

Lifelong learning to end at Leicester?

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The University of Leicester has announced that it intends to close its adult education department, the Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning, after a three-month consultation period. The reasons given are financial as the University claims that the Vaughan Centre is not profitable. Despite the obvious benefits to the community, the fact that lifelong learning is life-changing, and for some life-saving, the University considers the Centre to be a luxury it can no longer afford.

The proposal to close the Centre will bring to an end a long history of adult education in Leicester. The Centre is named after Revd David Vaughan who started a 'Working Men's Institute with Library, Reading Room and Classes' in 1862 providing adult classes in the evening. In 1880 a woman's department was started. A purpose-built college was erected in 1907-08 and was renamed the Vaughan Working Men's College. In 1929 the college became the extra mural department of Leicester University College, changing its name to Vaughan College, and it survived under this name as the teaching college for adult education at Leicester University until 2013. On the closure of the college in 2013, the classes were transferred to the main university campus with the promise that this would ensure the future of lifelong learning at the University. Sadly, it seems that this promise will not be kept under the new regime.

The Centre has over 300 adult learners from a wide range of backgrounds and offers distance learning and part-time higher education level courses. The majority of the courses are taught face-to-face in the evening by a dedicated team of tutors who are experienced in teaching those who come to university through non-traditional routes as well as being experts in their academic fields. The timing of the classes is especially popular with students who have family commitments and/or who work and can only study after work. The face-to-face element appeals to students. It not only gives students greater contact with tutors and keeps them engaged with their studies, but also enables

students to support each other. Consequently retention is often much higher than in blended or distance learning programmes. The positive experiences gained by the students are reflected in the Centre's high National Student Survey scores.

The Centre teaches a range of subjects. It is the only university in the country to offer courses in Drug and Alcohol Counselling and in Global Ecology and Wildlife Conservation. It also oversees the Certificate in Social Welfare, Advice and Guidance which is taught in a community centre in the Highfields area of Leicester. The degree in Humanities and Arts is the only face-to-face evening degree of its kind in the East Midlands and was 'highly commended' in the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning annual awards. The most significant teaching area is in counselling and the impact from this programme in the local area is immense: the foundation degree in integrative counselling requires students to gain 100 hours practical experience during two years of the course. This requirement makes a very significant contribution to the counselling services in the local region. Moreover, there will also be a fall in qualified counsellors in Leicestershire if the Centre is closed.

The Centre does make a profit but this is not enough to cover the amount the University demands from departments as the contribution towards buildings maintenance and university services (the full economic costing). If the Centre is closed down these costs will still need to be covered by other departments so no money is saved. However, the cost to lifelong learners in the region will be unmeasurable and the students are devastated by the proposal. Lifelong learning reaches those who have had no access to higher education before, offering them chances they often thought they'd never have. While it provides opportunities for career development, which is important, for many the most significant benefits are that lifelong learning gives a sense of personal satisfaction and self-worth. Confidence-building becomes empowerment and permeates into all areas of our students' lives.