

## Refereed article

# Lifelong learning and empowerment: a model in practice

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### Abstract

In July 2000, eight BBC staff graduated from the University of Northumbria at Newcastle with an Advanced Diploma in Lifelong Learning (Records Management). This is the first award in a new and innovative framework aimed at meeting the needs of industry in a flexible way. Explains the model for lifelong learning awards, which focuses on the individual or group of individuals and their specific education and development needs, and evaluates its use as part of a training programme at the BBC. The evaluation, based on the views of the student participants, other BBC staff involved and staff from the university, is overwhelmingly positive. The award has had a significant impact on the roles and responsibilities of the BBC staff as well as the status of records management within the BBC. With the collaboration, support and commitment of all those involved, the model was successful in empowering participants both as learners and records professionals.

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## Introduction

In July 2000 eight staff from Document Archives at the BBC in London graduated from the first in the new and innovative lifelong learning awards devised by the universities in the north-east of England. The aim of the awards is to meet the needs of industry by providing a flexible means of study that allows individuals to gain a university qualification while remaining in the workplace. Unlike the traditional university programme the lifelong learning awards focus on the individual or a group of individuals and their specific education and development needs. They are thus the ultimate in flexible learning and this flexibility, combined with the validation of a university award, not only empowers the individual as a learner but equally empowers the employee in his/her professional and vocational role. As a model they lend themselves to continuing professional development in the field of information studies. The aim of this paper is to explain and evaluate this model by presenting the experience of the School of Information Studies in designing and delivering the Advanced Diploma in Lifelong Learning (Records Management).

## The lifelong learning award framework

The UK Government has identified, as a priority, the need to develop and maintain a skilled and flexible workforce. Lifelong learning and widening participation are two of the key agents to achieve this goal by drawing on the active involvement of the range of education providers at local and regional level. In the north-east of England these two initiatives are seen as being central to regional development and regeneration and this has

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prompted the six universities of the north-east (formerly Higher Education Support for Industry in the North (HESIN)) to undertake the Credit for Lifelong Learning Project. The aims of the project were:

... to develop a regional mechanism for linking work-related education at the higher levels into a national credit framework, attracting academic and/or vocational credit (University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 1998).

With funding from the Department for Education and Employment's (DfEE) Higher Education Regional Development Fund, this project has, for the past three years, been working to provide new, imaginative and creative ways of giving credit for work-related learning.

The framework which has resulted from the project provides a series of mini-awards at each of the higher education levels, from undergraduate to masters, as follows:

- Level 1 = University Certificate.
- Level 2 = University Diploma.
- Level 3 = University Advanced Diploma.
- Level M = University Postgraduate Diploma.

The awards are aimed at people in work who want to obtain university qualifications related to and based on the knowledge and skills they need for their work. Each award is of the same size, viz. 60 credits at the relevant level, and this normally equates to one year of part-time study.

The distinctive characteristics of the awards are that:

- subject content, pace and mode of study are designed to meet the needs of the individual;
- they recognise learning achieved at work;
- learning can derive from a variety of sources provided that it is at the appropriate level and that it can be assessed;
- they offer progression to major university awards.

From the point of view of employers the awards provide a means of motivating employees towards continuing professional development within their job role and in addition to lifelong learning, by recognising their work-based achievement. They also supply a mechanism for accrediting in-house training. Finally, as regards the universities, they are able not only to support lifelong learning by providing a means of awarding

credit through the development of new programmes which draw on existing components, but also to widen access by creating links locally, regionally and nationally.

The awards have a single compulsory element, viz. managing own learning, confirming the underpinning principle of the framework. The other components of the award, as stated above, are determined by the needs of the individual or group, provided that they share the same needs and are operating at the same level. These additional components can either be generic, such as independent study or work-based project or can relate to a subject topic relevant to the job role, for example business studies.

The member universities in the Credit for Lifelong Learning Project have piloted a variety of awards, either individually or in partnership. Equally the models for delivery have been diverse, ranging from:

- an award for individuals from different organisations with a shared need;
- an award for a group within a single organisation;
- the lifelong learning participants, either individually or as a group, joining students on campus on other programmes to follow existing modules;
- the development of new modules on campus to meet the needs of the lifelong learning students;
- the delivery of modules in the workplace.

An initial evaluation of the pilots has highlighted the importance of establishing a strong partnership between all three stakeholders and the success of the model in which the group of learners belong to and are actively supported by their organisation.

### **Pioneering the award with the BBC**

The development of the lifelong learning award was very timely for the School of Information Studies as it coincided with a request from the BBC for a training programme in records management, with the possibility of an award. The training programme was to be for senior document analysts and document analysts who, while very experienced as practitioners did not have the theoretical underpinning in the discipline. They also lacked professional standing

because they did not have formal qualifications and this perception was hindering their personal development and the development of records management at a strategic level within the BBC. So began a new venture which linked education and training and provided an opportunity to deliver the first lifelong learning award in the school and the university.

### **The Advanced Diploma in Lifelong Learning (Records Management)**

The overall aim of the programme was to combine generic study of the records management discipline with direct application to the organisational context, through the analysis of practice at the BBC, and do so within an award framework. This was reflected in both the programme's composition and delivery. The following four elements were selected from the accredited lifelong learning award framework:

- (1) Managing records in your organisation.
- (2) Managing own learning (the compulsory element).
- (3) Independent study project.
- (4) Work-based project.

Given the educational and/or professional experience of the participants, the modules were selected or developed at Level 3 and, together, they make up the Advanced Diploma in Lifelong Learning (Records Management) award. It was felt important for the participants and the development of the profession to validate a named records management award and the development of the subject specific module allowed this to happen. In terms of academic credit Managing Records in Your Organisation and the work-based project are double the weight of the other two modules.

### **Delivering the award**

The award was studied over a period of 18 months based around a series of face-to-face workshops. Five workshops related to the Managing Records in Your Organisation Module and additional workshops, on study skills and presentation skills, related to the other three elements.

The Managing Own Learning and Managing Records in Your Organisation modules were studied over the full period of the award. The former was based on a personal and reflective portfolio which began

with an analysis of individual training and education needs. This formed the basis of personal goal setting, the choice of areas for the independent study and work-based project, and for reflection on learning and practice. Participants were supported via a workshop, facilitated by university colleagues who had been instrumental in the development of the lifelong learning award framework, to complete their needs analysis and structure their portfolio.

The workshops, which formed the core of the Managing Records in Your Organisation Module, were scheduled at regular intervals over the period of the award. They began with fundamental records management principles and practice and moved on to consider specific and more specialised aspects such as legislation and electronic records. Each workshop comprised a mixture of "mini lectures" covering theory and principles, followed or preceded by practical sessions to confirm or examine understanding of the principles. A crucial element of every workshop was a session(s) in which participants applied or critically evaluated the theory in practice within the context of the BBC. Initially, these sessions were facilitated by BBC staff who were members of the management team who had initiated the programme. Later sessions were facilitated by ourselves allowing the management staff to participate in the discussions.

At the end of each of these workshops the participants were set some directed learning. This comprised readings on the subject of that workshop to support reflection and consolidation, an assignment which was formally assessed, and further reading to prepare for the next workshop. This strategy set a pattern of continuous study and enabled the participants to obtain marks and feedback from a relatively early stage. Both issues are very important in support work-based distance learning students.

Once the participants had completed the first two workshops and two summative assignments another element of the award, the independent study, was introduced. This provided an opportunity for each participant to choose a topic to investigate. Participants were positively encouraged to choose topics of personal interest or immediate work-related interest to help them manage their workloads. Topics included, for example, marketing, managing intranet content and electronic

records management systems. The outcome of this module was knowledge and understanding of the topic based on a review of the literature and the collection and analysis of some original data. Although not a requirement participants were also encouraged, for obvious reasons, to choose a topic which might subsequently be further developed in their work-based project. The work-based project was a more extensive investigation of an aspect of records management, firmly based in the work place, i.e. a “real” project, but examined within an academic or theoretical framework. The outcome was a report with recommendations of relevance to the future development of the topic within the BBC. Participants were also required to give a presentation of their work to university tutors and peers. BBC supporters of the initiative also attended the presentations, as did one of the school’s external examiners, demonstrating the interest in and commitment to the participants and the programme. For the participants this marked the formal end of their study period and their achievements at that point were celebrated in suitable style (Hare, 2000).

### Records management at the BBC

Alongside the award a major revision of the approach to records management within the BBC was taking place. The focus was shifting from an operational to a strategic approach. Once the first cohort had completed the award they were able to move into new, more strategic roles, changing from doing hands-on records administration to facilitating records management through, for example, developing standards and guidelines.

Some of these records management developments were discussed in the workshops thus providing valuable opportunities to share ideas and reflect on possible strategies.

### Evaluation

Following the successful graduation of the first group of participants and the start of a second cohort the school evaluated the first delivery of the award. The participants, i.e.

students, were asked what the impact of the programme had been on them:

- as learners, including personal aspirations and development; and
- as records professionals, including their role, responsibilities and actions within the organisational context.

Those who had sponsored and supported the programme, i.e. management and human resources, were asked what the impact had been on the organisation. The results, which were collected via e-mail and therefore attributable, were both very interesting and, without exception, very positive. In addition the four members of university staff involved in the initiative, from the School of Information Studies and the Regional and European Office, also evaluated the initiative in terms of its strengths and areas for improvement for future delivery.

### Impact on the participants as learners

As indicated earlier, together the group of participants had a wealth of records management experience, in fact more than 70 years in total. However, individually they were quite diverse. Some had school-level qualifications and significant practical experience, others had a first degree and more or less professional experience, and one participant had a second degree in an information subject. They were all therefore expert learners in some sense but not necessarily confident or experienced in academic study.

One academically-strong graduate participant felt “the sense of achievement when the course was over and at graduation” but, not surprisingly perhaps, in relation to *learning*, the programme had the greatest impact on those participants who did not have a first degree. “The ideas and thought process stretched my imagination . . . and gave me a new found confidence” was one senior participant’s analysis. A recently promoted participant described the award as having had “considerable impact”. He said that his performance at the internal interview for the promoted position “was only possible because of what I had learnt through the University of Northumbria (UNN) award . . . I feel I have learnt more in the last couple of years than the entire 14 previous ones!!!”

Another participant, who “had hated school for a mixture of reasons” and left with one O-level summarised the impact as follows:

... the course gave me the opportunity to part fill an enormous gap in my education ... I was in awe of people who were bright enough to go to university and was excited and petrified when we were given the opportunity to have a taste of this experience. It took a while for me to settle into what was expected of me and when my first grade came back as 71 per cent I was very disappointed! *Education is the key to opening the mind*, and it is sad, and just plain unfair that so many people do not have this opportunity available to them ... I remember my husband saying that the floodgates had opened and my mind could not stop ... I know I could go on and on with education if I wanted to. I know I am bright enough.

The emphasis is the participant's own and encapsulates the impact of the programme on him/her as a learner. For someone with few academic qualifications, studying with a group of people which included graduates, the challenge was significant. But the participant rose to the challenge and is now eager to continue to learn and develop both in the work environment and outside. Significantly this participant is now responsible for liaison with the school in relation to the lifelong learning award. The comment about disappointment with a mark, which in fact is a first class grade, is very interesting and not atypical of part-time, mature, lifelong learners. The school has in fact experienced similar comments from other distance learning students and it is something which needs to be managed through discussion with participants about marking systems.

### **Impact on the participants as records professionals**

A number of related themes emerged in relation to the programme's impact on the participants as records professionals, viz. motivation, commitment and team work. On the one hand these can be viewed as being generic and not specific to records management, but on the other the participants' responses, and those of their sponsors', show that they have had a significant effect on their professional roles:

It has broadened my outlook considerably and with the direction the department is trying to head towards I firmly believe that I have a far greater understanding of records management issues, have far more to offer the department and

have more ability to help deliver the results we need.

On a professional level, my boredom has increased even further! By that I mean that I need constant change ... I am constantly looking for something new to get my teeth into ... I am allowed to take on the responsibilities of a more challenging level than I am currently at ... It means I can come up with lots of ideas quickly, get projects going and then am happy to hand over all the control to someone else, because I am happy to move onto a new opportunity.

For the participant who moved into a management position towards the end of the award:

... the greatest thing which came out of the course was the sense of team work and sharing, which has carried through into the way that we now work together as a department, rather than as lots of individuals ... Taking over a group of happy and focused managers was a far better proposition than the situation before the course began. This has filtered down through the department as a whole and it is a better place to work.

It is important to point out some of the background to this analysis. At the start of the course, while most of the participants knew each other they worked in small teams related to their particular business area or function and were physically spread in various locations in London. Team work at the departmental level was a challenge in this situation. Bringing staff together at the workshops provided an opportunity to share ideas and get to know each other better, but it was the motivation and willingness of the staff which carried this through beyond the workshops and into the workplace.

### **Impact on the organisation**

The lifelong learning award at the BBC was a major training initiative involving a new academic framework. Therefore expectations in terms of impact on the organisation were high and support for the initiative was crucial. A key supporter of the programme was the human resources manager and when asked why she was keen to support such a major initiative said there were several reasons:

... the main one was that there was a real demand within Document Archives for a recognised professional development programme which could benefit the business and the BBC as a whole. Having considered records management National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), it was felt that we required something which we could tailor to suit the business context rather than the

business having to adapt to predefined standards. Secondly, there was real management commitment within document archives to support the programme so that it became almost self-managed in conjunction with UNN. Thirdly, the organisation is committed to developing its employees. The format of the programme – delivered through workshops and with learning consolidated by work-based projects – made it more accessible than having to attend through day release or evening classes.

Commitment to such training initiatives is medium to long term because impact is often not felt immediately. Change is often gradual and incremental, but that is most definitely not the case here. The impact has been significant and rapid, noticeable even by ourselves who are not based in the BBC.

Steve Jupe the new head of records management at the BBC who, with his predecessor and programme initiator Phil Sawyer were involved from the beginning see the impact on the organisation in terms of:

- the changes in records management practice and provision; and
- staff roles and responsibilities.

Changes in records management practice are evident at both departmental and corporate level. At the corporate level records management service provision has been re-focused on corporate requirements and is “less generalised, with more specific solutions to individual issues, but with a common theoretical backbone”. The Document Archives group is part of Information and Archives and its objectives are now linked and are based on “a drive for self research, self-help solutions”.

At the departmental level the approach to records management is increasingly facilitative and consultative. It is moving away from a purely operational approach focused on “doing”, to a higher level more strategic approach. This is exemplified by projects and changes such as:

- the creation of an audit office with formalised and unified audit training;
- re-establishment of the service costing process;
- implementation of the functions-activities-transactions approach to records management (Schellenberg, 1956);
- focus on the retention schedule as a deliverable product rather than physical

management of records on behalf of customers.

In a period of major change and with the constantly high demand on day-to-day service provision, the significance of these achievements should not be underestimated. They have been inextricably linked to changes in roles and responsibilities, the second major area in which there has been an impact. Some examples of the changes in roles and responsibilities are:

- greater input from staff in generating ideas and projects;
- a consultancy venture i.e. the sale of expert services to users;
- focusing of staff on particular aspects of their job description with the potential for pathways to specialisation.

These have been the result of new skills developed (e.g. auditing, presentation of plans) and new requirements exposed (e.g. electronic folder management). Actual job changes have included the promotions referred to earlier, detachments from operational functions to training and development functions in areas such as auditing and scheduling, as well as the movement of some staff into the wider information management world of information and archives. While these staff might be seen as a “loss” from Document Archives they have in fact raised the department’s profile with fellow information professionals in a wider context, due to their involvement in the lifelong learning initiative.

In summary, Steve Jupe says he has seen a “marked change in attitude and confidence, increasing professionalism” which, in turn has had an impact on his own role enabling him “to concentrate on policy and direction . . . to develop the more sophisticated aspects of the ‘re-invention’ programme, as more and more base skills are distributed”.

Similar views were expressed in the assessment made by a senior manager in information and archives and a supporter of the initiative:

... it has given staff the opportunity to take a step back from the daily routines to take a more strategic view of the key issues for records management in the BBC. As a senior manager I am keen that staff should be part of the decision-making process, but this can be difficult to achieve when they are, quite understandably, concentrating on the day-to-day work.

The award gives staff the authority and confidence to advise senior BBC colleagues on records management matters. It provides the opportunity for staff to apply the theory learned during the course to practical situations in the workplace. Other staff in the Document Archives Department can see the benefits of the course and are keen to participate in the future.

Returning to the human resources manager, who is now based outside of the organisational structure within which document archives is placed, for an assessment of the impact of the programme, she explains:

... when the first round of students completed the programme it was encouraging to realise how much they had developed both professionally and personally. Not only did they raise the profile of records management within Document Archives, but also within the BBC as a whole. In short, it was an effective investment of the training and development budget.

While some of this rapid and significant impact on the organisation may be due to the number of people involved providing a “critical mass” (eight completing the award, a further three participating in the workshops, together with the department manager and three other members of the management team), it is also due to other factors. Changes in personnel provided opportunities for promotion. The new-found confidence of participants and the recognition of their professional knowledge and ability, on the part of the management team, were other important catalysts to this change.

### **The university’s perspective**

The members of university staff involved in the programme, both at the school and central levels, also believe that this new learning initiative has been successful. Its strengths lie in the areas of support, collaboration, commitment, relevance and delivery.

Internal support from immediate managers, senior managers and others was strong from the beginning. This was in the form of encouragement, work-based tutors, attendance at presentations, interest in the outcomes of work-based projects, and time, on an informal basis, to support assignment work. University support came from the school’s tutors and central staff in terms of responding to queries and requests as quickly as possible whether these were individual,

group based, made at a distance or raised during a workshop.

Collaboration, in the form of close, supportive and friendly working relationships between everyone involved, was a major contributing factor in the programme’s success. It meant there was commitment and ownership of the programme by the employer, university staff and students alike and it promoted and strengthened student learning. It also meant that the BBC and university staff collaborated on the design, development and delivery of the programme, including selection of individual study topics. The content was viewed as being relevant, participants studied issues of immediate professional concern to them and the BBC and which informed practice. The work-based project particularly allowed them to do this on a more individual basis and to find solutions to problems, which could then be implemented with the support of senior management.

The model for delivery also worked very well. The workshops were highly participatory and were stimulating and enjoyable for both participants and tutors. They gave BBC staff the opportunity to take a fresh outlook on their work and the way they approached it and challenged the university staff’s knowledge and skills. One of the enormous benefits for the school staff was the opportunity to keep up to date with current practice and the business context which is vital in a vocational subject such as information and records management.

It became clear as the programme progressed that the status of the award, the work of document archives and its staff were growing. It is explicit in the achievements cited earlier and also in relation to our work with the second cohort of award students. As a direct result of the success of the first group, staff from another part of information and archives, the Written Archives Centre, are part of the second group. They provide insight into another part of the records management dimension and knowledge is shared readily among everyone. The influence of the learning achieved by the first group is clear during discussions and activities.

Now that the model has been tested and received such a positive evaluation, it is being offered to other organisations.

## Conclusions

From the survey of participants and their managers it is clear that the participants of the award have been empowered as learners and as records professionals with enhanced status.

It was particularly revealing that there was not a direct correlation between previous academic success and level of achievement on the course. In fact the element that was most significant in terms of success was confidence in job role. A number of the participants in the initial cohort have moved into not only promoted posts but into roles which reflect and require a greater level of professional practice. These new roles became available as the shift in the approach to records management within the BBC was moved forward as a result of the education and training programme/lifelong learning award. The result is that “there has been a change in perception of the records management role at the top of the organisation” and the status of records management has been raised to the point that the places for the second cohort were oversubscribed.

One participant, who now has a management role, summarised the impact well by saying:

... the professionalism of those that have been on the course and the abilities and focus of those that are currently attending are noticeable when holding staff meetings, etc. I sincerely hope that this professional development continues and that the people attending get as much out of it as

myself. I think there is a genuine desire amongst those who attended last year and who are currently studying, to give a lot back in return. Long may it continue.

But the most powerful and humbling evaluation came from the participant who said:

The BBC gets a lot more out of me than it ever did. I happily work at unscheduled times because my work day is no longer completely locked into the 9-5. I set my own motivation levels which are very high and if I fail a deadline or feel I am not putting enough in I let myself down more than any other person ... Steve saw my need for more stimulating projects before I did and said over coffee one day ... “if you were a lawyer you would be running your own company, that’s why you’re not satisfied at the moment. No one would have said that to me a year ago before starting this course. I am now doing a more challenging role, but as always, want more!

Lifelong learning and empowerment is most definitely a model in practice.

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