



Making the connections in the diversity of learning

OCN NI management team: (L-R) Martin Flynn, Operations Manager, Brendan Clarke, Chief Executive Officer, Patricia Short, Business Development Manager, Simon Hamilton, Quality and Programmes Manager.

OCN Northern Ireland's Chief Executive, Brendan Clarke, explains his organisation's broad view of learning to Owen McQuade.

Schools, colleges and universities are often the first places that spring to mind when the word learning is mentioned but Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) is seeking to widen the word's definition.

"The National Open College Network (NOCN) originated about 25 years ago, reflecting the need to recognise learning wherever it actually takes place," Brendan Clarke explains. "There was a lot of traditional, structured, engaged learning

activity. The regional OCNs grew out of the need and the determination to recognise the enormous range and context of adult learning that was taking place but was being diluted or lost because it wasn't being recognised."

Since 1993, OCN NI has accredited over 187,000 learners in Northern Ireland, i.e. close to one in five of the working age population. It started life as a funded project, supported by the education and library boards, to recognise adult learning in similar ways to those which already existed in England and Wales.

OCN NI joined the network of OCNs to offer accreditation for learning and has since grown to be part of the largest credit-based awarding organisation in the UK. It employs 12 full-time staff in Northern Ireland, and plans to recruit more, as well as 10 part-time staff who focus on quality assurance.

Its broad range of work serves both people who take on learning as a personal discovery and those who require new qualifications in their profession. It accredits learning across all sectors in Northern Ireland providing centres with accreditation to deliver qualifications on the current National Database of Qualifications (NDAQ) and the emerging Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF). OCN NI also meets the needs of many providers by offering local accreditation for centres and employers wishing to develop bespoke accredited training.

In seeking to find ways to recognise and validate learning, wherever it takes place, the networks have laid foundations for the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

Explaining this approach, Clarke says: “Whilst we award qualifications, what we do is recognise learning where it takes place. That means focusing upon the opportunity to recognise a small piece of learning, a small piece of achievement, and to build those bite-size pieces of learning and achievement into blocks which reflect the diversity and the achievement of those individuals or groups.”

He can look back to the networks’ “very humble” origins and can now see organisations starting to follow their “trailblazing” approach.

Mission

“Our mission is to recognise the diversity of learning and to make sure that learning is available, at a place, at a point, to the right quality for anybody who wishes to learn,” he states.

“Sometimes our focus is not so much upon the grand institutions of learning and following their history. Our focus is on the learner’s history, the learner’s journey, to provide them and their



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families, their children, their parents, their grandparents, with an opportunity that reflects their origins, their starting points, their community, their capacity. And to provide them with an organic route which grows with them to recognising their potential and their capabilities in terms of achievement. This approach has a positive affect on inclusive lifelong learning.”

One distinguishing characteristic of OCN NI is its mission to recognise the diversity of learning and to support, develop and underpin the accreditation of learning for learners that enables them to access progression.

Taking people on a learning journey is a key theme that runs through the conversation and Clarke is keen to point out that this varies depending on the learner.

“It’s about that individual learning journey and recognising that that journey isn’t so much a 100-metre sprint nor is it indeed a 26-mile marathon. It’s everything in between. And it’s about recognising that different people have different steps, and OCN NI is committed to being responsive to that diversity.”

A learner can “pick their route” through their journey, for example by starting with “small pieces of personal development”



to help them move from one situation to another e.g. from raising a family into employment.

“It’s about providing individuals with that scope to see that the limitations that potentially have been placed upon them, by looking at learning only as a structured institutional approach, need to be

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challenge both personally and within wider society. Those limitations are either imposed on people or self-imposed, and part of our work is to try and deconstruct those limitations and open up horizons and to support and validate effective learning opportunities.”

Barriers

The major barriers to getting OCN NI’s approach accepted have been around getting organisations to recognise the opportunities that credit-based learning can provide. With the Qualifications and Credit Framework now being put in place,

he reflects that the organisation’s own journey has been a successful one.

Within the learning and skills sector, there has been a move from saying that “learning only takes place in recognised educational institutions” to recognising that learning actually takes place on a broader canvas.

“Learning takes place wherever a learning opportunity is seized so it can be in a college, it can be in a school, it can be in a community or voluntary organisation, in the work place it can be in a crèche,” he continues.

“It can be, for example, in a young offenders’ institution where children who are behaviourally challenged, moved from pillar to post – often because they’ve done something wrong – but their learning is disrupted because the learning route they have been on has been rigid and inflexible to their new situation. Whereas really if some of their learning is in small, bite-sized chunks, that learning could follow them and could actually potentially provide a route back into a more fulfilling, sustainable role in society for that young person.” This approach to recognising learning where it takes place is equally applicable to individuals and the economy.

With one in four adults in Northern Ireland experiencing problems with literacy and numeracy, OCN NI has also been playing its part in meeting the challenge of improving essential skills. It provides qualifications for these skills at entry level and plans to start qualifications at level one and level two.

One innovative scheme to bring adults into learning is OCN NI’s parents’ Better Reading Partnership programme being run by Western Education and Library Board Curriculum Advisory Support Services (WELB CASS), which encourages assistants to read with children in the school setting or parents to read with their children at home.

“The evidence that we’ve got is that that raises children’s literacy levels by one, two or three years. The idea is that rather than saying: ‘This is where and how learning takes place’, what we do is we say: ‘Where does that learning for that individual take place?’”

Clarke admits that there have been obstacles to overcome on the way to a more open recognition of the diversity of learning but he points out that organisations have started to become more outward-looking, flexible and responsive. There is now a stronger focus on building partnerships e.g. between schools and further education colleges “that reflect that individual learning journey, rather than saying there’s a rigidity here of a course that you must follow.”

Top priority

If he had three minutes to speak before the Assembly's Employment and Learning Committee, Clarke would focus on "recognising the diversity of learning wherever it is". He wants to see the Qualifications and Credit Framework become a reality for learners and describes the desired result as "almost like where cogs fit together".

Continuing, Clarke remarks: "You've got a learning institution and you've got an individual – and the Qualifications and Credit Framework is potentially the medium through which to forge a new and meaningful connectivity. So rather than simply being a supplier of services, or a provider of a qualification, or the deliverer of teaching now there is the opportunity to provide that mediation between what the Qualifications and Credit Framework gives learners – that scope and that potential and how learning can be more creatively packaged to benefit the learner, employer or learning provider.

"The QCF will provide an extra energy for the learner which will allow them to make demands of a learning society as opposed to simply receiving the perceived benefits of it."

Looking back 15 years ago, he reflects that qualifications were "rigid ... fairly long and you had to do it all and then there was a test right at the end" and there has, in the meantime, been a move towards continuous assessment instead.

He senses that in more recent times the sector's emphasis has moved away "from learning per se towards a focus upon skills and employability". Clarke recognises that this focus is important, especially given the current economic challenges but maintains that it does not give the full picture.

"If we focus only on the outcome of learning, as opposed to the process and the engagement [where] learning takes place, then potentially what we're not doing is giving people the building blocks, the hooks upon which to become a lifelong learner," he adds.

"One of the challenges I guess for us in Northern Ireland is to balance the need for the output, which is recognising the needs of the economy, but also recognising that actually for that output to be successful, we need to build in those skills for that lifelong learning journey."

The individual learner, he says, should be part of a "community of learning" in

society as a whole: "What we're about is providing some of the infrastructure that supports and makes connections that were previously not there. Because people previously thought they shouldn't have been brought together or weren't natural to be together."

"If people don't learn how to learn, people can't learn, then they're not going to be the engineers of their own future," he

comments. "We've got to empower people to engage with learning to become engineers of their own learning futures. We can provide them with the opportunities, we can support them but we've also got to give them the personal capability to actually be a directive voice for their lives and their children's lives. We see that side of learning as important. I'm not saying that others don't but for us it's at a premium."

OCN in brief

OCN Northern Ireland's mission statement is to support learning and widen opportunity by recognising achievement through credit based courses and qualifications.

Licensed by the National Open College Network, OCN NI is based in Belfast and accredits the delivery and achievement of nationally recognised, flexible, credit-based qualifications. It has provided a comprehensive accreditation service to learners throughout Northern Ireland since 1995.

It accredits national and local adult learning across different sectors and with diverse themes, including work based learning opportunities for ancillary staff in the Health Service gaining basic qualifications to progress in their careers, through the Widening Participation Unit; level 4 qualifications for DARD's veterinary inspectors; the Learner Access and Engagement Programme which supports 'hard to reach' learners through learning in voluntary and community groups in conjunction with FE colleges; enhancing literacy and numeracy skills through Family Learning programmes; employability qualifications for DEL training schemes; non traditional learning for offenders; accrediting a qualification for people seeking to join public bodies.



Profile: Brendan Clarke

Brendan Clarke has worked in education through all of his career as a youth worker, teacher, lecturer and manager. A "native Evertonian", he moved from Liverpool to Northern Ireland in 1996 with his wife and family: "My father was from Galway. The idea was to go back to Galway but I ended in Magherafelt, in Mid-Ulster."

He sees the learner journey concept is something that "helps Northern Ireland become a better place to live for ourselves and our children". Brendan's interests include medieval history, IT, integrated education and e-learning. He is married to Anna with three children – Niamh, Aoife and Charlie – and also coaches mini-rugby at Rainey Old Boys Rugby Club.