should we ask about learning centres?

Are they new? Or just a new name for existing practice?

Why are they apparently so popular?

How will they help to meet national education and training targets (NTETs)?

Will they attract disaffected learners?

How much reliance should learners place on new technology?

Are the teaching and learning methods tried and tested – or still to be evaluated?

What is an appropriate pedagogy for learning centres?

Will centres have parity of esteem and provision one with another?

Will funding be equitable and adequate?

How will existing providers be affected?

# References

1. *London Evening Standard*, 11 January 2000.
2. *The Guardian*, 15 January 2000.
3. [www.educationunlimited.co.uk/colleges/story/0,5500,223761,00.html](http://www.educationunlimited.co.uk/colleges/story/0,5500,223761,00.html)
4. Technologies for Training website [www.tft.co.uk/headline.html](http://www.tft.co.uk/headline.html)
5. DfEE ICT centres website [www.dfee.gov.uk/ict-learning-centres/int.htm](http://www.dfee.gov.uk/ict-learning-centres/int.htm)
6. *Closing the digital divide*, available via [www.pat15.org.uk](http://www.pat15.org.uk) and e.g. [www.pat15.org.uk/pdfs/rep10.pdf](http://www.pat15.org.uk/pdfs/rep10.pdf)
7. The *Modernising government* White Paper, published 30 March 1999.
8. A search on the Internet for 'learning centres' will produce thousands of references. There is at least one related discussion ('What are they?') to be found at: [www.ispo.cec.be/ispo/lists/ispo96/0800.html](http://www.ispo.cec.be/ispo/lists/ispo96/0800.html)
9. [www.learndirect.co.uk/home/whylearndirect/](http://www.learndirect.co.uk/home/whylearndirect/)
10. [www.tft.co.uk/briefing/note21a.html](http://www.tft.co.uk/briefing/note21a.html) and Tft Briefing 7, *Setting up a learning resource centre*.
11. [www.ecu-notes.org/Gatedata/3514.html](http://www.ecu-notes.org/Gatedata/3514.html)
12. [www.uophx.edu/socalif/](http://www.uophx.edu/socalif/)

## Comments

If you wish to comment on this bulletin or contribute to ongoing work, please contact:

**Kevin Donovan**, Development Adviser,  
Learning Technologies, FEDA,  
North West Regional Office, First floor,  
Alsop Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool L69 3BX.  
Tel: 0151 794 4788 Fax: 0151 794 4676  
E-mail: [kfortune@feda.ac.uk](mailto:kfortune@feda.ac.uk)

## Where can I get further information?

The publications and websites listed under 'References' (above) will be useful; they will be augmented over time and references will be included with subsequent outputs.

## [www.feda.ac.uk](http://www.feda.ac.uk)

This publication is available as a free download from FEDA's website at [www.feda.ac.uk](http://www.feda.ac.uk) (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader, available free from [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)).

Colleges are not the only organisations interested in learning centres. Learning centres are at the heart of many current government and other initiatives to bring the information age into education, training and public services. They have a range of goals, organisational models and resources. But are they effective?

*Clicks and mortar* is the first in a series of FEDA publications and web-based information to explore what learning centres do, how and why they do it, and to encourage dialogue between all who are interested in their development.

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