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As my U.S. friends might put it. “urban running rocks”. For me, there are few better ways of getting to see a city than pulling on your runners and heading out the door, particularly if you’re only there for a dew days.

I wrote this on the way back from a three-day event in Philadelphia organised by the Social Innovation Exchange (SIX). This is a global network of social innovators, supported by a small dynamic team housed in NESTA’s London offices. They brought around sixty social innovation specialists together in the City of Brotherly Love to address the hot topic of jobs and businesses for young people.

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<http://www.blog.urbact.eu/2013/07/running-the-river-of-awesome>

In Philly I took the chance to enjoy some very early morning sunshine (one of the few benefits of jetlag) so that I could soak up the atmosphere of this great city by running along the river. For the urban running anoraks amongst you, my mapmyrun route is attached.

Running gave me headspace to process some of the great content on show – as well as seeing some sights. I was there to share URBACT’s recent report on social innovation and youth in Europe’s cities. Our event emphasis was on the role of unusual suspects in the social innovation process, which we found to be important for successful cities.

Sometimes you go to events and you come away with very little, but this wasn’t one of those occasions! My luggage was metaphorically stuffed with take aways from the SIX session, which

I thought I'd share with you. In no particular order, here's my pick of the event highlights – inspirational stories from around the globe together with links so you can explore further.

Valerie Hannon from the Innovation Unit got the event under way with an inspirational input drawing upon her Learning a Living work. She touched upon some of the global trends and recurring themes in relation to youth and skills, noting that:

- In many countries, automation and labour-market restructuring are removing entry-level opportunities historically accessed by young people
- This is creating a large pool of unemployed youth – estimated at 300 million globally – particularly amongst those with lower skills
- Graduates also face significant challenges – the phenomenon of the graduate without a future
- The rising cost of higher education, combined with reduced prospects, makes growing numbers question the value of degree-level qualifications
- The 'permatemps' phenomenon means job security levels are diminishing and young people struggling to find career continuity

Against this backdrop, Valerie's work identified 15 global case studies which are effectively preparing young people for work, several of which were represented in Philadelphia.

Looking at the role of social innovation in addressing the youth issue, there were a number of exciting projects linked to the key themes, as follows:

Creating a new curriculum

Critics consistently identify the mainstream education curriculum as part of the problem. Many education systems were designed for a previous industrial era, characterised by a 'one size fits all approach'. Employers often complain that young people don't leave education with the right skills, but how can the system respond to a working environment that is changing so fast?

A key message coming from this event was that rather than try to tackle the juggernaut public school system, we can create alternative models. The analogy was made between acupuncture and traditional healthcare. These alternatives can act as beacons and provide inspiration and incentive to the mainstream.

We heard about the Omnia model in Espoo, Finland, which has re-engineered its vocational content, working closely with employers. The refreshed 53 options reflect current labour market needs, and the Omnia model also places great emphasis on mobile technology. Teachers are required to attend a technology boot camp so that they are fully conversant with their students' working methods.

From Brazil, we heard about the Lumiar schools, instigated by Carlos Semcar, where the focus is on collaborative problem solving. And from Burkina Faso we were inspired by the example of 2iE, a pan-African university majoring on environmental engineering and tackling real world problems. This innovative model has already produced two global award-winning products – an anti-malarial soap (Faso soap) and a high protein dietary supplement generated from shea tree caterpillars (Faso pro).

Placing emphasis on talent

Another strong theme was the need to build on young people's talents. The Discoverables, hosted by London NGO Spark and Mettle, has designed a slick set of tools to enable young people to assess and build their profiles. Another approach which gives young people responsibility and focuses on their abilities is the US-based Green for All project, mentioned by Nesta's Jo Casebourne. This promotes green energy by mobilising young people to convey the message within their communities.

Mobilising technology

Harnessing mobile technologies to reshape the learning offer was a third cross-cutting message that ran through this event. We heard first hand how organisations are using new technologies to redefine their relationship with learners and the wider community. Andrea Coleman from the New York City iZone spoke about the need for new commissioning models and the importance of extending the network of potential product and service providers. Using open methods – challenges, design methodology and ethnography – they are shifting to a more user-centred design model. This is starting to yield benefits, such as the recent Gap App Challenge, which produced an App addressing issues relating to middle school mathematics.

An overarching message from the SIX event was expressed in a very American way – “Bake it in, don't frost it on.” Innovation must become more embedded in all of our behaviours – rather than being an add on option. This is particularly the case in Europe where our skills and learning systems face huge challenges with reduced resources.

For those wishing to read more, the latest edition of the Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal contains articles on many of the projects mentioned here. So, in the words of another US delegate, why not “jump into the river of awesome” and experience it first hand!

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