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A case study of a unique model of adult education in north-east England: Ten years experience of the Explore member-run Lifelong Learning Programme

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Abstract: *Joseph Cowen Lifelong Learning Centre (JCLLC) was created in 2013 following the closure of the university-based Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL). JCLLC is a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) providing the member-run Explore Lifelong Learning programme, based on the model developed by its predecessor.*

Explore Lifelong Learning has survived existential threats including the Covid-19 pandemic and loss of its premises. This case-study reflects on its history, achievements and challenges. We share insight into how lifelong learning can be delivered at community level and valued for its personal and social benefits, with reference to survey responses of members.

Keys to success have been committed member-volunteer leadership and support, a wide-ranging academic programme delivered by high-calibre tutors, a loyal core membership, organisational flexibility and adaptability, a lean financial model and excellent administrative support. The major ongoing challenge is to rebuild the membership base post-pandemic, whilst maintaining high standards in the academic programme.

Key Words: Lifelong learning, adult education, volunteers, member-led, ageing, cognitive health

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Introduction and background

North-East England has a long history of independent learning. JCLLC takes its name from Joseph Cowen Jr., Liberal politician, MP for Newcastle upon Tyne 1874-1886, and advocate of workers' education programmes. (Newcastle University Library (2018), Newcastle University Library Special Collections and Archives n.d.).

The social and personal benefits of education beyond childhood were recognised in the landmark 1919 'Adult Education Committee' report, commissioned in response to the need to rebuild post-war Britain. A century later, the 2019 Centenary Commission on Adult Education stated;

> Adult education must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there…….it is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong.

The commission acknowledged the challenge of balancing adult education provision supporting economic prosperity against that which promotes individual flourishing. It concluded that the balance has been wrong, with damaging consequences, placing the onus on universities to provide accessible adult education, with recognition of the role of the voluntary sector. (Centenary Report on Adult Education, 2019)

History and context of the Centre for Lifelong Learning, JCLLC and Explore.

For ten years the University of Newcastle CLL ran a successful extra-mural programme; approximately 3,000 part-time students on 300 courses in 100 venues across the north-east of England and Cumbria, provided by a small team of academic and administrative staff (Centre for Lifelong Learning, 2009).

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There were challenges. Provision of openly accessible courses was incompatible with the University's research ambitions, and in 2003 it transferred its lifelong learning provision to the nearby University of Sunderland, though teaching remained on Newcastle's campus.

In 2007, the UK government introduced the 'Equal or Lower Qualifications' (ELQ) policy. After 2009 no student was funded for working towards a qualification equal to or lower than that which they already possessed. Despite Sunderland University's continued support for the CLL programme, it and similar schemes across the UK seemed doomed.

The CLL team came up with an innovative solution, refashioning the scheme on the model of gym membership. This required a pared-down programme that was academically attractive and financially self-sustaining. For a single annual fee (or monthly subscription), an adult student could access all courses offered.

From an educational perspective this had benefits. CLL students had been conservative in their learning choices, sticking to the same subject area, topic or tutor. Barriers to new learning were the cost and uncertain value of the new course, and the opportunity cost of losing the known value of a familiar course. The new model removed those barriers, promoting a richer and more diverse learning experience. This was lifelong learning on the traditional model of liberal adult education but freed from government and institutional constraints. The financial viability equation was straightforward: membership fees were balanced against fixed overheads plus costs of tutors and venues. Sunderland University supported the programme and the Explore scheme launched in October 2009, learners paying an annual fee set at about the cost of 3 courses per year under the previous structure. (Explore with the North-East Centre for Lifelong Learning, 2012). The reaction from learners and tutors was polarised. For many, the programme was liberating, for others this change was too radical.

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The CLL Explore programme ran for 4 years, a remarkable achievement by the team who had invented, designed and delivered a novel scheme for lifelong learning. In 2010, Explore won the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) National Award for its 'creativity, innovation, impact and transferability' (Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL), 2011). The University of Sunderland was generous in its support but, in 2013, new financial pressures meant that the CLL and its Explore programme was no longer sustainable and was closed.

Joseph Cowen Lifelong Learning Centre and its new Explore programme:

Urgent discussions were held to consider options. Could Explore run as an independent community organisation? The University responded positively, releasing assets and intellectual property rights. A learner-led steering group acted rapidly and decisively. The new organisation was established in 2013 as a voluntary and democratic body which adopted the model of the award-winning CLL Explore scheme. It took the name of Explore Lifelong Learning but, as a legal entity, became Joseph Cowen Lifelong Learning Centre, to acknowledge its origins (Explore Lifelong Learning, n.d.). Once again, north-east-based adult education was to innovate, and an entirely new model of adult education in the UK was launched.

Explore Lifelong Learning 2013 to 2024

The first year

A calculation was made of the income required to fund an academic programme, and how this translated into member numbers and annual subscriptions. The new Explore Lifelong Learning scheme was launched and advertised; subscribers to the previous programme formed most of the membership. Previous CLL tutors supported the new venture and provided the core of the

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academic programme. Accommodation was found in central Newcastle upon Tyne, close to transport links, providing teaching rooms, an office, and shared social space.

Office furniture and IT equipment were donated by Sunderland University; overheads and other expenditure were kept to a minimum. Management and administrative functions, including programme planning, marketing, internal and external communication and financial management, were undertaken by learner volunteers.

The first year ended with over 200 members, a small financial surplus and an optimistic outlook for continued viability.

2014 to 2024

From 2014 to 2020, JCLLC and its Explore programme expanded and developed; member numbers increased to around 220. With increased income, annual teaching hours were increased to 800+. Evening and Saturday morning sessions were introduced to accommodate members with weekday commitments. External partnerships were developed with local universities, NHS research departments and academic organisations. A generous legacy enabled endowment of an annual public lecture, professional input into marketing, production of a promotional film (Explore Lifelong Learning Promotional Video n.d.), purchase of equipment, and provision of a financial reserve.

Challenges and setbacks

Member recruitment and retention

An ongoing marketing campaign was needed to recruit new members. 'Taster days', when interested people were invited to sample short talks, with refreshments and opportunities for

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informal chats with members, proved successful recruitment events. Leaflet distributions and social media were less effective; media interest was hard to engage. Word-of-mouth was the most successful mode of recruitment, but the pool of prospective members was limited. Member retention was equally important. When offering feedback, most non-renewing members cited lifestyle changes; dissatisfaction with the programme was an infrequent cause and many rejoined when circumstances permitted.

Covid-19

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived. As the country went into lockdown, Explore ceased face-to-face teaching. There were no contingency plans for this situation, nor any experience of online learning. The demographic of Explore's membership was older adults, many with limited engagement with the digital world.

One tutor undertook to deliver his course by Zoom, a new concept to most members. A trustee with IT skills and training experience familiarised herself with the system, produced training materials, and supported members and tutors as they embraced this new mode of learning with varying degrees of enthusiasm. In April 2020, Explore launched its programme of online and email courses. Explore's administrator worked from home and maintained regular communication with members and tutors. A survey in June 2020 of tutors and members was encouraging. Of 70% of members who responded, 80% were participating in the online programme.

Over that summer, Covid restrictions were eased. A return to face-to-face teaching seemed possible, then a second wave of Covid loomed. Restrictions were re-imposed, the programme was again moved online and was re-launched in September 2020. Existing members were

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encouraged to rejoin at a reduced subscription to reflect the limited teaching hours. Gratifyingly, most did. It was not feasible to recruit new members, so JCLLC faced a reduction in income, though costs were also lower due to savings on room hire costs and tutor fees for fewer sessions. Attendance at online lectures was encouragingly high; member feedback was positive. Active participation and discussion were possible; pre-session informal chats took place. Without the need for travel, members with health issues or caring responsibilities could continue to participate. Others engaged with a wider range of different course topics.

Factors in Explore's survival were the flexibility and decisiveness of the small organisation, the shared values and motivations of the membership and team, and a culture of open-minded learning that enabled Explore to continue to function under unprecedented and unpredictable circumstances.

Loss of Premises

In March 2021, as recovery from the pandemic was underway and in-person activities were cautiously resumed, JCLLC received the news that the building that was Explore's base was to be demolished and a new venue must be found. A church in central Newcastle offered suitable meeting spaces. Face-to-face teaching began there in October 2021 and is ongoing. Their volunteer-run cafe provides opportunities for social interaction whilst a 'hot desk' office arrangement consolidates the partnership. The impact of this move was mitigated by adaptations for remote working made during the pandemic.

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Ten years on - JCLLC and Explore Lifelong Learning in 2024

Governance, management and administration

JCLLC was initially constituted as a community interest company (CIC), for expediency and reflecting its aims as a social enterprise. CICs pay tax on surpluses and do not enjoy other advantages of registered charities, so in 2017, JCLLC was converted to a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). CIO members are subscribing learners. An Annual General Meeting (AGM) deals with formal business, including adoption of the annual report and appointment of trustees. Trustees are recruited from members and tutors, with a three-year rolling programme of elections, to ensure the necessary skills for charitable educational organisation are met. The AGM, held face-to-face and online, is also an open forum to air views about the organisation and its future and is a significant occasion for dialogue between trustees and membership. Management and day-to-day functioning of Explore are led and delivered by its members. JCLLC trustees undertake financial management, marketing and communication, programme planning and overseeing of administration, in addition to governance and strategic planning.

The programme is planned and delivered by a volunteer team of members advised by a trustee with an academic background. Every teaching session requires front-of-house and IT volunteer support. Thus far, Explore has been fortunate in finding the necessary expertise and commitment among its membership. Some have relevant experience, many functions are undertaken by retired professionals learning new skills. Professional administrative support has been crucial to Explore's ongoing success. In 2014 a part-time administrator post was established, providing continuity and a personal point of contact as well as organisational and communication expertise.

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Financial considerations and risks

JCLLC is self-financing; over 90% of income comes from membership subscriptions. This creates vulnerability as, unless enough members join and pay annually up-front, income may be inadequate to fund the programme. Financial policies have been adapted to meet changing needs. A flexible payment scheme has been introduced allowing termly payments, and subscriptions pegged to pre-pandemic levels. This impacts on the stability of JCLLC's income but has been possible because JCLLC has reserves, further boosted by reduced expenditure during the pandemic. JCLLC's main financial risk is that programme costs are the same with 200 members or 140 (pre- and post-Covid levels respectively). When numbers decline there is pressure to increase the subscription or reduce content; either could risk member recruitment and retention.

Academic input and programme development

The Explore programme delivers a curriculum encompassing six 'strands': Art History, Practical Art & Design, 'Culture & Society' (includes History, Archaeology, Sociology, Law, Politics), Philosophy, Science & Mathematics, and 'Narratives' (Literature, Music, Film), delivered as one-off talks and lecture series; teaching styles vary from the didactic lecture to a seminar approach. Unusually in adult learning provision, there is no requirement for learners to sign up to sessions in advance, nor minimum numbers to proceed. The Explore approach welcomes speakers who might be considered niche, 'too academic' for general learners, or who come from backgrounds outside of formal education. Members are encouraged to suggest topics for study.

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Proximity to four universities has been crucial in enabling Explore to recruit excellent freelance tutors, including recently retired academics or practising experts in their field. Many comment that they enjoy engaging with the Explore community, who come from a wide range of backgrounds, are well informed and ready to participate in discussion and debate. New speakers must continuously be found, so programmers connect with local university departments and other networks to identify potential new recruits, whilst 'horizon scanning' for significant dates and themes. Online teaching has made it possible to engage tutors from outside the north-east region.

2024 and onwards – time for reappraisal

In 2024, JCLLC and its Explore scheme celebrated its 10th birthday, providing a stimulus to review, re-appraise and plan for its future.

Membership - profile and engagement – Summary of survey results

An online survey in February 2025 investigated the demographics of Explore members, their experiences of Explore and motivations for undertaking this lifelong learning programme.

The survey requested a combination of quantifiable answers with free text. A link was sent to 144 current Explore members, 111 (77%) responded; quantifiable responses are tabulated in *Appendix 1.*

Member demographics

Predominantly elderly, over twice as many women as men, most identify as White British. Most are fully or partially retired, live within a 10-mile radius of Newcastle upon Tyne and rely on public transport to attend.

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Education and employment

Most are educated to degree level or above, with a range of professional employment, predominantly senior positions in education and healthcare.

Experiences of Explore Lifelong Learning

There is a high level of loyalty to Explore, though only a minority takes an active role in running the organisation.

Experience of the Explore model

Most exploit the subscription model, attending sessions in several 'strands' and several times a week. Post-pandemic, Explore has retained face-to-face and online sessions, with a small number delivered by both. Members hold strong and divergent views about their preferred mode of delivery. Some regard face-to-face interaction as integral to learning; others value online access for various personal reasons. Top three benefits of Explore membership were identified as increased knowledge, mental stimulation and social interaction. Members also reported that learning and skills gained were useful in other areas of their lives, e.g. Zoom proficiency, other technical and non-technical expertise, but especially knowledge and ideas.

Asked to identify distinctive features of Explore Lifelong Learning, 95 members provided 190 evaluable comments. 58 commented that the diversity and range of subjects offered are special; 45 complimented the high academic standard and excellence of tutors; 28 appreciated contributions made by fellow members, either in discussions or in creating a welcoming atmosphere and sense of community; 6 commented favourably on the venue and its accessibility; 19 commended the organisation's efficiency, communication and the work of

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member volunteers; 16 commented that the subscription model is unique and provides good value for money.

The future

Like other cultural organisations and compounded by cost-of-living concerns (Cultural Participation Monitor 2023). Explore has struggled to rebuild its membership post-pandemic. Recent retirees are harder to identify and contact, and the retirement age is rising. The proliferation of online resources during the pandemic opened competing opportunities for digital engagement, and many people lost the habit of going out. Some longstanding Explore members reassessed priorities for limited time and financial resources. The programme is popular with members for its good value and flexibility, but it can be difficult to 'sell' to prospective new members. Finding members willing to volunteer time and energy to supporting Explore is an ongoing challenge.

JCLLC hopes to rebuild after the bruising experiences of recent years. Meanwhile it runs at a small financial loss, drawing on its reserves. Its priority is to restore member numbers to ensure sufficient income for the ongoing provision and consolidation of its academic curriculum. Active involvement of members is crucial to this process.

The ethos of Explore, promoting 'learning for the love of learning' and offering flexible access, is attractive to open-minded and inquisitive people looking to sample a variety of subjects, without the constraints of accredited courses, and with the added benefits of social engagement. It is however accessed by only a small segment of the population, largely retired professionals and academics. To flourish, Explore must widen its demographic and diversity.

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Conclusions

The benefits of lifelong learning to an ageing population, for well-being, cognitive health and social engagement, are well researched and documented (Molina, M.Á., Schettini, R. (2021), Zammit AR, Yu L et al., (2026). Government resources are currently targeted towards vocational courses aimed at extending employability, with scant attention paid to the potential health and social benefits of academic study in retirement (Narushima M, Liu J, Diestelkamp N. (2018).

Explore Lifelong Learning rose from the ashes of a university-based programme which was a victim of changed priorities and government policies. In defiance of expectations and in the face of existential challenges, Explore continues to thrive, though its longer-term future is uncertain. Running the programme is onerous for volunteers, and succession planning is vital. Social aspects are important in forging friendships and welcoming new and potential members. Explore's immediate challenge is to increase its membership to ensure future financial security. Thereafter, it must look to rebuilding and extending academic, creative and civic partnerships, and establishing its place in the network of adult and continuing education in the north-east of England region and beyond.

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Appendix 1

Member Demographics

Age band	<50	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+
%	0	2	10	71	14	2

Analysis by gender	Male	Female
%	32	68

Ethnicity	White British	Other
	95	5

Travel distance	<10 miles	>10 miles
%	61	39

Education and Employment

Employment status	Fully/ partially retired	Other
%	97	3

Previous employment	Education	Healthcare	Public sector	Other
%	46	26	20	8

Educational achievement	Degree or above	Postgraduate degree or diploma	Vocational or professional qualification
%	75	50	21

Membership Experience

Length of Membership	University CLL member	> 10 years	> 5 years	< 5 years
%	46	49	75	25

Nature of Membership	Unbroken	Rejoined after break
%	86	14

Actively Involved in Running Explore?	Not actively involved	Regular volunteers	Major volunteers
%	68	21	11

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Number of Strands Attended	5 Strands	4 Strands	3 Strands	2 Strands	1 Strand
%	18	31	34	14	3

Sessions Attended Per Week	4 to 8	1 to 3	1 or fewer
%	31	56	13

Perceived Benefits	Increased knowledge	Mental stimulation	New interests	Improved mental health	Social interaction
%	33	23	14	8	20

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