

A Statement of Ambition – the right direction, but to what place?

Michael Osborne¹

University of Glasgow

The publication of *Adult Learning in Scotland – Statement of Ambition* is welcome. It would be difficult to argue against the statement of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Mike Russell, in his forward that everyone in the country should have the ‘right to access high quality learning to meet their needs and aspirations – throughout their lives’. The notion that adult learning should be life-long and life-wide, and that it should be learner-centred and informed by the interests and motives of learners has been core to thinking within the field for many decades. Many readers will be able to draw a line back to the UNESCO reports of Faure (1972 *et al.*) and Delors (1996 *et al.*), the various Confintea statements and the numerous policy papers of the European Commission (EC 1990, 2000 and 2007). Perhaps what is not so explicit in the Statement is the link to current thinking of UNESCO, in particular in relation to the importance of the city and region in learning. I will return to that notion in more depth later.

There is also clear recognition that there are potentially multiple benefits of adult learning that extend beyond the economic to a range of other outcomes including those related to health, social care and community cohesion. It is these wider benefits of learning, including the unplanned spin-off externalities, which have previously been drawn to our attention by the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning (Feinstein and Hammond 2004), the *Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning* (Field 2009), the Marmot Review (2010) and the British Academy (2014) that have been given strong recognition in the Statement.

We see echoes here of the recently published Child Poverty Strategy In Scotland, which speaks of the ‘need to break the cycles of poverty, deprivation, unemployment, health inequalities and poor educational attainment which have become deeply embedded in our society, particularly in our disadvantaged communities’ (Scottish Government 2013:7). Healthy children are more likely to perform well at school and young people with high levels of educational attainment are more likely to find high quality employment.

Also we can see a relationship with an earlier paper *Good Places, Better Health for Scotland’s Children*, which argues in that ‘Good Places’ (i.e. with high quality social, economic, cultural and physical environments) lead to better health (Scottish Government 2011). The argument, which is supported by some robust research, is that good places contain healthy people, who are more likely to enter learning, gain qualifications and become employed. Furthermore they will then become more civically-minded engaged citizens. These relationships are correlational rather than

¹ Michael Osborne is Professor of Adult and Lifelong Learning at the University of Glasgow and director of the Research and Teaching Group (RTG) in Social Justice, Place and Lifelong Education (SJPLE) within the School of Education.

based on cause and effect, and are not uni-directional. So just as healthy people are more likely to be learners, engagement in learning is associated with improvements in health, as the Marmot Review illustrates. Amongst the findings cited in the review are that 'studies of adults in their 30s and 40s show a correlating relationship between measures of participation in learning and outcomes such as life satisfaction and/or psychological wellbeing'. Interesting and one good reason for a life-wide perspective is that 'amongst older adults, it was leisure courses, rather than vocational courses, which appeared to have significant effects'.

This reminds us however that in Scotland, provision in the liberal adult tradition within Higher Education has suffered considerably in the last decade. Universities are not mentioned specifically in the Statement, and it is notable that no senior university representative was included within the National Strategic Forum for Adult Learning. Perhaps that is because of a perception that the sector has withdrawn from the area. To an extent that is true with the demise of the extra-mural tradition – however that decline has not been as significant as in other parts of the UK, and probably the Scottish university sector maintains itself a world leader in access to non-accredited learning for personal development. Further the Outcome Agreements that the universities sign with the Scottish Funding Council are vehicles to ensure a certain level of accessibility to undergraduate provision.

Outcome Agreements are mentioned in the Statement in the context of Further Education Colleges and future strategic planning to move ambitions forward. What is not mentioned is that severe cuts to which the FE sector has been subject, means that it has limited capacity to respond in the flexible approaches implied by the Statement. Nonetheless these Regional Outcome agreements are important, as are the Requirements for Community Learning and Development (Scotland) Regulations 2013, a statutory requirement for Education Authorities 'to initiate and, having done so, to maintain and facilitate a process by which community learning and development secured within the area of the education authority is secured ...' (Scottish Statutory Instruments 2013)

The Statute leaves Education Authorities to determine who should be the 'target individuals and groups' deemed to in need of community learning and development, though it is charged with consulting with persons 'appearing ... to be representative of the target individuals and groups; and ... appearing ... to be representative of persons providing community learning and development' in their area. We can obviously debate the meaning of 'appearing' and who will be brought into the tent to discuss needs and importantly priorities, but what is helpful is that a structure is in place at regional level. In work that we undertook within the *ELLECTROnet: (European Lifelong Learning Expertise for Cities, Towns and Regions Organisational Network)* project, a decade ago, we pointed out the importance of statutory obligation in delivering partnership working and engagement with communities in decision-making that affect the delivery of public services (Sankey and Osborne 2006). The context then was the requirement of the *Local Government in Scotland Act* (2003) for all local authorities to address 'Community Planning'.

We drew a link between the requirement for community planning with the concept of developing the learning city/region in as much as both implied networking and partnership working between providers. In the case of learning city/region, the European Commission in its Regions of Lifelong Learning Initiative of 2002 called for:

'mobilisation of all 'players' involved in ascertaining learning needs, opening up learning opportunities for people of all ages, ensuring the quality of education and training provision, and making sure that people are given credit for their knowledge, skills and competences, wherever and however these may have been acquired'. (EC 2002)

The Scottish Government's statement moves us in this direction and proposes a process for developing strategic planning in order to implement its ideas. It is important that all relevant players are around the same table, and that instruments are in place to ensure that plans can be delivered. With Community Planning Partnerships, Community Learning and Development Regulations and Outcome Agreements for both the FE and HE sector there are no shortage of drivers for policy. The HE sector is not explicitly charged with an involvement in achieving the ambitions of the Statement, and this is an important element to add, not simply because it is a significant deliverer of adult learning, but also of the training for adult learning providers which is absent in Scotland. I would argue that the sector can offer much more to adults, and has not sustained many of the adult-friendly developments of the 1990s. I have commented recently in relation to improving the flexibility of HE that 'Despite having the vehicles in place such as the SCQF, few of the drivers have passed the test' and that initiatives funded through the Flexibility in Teaching and Learning Scheme from 1993-1995 have not been sustained (Osborne 2013). In developing a new vision, it is important to look backwards as well as to the future, to determine what has worked and why.

Finally returning to the importance of place, clear opportunities exist for Scotland because of these ambitions for adult learning to project itself as a world leader. It can do this by tying its proposals to the international resurgence of the concept of the learning city. A set of *Key Features of Learning Cities* have been developed by UNESCO (2013a), the details of which were announced at a major conference in Beijing in October 2013, which launched the *International Platform of Learning Cities* and a related Beijing Declaration (UNESCO 2013b). This may ultimately lead to a UNESCO City of Learning award, and it is cities in Asia, notably in China and Korea that are at the forefront of utilizing the concept as a lever for networking and partnership at a city and regional level in learning. Some places in Scotland have declared themselves as 'learning cities'. In Edinburgh and Glasgow past initiatives appear dormant, but in Dundee the learning city is alive, and Dumfries has declared itself to be a 'Learning Town'. However despite earlier UK wide initiatives these are one-off developments, and we are some way from embedding learning into local consciousness as in countries such as Korea with its annual learning festivals and awards for cities (Chang and Cha 2008; Yang 2012). We tend to be suspicious in the west about awards and competition, but I would argue that to really involve citizens and to create a sense of achievement in learning we might consider adopting some

of the strategies found in the East. This would build on existing favourable structures, badge the vehicle for delivery and project an international connectedness as well as clear a clear national direction. Unlike some parts of the UK, Scotland is perhaps more likely to be open to consideration of initiatives from the East. I look forward to a Scottish Learning Cities and Regions Network, though I do admit to be an interested party².

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² I encourage readers to look at the initiatives of the PASCAL Observatory (<http://pascalobservatory.org>), which I direct in Europe, and in particular Learning Cities 2020 (<http://learningcities2020.org>) and our Learning Cities Network (<http://lcn.pascalobservatory.org>). We are also operationalizing some of UNESCO's Measures of Learning Cities within Glasgow as part of the new ESRC-funded Urban Big Data Centre (see <http://urbanbigdatacentre.com>)

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